

CANADIAN COMPOSERS PORTRAITS SERIES**JACQUES HÉTU DOCUMENTARY**

Produced and presented by Eitan Cornfield

Transcription

EITAN CORNFIELD: Jacques Héту is at a crossroads in his life. He has just retired from a long career teaching music. For the first time in his life he can do nothing but compose. He has just finished a concerto for organ and orchestra, and he is already thinking about another. It will probably be a triple concerto for piano, violin, and cello. Beyond that, the waiting list extends to twelve commissions, several years' worth. Héту is one of Canada's most successful composers, yet there was a time when he was a prophet without honour in his own land, when he wasn't modern enough for Québec's critical establishment.

I caught up with Jacques Héту at his home on a wooded hillside near the town of St.-Hippolyte, an hour north of Montreal.

JACQUES HÉTU: It was a farm here. My wife was making goat cheese, with fourteen goats, but that was twenty-five years ago, you know.

EITAN CORNFIELD: We walked the property to the edge of the woods. We're surrounded by rolling hills. A gleaming lake stretches off in the distance. There are splashes of colour everywhere, the first hints of fall.

JACQUES HÉTU: Here are the -- you know, gardens and ---

EITAN CORNFIELD: We arrive at a screened-in porch attached to the guest house. There's a smell of fresh paint.

JACQUES HÉTU: --- construction here.

EITAN CORNFIELD: We're getting close to the house now. It's a two-storey chalet. It has been updated and added on to, but still has a real Laurentian charm. I can see Hétu's wife, at a south-facing window, fussing over some plants.

MRS. HÉTU: Hello.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Good morning. How are you?

MRS. HÉTU: Fine. And you?

EITAN CORNFIELD: Books, armchairs, varnished wood everywhere. The house is airy, cheerful and comfortable. We climb the stairs to Hétu's studio. He walks over to a drafting table set up in the middle of the room. Behind him is the piano. He opens a large manuscript book and shows me his latest triumph: a concerto for organ and symphony orchestra. The ink is barely dry. The concerto will be the first music played on the brand new organ at Edmonton's Winspear Centre.

JACQUES HÉTU: I had to put an orchestral density, you know, because I'm sure that there will be no problem for the organ, but the balance, you know – so, maybe it's the first work that I will be obliged to change some – some dynamics; because -- I never change a note of my music, maybe some phrasing, yes, just little things, but I've never changed a note of an orchestral or soloist part, but the organ, you know, with this work, I don't know.

EITAN CORNFIELD: That note of uncertainty comes as something of a surprise, because Hétu is famous for delivering a well thought through score. Maybe it's because, for the very first time, he's not composing for a specific performer. That person hasn't been hired yet. What's more, nobody has heard the organ; it hasn't even been built. While I look through the score, Hétu pulls out a fat pipe, lights it, and takes a drag. For his old friend, conductor Mario Bernardi, it's a cherished gesture.

MARIO BERNARDI: Oh, he looks very mild, or should I say a typical French-Canadian. I mean, he's – but, maybe not so typical, because he – he seems to have an aura of Europe about him. He has a very charming wife. I speak

French, so I'm very much at ease with him. He does have a stinking, bloody pipe, and if you can forego that, he's a very charming man, very mild-mannered, jovial, really, in his – in his outlook to life, it seems to me.

ROBERT CRAM: You know, the first thing I would say is he has twinkling eyes.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Flutist Robert Cram.

ROBERT CRAM: The man's eyes twinkle. He's constantly smiling. He's constantly chuckling. He has a beard. He has – oh, he's – you know, he's pretty bald on top. If I were casting a movie, and I wanted someone to play the role of a joyous monk, I would think of Jacques very quickly, and whenever I'm visiting with Jacques, there's something about that pipe-smoke that's very comforting.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Robert Cram first played Jacques Hétu's music in the early '70s, while he was principal flutist of the National Art Centre Orchestra. Over the years, he and the composer became friends. In the early '90s, the National Art Centre Orchestra was getting ready for a big tour across Canada.

ROBERT CRAM: I remember looking at the plans for the tour, and I went into the office and I said, 'Just a second, you didn't commission a Canadian piece for this. What's going on? What's wrong with you folks?', and the answer I was given was, 'Well, it's much too late to do anything like that'. So, then and there, I picked up the phone, dialed Jacques's home, and said, 'Jacques, how would you like to write me a flute concerto?'. So, Jacques wrote me this, his absolutely magnificent flute concerto, his fun flute concerto, and we took it across the country, and played it from Newfoundland to – to the Pacific, to Victoria.

JACQUES HÉTU: Since about twelve or fifteen years, I've written – I think – I think twelve concertos. So, I like the concerto form because it's a dramatic form. There is a soloist with the – the actor, you know, and the orchestra tell the story, and, you know, if I had to compose just what I want, it – it will be

operas, operas, operas. But, we are in a country where the commissions of the – the opera are very quiet, you know.

So, I – I like the concerto. I like the orchestra. I like all the instruments, but the ideal is of the – of the concerto. So, if you ask as to – if you ask what’s – what will be the music, the next music of Jacques Hétu, trust me, it will be again a concerto. The next one that I – I have to work -- it’s the project.

EITAN CORNFIELD: This project is a triple concerto for the Montreal-based Trio Hochelaga. The odds are very good that the musicians and the public will enjoy the piece on first hearing. Hétu’s previous concertos all display a lyrical flow of ideas balanced with logic, clarity, and brevity. Like all good music, his profits from multiple hearings, but you do get it the first time, and that’s largely because of the common element at the heart of all of Hétu’s music.

JACQUES HÉTU: Always, it’s melodic line. The first notes of any works that I’ve begun, it’s a simple melodic line of ten seconds or twelve, and after this melodic line, I begin to work, and it’s always this little fragment goes to either two or three or four or five movements of the work, and it makes a kind of cyclical, musical, structural – to unify the work, because after I find an interesting thing in that melodic way, the big structure comes naturally.

You know, I am a melodist, I think. I came from Schubert, you know. That was the first composer that really – oh, at the age of eight, so -- my father was a doctor, and my parents lived in a great familial house, you know, with twenty-three or twenty-four apartments in a big house in Trois-Rivières, with nurses, and with, you know – great bourgeois. When I was three or four years old, in this big house, there was a big Victrola, you know, a big -- with some records. So, I heard music of Liszt and Puccini sung by Beniamino Gigli.

Until the age of five, I was in these gardens and protected by *clôtures*, you know, but I was free; and at the age of five, I was put in, what we call a *jardin de l’enfance*, but it was not a garden, or a children’s garden for me, because I – for

ten years -- five to fifteen, I was apart from my family, except in between June and September.

I didn't know that I was so special, and it's not until the age of eight, I asked my parents to buy for my birthday a Schubert symphony, yes, Grieg or a Schubert symphony, but my parents were not musicians. Nobody discovered my -- my interest to the music, until the age of fifteen, where myself, I, after an organ recital by Raymond Daveluy, I go to the piano, wherever, and I began to play some passage of Couperin or Buxtehude or Bach. I had never touched a piano before, and I find it easy. For me, it was funny, until one of my friends -- 'it's very curious -- it's not normal -- it's not normal this kind of' -- and I said, 'no, I don't know', but one week after, I was -- my -- all music.

And, six months later, I was no more in the college. I was learning music to become a composer. So, it's -- it's so fast the kind of discovery for me of the potential to make the music. I discovered music like somebody discovers love, you know -- ha, that's it! It was -- it was my life. I was sure that it was my way of thinking, of living, of -- I was so sure that, you know, my parents thought that I had to go to the psychologist -- 'is this young guy normal?' Yes, I was normal.

One night I heard on the radio a modern piece, you know, but very strong, and I said, 'Oh, what good music. That's contemporary. That's expressive. I want to study with the guy who wrote it', and it was a piece by Clermont Pépin. I was with Clermont Pépin in the composition class, but Clermont, after eight classes, he take me apart, and do counterpoint harmony and a little -- you know, just because he sees that I can go quickly, you know. So, I make the counterpoint for two voices, you know, until the -- double the choir -- at eight or sixteen voices, in six months. So, he is my composition teacher, but Clermont gave me many things, many more than compositions.

EITAN CORNFIELD: After five years with Pépin, Jacques Héту won the Montreal Conservatory's first prize. What's more, he was awarded both a Canada Council grant and Québec's top music prize, the Prix d'Europe. Héту was taken

with the music of the French composer Henri Dutilleux. He made up his mind to go to Paris and study with him. Hétu arrived at the École Normale in 1961. In Dutilleux, he found a teacher very much like Clermont Pépin in Montreal; he had a deep respect for tradition. But, this *was* Paris in the '60s, and it was the hey-day of the avant-garde serial composers led by Pierre Boulez.

JACQUES HÉTU: One day, I bring Dutilleux a piano solo piece, and he looks at this, and says, 'Why don't you show it to Pierre Boulez?' It's really in Paris in '61, '62, '63, you know, that Boulez was the great master, you know. Messaien, somewhat, but, Boulez was -- was God, you know. But, I had to make a choice. I just knew that, yes, I can write with serialism, and all this, in character, not only the notes, but the intensity – all that. But, my own expression has nothing to do with that.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Hétu pauses for a minute to draw on his pipe; then, he points to his heart.

JACQUES HÉTU: For me, music must be here, you know, and not only here, but with written ideas. That's why the melodic may be – and the structural – classical structures – are, for me, essential for the intelligence of a work, and for me, what I have to tell in the music. So, I stayed with Dutilleux, and I had absolutely not the intention to go with Boulez. I respect Boulez. I was at all his concerts and all these things, but not interested to make – to write *du Boulez*.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Boulez developed the serial techniques that Schoenberg and Webern had applied to pitch. His total serialism brought rhythm, dynamics, and orchestration under systematic control. Berio, Cage, and Stockhausen came under his spell. Jacques Hétu didn't. But, that didn't prevent him from having a serious go at serialism. His *Petite Suite* for piano in 1962 is very much in the school of Anton Webern: it's terse and angular.

Jacques Hétu looks back at the *Petite Suite* as a kind of exercise. As soon as he had proven to himself that he could do it, he rejected rigorous serialism. His

very next piece, the *Piano Variations, Opus 8*, was a watershed. It would define his style and help launch his career in a quite spectacular way.

JACQUES HÉTU: It was my first work without a teacher, you know. And, *Piano Variations* – that’s a kind of amalgam of what I knew before, and what I wanted. It’s a very important work for me from a technical point of view. You know, it’s a mix of serial, of modern music, even tonal and chromatic – all these things. And, after the *Piano Variations* in ’64, it was very quiet, until Glenn Gould, who would put it on record.

I am lucky that great musicians like Glenn Gould – you know, for my career, it was really the beginning, and the week after that I knew that Glenn Gould – I had commissions – three or four commissions.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Jacques Hétu spent two years in France. When he came back, he began teaching at Laval University, where he stayed for the next fifteen years. He consolidated the distinctive style that had first come out in his *Piano Variations*. It was a style with a broad appeal to instrumental soloists, and he received a stream of commissions for concertos. By the time Robert Cram commissioned a flute concerto in 1991, he had a pretty good idea of what he could expect from Hétu.

ROBERT CRAM: The people that I admire in this world are the ones who, when you hear the music, even if they’re speaking a slightly different language for one reason or another because of the genre that they’re using, because they’re attempting something new, you recognize a voice instantly, and Jacques has a voice: when you hear a few chords of his, you – you just simply know Jacques Hétu wrote that piece of music.

I knew that there would be a lyricism, because he’s unabashedly lyrical. He’s – in fact, the first impression one gets upon meeting him, is that he is a man who is very comfortable in his skin, as a person and as a composer. He knows what he is going to be writing. He has a language of his own, and he loves it.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Hétu has devised a complex language of his own. But, if there's one reason musicians, like Robert Cram, can identify his work within a few chords, it's his harmony.

JACQUES HÉTU: My melodies are very often inside the twelve tones, but the harmony it comes from – from modal scales. If I put a G-major chord – you know, it's not so tonal that – what I play, but it gives you an idea of very simple chords, and a very chromatic, melodic line. So, you know, I mix modal scales with tonal effects, with chromatic melodies.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Mario Bernardi has conducted the premieres of half a dozen works by Jacques Hétu. He learned long ago what to expect from the composer.

MARIO BERNARDI: Something well-crafted, something that has unmistakably got a French flavour to it. It seems that he has that – that's sort of a given, to be -- to my ears, at least. Everything that he writes seems to sort of echo things of the past from France. I mean, he doesn't – I mean, it doesn't sound like Debussy, but one sees a little bit of an accent there that recalls him, and Roussel, too, perhaps. But, it goes further than that, of course. I don't mean to say that he is not original. He is original. I also expect from him a piece that will work very well.

ARTHUR KAPTAINIS: Oh, you go to Jacques Hétu for something that works.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Arthur Kaptainis has written about sixty performances of Hétu's work, during his fifteen years as music critic for the Montreal Gazette.

ARTHUR KAPTAINIS: I don't want to sound cynical about this, but it's vital for an orchestra or a commissioning body to feel safe. Now, that's – that's a dangerous word. I'm quite aware of that, but there are enough composers out there with whom you feel unsafe. To approach a composer who will inevitably produce something that is of high professional calibre is a natural thing for

orchestras to do. You know, that means that there will be at least one curtain call after the premiere. That means there will be time for the composer to march down the stairs and get up on the stage, and take a bow.

If I sound like I'm being a little cold-hearted about that, think about what the opposite situation is. I mean, it's pretty dreadful. So, they go to Jacques Hétu for something that works. But, I think they can honestly go to Jacques Hétu also for something that – that will last, I mean, something that has meaning, that sounds like it was worth commissioning in the first place.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Implicit in Kaptainis's reaction to Jacques Hétu's music is a critical paradox. One has to admit the success of the work that's crafted by a master, and that connects with an audience on first hearing. On the other hand, there's a whiff of critical suspicion. New music has to be difficult and challenging to be meaningful. To be really good, it has to ignore familiar landmarks and stretch the envelope.

The critical establishment, especially in Québec, has always struggled with what to make of Hétu's music. When Hétu was coming of age in the '60s and '70s, the new music scene in Québec was dominated by the Société de Musique Contemporaine du Québec. Its avant-garde aesthetic precluded serious critical consideration of a composer who is so proudly traditional.

JACQUES HÉTU: I am – I am a Romantic, you know. So, what it means – it means that about my structures and my musical way, I think that I am really from the German and Viennese music, but the sounds are very French – about the orchestral -- about the sonorities. That's -- so, it's a mix – it's normal, I think – a mix of German and French.

ARTHUR KAPTAINIS: Because his style is so international and conservative -- with an asterisk , because I think we have to remember we're not talking about somebody who writes in the style Rachmaninov or Brahms. For those two reasons, I think that he probably was regarded with suspicion by the avant-garde mainstream which was in a very dominant position in Québec from

the '50s on. There was a society, which – well, there is a society – the SMCQ – which stood for all that was revolutionary in music. You had the sense that they were taking orders from Paris and from Boulez.

JACQUES HÉTU: It was supposed to be the only way to think of music, you know. You must be avant-garde or nothing. I was not avant-garde, and I think that I was not nothing. You know, I was considered, like a kind of a *dinosaure*, we say in French, not for my music, but for myself. Yes, that was hard. That was hard.

ARTHUR KAPTAINIS: A listener, I think, defines originality by the absence of touchstones, and by the absence to references to other styles and other composers. Jacques Héту's music is connected – is connected to the past, and to the recent past, and what that has meant for me, I think I can say fairly, is that his music can seem a successful elaboration of the past, or it can seem a little too grounded in the past.

Because he's so able, and because he is such a craftsman, I think he inevitably succeeds at a certain level, and that accounts for his – his popularity with musicians and his continued success. Yet, when I think about the works of his that I've heard, my reactions do vary, and they vary, I think, according to the extent he is able to find an original voice in a context that is inevitably European and Western, and, as I say, I suppose, conservative.

MARIO BERNARDI: I think that's nonsense. I don't think that's the essence of music. The essence of music is to – to hit the intellect and the sensibilities of the listener, and you don't have to have something new. He writes for the audience directly. You know, musicians sort of 'pooh-pooh' all that, but they're wrong.

EITAN CORNFIELD: So, who's right? Does music have to be challenging to be good?

ROBERT CRAM: That's actually a very good question, and I'm going to answer it by saying that he is challenging. I look for certain things in music. One

is a voice. Another is the control of the craft: how well the composer understands composition, and understands the instruments that he or she is writing for. The other is what demands does that composer make of me as a performer in interpreting their music.

Now, technically, Jacques writes music that's demanding. You have to work hard to learn his music. It's not simple to play, and, as a performer, he does -- one of the other things that I find most interesting: he gives you material, and then you've got to go to work. And, there's enough room in it for many decisions, for many ways of performing that music, for many different interpretive possibilities. It's a whole world of fantasy that he opens up, in effect, for a performer, and there is enormous pleasure in that. So, yes, there's a challenge there. Now, is it a challenge in that it's hard to listen to? Not at all.

JACQUES HÉTU: I know that maybe I have not created a very new musical language. But, originality is not only in the technical language, you know. The language – the technical language is just a kind of – of support of – you know – of the music itself, and the spirit of my music, it's there that you can find, I think, the originality in the expression, what I have to say in music.

When I am in my studio, I don't look at the lake or – no. I live in the middle of birds – I have dozens of birds. I feed the birds, and, you know, I live in the country, but for the music – it's good for the spirit – but it's the sonorities of instruments, you know. If I have a concerto to write for the flute, or a piano piece, a solo piece, it's the colour of the instrument, soloist instrument -- or if I have to write for a big orchestra.

So, again, it's – it's not the trees. It's not the birds. It's music -- and the music – so, sonorities of instruments – and it's naturally an emotional expression, but I cannot explain exactly my emotional expression, but it must be with this little melodic fragment who will become a work.

EITAN CORNFIELD: More often than not, that little melodic fragment comes to Jacques Héту early in the morning.

JACQUES HÉTU: It's in the morning that my mind is clear. And, many times in the evening, I sleep with the problem – with the transition, I call it -- of the switch between one part and the other part that it takes – you know, I can stay one week on three bars, and the week after, I go for one hundred bars, and then I stop, and I – I try to put the sections inside. So, late in the night, if I have a problem, the morning, next morning – not always, but – I have the solution. I work in the morning for six to eight hours, ten maybe when I am – and after, I'm going in the woods.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Going into the woods to clear your head after a hard day's work is an honourable Canadian tradition. It's tempting to look for evocations of his land and its culture in Hétu's music. But, he's guarded about notions of nationalism, and about what it means to be a Canadian composer.

JACQUES HÉTU: Sure, I'm a Canadian composer, because I live in Canada, but my music is European – you know – influenced. We have no tradition here. We have no tradition in Canada. If I was born in Australia or in Denmark – I don't know – will my music be the same? For a great part, yes; that's a kind of answer for that. But, the context, sure, it will be different.

You know, some critics try to find some north influence or Sibelius or -- I don't know. Maybe in my music -- but I am – I don't try to put the spirit of my country -- but I am Canadian. Yes, sure, I am Canadian.

ARTHUR KAPTAINIS: Many Canadian composers have defined their styles according to the example of the – of the big names of the middle of the century: Bartók, Shostakovich, Stravinsky, Hindemith. I think that Jacques Hétu can be fairly called Canadian in that he belongs to that group. His subject matter also has Canadian genesis. He has set the poetry of Émile Nelligan, who was, I suppose, the dominant Romantic poet of Québec.

JACQUES HÉTU: Émile Nelligan was the first French-Canadian poet to express something new, and when I discovered Nelligan at the age of around sixteen, one of my first ideas was to put music to one of his most famous poems,

Le Vaisseau d'or, you know, but it was not until many years after – many years later that I seriously put this poet in music.

It's a – it's a commission from Joseph Rouleau, the bass. And, he wanted something dramatic, something – you know, he is an operatic performer. So, I chose four poems, and – for him, but also for me, too, because I think these four poems in the *Les Abîmes du rêve* are the four most fantastic poems by Émile Nelligan.

And, I would try to write – he wanted an orchestral piece – you know, something long and dramatic, so it was very easy for me to go on with these poems, because when I am reading Nelligan, I read one phrase, and – oh! Immediately, I heard this music. Immediately, the sounds, the phrases, the melodic line was there.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Hétu has set four collections of Nelligan poems to music. But, *Les Abîmes du rêve* is perhaps the epitome of Hétu's dramatic strengths. This is intense music, inspired by a tragic poet who produced his great masterpieces between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, then spent the rest of his life in an insane asylum. Hétu has a deep appreciation of French literature, and counts many of Québec's writers among his friends. One of them is Yves Beauchemin, who wrote the libretto for his only opera, *Le Prix*.

While he has an instinct for drama and a flair for colourful orchestration, something else is at the heart of Hétu's music. It's a serene lyricism, sometimes tinged with sadness, and it's a lyricism that's quite literally at the heart of his music, because Hétu is given to building entire works around their slow movements.

JACQUES HÉTU: Very often when I begin something or choose to write a piece, it will be probably the adagio, and from the adagio, I go to the beginning and to the end, until the end. You know, it's – it's -- I never compose from the bar one to – no, no, no. It's kind of like in cinema, you know, a kind of montage of

things, but the adagio – when I am satisfied with the slow movement, so, maybe the work will – will keep, and I work on the other movements.

ROBERT CRAM: I hear music, and I hear a human being, and I hear somebody writing something that moves me and touches me. It has got to be slow movements, doesn't it? I find the slow movements are a joy to play, and a joy to listen to, and fast movements are great fun, as well, but the slow movements, I think, have great depth and great profundity.

MARIO BERNARDI: I would say he is the pre-eminent French-Canadian composer, and I have to put him in that category because he has this French flavour to all his music, and, therefore, he belongs to that part of Canada that speaks French. His music speaks French, to me.

ARTHUR KAPTAINIS: I think it's a fine and noble thing to produce a body of music that will survive, rather than a body of music that is immensely controversial, and – and immensely original, and ultimately incomprehensible, that will not survive. There are many – it seems to me, there are many composers in Québec and Canada who will pretty much be a footnote phenomenon, but that's not going to be Jacques Hétu's fate.

JACQUES HÉTU: I am so happy when I compose. It's a way of life for me. I call it work, but it's – it's work, yes, very hard work, but it's so extraordinary to put these sounds together.

.....transcribed by Michelle Ferreira