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| Garant, Serge (1929-1986) |
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| Composer, conductor, teacher, radio host, artistic director and music critic, Serge Garant has been one of the main figures in the Canadian contemporary music landscape. His early works bore the influences of Messiaen and Boulez, and his maturity style was that of a complex alloy between the rigorous post-serialism structural tendencies and controlled indeterminacy. Lyrical by nature, the music of Serge Garant is a rich testimony of a search for a balance between rigor and intuition, a goal shared by several composers of his generation. |
| Serge Garant is a French Canadian composer born on September 22nd 1929. He first studied piano with Sylvio Lacharité, harmony with Paul-Marcel Robidoux and played the clarinet for the Sherbrooke Symphony Orchestra, before pursuing his musical training further in Montreal, where he took piano lessons with Yvonne Hubert and studied composition with well-known pedagogue Claude Champagne (1891-1965). In the fall of 1951, he studied in France for half a year. There, he studied counterpoint with Andrée-Vaurabourg-Honegger and attended Messiaen’s already famous analysis class, along with Canadian composer Clermont Pépin and the young Karlheinz Stockhausen. At that moment, he explored major works of early twentieth century composers such as Debussy and Berg; these discoveries were added to that of Schönberg’s piano music, which he had learned to play by himself in Sherbrooke, the year before. He also became familiar with Messiaen’s modes of limited transposition and rhythmical theories, and was deeply impressed by Boulez’s Second piano sonata (1948); both these composers have had a major influence on Garant’s conceptions of musical creation. The two first melodies of the cycle *Concerts sur Terre*, in which Messiaen’s harmonic influence is clearly at work - although Garant did not use his specific scales - were composed at that time; the cycle would only be completed in 1956 in a voluntarily homogenuous style, in spite of the aesthetic evolution he had by then undergone.  In 1953, Serge Garant moved to Montreal where he worked as a versatile pianist and eventually as an arranger for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). Simultaneously, he began the composition of the vocal cycle *Caprices,* that inscribes itself in that same generalised serialism fashion that generated Boulez’s *Le marteau sans maître* (1954) and Stockhausen’s first four *Klavierstücke* (1954). In February 1954, he strongly responded, in the avant-garde journal *L’Autorité,* to a virulent article of the Montreal music critic Jean Vallerand, who had just written a polemic text that presented serialism as « music for the deaf». That same year, on the first of May, Garant organised a concert of modern and avant-garde music with fellow composers François Morel and Gilles Tremblay, featuring works by Messiaen, Boulez and Webern, mostly heard for the first time in Canada. Works by the three young Quebec composers where also performed, including Garant’s four *Caprices* melodies, then heard for the first time. The concert’s attendance is believed to have reached over six hundred, a considerable achievement for the period. Exactly a year later, on May 1st 1955, the same composers and some of their friends offered another concert, this time a commemoration of the tenth anniversary of Anton Webern’s death. Was then premiered Garant’s *Nucleogame*, believed to be the first canadian work for instruments and tape. In 1956, he became involved, as a pianist, with *Musique de notre temps*, an ensemble that was only active for two seasons. Simultaneously, as a composer, he continued to explore generalised serialism (*Asymétries n°1*, 1958), and slowly turned toward what he called controlled indeterminacy, which consists in methodically conceived and highly structured scores, that allowed performers some degree of choice. This evolution in Garant’s compositional process was first developed in the late 1950’s *Pièce pour quatuor à cordes* (1958) and in *Cage d’oiseau* (1962), for soprano and piano.  Although a considerable proportion of the composer’s catalogue was produced in the 1950’s, he really became a prominent figure in 1961, during the *Semaine internationale de musique actuelle de Montréal*, a week long music happening organised by Canadian composer Pierre Mercure, in which many important figures of North American and European contemporary music took part (Cage, Feldman, Brown, etc). Garant’s *Anerca* (1961, rev. in 1963), for soprano and chamber ensemble, based on Inuit poems, was then premiered under the baton of Mauricio Kagel and made great impression amongst the other composers. From then on, Garant’s reputation grew considerably as to become one of the most important leading figures of Quebec’s avant-garde music scene.  When Pierre Mercure accidentally died in January 1966, Garant was chosen to replace him as main conductor of the newly founded *Société de musique contemporaine du Québec* (SMCQ), Canada’s very first ensemble devoted to contemporary music. As the leading figure of the SMCQ, Garant performed music from around the world, including many first auditions of canadian works. He also contributed to extend Canadian music’s reputation in many countries by conducting the SMCQ ensemble in Europe (1972) and America (1977). In 1967, Serge Garant joined the leading staff of the Université de Montréal’s music faculty, where he taught composition and music analysis, with a focus on the post-webernian serial repertoire. His profound convictions that new music shall be thoroughly structurated had a strong impact on his students, even on those who questioned or rejected it. At that time, he was also heard once a week as presenter of *Musique de notre siècle* (1971-1986)*,* a CBC radio program. He truly excelled in this role, bringing historical context to major twenthieth century masterpieces and providing listeners with cues to understanding recent works by living composers of international status. Conductor, teacher and communicator: Serge Garant occupied these functions from the mid 1960’s to the time of his death, on November 1st 1986.  As a composer, Serge Garant produced many cycles of vocal and instrumental music. Following the two songs cycles already mentioned, i.e., *Concerts sur* Terre (1951,1956) and *Caprices* (1954), he wrote in the 1960s *Phrases* *I* (1967) and *Phrases II* (1968); he then began a major cycle of three compositions entitled *Offrande*, (1969, 1970, 1971), based on proportions taken from the main theme of Bach’s *Musikalisches Opfer*. These important works were followed by a second triptych entitled *Circuit*, (1972, 1972, 1973) which pushed even further the conceptual process inspired by the material developed in the three *Offrandes*. Other significant works by Serge Garant are *Amuya* (1968), *…chant d’amours* (1975), *Rivages* (1976), Quintette (1978) and *Plages* (1981).  In all of his mature works, Garant remained a lyrical composer, always in search of a way to « make sounds sing », as he himself used to say. In his music, as well as in his spoken and written words (as a radio host, in interviews and in his published texts) he attacked conservative stagnation in a cultural landscape where Catholicism was still deeply rooted, and criticised folklorism as a mean to define Canadian musical identity in a broad way, and specifically Quebec’s own particularities. He also claimed the recognition, on the international music scene, of the works composed by his French Canadian colleagues, a repertoire that he considered equal in quality to that of many composers of the highest reputation in the world. Garant defended conceptual rigor and a search for new musical structures, while denouncing the inert repetitions of extinguished past forms. Above all, he favored artistic necessity and contemporary means of expression over the comfort of conventional romantic and post-romantic lyricisms. In many ways, as music critic Gilles Potvin wrote in 1979, on the occasion of the composer’s 50th birthday, Serge Garant could well have been that long awaited composer, equivalent in music to Quebec revolutionary painter Jean-Claude Borduas (1905-1960), that he had, at the beginning of his career, wished for in his writings. He embodied the spirit of a new generation of composers, born, in his view, in a musical culture that had only recently reached its first maturity, and that still searched its way to the culminating point of a momentarily attained perfection, ideologically conceived. |
| Further reading:  (Boivin)  (Duguay)  (Fleuret)  (Lefebvre) |