

Lacking an “Original Voice”: Neoclassicism in Henri Dutilleux’s *Au Gré des Ondes*

Critic Thomas Cooper said of Henri Dutilleux's 1946 piano work *Au Gré des Ondes*, "there is little in the suite to suggest an original voice."¹ Such a comment is not encouraging, especially early in one's composing career, and it is reasonable to speculate that such harsh criticism was the cause of Dutilleux's later rejection of his early works. Yet the lack of such an "original voice" allows *Au Gré des Ondes* to provide a thoughtful reflection of the past through its neoclassical style, a contrast to the tumultuous and rapidly changing world in which the suite was composed. The form, harmony and emotional expression of *Au Gré des Ondes* – all important aspects to consider in performance – are influenced by neoclassical ideas. It is this style – reflecting past and present, and combining classical and more popular music – which forms the foundation of the suite, and which allowed Henri Dutilleux to appeal to the large audience readily available to him through the radio.

To understand the foundation of the suite, it is important to understand the influences on Dutilleux's compositional style. Although he is known for his many wonderful orchestral works and chamber compositions, music and the piano formed an important part of Dutilleux's life from his early years: his parents were an amateur pianist and violinist, and his maternal grandfather, Jean Koszul, was an organist, composer and a friend of the renowned French composer Gabriel Fauré.² Although he died in 1927, Koszul spent the last years of his life with his daughter and her family, and his more conservative musical influence was probably exerted on his young grandson. This influence stands in contrast to the more radical developing ideas of the time, including Dadaism and Surrealism: born in 1916, Dutilleux's formative years coincided with the quest of composers to experiment with musical styles, and to develop existing ideas beyond all recognition. As Paris was commonly recognized as the center of musical progress in the inter-war period, the young Dutilleux was close to the center of musical development in his early years.

¹ Caroline Potter, *Henri Dutilleux: His Life and Works* (Brookfield, VT: Ashfield Publishing Company, 1997), 47.

² Caroline Potter, *Henri Dutilleux: His Life and Works* (Brookfield, VT: Ashfield Publishing Company, 1997), 2.

Like many other technologies in the twentieth century, the development of radio was stimulated by the First and Second World Wars, and by the 1940s was a common household item. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Henri Dutilleux took a post as director of music productions at the French Radio, a position he held until 1963.³ *Au Gré des Ondes* was written as incidental music for the radio: its title can be translated into English as “At the Whim of the Waves” - the word “waves” probably referring to radio waves.⁴ Through the combination of past and present synthesized by its neoclassical style, *Au Gré des Ondes* could appeal to the musical taste of many radio listeners.

The neoclassical movement was firmly established in Paris. In a response to the ill-defined form and extremes of emotion characteristic of the Romantic period, neoclassicism revitalized the styles, genres and forms of pre-Romantic music through imitation or evocation.⁵ This included, among other elements, a return to the control of simple, balanced formal structure; a return to clarity and simplicity of emotional expression; and the use of modal harmonies.⁶ Although it is important to note that the revival of older musical styles had itself been present in the past – witness Felix Mendelssohn’s well-known Bach revival – as implied by its name, neoclassicism did not pretend to strictly adhere to the established norms of previous periods. Instead, it adopted allusions to the music of machines, the music hall, and extended tonality in lieu of clear harmonic progressions.⁷ Dutilleux’s early works are associated with this movement by the composer himself – he characterized his Piano Sonata (published in 1948, although he began writing it in 1946, soon after *Au Gré des Ondes*), as “hidebound by classical or neo-classical

³ Caroline Potter, “Dutilleux, Henri,” in *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press, 2001; online ed., 2001, updated 25 July 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.08428>.

⁴ Caroline Potter, *Henri Dutilleux: His Life and Works* (Brookfield, VT: Ashfield Publishing Company, 1997), 8.

⁵ Barbara Hanning, *Concise History of Western Music*, fifth ed., (New York, NY: Norton, 2015), 588.

⁶ Arnold Whittall, “Neo-classicism,” in *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press, 2001; online ed., 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.19723>.

⁷ Joseph Auner, *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries: Western Music in Context* (New York, NY: Norton, 2013), 106.

forms.”⁸ Dutilleux considered the Piano Sonata his Opus 1, and discouraged performance of the majority of his previous works, including *Au Gré des Ondes*.⁹ Dutilleux has never given a clear answer about the reasons for this rejection, although he has criticized the French musical style for its adherence to “the realm of charm, elegance and wit.”¹⁰ For this reason, scholars have speculated that as a composer well-known for his concern for originality, Dutilleux – although respecting his forbears – wished to forge his own path in the musical world.

Neoclassicism is reflective of the past through its evocation of the clear forms of the Classical and Baroque eras. This is apparent in many ways throughout *Au Gré des Ondes*. Overall, the work is a keyboard suite comprised of six movements, and unattached to programmatic sources from the theatre or literature. This general form harkens to a work from the more recent past: Maurice Ravel’s *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1914-1917), considered among the first Neoclassic works for keyboard. Like *Au Gré des Ondes*, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is a keyboard suite comprised of six movements. There is a distinct similarity between the contexts in which these works were written: both were composed during or immediately after the confusion and chaos of world war. Similarities in compositional style are evident when comparing the “Tocatta” from Ravel’s suite with Dutilleux’s “Étude,” as both pieces open with a section in which the hands collaborate to create a light and airy texture through a rapid pattern of sixteenth notes. These pieces also share a similar flow of rapid and ceaseless sixteenth notes, a feature which emphasizes their virtuosic potential and requires a technical expertise in performance. These similarities are evident in a comparison of their first four measures, as shown below.

⁸ Caroline Potter, *Henri Dutilleux: His Life and Works* (Brookfield, VT: Ashfield Publishing Company, 1997), 8.

⁹ Marian Anderson, “Henri Dutilleux: Painstaking composer whose work was rooted in unfashionable tonality,” *The Independent*, May 26, 2016, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/henri-dutilleux-painstaking-composer-whose-work-was-rooted-in-unfashionable-tonality-8632968.html>.

¹⁰ Caroline Potter, *Henri Dutilleux: His Life and Works* (Brookfield, VT: Ashfield Publishing Company, 1997), 9.

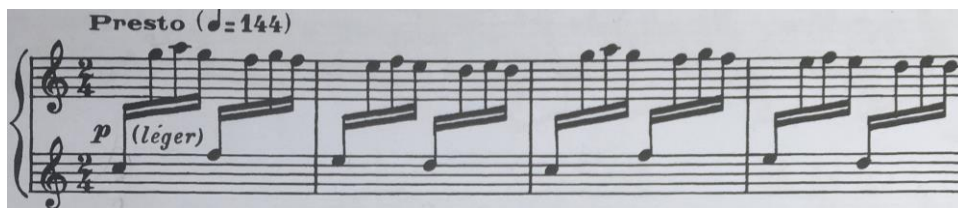


Fig. 1 “Étude” mm. 1-4. (Henri Dutilleux, *Au Gré des Ondes: Six petites Pièces pour Piano*. Paris, France: Alphonse Leduc Éditions Musicales, 1946).

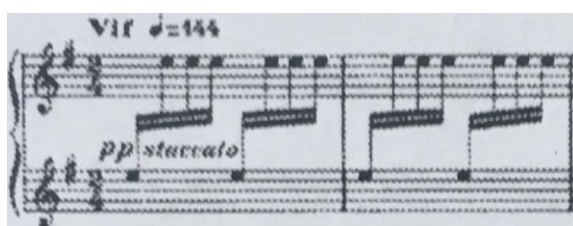


Fig. 2 “Toccata” mm. 1-4. (Maurice Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. Paris, France: Durand, 1918).

As well, the overall form of *Au Gré des Ondes* echoes the keyboard suites of J.S. Bach and Handel. Although none of Dutilleux’s movements are named for traditional Baroque dances, the second movement evokes contemporary dance through the title “Claquettes,” the French term for tap-dancing.¹¹ In addition, the clear form of individual movements can be linked to forms of the past. Three movements of the suite are in simple ternary form (ABA) in which the last A section is a literal repetition of the first, a form delineated by repeat signs (a unique feature among Dutilleux’s works).¹² The formal simplicity of these movements is reflective of the simple binary forms (AB) that distinguish Baroque dances. The final two movements of the suite could be termed ‘through-composed’ due to the lack of repetition in their musical material. The fifth movement of the suite, “Hommage a Bach” (“Homage to Bach”) is

¹¹ Caroline Potter, *Henri Dutilleux: His Life and Works* (Brookfield, VT: Ashfield Publishing Company, 1997), 47.

¹² Caroline Potter, *Henri Dutilleux: His Life and Works* (Brookfield, VT: Ashfield Publishing Company, 1997), 47.

contrapuntal, like many of J.S. Bach's works. This style evokes Bach's two-voice Inventions, which are also 'through-composed.' That Dutilleux refers to Bach specifically is also important to note: the slogan for the neoclassical movement, popularized by Igor Stravinsky, was "Back to Bach," and many composers rejected more nationalistic ideas to employ what Richard Taruskin aptly describes as "self-conscious allusions" to Bach, the composer who embodied the "fountainhead of universal musical values."¹³ Thus, Dutilleux's choice of the overall suite form, as well as the forms of individual movements, evoke works of the past on multiple levels.

Neoclassical composers sought to evoke the past through modal harmonies, although Richard Taruskin notes that the pursuit of an "olden style" furnished composers with the excuse to use "quasi-modal" harmonies which would have been out of place in ancient times.¹⁴ (The diatonic modes we know today, although they are thought to have developed from the music of the ancient Greece and the mediaeval church, may no longer be accurate due to the distortion of time). However, these same modal harmonies grace the music with a foreign sound that became popular with its audiences. This modality also offers a different path for harmony and chromaticism than the one followed by the Second Viennese School (comprised of Arnold Schoenberg and his pupils Anton Webern and Alban Berg), who abandoned tonality and developed the 12-tone system known as serialism. Dutilleux does not appear to use a specific mode consistently throughout any of the pieces that form *Au Gré des Ondes*, but modal harmony is implied at many moments throughout the work. For instance, Dutilleux uses the A Mixolydian scale in "Mouvement Perpetuel," as the piece gains momentum in the second half of its A section.

¹³ Richard Taruskin, "Back to Whom? Neoclassicism as Ideology," review of *Neoclassicism in Music: From the Genesis of the Concept through the Schoenberg/Stravinsky Polemic* by Scott Messing, *Nineteenth Century Music*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1993), p. 293, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/746396>.

¹⁴ Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music: Music in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 454.



Fig. 3 “Mouvement Perpetuel” mm. 27-28. (Henri Dutilleux, *Au Gré des Ondes: Six petites Pièces pour Piano*. Paris, France: Alphonse Leduc Éditions Musicales, 1946).

Modal harmonies are particularly evident in the opening measures of the first movement, “Prélude en Berceuse” shown below. Ostensibly written in the key of B minor, Dutilleux fluctuates between a F natural and F sharp in both the left-hand accompaniment and the right-hand melody. This causes the piece to sound unstable to the ears of the audience, an effect which is enhanced by missing downbeats in the left-hand. This instability is appropriate, as it contributes to the sensation of rocking indicated by the description “en berceuse” (“in a cradle”) in the title of the movement. Because of this instability, the audience is left questioning the final destination of the music, providing interest for both performer and audience.



Fig. 4 “Prélude en Berceuse” mm. 1-4. (Henri Dutilleux, *Au Gré des Ondes: Six petites Pièces pour Piano*. Paris, France: Alphonse Leduc Éditions Musicales, 1946).

The harmonies Dutilleux employs reflect more recent times through the influence of Les Six, a group of Dutilleux’s own countrymen who worked together for a brief time between the two world wars. For reasons strongly linked to the politics of the time, French composers of the inter-war period sought to refute German influence on French culture. As one of the defining characteristics of German Romantic

music was its heavy emphasis on emotions, desires and aspirations, Les Six – drawing inspiration from the example of the French composer Erik Satie – made it their task to create a new kind of music: one that was the reverse of German Romanticism in its dryness, brevity and straightforwardness. However, this music also gained inspiration from modern sources – harnessing the sounds of the developing world of machines, the music hall, circus, and jazz bands.¹⁵ Of the more well-known members of the group, Darius Milhaud (1892-1974) wrote prolifically in an immense variety of genres and styles, composing piano pieces, children’s music, operas, symphonies, film scores, and ballet music.¹⁶ Significantly, Milhaud’s work shows clear inspiration from “lower” forms of music (such as the music hall, jazz band, and circus). His 1923 ballet *La Création du Monde* (The Creation of the World) incorporates ragtime, saxophone (an instrument commonly associated with jazz), and elements of the blues style, alongside techniques from the past such as fugue.¹⁷ Dutilleux’s work could be influenced by the music hall through his subtle use of the constantly leaping left hand pattern associated with ragtime music. This pattern frequently consists of a single note or octave on the strong beats of the measure, and a chord, in a higher register, on the weak beats. In “Claquettes,” a similar left-hand pattern is briefly established, as seen in the measures below.

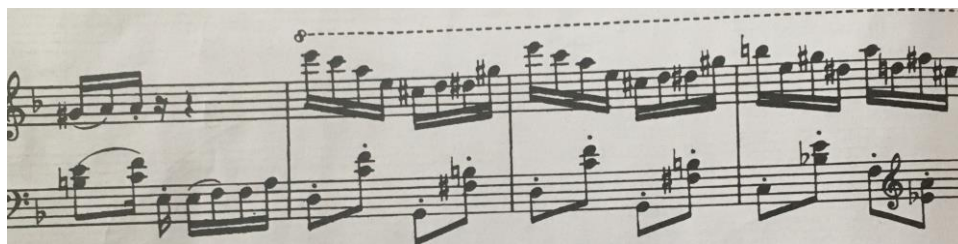


Fig. 5 “Claquettes” mm.8-11. (Henri Dutilleux, *Au Gré des Ondes: Six petites Pièces pour Piano*. Paris, France: Alphonse Leduc Éditions Musicales, 1946).

Jazz influences are subtly apparent in *Au Gré des Ondes* through jazz-like harmonies, which are employed most obviously in “Mouvement Perpetuel.” In the passage below, Dutilleux uses the extended

¹⁵ Paul Griffiths, “Six, Les,” in *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press, 2001; online ed., 2001; updated 26 October 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.25911>.

¹⁶ Barbara Hanning, *Concise History of Western Music*, fifth ed., (New York, NY: Norton, 2015), 588.

¹⁷ Barbara Hanning, *Concise History of Western Music*, fifth ed., (New York, NY: Norton, 2015), 588.

9th, 11th, and 13th chords typically found in jazz. As this passage serves as a bridge between two sections, these extended intervals greatly increase the dramatic tension and the audience's expectation. Dutilleux's use of music hall influences and jazz-inspired harmonies thus reflect the popular music of the time in which he lived and wrote, and the influence of Les Six.



Fig. 6 “Mouvement Perpetuel” mm. 60-65. (Henri Dutilleux, *Au Gré des Ondes: Six petites Pièces pour Piano*. Paris, France: Alphonse Leduc Éditions Musicales, 1946).

Like the form and modal harmonies which make *Au Gré des Ondes* neoclassical, Dutilleux's manipulation of emotion reflects the music of the past. Russian-born composer Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971), whose *Octet for Winds* (1923) is credited with initially influencing composers to return to pre-Romantic styles, wrote of his composition: it “is not an ‘emotive’ work, but a musical composition based on objective elements which are sufficient unto themselves.”¹⁸ As scholar Steve Messing further explains, “emotions, feelings, desires, aspirations: this is the terrain from which [Stravinsky] has pushed his work. The art of Stravinsky is nevertheless strongly expressive; he moves us profoundly and his perception is never formularized; but there is one specific emotion.”¹⁹ In this objectivity, neoclassic music is similar to the balance and calm characteristic of the Renaissance period.²⁰ However, in its evocation of a single emotion, it also becomes linked to the theory of the affections of the Baroque period. The affections – emotions such as anger, sadness or joy – were thought to be stable states of the soul, which once

¹⁸ Joseph Auner, *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries: Western Music in Context* (New York, NY: Norton, 2013), 117.

¹⁹ Richard Taruskin, “Back to Whom? Neoclassicism as Ideology,” review of *Neoclassicism in Music: From the Genesis of the Concept through the Schoenberg/Stravinsky Polemic* by Scott Messing, *Nineteenth Century Music*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1993), p.130, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/746396>.

²⁰ Barbara Hanning, *Concise History of Western Music*, fifth ed., (New York, NY: Norton, 2015), 173.

stimulated by outer sources, would create a specific emotion.²¹ Although provoking the emotions of the audience was an essential goal of Baroque composers, they sought to arouse only one distinct emotion in their audience. A similar focus on specific emotions can be noted in *Au Gré des Ondes*. Three pieces in the suite – “Claquettes,” “Mouvement Perpetuel” and “Étude” – due to their quick tempo, frequent staccato articulation markings, and rapid sixteenth note passages – portray joyous emotion. Interspersed with these rapid and gleeful pieces are “Improvisations” and “Hommage a Bach,” both of which are reflective and calming due to their slower tempo. These movements have longer, more fluid phrases which build a sense of tranquility and repose. Although “Prélude en Berceuse” shares the characteristics of a slower tempo and long phrases, its frequently missing downbeats and unstable tonal center make it unsettled, a feeling which is only resolved as the suite continues. In this limited range of emotions itself, *Au Gré des Ondes* adheres to the Baroque idea of the affections. Moreover, unlike the huge dynamic span of German Romantic works, *Au Gré des Ondes* exists in a very narrow dynamic range, both within the pieces individually and in the cycle as a whole: despite the different emotions they evoke, the majority of these pieces move between *piano* and *pianissimo*, with the exception of *mezzo-forte* for brief moments in “Mouvement Perpetuel” and “Étude.” This exception serves to increase the playful character of these movements, juxtaposing them with the subdued dynamics of the rest of the suite. In this narrow range and focus on specific emotions throughout the suite, Dutilleux reflects the music of Baroque and Renaissance periods.

Understanding the neoclassical roots of *Au Gré des Ondes* allows both performer and audience to appreciate the artistry of Dutilleux’s manipulation of past musical styles in a work that reflects the past during the tumultuous upheaval of the period immediately following the Second World War. Reflection of the past is evident through Dutilleux’s use of classical forms, modal harmonies, and a narrow range of

²¹ Barbara Hanning, *Concise History of Western Music*, fifth ed., (New York, NY: Norton, 2015), 173.

emotions, but the incorporation of elements of the jazz style into the work synthesizes various musical elements into a unique and interesting whole.

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