

# Textual and Musical Entanglements in Henri Pousseur's *Déclarations d'orages* (1988–89)

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Composed for the bicentenary of the French Revolution (1989), Henri Pousseur's *Déclarations d'orages* may be considered a representative piece of Pousseur's post-*Votre Faust* output. Written for narrator, soprano, baritone, three improvising instruments, symphonic orchestra and magnetic tape, the piece was elaborated by Pousseur in collaboration with Michel Butor. As always when these two friends are involved, their cooperation brings together an astounding web of musical and textual transformations, reuses, and quotations that form a distinctive artistic outlook. A series of twelve "chansons" on poems by Butor – on the notion of revolution – organizes the piece within a spiraled design, in which are interwoven texts by Blake, Neruda, Mayakovsky, and Schiller. At the same time, the orchestral fabric is made up of the self-borrowed musical material from Pousseur's *Trajets dans les arpens du ciel* (1983), itself inspired by a book by Marcel Granet, *La Pensée chinoise* – a text which Pousseur and Butor used as the basis for another of their collaborations called *La Rose des voix* (1982). As is the case in many of Pousseur's reuses of his own music, *Trajets* is dissected and re-ordered to match serially the new structure of the text of *Déclarations*. In addition, Pousseur collected and mixed together a series of political revolutionary declarations (for example French, American, or Russian ones). The languages and types of elocution (talked, whispered, shouted) of these various declarations are serialized by Pousseur and form the basis of a tape played before the piece. Additionally, melodic references are included in the play of quotations, especially two references that



Example 1: Opening of Henri Pousseur's *Déclarations d'orages*.

shape the design of much of the motivic component of the “chansons” – Gounod's *Faust* and the *Marseillaise* – a two-pronged quotation with which the music opens (Example 1 and Plate 1).

“Enfants, debout!” (Children, arise!), is the first of a long series of signals that punctuate the piece. This spoken signal makes an explicit reference to the text of the French National Anthem, the *Marseillaise*. It also makes reference to the music of the Anthem in the intervals Pousseur selected for the spoken text: the fourth and fifth interval, both structurally important in the piece's later unfolding. The music accompanying the text, with its opening trombone motif, also makes a clear nod to the Anthem, but the motif is quickly transformed when the melody is taken over by the solo saxophone into a quotation of Gounod's *Faust* aria “Le Veau d'or est toujours debout.”<sup>1</sup> To start *Déclarations* with such a compound gives one a sense of the intertextual and intermusical entanglements that weave the fabric of the piece. The coalescence of the revolutionary anthem with an aria that makes reference to the adoration of false idols – the golden calf, Moses' failed “revolution” – puts forward a critical position that Pousseur seems to adopt regarding the success of the French Revolution, that led to the establishment of the Napoleonic Empire. Although the fading of one song into another happens smoothly, the transformation of a revolutionary anthem into an aria composed during the French Second Empire imparts an ambivalent character to the opening of *Déclarations*.

Pousseur analyses in *Musiques croisées* (1997) how Gounod's *Faust* exemplified the bourgeois reaction to revolutionary threats. In particular, Pousseur draws specific melodic parallels between

1 Probably, a further association is to be made between the “or” (gold) of the “veau d'or,” and the “or” of “déclarations d'orage.” Such puns are common practices for Butor and Pousseur. See especially the collection of poetry by Pousseur kept in the Henri Pousseur Collection (henceforth PSS-HPC) where such play on words are found in abundance.

the “chœur des soldats” and the opening motif of the *Marseillaise*.<sup>2</sup> In Pousseur’s mind, the French anthem and Gounod’s *Faust* are intricately linked together in a historical and critical narrative. What is more, such a narrative echoes another frequent comment by Pousseur on the parallels between the musical and political evolution of this period:

“In the eighteenth century, it was believed that the bourgeoisie and the bourgeois economic and political system would truly improve the world, that the French Revolution would bring harmony to earth. It was believed that the Ancien Régime would be abolished and then it would be over, that everything would be perfect. And then we realized that we were far from it. Napoleon became Emperor, the bourgeoisie became a new aristocracy, repressing other classes even more savagely than the aristocracy had done.”<sup>3</sup>

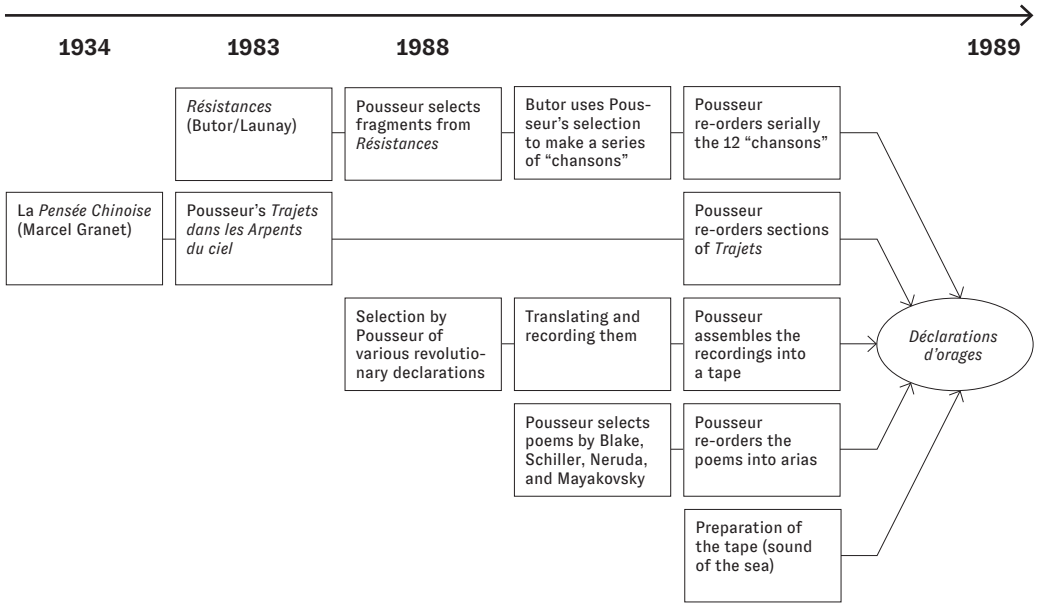
The *Marseillaise/Faust* collage that opens the piece is then a form of jump through time that announces political evolutions in parallel to musical ones. Pousseur is partial to such stylistic historical progressions through the unfolding of his music, as in the opening of *Les Épreuves de Pierrot l’Hébreu* (1974/1978), where the music of the prologue re-stages the evolution of musical styles from the eighteenth-century dance to Schoenberg.

This play of references, quotations, and borrowings is central to Pousseur’s output from the 1960s onwards. In the case of *Déclarations*, however, Pousseur’s penchant for intertextual networks seems to have been spurred by the “lack of time” and the “insufficient payment” that accompanied the elaboration of the work.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the complex spiral-like structuring of the piece is hardly a way to save compositional time, and indicates the priorities at work in Pousseur’s aesthetics: although musical material may be reused, the structural play between entangled textual and musical layers is still the pivotal attitude that drives

2 “Berçons-nous de *Faust*-Gounod!,” in Henri Pousseur, *Musiques croisées* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997), pp.107–20, esp. p.117.

3 “On a cru au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle que la bourgeoisie et le système économique et politique bourgeois allaient vraiment améliorer le monde, que la révolution française allait apporter l’harmonie sur terre. On a cru qu’on allait supprimer l’Ancien Régime et puis que c’était fini, que tout allait être parfait. Et puis on s’est rendu compte qu’on était loin du compte. Napoléon est devenu Empereur, la bourgeoisie est devenue une nouvelle aristocratie, a réprimé encore plus sauvagement d’autres classes que l’aristocratie ne l’avait fait”; Henri Pousseur in interview recording, RTBF Namur, Le Radioteur, n.d. (PSS-HPC).

4 Note for a communication to Butor (PSS-HPC, manuscripts for *Déclarations d’orages*). Pousseur also went through medical difficulties around the time of the composing of *Déclaration*, as he states in a letter to Butor, November 4, 1988 (PSS-HPC).



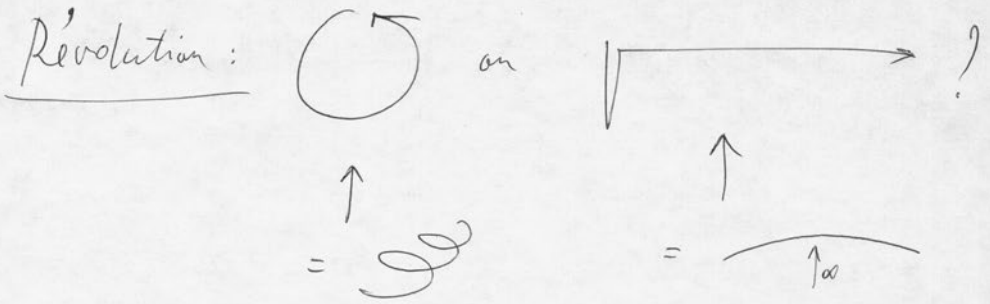
Example 2: Musical and textual threads leading to *Déclarations d'orages*.

Pousseur's compositions. It appears that such games are where Pousseur takes the most compositional pleasure; in "com-posing" in the literal sense – in weaving material together, may this material be musical or textual. For the sake of clarity, the chart above summarizes the different threads that lace *Déclarations d'orages* (Example 2).

As made evident by the analysis of his structuring process – through the study of his sketches and his correspondence with Michel Butor<sup>5</sup> – Pousseur habitually initiates his compositional process by shredding found material into fragments, then making lists and structuring the fragments anew, reordering the material into a new form. Hence, in a piece that concerns itself with matters of revolution, Pousseur reorganizes the different fragments of material into a revolutionary design (Plate 2 shows an advanced version; Plate 3 presents an early stage of reflection).

Such a design recalls other works by Pousseur, like the rotational organization of *La Rose des Voix* (1982). The spiral-like interactive pattern also evokes a piece like *Tales and Songs from the Bible of Hell* (1979) and its "spiral of tears" inspired by an analysis

5 Preserved in PSS-HPC.



différences -  
ressemblances

abolir le temps  
pour recommencer mieux

aligner, additionner des  
événements pour remplir  
un "programme" → rituel  
→ de progrès

Les révol. : <sup>(anglaise)</sup> américaine  
française (XIX<sup>e</sup> / américain / Allemagne)

Dates  
lieux

mitte  
chinoise  
etc...  
(mésaméric.) ↓

décolonisation  
(hispano-amér.,  
asiatique,  
africaine, etc...)  
(océanienne)

Les Bastilles  
aujourd'hui.

Un rêve de ?

Plate 3: Exploratory sketches for designing the structure of *Déclarations d'orages* (c. 1988–89) (PSS-HPC).

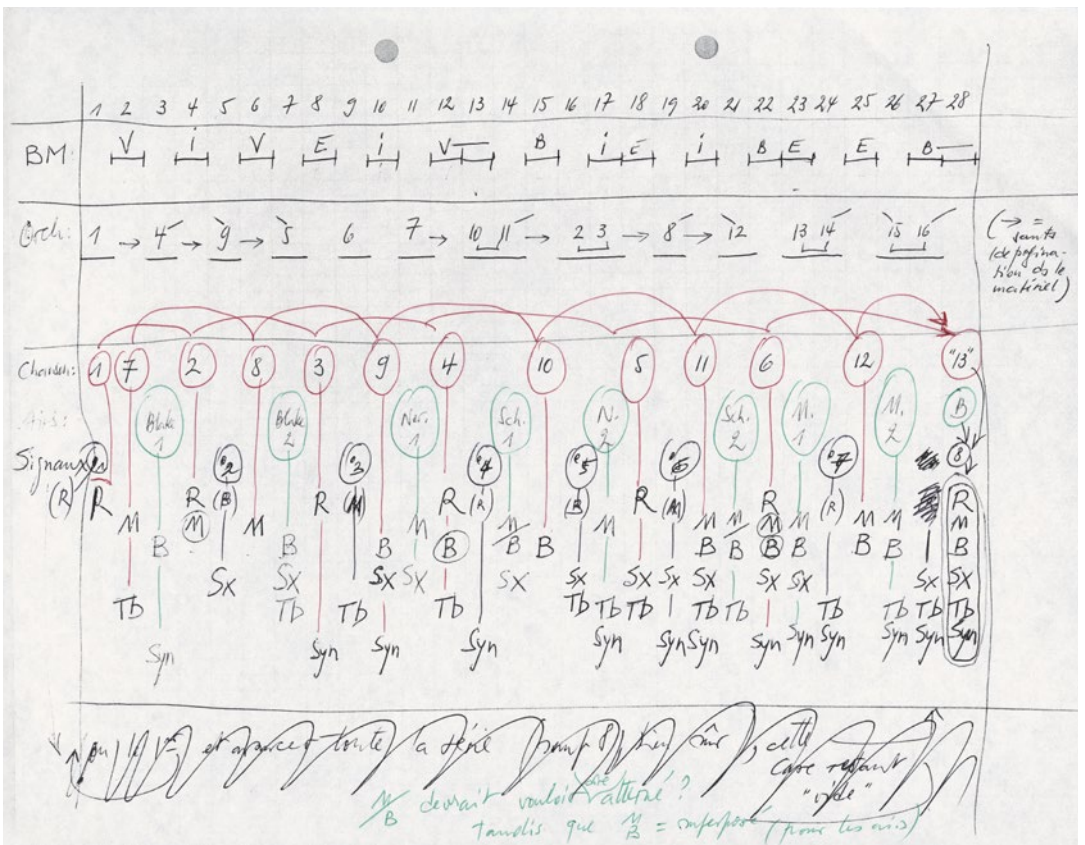


Plate 4: Structural sketch of *Déclarations d'orages*; enclosed in the letter from Henri Pousseur to Michel Butor, November 9, 1988, Liège (PSS-HPC).

of John Dowland (analysis reproduced in *Musiques croisées*).<sup>6</sup> As indicated on the back of an envelope to Butor (Plate 2), Pousseur fashions a “spiral forming a sort of nebula that one explores or traverses along a double spiral that eventually breaks free from the central and original inertia.”<sup>7</sup> Besides, one may observe the way Pousseur restructures serially the different threads that organize the piece, interlinking the tape, the orchestra, Butor’s “Chansons,” the songs on Blake, Schiller, and others, and the signals (“Enfants, debout”) into a kaleidoscopic interface (Plate 4).

6 “La spirale des larmes de John Dowland (Analyse de la plus célèbre des pavanes intitulées *Lacrimae*),” in Pousseur, *Musiques croisées* (see note 2), pp. 79–100, esp. p. 99.

7 “[Une] spire formant une sorte de nébuleuse qu’on explore ou parcourt selon une double spirale qui finit par s’arracher à l’inertie central et originelle”; envelope to Henri Pousseur’s letter to Michel Butor, November 9, 1988, Liège (PSS-HPC).

This short overview of *Déclarations d'orages*, a piece typical of Pousseur's complex output, demonstrates the richness available in the Henri Pousseur Collection. The maze-like sketches and correspondence that Pousseur left us offer fascinating pathways through his labyrinthine legacy; through an œuvre that comprises cross-references, serial cryptic games, and playful transformations as source for creativity and musical structuring.