

## Interview with Joseph Petric Entretien avec Joseph Petric

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Article abstract

In this interview, Joseph Petric, the internationally acclaimed concert accordionist, shares his thoughts on his personal artistic development, on his relationship to the works of the past, and on his 'plurivocal' (Eco) view of the conflicting aesthetic tendencies which lie at the heart of today's concert music. His relationship with his somewhat unusual instrument turns out to be inseparable from his undying support for contemporary and even experimental music. His goal is to produce, sometimes ironically, an authentic artistic enunciation.

# Interview with Joseph Petric

Jonathan Goldman

JOSEPH PETRIC IS THE ONLY accordionist in Canada who devotes himself exclusively to concertizing, recording and commissioning. Known for his inclusivity and versatility, as well as for the rich palette of colours that he draws from his instrument, his programs often juxtapose works by Bach and Rameau with those of Berio, Lutoslawski, as well as newly commissioned scores. Petric's discography, which includes 20 CDs, was nominated for the 2003 Hunter Foundation Recording Award. He is the dedicatee of more than 150 commissions, among them 10 concerti and 22 electroacoustic works. With his bibliography of transcriptions of more than 1,200 scores, prepared between 1992 and 2000 with the support of the Canada Council, he has created an expansive repertory for the accordion. The first accordionist to audition successfully for the BBC's Radio 3, he has recorded for BBC 3, PBS, and Canada's CBC and Société Radio Canada, as well as French, Norwegian, and Swedish national radio and the EU TV5. He has appeared, among other places, at Boston Symphony's Tanglewood Festival, London's Purcell Room, IRCAM in Paris, Kennedy Centre Washington, and Vienna's Musikhaus.

Petric had a short stay in Montreal in December 2003, to meet with composer Denis Gougeon, who is working on a concerto for him that will be performed next year with the *Nouvel Ensemble Moderne* (NEM). A striking transformation has occurred in our perception of this man. From an accordionist working on

the rarified margins of an already marginalized instrument, suddenly, in 2003, after having commissioned 150 new works for the accordion, Petric appears as very much a central figure in Canadian new music and beyond. A great defender of contemporary music in Canada and abroad, he is also a champion, through the musicality of his performances, of the accordion as a viable means of expression for what he calls a 'living art': new music on the one hand, and the accordion on the other: two concepts which are perennially in need of support against various kinds of attacks from reactionary forces. To which Petric's response is disarmingly simple, i.e., great music-making.

His love of the new is coupled with his love of the old — transcriptions; his omnivorousness is contagious, even intimidating. His chosen instrument intrigues, especially composers: at once a stereophonic and truly multiphonic instrument on which crescendo and decrescendo is possible on a single note, it can play at any dynamic range in any register: it's hard to find something that the accordion *can't* do. But then the accordion's *way* is plural. The accordion harbours a multiplicity of cultural meanings: roots in folk culture, immigration and diaspora, but also an instrument of progress, technological cousin of the typewriter, with which it shares a certain similarity. Past/present, old world/new world, learned music/folk traditions — as many oppositions contained within its concept, as within this man who lives under the sign of 'plurivocality'.

### **'I am all embracing, because I am from otherness'**

JONATHAN GOLDMAN: A Joseph Petric concert puts the emphasis on the music: one comes away with the feeling that Joseph Petric is a musician first, and an accordionist not secondarily, but in equal measure: the point is the music. There's a tradition, largely in Eastern block countries, of playing accordion almost as if it were a sport — empty virtuosity which is encouraged in the conservatory studies. You have a different approach. Where does that come from?

JOSEPH PETRIC: I can't say, but I know that it's deeply embedded in my personality. That's the place I began from in the way of artistic exploration. The issue that you bring up about musicians from the Eastern Block is really a very Marxist approach, especially typical of the Gnessin Institute [for music education, in Moscow], from 1927-1991, when the Berlin wall fell. That's the kind of training that was encouraged and promoted for seventy-odd years.

J. G.: Do you find that your performance techniques — and I mean that in the broadest sense — not just in the sense of specific techniques and ways of sound production of the accordion, but also simply the ways you express yourself on the accordion, are they the result of the music, from the challenge that different pieces present to you, or do they come from yourself, and you then

expand the possibilities of the instrument, and then encourage composers to write as a function of that?

J. P.: That's a really important question, because it strikes at the heart of a performance practice in music after modernism. Modernism, the way I saw it, from the late 1960s and early 1970s in Canada and Europe, because I travelled through Europe as a student, was based on authority, it was based on *privileged positionality*. People in places of entitlement declaring *from above* what is worthy and what is not, and students would follow accordingly these injunctions in deciding *how* to play and *what* to play. One of the interesting things is that when I was a teenager, I had this disposition to pursue transcriptions — and I was told in no uncertain terms that I shouldn't do that. But it was my saving grace, because in a modern world in which there is more and more *ennui* with *univocality*, that is, repetitive classicism, or formal modernism, and a linear view of presentation and playing, transcriptions offered a means for a renewal of the performance art. In a Marxist setting, the professor tells you what to play and how to play it...authoritative yes, but hardly a creative situation. My answer to your question is that I pursued a very far-ranging methodology as part of my basic make-up. At the age of 16 or 17, I was playing Bach's D minor concerto [hums opening theme] on the accordion — I was already experimenting with that. I was the first to transcribe the Handel D-minor harpsichord suite. I was probably the first to do some of Bach's English Suites — the A minor, the E minor, the G minor. (The Russians and Europeans preferred the heroic organ repertoire (some still do) of Bach, Boellman and Widor.) At the same time I was playing a lot of new music, so in fact, I wasn't too concerned about expanding what the accordion could do — I did that, but it was a secondary consequence of a more fundamental need for me to come to grips with the accordion as an *enunciative voice*, and that implies an enormous understanding of style and technique. All the other things [i.e., expanding instrumental possibilities] fell into place only later. Even in my first commissions, I never asked a composer to 'expand the envelope of the instrument,' I really don't know what that means! Who is it for, what does it do, and apart from a culture of premieres where you play a piece only once, is it ever going to be played again? I was committed to community and communication. I'm certainly not a populist, but when I look back on it now, I was very much in the mould of what Umberto Eco described as an *interpretive* artist. This relationship that Eco describes between a performing artist, an audience and a composer is very much an integrated, interdependent relationship which is extremely sophisticated, and far more *plurivocal* than a classical univocality. Eco's concept of *plurivocality* is very attractive to me, because it's very rich in its texture, respects our humanness, and in that regard, I didn't

feel I had to define the accordion in any modernist or classical terms. I think one of the failures of the modern accordion has been that there have been moments when classical accordionists have tried to “out-classicalize” the classical world, by playing, for example, the *Goldberg Variations*. It’s been a failure in my view for a number of reasons. First, as beautifully as it’s performed, as astonishing as it is technically, it’s presented as a univocal enlightenment issue. If it had been approached through the lens of the last variation, the quodlibet, with its inherent artistic invitation to parody and whimsy, it could have had completely different results. But this was not to be, because accordionists are trying to *outdo* the classical world on its own terms. That’s not my approach; I refuse to go there.

J. G.: I think a lot of accordionists feel deprived of a classical or romantic past. They feel that the accordion came on the scene, true, in the mid 19<sup>th</sup>-century, but true accordion literature, strictly speaking, dates only from the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, and so these accordionists feel they missed out on classicism and romanticism.

J. P.: That’s precisely my point. Accordionists traditionally looked at it from a *negative* point of view, with a sense of loss and deprivation, searching for “acceptance” as if they were excluded from that past. In fact, what I’ve done in my career is to *invert* the concept of abandonment you speak of. Instead of feeling that I personally have not been included as an artist in that univocal legacy, it was never an issue for me. Instead, I looked at all the repertoire around me that interested me, and I brought it *into me*. I became inclusive.

I became all-embracing. And I simply inverted the whole issue. That has been an artistically significant point from which I generate my artistic enunciation. It’s life-affirming and energizing when one can approach things that way. Inclusivity as remembrance is also an expression of reverence for what lives! Many accordionists did not appreciate that in their haste to gain “acceptance”, they became exclusive, just like the intransigent Classical univocality they despised and railed against in the beginning. On the other hand, I’ve missed nothing! Because I understood that I was from an *otherness* (one of Berio’s favourite concepts). I was able first to invert the issue, *then* convert it into a method of artistic strength and longevity.

### **Irony: playing baroque music on the accordion**

J. G.: You took a serious interest in transcriptions from early on, at the height of what we might call ‘modernistic scorn’ for that sort of thing. Today, transcriptions are one of the trademarks of what we call, rightly or wrongly, musical postmodernism. But a little before that, another Canadian was also interested in transcriptions, and also set down a sustained reflection on their meaning. I’m thinking of Glenn Gould, of course, who was not at all interested in ‘piano

literature' as such. He was only interested in making music on what came most naturally to him, which happened to be the piano. Today people look back on Gould as a precursor of postmodernism<sup>1</sup>. In an analogous fashion, you also embrace transcriptions, and it has to do with a certain sense of 'irony'. Yet when you play transcriptions, whether Antonio Soler or J.S. Bach, what one hears is the music coming to life, not an ironic stance to that music.

J. P.: Not at all. I'm not suggesting that I bring an ironic bent to the music. Soler was written for fortepiano or harpsichord, so there's a certain understanding by concert goers that that would be a given. But when they hear it on the accordion, all of a sudden, there is a kind of duality between what you see and what you hear. You hear the repertoire, but what you see and hear is an accordion, and that, in the first instance, is a moment of irony, because it's a transgression of the model, the canon if you will. But now, it's a double-edged sword. On the one hand, 'Oh, an accordion!' is an old reaction. On the other hand, one can embrace the accordion as it distances, repeats, illuminates and reclaims memory, mediating between old and new in a way that a harpsichord or a piano could never do; so what you do is present to the audience this *plurivocality*, on multiple levels of receptivity, according to each individual's experience. This is what's so fascinating for me about Umberto Eco's writing, because he respects that ability of the listener to address the issue of how does, for example, *whimsy* touch me as a listener, how does *irony* touch me. I like the French expression '*assister au concert*', meaning 'to participate at a concert'. That's a brilliant phrase, because when I would play for Francophone audiences I knew there was a completely different kind of attention from the audience, in that they would be there *participating* immediately from the moment they stepped into the hall. That's a very different situation from merely 'going to a concert'. It reinforces what Eco has been writing about for thirty years, and it's very reaffirming for me, because that's been my instinct all my life, that I am an interpreter, enunciator, who communicates. I never took easily to Modernism — while I commissioned many works which could be described as modernistic — I never fell into the ghetto of formal modernism, because the *enunciation* and the *connection* to a receiver, an audience, was primordial for me.

### 3. Contemporary performance practice

J. G.: One of the things I want to talk to you about is performance practice. In musicology, there is a lot of interest in the history of performance practice, starting with the study of Baroque performance: how, for example, Bach's music was performed in its own time. This study of performance practice has slowly crept up to more recent music; Webern, for example, was apparently not played

1. C.f., Nattiez, J.-J., "Gould As Precursor Of Postmodernism", ch. 7 of *The Battle of Chronos and Orpheus*, London, Oxford University Press, forthcoming (French original, chpt. 7, *Le combat de Chronos et d'Orphée*, Paris, Bourgois, 1993).

2. The model of the accordion best suited to playing contemporary music. Instead of a left-hand button system that triggers preset major, minor and seventh chords (the 'Stradella' system), the free-bass accordion allows playing single notes arranged chromatically in the left hand, permitting the player to have a greater freedom of pitches in all registers.

3. Lips, Friedrich (2000), *The Art of Bayan Playing*, Ulrich Schmullin (éd.), Kamen, Karthouse-Schmulling.

4. The Gnessin Institute in Moscow founded its *bayan* (the Russian version of the accordion) program in 1927, and spawned among many others, acclaimed bayanists Yuri Kazkov, Vecheslav Galkin, and Friederich Lips.

in the 1930s in Vienna as it was played in the 1950s at Darmstadt, i.e., in a pointillistic manner. The accordion, of course, has a shorter history than the violin. The modern concert accordion, or the chromatic free-bass accordion<sup>2</sup> goes back 100 years, as you told me, since you once saw a photograph of such an instrument, built by Antonio Vercelli, from 1908. Let's say, for the sake of argument, that the history of contemporary works on this type of accordion goes back 50 years. Would you say that there is a *history* of accordion performance practice which could be traced from 1950 until today?

J. P.: Definitely; I see the differences as due to the very 'Balkanized', regionalized inflections combined with various remnants of Eurocentric enlightenment univocality within that performance practice. Canada established artistic enunciation from the outset in 1964 by virtue of its sociological and anthropological givens. The Russians, for example, have an authoritative approach; the Germans have theirs: Hugo Noth, for example, has been teaching for 30 years now, at the *Hochschule für Musik* in Trossingen: I estimate he has trained just under a thousand students, and they constitute a veritable opus: a committed artist and pedagogue. The Italians are different. It's *extremely* different from what [pioneering Danish accordionist] Mogens Ellegaard [(1936-1996)] did. Ellegaard's approach was very different from what the Sibelius Academy [in Helsinki, Finland] is doing, and a lot of these traditions have effectively more to do with hierarchical and technocratic training in an authoritative conservatory setting, than with a specifically artistic enunciation; regional differences combined with remnants of enlightenment authoritative positionality and entitlement effectively overshadow a living art as seen in the training of accordion technocrats, accordion musicologists, accordion professors, and the imposition of a policy of studying performance practice as artifact and curatorial objectification.

This predictably included the systemic equivocation of an improvisational and living art, reinforced by an institutional and Marxist amputation of memory. One such example is Friedrich Lips' book in which he combines voluntary amnesia, authoritative positionality and a plea for a 19<sup>th</sup>-century-style heroic art, while revealing the equivocating effect of Marxist diktats on 20<sup>th</sup>-century performance practice, published in 2000.<sup>3</sup>

In Canada, we had the first broadly based artistic accordion program in the world (and as of today, still the longest continuously running program in the world!) — with the exception of the Gnessin Institute in communist Russia<sup>4</sup>; in 1964, the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto introduced an accordion program; in 1969, Queen's University [in Kingston, Ontario] accepted Accordion Performance majors.

The bayan at the Gnessin Institute was bypassed by every single development in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century music — including serialism, modernism, jazz improvisation, contemporary improvisation, electronic and electroacoustic composition, chance music, theatre music, and computer generated stochastic works, on account of its Marxist political agenda. This anachronism is proven by the fact that in 1999, Russia's leading bayan player included, in a list of commissions in the liner-notes to his CD, more than twenty works named 'Theme and Variations'. In a move which can be viewed as an acknowledgement of the Western influence of a living art, his list was revised in 2002 so as to eliminate all 22 theme and variations titles (a plurivocal irony if ever there was one!....) One can only speculate as to the inherent gaps in performance practice that Marxist positionality imposed on generations of other bayan players : but the accordion programs at Queen's University and the University of Toronto taught from the outset, chamber-music, analysis, solo performance, formally structured courses in contemporary improvisation, concerto performance training, international master classes, repertoire research and programming, methodologies in commissioning through the provincial and federal arts councils; in 1970 the University of Toronto followed suit, as did the University of Ottawa in 1971; in 1973, it was the University of Calgary's turn. Montreal had Christian Di Maccio (1941-1993), a French national who settled and taught in Quebec before he moved to San Francisco in the late 1980s. We had European instructors coming here, between 1969 and 1979, and they were frankly *astonished* by what was going on here. It wasn't until the mid-1970s that Germany, Denmark, Norway and Finland actually *began* their conservatory programs, some ten years later!

### **The Canadian example**

J. G.: Why do you think it developed so early in Canada? What you're saying is that the accordion was accepted as an academic course of study before, for example, jazz music...

J. P.: Canada is a very inclusive place; you have the ideal of inclusivity, and if somebody has something to say artistically, they would get a fair hearing, and that's what happened.

Further, Canadians are both practical, sophisticated politically, and have a deep distrust of authority, That was also significant in the development of an accordion methodology in Canada. In fact, Pierre Gervasoni, in his book on the accordion, *Accordéon, instrument du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, Mazo, 1987), has an important section on the activities of the University of Toronto and the Royal



5. Published as *The Accordion*, New York, Accordion Music Publishing Co., 1955.

Conservatory of Music; all he did to prove his point was to photocopy lists of the imposed accordion pieces on an ARCT exam [teaching diploma from RCM] as an example to readers as to what Canada was doing. And that was published in the 1970s! For me, of all the scholarly works on the accordion since Toni Charuhas' MA Dissertation from Catholic University in Washington DC in the 1950s<sup>5</sup>, Gervasoni's tome is impressive for its evenhandedness. He eschews all revisionism, and all ethnocentric and technocratic tendencies so common to previous and subsequent publications — a refreshing must read.

So it's very significant, that a Canadian approach to creating an accordion methodology (as opposed to a tradition) was extremely far-ranging in its implications, and ultimately, its outcomes. I went to study with Hugo Noth in Trossingen in 1977, and what I had been trained to do between the ages of 18 and 24 in a Canadian Bachelor's music program, a Musicology MA and Performance practice were well beyond anything that was available in Europe at the time, and even today.

J. G.: Who were your teachers?

J. P.: In Canada, Joseph Macerollo. In Europe Hugo Noth. I was the first North American accordion student to study at an accredited European institution.

J. G.: You speak also of Mogens Ellegaard, as, if not a teacher, a mentor or a model. You used to play on his instrument, his Hohner Gola.

J. P.: That's because I bought it from him! It was strictly a business deal [laughs]. I never studied with him, but he wanted very much to be my mentor, though I fear as a Canadian I was not particularly fertile ground for his proselytizing vision. But he did invite me to give master classes and lectures and concerts in Scandinavia in 1986, so I got to know him very well at that time. He was an example of a Nietzschean 'strong man' who established an accordion program in an authoritative conservatory setting, advocating a particularly modernistic vision of the accordion.

### **Vibrato and expression, and instrument making**

J. G.: When we talk about performance practice, we arrive at the question of expression. What is associated with your playing style, something that you have also thematized, among other places in the liner-notes to your CD *Orbiting Garden*<sup>6</sup> is the use of vibrato. The accordion is an instrument which arrived at vibrato rather late in life. What does it mean to you, why do you assign such importance to that technique or form of expression?

J. P.: It goes back to your question of traditions and styles. I spent eight years studying with an Early Music performer as well as one of the world's great harpsichordists. I received a Canada Council grant for that. I would go to the

6. Centrediscs, 2002, CMCCD-7802

harpichordist's studio, and play Rameau and Scarlatti for him, and he would play the same pieces on his instrument; and we would discuss why a particular repertoire worked or didn't work on the accordion, and the technical limitations of the harpsichord or of the accordion. What was important there was my heightened understanding of subtle inflections in the music of ancient times and how that can make the accordion even more alive today. I know of no other accordionist who has invested that much time into studying interpretive issues in that manner with a view to making a more impacting performance presence. This is very important because, when you ask about vibrato, vibrato has been used for centuries; why *not* vibrato? You choose certain structural places, and moments, to use vibrato.

J. G.: It's available to you.

J. P.: That's right. And what I also had to investigate was how my own body works: I studied physiology for about five years with acquaintances of mine who are medical professionals — *Gray's Anatomy* and all that — in order to understand how in fact your body works [and produces sound on the instrument]. This was not available: you had to go out and find it. When you combine neurology, physiology, performance art in many different styles, you arrive at something that works. I'm not claiming to have arrived at an authentic performance practice for Baroque music on the accordion: that's not the point. The point is that I'm trying to understand as much as I can about the Baroque period and the performance practice of the time of Rameau and Bach so that the accordion can actually be elevated through the experience of the past, and the repertoire can be illuminated in completely different ways. This method is truly reflective of the function of parody and irony in a living art. We have the model, contexts (historical, anthropological, sociological, neurological, physiological), sound as sensation (Helmholtz), musical models, distancing of the same, canon, its transgression or inversion in the generation of a living art, and finally enunciation of plurivocality to community. To me — although I don't like to use the term 'postmodern', because it's become a cliché — *music after modernism* is a completely different world of sound, psychology and presentation. All this becomes a part of an artist's *arsenal* of enunciating material that he or she can draw on, in order to heighten artistic impact.

J. G.: I know you've also worked closely with instrument makers in order to arrive at an instrument which suits your demands, one of your demands being the ability to perform concertos without amplification (such as the ten you've commissioned so far!). In what other ways have you worked with instrument makers?

J. P.: I've only worked with one, Leo Niemi, but I've worked with him for almost 30 years. I was fortunate to find him: he understood materials : metals,

wood, etc. He was trained as a geological engineer, and worked as one for two years, before leaving it, because he realized he was too artistic for that sort of work. He's always played the accordion, and he's a very fine player. I sketched a design for an instrument, and then I encouraged him to start building one; I trusted him implicitly. He had such confidence, flair and understanding. He had a lot of imagination, and was willing to try things that had never been done before.

J. G.: What sort of things did you work on specifically?

J. P.: Well, we began with the question "What if....?" We looked into widening the resonating box, experimenting with different woods, we tried creating a finish on the wood on the interior of the instrument: all these things had never appeared in an accordion before. Most of all, I created this system of sound-posts in my instrument, like the ones used in violins. It makes perfect sense, and it's calibrated to resonate with a natural, speaking tone. This didn't exist in accordions before. If you open up your Dallapé accordion [full disclosure: the interviewer plays the accordion!], you won't find it, because it didn't exist; and that was a very fine instrument in its day.

### **Cultural meanings, commissions**

J. G.: What interests me are all the different cultural meanings that the accordion has: an audience member who goes to one of your concerts comes with a certain cultural baggage, and you then play off of these givens — either by *confirming* or *subverting* his or her presuppositions about the accordion. To take two extreme examples in your vast repertoire, consider playing Sophia Gubaidulina's *Sieben Worte*, which approaches the realm of sacred music, on the one hand, and John Zorn's *Roadrunner* on the other hand, which is a satirical compendium of every tacky accordion tune, up to and including the regrettable *Chicken Dance*. Do you find that different pieces are received differently by different audiences?

J. P.: I have no doubt that they are, but I don't concern myself with that... My job is only to present the pieces as intelligently and as incisively as I possibly can. I leave it at that. Clearly, the Zorn is received differently in Moscow. In France, for example, it has become a cult piece! (Some years ago I had a group of Paris accordion students follow me from Paris to Lyon in order to hear me play the Zorn.) Similarly, the Gubaidulina has had a following for fifteen years, because of its pseudo-religious quality — a cult-piece of a different kind. I played it in London, Ontario with Orchestra London and I had Russians in the audience who had heard it many times in Europe and the former Soviet Union; they came backstage because they were so struck by the performance; it's a

strong case for plurivocality in a living performance art and they reaffirmed it backstage, because it's a performance in the New World of a piece that was written underground in a Marxist state. Gubaidulina had to be clandestine for many years during the Marxist regime. I offer dimensions in my performances that cannot possibly exist anywhere else by virtue of the richly textured sociological and anthropological contexts of Canadian society and all that encompasses and implies. Audiences and critics respond positively to this.

J. G.: We were talking about how we are approaching 100 years of the modern concert accordion (which dates back to 1908), even if the first accordion goes back to the 1820s: the free bass system in the left hand allowed it to break with its folkloric past. On the other hand, you have commissioned more than 150 pieces, transcribed and created a bibliography of over 1000 standard works, which is a staggering number, to say the least, probably more than any other performer on any other instrument in Canada. How closely do you work with composers who are writing for you?

J. P.: Extremely closely. I need to get in there and have it done, as they say in French, *sur mesure*. I have always sought composers who write *for* a performer. It becomes a very close collaboration. That way, the composer begins to understand my outlook, my performance practices, what my goals are, and some information about the hall, venue, audience, etc. And the piece begins to serve this complete outlook. I find that pieces that are written without much input from the dedicatee and no subsequent attention from the composer tend to have a weak performance life — not always, but usually. All of a sudden it becomes a heightened collaboration in the service of communication.

J. G.: Are there any of those commissions that you feel particularly close to?

J. P.: Well, I don't have favorites, but some of them have taken on a life of their own, and have had a larger career than I thought they would, because audiences have responded to them really well. I tend to keep an objective distance, which becomes more artistically interesting. When you leave a piece for a few years, and then come back to it, then you discover all sorts of new things in it. What's important is to come back to the well to reinvigorate. That's important to me, and that's at the heart of how I approach things.

J. G.: How has your approach influenced other performers: after all, your playing is informed by a serious interest in all music from the Baroque to the present day, including improvised musics?

J. P.: The issue of commissions is very important, because I was very systematic in my choice of commissions. I would commission a piece for a certain combination of instruments because I knew it didn't exist in the repertoire. I have commissions from Dan Foley, Alcides Lanza, Peter Hatch and I play them

all over Europe. I remember when Marjan Mozetich's wonderful piece for accordion and string trio, *Dance of the Blind*, was composed in 1979 (commissioned by CBC producer David Jaeger) in a minimalist, plurivocal style at a time when the modernist ethic was still intransigent, that piece was very much misunderstood because Europe was so univocal. Today, it is played with great success in European conservatories and recital halls all over Europe as well as North America. As an observation, when I was recently invited to be a juror for Masters Degree accordion recitals at the University of Toronto, I found that up to 50% of what the students played were pieces which I had commissioned. This satisfied me and reaffirmed my work. Students play this music not only because they like it, but because they feel it somehow speaks to them. Many of these pieces are now held in important music lending libraries and archives, like the *Bundes Archiv* in Germany, the Accordion Institute of Finland, and of course the Canadian Music Centre. Among my 150 commissions there are ten concertos and 22 electroacoustic works, which have re-evaluated both accordion performance practice and in the case of electroacoustic works, created and redefined the very canon itself.

### **A living art**

J. G.: I heard Berio speaking about his thirteenth *Sequenza*, for accordion, and the first thing he said was that the accordion evokes a folkloric past, and he described an image of someone playing folk songs atop a mountain. What is interesting is that even among the musically hyper-literate, the accordion is considered a folkloric instrument, whereas the truth of the matter is that this highly mechanical product of industrialization actually usurps the place of traditional, native instruments, and is a pure product of modernity.

J. P.: Yes. The accordion is the perfect medium for a living musical art in music after modernism. It is revealing indeed that Berio, who wrote his accordion *Sequenza* in 1995, the last of his *Sequenze*, is speaking about accordions in a way that was normative in Canada in 1960, more than 40 years ago! This attitude is still prevalent in Europe as confirmed by the French Accordion Society conference in Paris in 2000 in which Pierre Gervasoni (former accordionist, now music critic for *Le Monde*) participated. They were discussing the same problems in 2000 as were discussed in Toronto in 1960. It confirms how univocal Europe remains at this late date, and may not be as nuanced as one is led to believe.

This Eurocentric struggle with issues of a living art after Enlightenment univocality is further confirmed by the English composer Martin Butler's address at the University of Sussex on Oct 28, 2003, in which he calls into question the

value of composing in an academic setting. Butler, a composer and guest lecturer at Princeton, ends up effectively justifying academic composing as a form of research<sup>7</sup>! This reaffirms the curious struggle of the forces of technocratic entitlement, privileged academic positionality and artistic creation in Europe, and the need for authority in a world where modernist remnants and the sociology of globalization meet the psychology of a living art.

Putting aside questions of modernism and plurality of the accordion, the accordion fit into the spaces of Canadian life: playing with people, for people, before the invention of television. I associate it with that other Canadian institution, going out and playing hockey on a frozen lake after coming home from school — but before I could do that, we would have to shovel and clear the ice for an hour with a dozen other friends before the game began.....a living fabric, a physical labour, then poetry...*echoes of Eco*.

J. G.: What is your objective as a performer?

J. P.: To create a living art: I should think that's the challenge for any performer today. Without community there is nothing. That's why I have always been equally committed to arrangements as well as transcriptions. There is no exclusivity in what I do: composers don't *feed* me, and I don't *feed* audiences [re: interview with Torstensson!], I *enunciate*. Since 1970 there are only 5 or 6 pieces for accordion and tape or electronics. I'm happy to say that I have added 22 works, including many with live electronics for this combination among my commissions. For example, Alcides Lanza's piece for accordion and tape [*Arghanum V*, 1991] really does something to me. Also, more recently solo pieces have been important to me. Linda C. Smith, the Toronto-based composer, for example, wrote a solo accordion piece for me [*Low Tide* 2003], that lasts 19 minutes! It's one of the most substantial pieces ever written for the instrument! Micheline Roi wrote a solo accordion piece [*Fondly Through the Madness Breathing*, 1992], that we later coupled with a choreographer (2003), which was then furnished with narration (2004): that's what I mean by a living art. It's one thing to commission works, to throw those pieces out there. But to give life to the pieces, and to establish a relationship with audiences is another matter.

I have never asked myself 'What will the audience like?', and then go on to choose my programs accordingly; First, I ask, 'Where is the artistic power in my repertoire, my program?' Second, I ask what I can do to actively engage the audience with the music I present. The challenge is how to make a concert an *event*, in every sense of that word. Communication and community. ♦

7. Butler, Martin (2003), 'What's a Composer doing in a University?', *Society for the Promotion of New Music*, December, p.1-2.