



Tina Pearson

CLAUDE VIVIER IN CONVERSATION

Susan Frykberg had this talk with Claude Vivier in the summer of 1981.

Claude: Why do I write music — that's a very important question ... Basically, when I was young, I went to a college to become a brother, and my first contact with music was midnight mass, Catholic midnight mass, so I sang, and basically from that moment on, I wanted to repeat that experience. I mean, taking it in a mythical way, it's trying to do the deeds of the gods. So to compose, I need to feel as if it were Christmas day, and of course there's a lot of psychological side effects to that. It means that there's got to be something terribly important to be said, and also, at that moment of creation, there's a basic expression of purity.

Susan: And you could only express it in music?

Claude: Yes, only music ... well it could be something else. I did a video ... but basically I think it's music. This urge for purity, it's created a style of its own. Because I think there's a misunderstanding, especially here in Québec because we're very Catholic, purity is a very badly used word. As far as my music is concerned, purity is only expressing exactly what you have to express; to write music and try to get to this thing that is exactly what you want to say. Purity is a total acceptance of what comes out of me and an attempt to say it in the most appropriate way. Also, at one point during the levels of creation, there is something more, you call it inspiration, or you call it god or you call it love. I work on two levels in this respect, there's my own self, time-bound self, which is only a little point on the infinite history of humankind, and on top of that, we call it immanence ... A whole of ideas, just purely ideas that are made into something, artworks or music or political systems. I guess there's always a relation between one's own life and this ...

Susan: Collective unconscious?

Claude: Sort of collective unconscious ... but on a higher level, there's something more than the collective unconscious ... the collective unconscious has been formed by millions and trillions of human beings, but on top of that, I think there's something more, uh ... somehow masterpieces have what I'm talking about.

Susan: Do you perceive your style as being similar from piece to piece, or what?

Claude: I'm a human being, with one history, which no other human being has. And it has its own unity, and of course when this human being expresses something, there's a unity of style.

Susan: Ok, but that's not necessarily on a perceived level.

Claude: On a perceived level, it's got to be the same thing too. A unity of style and a unity of personality. All Bach you can say is Bach, all Mozart you can say is Mozart, all Beethoven, all Stravinsky. Even if Stravinsky has so many so-called styles, it's one personality, it's one style.

Susan: Stravinsky is a good example because if you were to listen to *Pulcharella* and the *Rite of Spring*, as an outsider you would never know it was the same composer.

Claude: As an outsider, you'd probably feel something.

Susan: Not much!

Claude: Well there are different styles ... life is not a one shot deal. I guess in my music, I went through different styles, but those different styles arose only through the fact that I refined more and more my musical technique.

Susan: But also, if you're talking about this purity coming from yourself as well as from outside, there is change, and the perception of the god or the immanence or whatever it is changes too.

Claude: But my personality as a whole stays always the same. You always feel like a little child anyway. You

don't see yourself grow old. I think that's what makes the unity of a human being. Of course there is what's called in paintings periods, where you discover things, because you work. That's why you write another piece. Those questions you ask when you create, most of the time, they're unanswerable. They're just questions to be asked in the infinity of time. The problem in the western world is that they always wanted to have answers to questions, and they thought that any system, whether artistic, political or social, had to have an answer. And this is a half truth, because this whole way of thinking belongs to a very manly way of thinking. In the Bible, God didn't say to the woman to go and create, or go and name things, he said that to the man ... and the Bible is a very influential book. But this is only one half of it. Instead of naming things, you are an elephant or a tiger, you can say, ah ha!! you're a big nice animal. Are you angry or are you dangerous? ... if you ask questions without answering.

Susan: I think this is the idea of eternal self discovery. If you think of self and outside-self, then you're always asking questions.

Claude: But in our civilization, people always expect answers. An aesthetic answer, to say, ah ha! this is the truth. And political systems are the same thing. They try to find answers and they try to apply those answers to masses of human beings. Which is sometimes very dangerous to individual lives. What's happening now is that there's a total shift in the political fuse and ...

Susan: So you always ask questions in your music ... what sort of questions?

Claude: Time, love, intimate ones usually. But it's hard to say I ask questions in my music, because music is such a ... Once you've got the piece there, it's done, you know. My music is a paradox. Usually in music you have some development, some direction or some aim, the big bang or the crescendo or whatever which in my music, happens less and less. I just have statements, musical statements, which somehow, lead nowhere. Also on the other hand, they lead somewhere, but it's on a much more subtle basis. Not on the basis of mastering the crescendo or mastering the actual expectations of the listeners, I mean expectations in the dramatic sense. Very often my music doesn't have these expectations. It's often only statements, very clear statements, sometimes with dramatic curves, but not as in romantic music.

Susan: With that attitude, can you compare yourself with any past composers?

Claude: I could compare myself with some Japanese musics or Balinese musics. Among the western composers I could compare myself with Mozart and Chopin.

Susan: Mozart or Chopin?

Claude: Yeah.

Susan: How? I mean, Chopin's really romantic, with dramatic curves and ...

Claude: Well, there's always curves ... but there is in both those composers a purity in terms of line, melody, harmony and style of development, that you don't find in other composers. There's an episodic development, where you have a cell, getting bigger and bigger and developing itself.

Susan: But that's not what we were talking about before, which was about clear statements. They're definitely going somewhere.

Claude: Yes, it is going somewhere, but it's not going where —

Susan: Brahms takes it.

Claude: or Beethoven or even Bach. Oh! It's hard to define this. Because I'm not anti-gestural per se — anti-gestural would be some pieces of those artists in New York, where you have nothing. But here, if you have a melody then it has to go somewhere.

Susan: You could almost say then that it's anti-romantic.

Claude: It's anti-romantic, but people would say it is romantic sometimes. Which shows a very bad understanding of romantic music itself. Actually maybe the best examples of my music are those last pieces ... *Copernicus*, *Lonely Child*, *Marco Polo*, *Samarkand*, *Orion* ... *Boukhara*. There I dropped completely what was terribly important in western music, counterpoint, and I was only working with melody. That's the most important link with non-western music. The melody is almost automatic. There's a lot of automatism in my music in fact, even if it doesn't sound like it. The melody gives the colors, and sometimes even a counterpoint, but only as a matter of phase-shifting, and even the phase-shifting, I use it less and less.

Susan: Well, *Lonely Child* seems to me to be pure melody.

Claude: It's pure melody, with colors on top of it, and the colors are contrapuntal. Whereas *Boukhara*, which is the purest one I've done — 13 minutes of melody — there's only the colors. And the very last one, *Et Je Réverai Cette Ville Etrange*, there's only melody. In the opera I used harmony, in *Orion* I used mirror chords, things like that, to get the colors, and in *Lonely Child* I use the colors. I've gotten maybe to the purest form of one melody, in *Et Je Réverai Cette Ville Etrange*. In *Marco Polo*, I did a whole development with one sound; interval, harmony, harmony plus colors, interval plus colors, and that made up the whole piece. And in that piece, there is a fluidity of melodic treatment and development to color. And there are sometimes lines, and even directions ... and transformations of the colors. For instance, sheer color to rhythmical patterns to noise ...

Susan: This is getting back to your notion of cellular development.

Claude: Yeah. But it's also process development ... Though not in the last one. There's a process, somehow the color goes somewhere. But at the same time, because of the melody, there is a stasis, it doesn't really go anywhere! The last one though, I took it all out, everything. I took a chance. Somehow those colors were a crutch. There was something artificial about it. It was as if the basic thing in those other pieces was still the melody, but in order to sustain the melody, to have it live

Susan: But I think that's musical tradition. Everyone in the past used various devices to sustain a melody, harmony or orchestration or whatever.

Claude: But they never used colors in the same way.

Susan: Yes they did!

Claude: But what I did in those pieces is to make the colors totally independent from the melody. That was my counterpoint. Except in the last piece, I took everything out except the melody. I think this will be the last melodic piece I do.

Susan: So in a sense, it's trying to attain an absolute purity in one element of music.

Claude: Yeah. In another piece where I try to do this kind of thing is *Pulau Dewata*. But this was more a tribute to the Balinese people, so I didn't actually achieve anything. Well, I did achieve an 11 minute melody ...

Susan: But in fact *Pulau Dewata* is a very different piece depending on the instrumentation. It's beautiful with the

