

Tant que durera l'automne":  
Text-music relationships in *Correspondances* by Henri Dutilleux

Troy Ducharme

Western University

Abstract

The reputation of French composer Henri Dutilleux (1916-2013) rests primarily on his orchestral works, produced regularly throughout his mature career. By contrast, his output of vocal works reveals an interesting gap: having won the Prix de Rome in 1938 for his student cantata, *L'anneau du Roi* and composing small vocal works at intervals until approximately 1967, he would produce no more vocal music from this time until 1997. After a gap of 30 years, his last decade-and-a-half of compositional activity contained a disproportionate amount of vocal writing, beginning modestly with the incorporation of children's voices in the primarily orchestral work, *The Shadows of Time* (1997), and continuing with two substantial works for soprano and orchestra: *Correspondances* (2003) and *Le temps l'horloge* (2007-2009). This study looks at elements of voice-leading, harmony, motive and musical structure in *Correspondances*, with specific concern for how these inform and are informed by the texts. For example, the first movement begins with a chord built out of a cycle of perfect fifths/fourths and comprising a 1#-diatonic collection, perhaps representing the gong of the title. The vocal line is initially limited to the pitches D, E and F#, present in the double bass harmonics of the first chord. But as the text suggests the possibility of a sound which is not measurable by the ear, so the melodic line stretches, at the word 'mesurable,' to G#, transcending the initial harmonic context and establishing a new one: the whole-tone collection implied by the first four vocal pitch-classes will control the remainder of the vocal line in this movement and determine many elements of the harmonic progression, including extensions and transpositions of the initial interval-cycle. Similar processes will be explored in the other movements, as well as textual and musical connections among movements, with the goal of exposing elements of style and technique in the late works of Dutilleux and musical meanings within this important late work.

French composer Henri Dutilleux (1916-2013) is known primarily for his orchestral works, which he produced regularly throughout his mature career. His output of vocal works is less prolific, and less regular. After having won the *Prix de Rome* in 1938 for his student cantata, *L'Anneau du Roi*, and having composed small vocal works at intervals until 1967<sup>i</sup>, Dutilleux produced no more vocal works between that time and 1997. After this gap of nearly 30 years, his last decade-and-a-half of composing contained a disproportionate amount of vocal writing, beginning modestly with the incorporation of children's voices in the primarily orchestral work, *The Shadows of Time* (1997), and continuing with two substantial works for soprano and orchestra: *Correspondances* (2003) and *Le temps l'horloge* (2007-2009).

These three pieces<sup>ii</sup> bring Dutilleux's masterful œuvre to its completion, and among them we find *Correspondances* flanked by two pieces with titles that betray an explicit concern with the temporal. Accordingly, my interpretation of the central piece begins with a phrase from the final song of the cycle, on a text by Vincent van Gogh, that resonates with an image of Dutilleux, in his ninth decade, working on one of what he must have known were to be his final works. Van Gogh writes: "Tant que durera l'automne, je n'aurai pas assez de mains, de toile, et de couleurs pour peindre ce que je vois de beau." / "As long as autumn lasts, I shall not have hands, canvas, or colours enough to paint the beautiful things I see" (Dutilleux, 2009, xiii/xv).<sup>iii</sup> If we look from this quote to Dutilleux's notes on the piece, we see that he draws the listener's attention to notions of "space," "infinity," "mystical thinking," and "the Cosmos" that pervade his chosen texts (Dutilleux, 2009, vi/vii). Considering his notes, then, together with the words of van Gogh, one can hear the combination of the texts and their music as pushing the imminent and the finite out towards the sublime and the infinite. Or, to reign in this flight of poetic fancy, we could simply say that Dutilleux's approach to composing *Correspondances* answers a problem of

efficiency: how to make the limited materials and time remaining at hand do the greatest amount of meaningful work.

Dutilleux's suggestion – again from the program note - that we consider the “different meanings” of the title word, *correspondances*, provides an instance of such efficiency as well as keys to understanding how the texts and music will create meanings, in depth and in numbers. He points first to the superficial meaning of the term, as correspondence, to refer to the texts of the third and fifth song, drawn respectively from letters of Alexander Solzhenitsyn to Mstislav Rostropovich and Galina Vichnevskaia and of Vincent van Gogh to his brother, Théo. He goes on from this meaning of the term to cite the specific example of Charles Baudelaire's famous poem, which lent its title to the piece at hand, and in which Baudelaire makes explicit use of the poetic concept of synaesthesia. Finally, implicit in Dutilleux's ‘different meanings’ and in Baudelaire's poem, we may find the inspiration to interpret ‘correspondances’ as points of resemblance between two or more things<sup>iv</sup> and pay critical attention to the ways in which Dutilleux proceeds by quotation and allusion to incorporate other works of art – musical and otherwise – into our perception of his piece, as well as to create connections among the five songs and their texts. In the case of these connections between songs, we will be forced by this emphasis to discuss them not as inert or abstract ‘unifying’ elements, but as carriers of musical meaning. That is, the relationships created among the songs will inform how we interpret the texts and how we hear the music as giving expression to those texts.

The first song, on a short poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, begins with a chord built out of a cycle of perfect fifths and comprising a 1#-diatonic collection. The vocal line is initially limited to the pitches D<sup>4</sup>, E<sup>4</sup>, F#<sup>4</sup>, having picked these pitches out of the double bass harmonics. These harmonics are, in their turn, all that remains after the sharp attack of the initial chord gives way,

in a stylized representation of the gong of the title, and when the voice enters. But on the word ‘mesurable,’ the vocal line stretches to  $G\sharp^4$ , transcending the initial diatonic harmonic context and establishing a new one: the whole-tone collection implied by the first four vocal pitch-classes will control the remainder of the vocal line and determine many elements of the harmonic progression, including extensions and transpositions of the initial interval cycle. One could even say that this song is generated from the points of resemblance, *correspondances*, between the whole-tone collection and the diatonic, and that the *correspondance* initially consists of a shared [246] trichord. Figure 1 provides a motivic and harmonic analysis – with many details which could be discussed at length, but which are beyond the scope of this paper.

Figure 1. Dutilleux, “Gong”, Voice-Leading and Motives.

Figure 2. Dutilleux, “Gong”, Harmonic Collections and Interval Cycles.

The pivotal moment in the vocal line, the move to G#<sup>4</sup>, occurs as the initiating segment of the text - “Timbre / qui n’est plus par l’ouïe mesurable” - completes the thought of a sound no longer measured, or understood, by our hearing. The idea of a sensory stimulus requiring the participation of senses other than those with which we would normally associate the stimulus brings the work into the literary world of synaesthesia, of the “expression of intersense analogues” (Brogan & Engstrom 1993). One encounters synaesthesia clearly in Baudelaire’s poem “Correspondances” from *Les Fleurs du Mal*: “Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d’enfants,/ Doux comme les hautbois, vert comme les prairies”/“There are perfumes cool as the flesh of children/Sweet as oboes, green as meadows” (Baudelaire, 2004/1868). In this case, the scent stimulus is interpreted poetically in terms of touch, hearing (conflated with taste in this translation), and sight. The *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* says, “*synaesthesia*... has been exploited in literature for a variety of effects, particularly increase of textural richness, complication and unification” (Brogan & Engstrom 1993). The entry goes on to cite Percy Byssche Shelley’s use of *synaesthesia* “in connection with visionary and mystical states of transcendental union” and Baudelaire’s poem concurs, as it concludes: “Ayant l’expansion des choses infinies,/ Comme l’ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l’encens,/ Qui chantent les transports de l’esprit et des sens”/ “With power to expand into infinity,/ Like amber and incense, musk, benzoin/ That sing the ecstasy of the soul and the senses” (Baudelaire, 2004/1868). In this way, the use of synaesthesia is seen to serve Dutilleux’s interest, expressed in the programme notes and already cited, in the mystical and the infinite.

The text of “Gong” continues: “Comme si le son qui nous surpasse de toutes parts/ Etait l’espace qui mûrit.”/ “As if the sound which surpasses us, exceeds us on all sides/(As if that sound) was the space as it ripens” (Dutilleux 2009, xii; my translation). Especially with

Baudelaire's model in mind, we get the impression of a sound that isn't merely a direct "communication" which activates our hearing, but exists as a space – a space that we may presumably explore with all of our senses. This sense of exceeding boundaries is wonderfully and subtly painted when, at the text "toutes parts" the line – which had previously been rising predictably in single whole steps, from F#<sup>4</sup> to G#<sup>4</sup> and on to A#<sup>4</sup> – reaches up a major third from B-flat<sup>4</sup> to D<sup>5</sup> before resolving, appoggiatura-like, on the C<sup>5</sup> which is both the next step and the goal of the line, a tritone away from the central pitch F#<sup>4</sup> (Dutilleux 2009, 1-4).

Much of the interpretation of "Gong" depends on a close reading of the French text as distinct from the German original. Dutilleux uses a rather free translation by Jean-Yves Masson, which differs substantially in content and emphasis from Rilke's original and the much more literal English translation of the German provided in the score (Dutilleux 2009, xii, xiv, xvi). A telling change is to replace "Klang/Sound" with "Timbre" and to place this word on its own line at the head of the poem, providing an emphasis on the term which Dutilleux reinforces in his setting by isolating that word in the vocal line. The textual change, tantamount to altering Rilke's original *Klang* to *Klangfarben*, makes reference to a more exclusively musical sound and requires the already synaesthetic concept of tone colour for understanding. The metaphorical move from sound to colour, from hearing to sight, is reflected at the end of the song cycle in the words of van Gogh, which reverse the move by exploring colour in terms of various non-visual attributes: "... de rose **tendre** et de rouge **sang et lie du vin**... avec les verts-jaunes et les verts-bleus **dur**, tout cela dans une **atmosphere** de fournaise infernale, de **soufre pale**, à exprimer comme la puissance **des ténèbres** d'un assommoir." (Dutilleux 2009, xiii; emphasis mine). We find van Gogh here discussing the tender pink and the hard green-blues (invoking the sense of touch), as well as the atmosphere (feeling, abstraction of touch) of pale (sight) sulfur (smell).

And the passage is rounded off on either end with allusions to violence (blood-red) and drunkenness (wine-red) as the powers of darkness (*ténèbres* in the sense of *tenebrae*, or the shadows of death, evil forces rather than an absence of light) in the *assommoir*.

The *correspondances* between the first and fifth movements go beyond a particular reading of the texts and are reinforced by musical considerations. For example, the resonances of “timbre” from the first movement in this text may have been partially responsible for the choice to include at this point in the fifth movement a quotation from Dutilleux’s earlier orchestral work, *Timbres, espace, mouvement* [1976-78], in the form of its 12-tone row/theme (Dutilleux 2009, 49-50). The musical connection between this element of the fifth song and the material of the first song consists – entirely and very subtly – in the emphasis within the row on the interval of a descending major third, an interval used prevalently and motivically throughout the first song and associated from the outset with the word ‘timbre’. It may also be significant that the row begins – in all transformations used in this movement – on the pitch-class 8 (G#), which was so crucial in determining the harmony and meaning of that first movement.

Of course, the more immediately understood justification of the quotation within the fifth movement is based on the fact that *Timbres, espace, mouvement* was – in its turn – inspired by van Gogh’s *La nuit étoilée*. The quoted row enters for the first time, appropriately, after the line in the text in which van Gogh describes going outside at night to paint the stars, and as a pause in the delivery of the text: the row is vocalized to “Ah”. But, turning our attention to the piece from which the quotation is taken, we find that Dutilleux’s comments on the earlier piece foreshadow the content of the first song’s text and close this particular circle of musical and textual reference:

I strove by the interplay of sounds to give the impression of great space which had been suggested to me by that extraordinary, visionary painting by Vincent van Gogh, *La nuit étoilée*. ... [T]hough I reject futile illustration, I had felt that the throbbing intensity animating these canvasses, their prevailing sense of space, their vibrant material, and above all the effect of almost cosmic vibration they produce could find equivalents in the field of sound (Quoted in Thurlow 1998, 261).

The visual impetus of the painting, its ‘sense of space’ and ‘cosmic vibration’, find sonic equivalents in *Timbres, Espaces, Mouvement*; and in “Gong” it is sound which is discussed as creating a sense of space, of being interpreted in terms of other senses.

Opening up another, intersecting, circle of cross-reference, the sense of cosmic vibration in Dutilleux’s description of *La nuit étoilée* is taken up in the text of the second song by the image of dancing flames. The poem “Danse Cosmique” by Prithwindra Mukherjee is set in the second song, and with frequent recourse to unexpected metaphors, the poem draws on the visual, tactile and ritual qualities of flame as a stand-in for the motions of stars and planets in the cosmos. The flames become a dancer, under whose feet the earth and planets tremble; they become a flood, penetrating all hearts and ‘teasing the waves of the ocean of night;’ and then the flames move inside caverns, where sun-flowers unexpectedly bloom and where the flames destroy to begin a process of regeneration. Most telling, though, is the personification of these flames in each of two questions found, respectively, near the beginning and at the end of the poem: “Qui est-tu, ô Danseur, dans l’oubli du monde?” and “Qui est-tu, ô barde celeste, qui chantes l’avenir?” (Dutilleux 2009, xii). In the first, the dancer seems representative of the powerful forces of creation in the early universe, beyond worldly memory, but which we witness through astronomical study of the motion of celestial bodies. In the second, we incorporate the

intervening descriptions of the flames into an apocalyptic vision, the cosmic dance as a means (perhaps astrological?) of divining our future.

The dance is portrayed by and embodied in the use of a rhythmic ostinato in 8/8 (3+3+2). This element – an ostinato – features prominently in the fifth song as well, as the *Timbres, espace, mouvement* row is converted into an ostinato, played – like the ostinato of the second song – by *pizzicato* basses and celli. The similarities extend past texture and instrumentation, as the metric implications of the two ostinati are very much in line with one another, despite the 3/4 notation of the fifth song's ostinato and the fact that this ostinato works against the clearer (and contrary) metric implications of the vocal line (Dutilleux 2009, 5 and 53-55).

Thus the music invites listeners to view “La nuit étoilée” again, with the poetry and music of the “Danse Cosmique” ringing in our ears. Doing so, our eyes may be drawn to the cypress tree in the foreground of the painting. Considerably abstracted already, the cypress becomes in this context an obelisk of flames, the upward movement “invading the sky/ envahissent la ciel” (Dutilleux 2009, xiv/xii). And the sky itself is filled with remarkable depictions of celestial bodies in motion and carries with it all of the astronomical and astrological meanings, of past and future, that go with them. The relationship between this image and the text of the “Danse Cosmique” informs the end of the piece: Dutilleux's final vocal line rushes upwards through the octave from C#<sup>4</sup> to C#<sup>5</sup>, and the winds echo that with a larger span over a shorter time period in the final measures, providing a musical gesture with a similar ‘vertical’ orientation to that of the painting's cypress.

One could easily go on at length. The rich web of *correspondances* – musical, textual, visual, and otherwise sensual; within and among the songs; as well as reaching beyond them to other art works – is far too dense to be explicated in a brief paper. I have not, for example,

touched on the third or fourth songs or on the orchestral interlude. Nor have I dealt with the quotation in the fourth song from *Boris Godounov*, or with the structural import of the arrangement of poetic texts of various lengths in opposition to the more extended songs on prose (letter) texts. But one needs to draw a line somewhere: the meaningful associations engendered by the music and the texts simply exceed the limits of any container into which one might like to put them. They are not quite infinite, but it is difficult to find a single perspective that would put them all in view, so they seem to be infinite. And this is as it should be: *Correspondances* connects in meaningful ways to so much of Dutilleux's output and comes as close as any piece to providing a summary of his career as a composer and of his guiding principles that I would be willing to argue – though further research is required – that this work may, in a final analysis of his achievements as a composer, prove to take a central place. The song cycle is thus a remarkable achievement, even for such a recognized and consummate master as Dutilleux, and even after eschewing vocal writing for so much of his mature career; and it is remarkable, among other reasons, for being his answer to the autumnal challenge of finding hands, canvas and colours enough to 'paint' all that he saw as beautiful.

## References

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Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> Dutilleux's vocal output ceased – or so it seems – with a piece entitled *Hommage à Nadia Boulanger* for soprano, 3 violas, clarinet, percussion, and zither. This piece is listed on the Wikipedia page dedicated to Dutilleux ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri\\_Dutilleux](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri_Dutilleux)), but not in Potter 2001. The only decent source for information about the work is to be found at <http://brahms.ircam.fr/works/work/18263>.
- <sup>ii</sup> It seems plausible that these three pieces belong together as a triptych, but I have not seen such a hypothesis put forth elsewhere, and the question would require further research.
- <sup>iii</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are taken from the study score. Pages are unnumbered in the front matter of this score, so I have supplied numbers beginning with the title page as i.
- <sup>iv</sup> “Rapport de ressemblance, de conformité, d’harmonie entre deux ou plusieurs choses; point de ressemblance.” <http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/correspondance/19439>