

DANIEL ROTHMAN
Cézanne's Doubt

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Cézanne's Doubt. Nature, reality, perception, and art.

One has grown accustomed to discussing the various disciplines of art individually, as well as considering the specific conditions of their creation separately. But regardless whether it is to chisel some form out of stone; if an idea, a mood, a story, be set into words; if wood, paper, plaster or canvas, give ground and boundaries for painting or drawing; if a sound formation be etched in the air or fixed by any established or newly invented system of symbols; —sculptor, writer, painter or composer are equally confronted with the problem of mediating ‘reality’ (or some imagined object or idea taking hold as such), and the problem of how to realize it in a way that is at least approximate. This is the crucial question by which Cézanne's lifelong doubt became inflamed to despair and to such an extent that an artist whose solutions we admire would qualify his work as ‘studies’ even at the end of his lifetime, looking upon himself as still learning by nature, developing only slowly. (And not by chance, it was Baudelaire's *Une charogne* Cézanne knew by heart—a poem that speaks of the transitoriness of life and beauty, concluding that the essence of an object may be kept by memory, by love, and—we might add—not the least by art, which is both. Furthermore, the poem makes us aware of the fact that being really fascinated by an object eliminates any relevance of categories as ‘beautiful’ or ‘ugly’—and that the act of perception also means a kind of destruction.)

By taking a painter and his inner monologue as the subject of his opera, Daniel Rothman has been allowed to pursue two modes of reflection. The more obvious equivalents between painting and music—e.g., the use of color shadings, the ‘grasping’ of an object, the maintenance of proportion, the dynamic component within the act of applying the colors as well as within the shaping of the moment *and* time process—are self-evident, and do not have to be articulated specifically. (This does not mean that synesthetic relations such as those referred to by Olivier Messiaen were incorporated; what is of concern here is given words by Luigi Nono's question, aiming toward a broadened perception: “How shall one be able to *hear* the red and white stones of Venice at sunrise—how shall one be able to *hear* the infinite bow of colors at the lagoon of Venice at sunset-- . . .”). But by presenting the painter's inner monologue, instead of showing him practicing his métier (as an older style of opera would certainly have done), the streams of reflection automatically draw time to the foreground—the temporality of perception, and its apprehension and expression. This is also to say that the time-art, music, is inseparably included in the discourse, which can therefore directly pose the question of how to transmit the ‘nature’ of a vis-a-vis into a new medium by means of technical skill and vision. While Rothman's complex sonorities are transforming themselves permanently, forming different gradations of presence, the listener/spectator's attention is constantly and inevitably directed to the process of perception. And further, new technologies, creating the possibility of ‘staging’ within the mind, become included as an inseparable component of the opera. Using a processed video projection addresses the problem of perception as well, transforming Cézanne into a metaphor.

That Daniel Rothman chose this subject for his opera seems—aside from its fascinating idea dealing with the crucial question that has probably confronted every artist—to be absolutely consistent under several further aspects. Not only do the titles of the majority of his previous compositions emphasize the composer's close relation to the visual arts (for example, *Tilted Arc*, for ensemble with

live electronics, takes its title from Richard Serra's sculpture of the same name; *Lollipops* for tape was inspired by Calder's mobiles) and to poetry (his string quartet *Was naeht an dieser Stimme* borrows its title from a poem by Paul Celan, and is dedicated “in memoriam Primo Levi”; both piano pieces’ titles refer to poems of Jiménez and Bukowski, respectively). By no means used in the sense of program music, these titles are intended to produce associations and a kind of ‘space’ in which the music is able to unfold for the listener’s imagination; they are discerned as catalysts, aiming at a meta-level. But the underlying reasons for choosing this subject can be recognized in the fact that Rothman's composing has constantly been dedicated to the problem of reproducing sounds’ complex and oscillating ‘reality,’ and the problem of fixing (and evocating) the findings of a refined perception. In a certain sense, it would be right to say that all the experiences evoked with his previous pieces are condensed in the opera, putting the focus on the more restrained side of his music.

First, Rothman's design of forms does not rely on the given arsenal of traditional models. Instead of that, a developing process that trusts in careful listening to something set, or ‘found,’ is allowed to grow within time, freeing a hidden potential with patience or energetic power. Concerning the composer, on the one hand this means a dialectical tension between giving oneself in an open-minded and curious way to something already existing and being involved in a process and on the other hand, regulating and making one’s own decisions. Maybe his piano piece *la musica: mujer desnuda-corriendo loca por la noche pura* represents the exemplary shape of this attitude—a passacaglia of very special type, exploring the changes and possibilities of something that remains unchanged in its very essence, and creating a form that is built and growing by itself at the same time.

The condition for building such organically growing boughs is a kind of sound architecture which allows the logical unfolding of the sounds used by following their inner necessity and their affinity to each other. The sound progressions of the opera make use of the richness of colors explored in previous pieces (having reached a peak with the orchestral piece *The skin is the threshold*). Their perfectly fitting character arises through expansion of the chromatic scale with microtonal divergences and by combinations of overtones, undertones, difference tones and—to a large extent—harmonics.

It is clear that Rothman's rhythmic organization tends to touch extremes: It may be eruptively probing, energetic and excessive; it may just carry and support the subtle flow of sound metamorphosis or even be reduced to wavelike breathing. Corresponding to the absorbed attitude and its subject, the pendulum of the rhythmic organization in the opera swings to an extreme, dreamlike side, with the effect of almost giving up articulation of time.

How can you be true as an artist? “How shall one be able to *hear* the red and white stones...?” There is an answer in this music.

—Wolfgang Thein

Wolfgang Thein Ph.D., *a musicologist and organist, lives in Wiesbaden, Germany. He teaches at the University and at the Musikbohschule in Würzburg, and has written numerous articles on music.*

Cézanne’s Doubt

In a letter to Clara Rilke, on October 19, 1907, a year after Cézanne's death, Rainer Maria Rilke writes: "You surely remember . . . from the *Notebooks of Malte Laurids*, the passage that has to do with Baudelaire and his poem *Une Charogne*. I cannot help thinking that without this poem the whole of development toward objective expression, which we now recognise in Cézanne, could have started . . . you could imagine how it moves me to read that Cézanne in his last years still knew this very poem entirely by heart, and how he recited it word for word." But Cézanne himself wrote, only a month before he died at the age of 67: "I was in such great confusion that for a time my weak reason would not survive . . . Now it seems I am better and that I see more clearly the direction my studies are taking. Will I ever arrive at the goal so intensely sought and so long pursued? I am still learning from nature, and it seems to me I am making slow progress."

Cézanne's Doubt was inspired by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's seminal essay in which he explores the artist's crisis between experience and expression. Since the only character is Cézanne, who does not flail himself around a stage in existential torment, it is not opera in any traditional sense. But my actual subject, the synthesis and expression of an experience, seems to me both an ordinary and extraordinary crisis, perfectly human and brilliantly characterized by Cézanne.

Cézanne's obsession with sight brought him beyond the boundaries of mid-nineteenth century painting's aesthetic conventions, seeking a way to express an object in the act of appearing rather than its mere representation. But unlike the Impressionists, of whom he felt that objects in their paintings were submerged, lost their proper weight, and were broken up in the spectrum, Cézanne graduated colors with a progression of chromatic nuances across the object's form and to the light it receives.

Cézanne's doubt was not only manifested from his artistic obsessions—he also wondered if the novelty of his painting might not come from trouble with his eyes, that his life was somehow based on an accident of his body. Giacometti, in conversation with James Lord, often referred to Cézanne's inability to finish a piece, slashing his canvases after hundreds of sittings. He was reclusive, with moods swinging wildly between extreme arrogance and despair. And Emile Zola, his longtime friend, abandoned him as "a failure and suicide."

Cézanne's Doubt takes place in Cézanne's mind: his words with Zola, his self-reflection, his letters to his son Paul, and Baudelaire's poem *Une Charogne*. The poem mediates the relationship among Cézanne's visual revelations, my musical ones—of a microtonal palette of tuned multiphonics, upper spectra harmonics, and subtle acoustic signal processing that is as much about hearing as Cézanne's is about seeing—and the processed projected video by artists Elliot Anderson and Jim Campbell, itself a narrative of perception.

—Daniel Rothman

1. *Rappelez-vous l'objet que nous vîmes, mon âme,
Ce beau matin d'été si doux:
Au détour d'un sentier une charogne infâme
Sur un lit semé de cailloux,*

*Les jambes en l'air, comme une femme lubrique,
Brûlant et suant les poisons,
Ouvrait d'une façon nonchalante et cynique*

Son ventre plein d'exhalaisons.

Eh, oui, mon cher Emile, I often think of you . . .
with infinite joy I would embrace you.
Four years since you've been gone . . .

*Le soleil rayonnait sur cette pourriture,
Comme afin de la cuire à point, □ □*

Yes, I stopped seeing you
—with your fine rugs and insolent servants
—enthroned like some old dirty bourgeois . . .
you've grown stupid.

*Et de rendre au centuple à la grande Nature
Tout ce qu'ensemble elle avait joint;*

I was your fool, your suicide,
Thank you—thank you for your insight . . . for your society.

2. *Et le ciel regardait la carcasse superbe
Comme une fleur s'épanouir.
La puanteur était si forte, que sur l'herbe
Vous crûtes vous évanouir.*

The sun is terrifying . . .

*Les mouches bourdonnaient sur ce ventre putride,
D'où sortaient de noirs bataillons
De larves, qui coulaient comme un épais liquide
Le long de ces vivants baillons.*

*Tout cela descendait, montait comme une vague,
Ou s'élançait en pétillant;
On eût dit que le corps, enflé d'un souffle vague,
Vivait en se multipliant.*

All went well at first,
but it was not long before I found myself in the dark . . .
must work carefully

how slowly nature reveals herself . . .
just as I begin to understand, it all evaporates

*Et ce monde rendait une étrange musique,
Comme l'eau courante et le vent,
Ou le grain qu'un vanneur d'un mouvement rythmique
Agite et tourne dans son van.*

I should make a little hole in nature and pass through it—
a minute of the world passes even as I try to grasp
the full reality of what I see.

*Les formes s'effaçaient et n'étaient plus qu'un rêve,
Une ébauche lente à venir,
Sur la toile oubliée, et que l'artiste achève
Seulement par le souvenir.*

3. Cher Paul, if I forget to write to you,
it is because I lose the awareness of time.
The heat is appalling . . . no air at all . . .
good for nothing but the expansion of metals . . .
I am heavy and slow . . .

Dark sorrow oppresses me. I see no one.
Life terrifies me . . . Art worse.
I paint . . . I go to church . . .
I paint . . . I eat . . .
I paint

*Derrière les rochers une chienne inquiète
Nous regardait d'un œil fâché,
Épiant le moment de reprendre au squelette
Le morceau qu'elle avait lâché.*

Cher Paul, I rely on your guidance . . .
At the end of my strength . . .
Illusions are no longer permitted . . .

—*Et pourtant vous serez semblable à cette ordure,
A cette horrible infection,*

—I would like you near me

*Etoile de mes yeux, soleil de ma nature,
Vous, mon ange et ma passion!*

*Où! telle que vous serez, ô la reine des grâces,
Après les derniers sacrements,
Quand vous irez, sous l'herbe et les floraisons grasses,
Moisir parmi les ossements.*

Cher Paul, I wait impatiently
for my paint box you've mended
Cher Paul, add a palette with a hole large enough . . .

Hurry.

Soon a carriage will take me to the river
There are some large trees that form a vault
Over the water.

*Alors, ô ma beauté! dite à la vermine
Qui vous mangera de baisers,
Que j'ai gardé la forme et l'essence divine
De mes amours décomposés!*

Carrion

Remember, my soul, the thing we saw
that lovely summer day?
On a pile of stones where the path turned off,
the hideous carrion—

legs in the air, like a whore—displayed,
indifferent to the last,
a belly slick with lethal sweat
and swollen with foul gas.

The sun lit up that rottenness
as though to roast it through,

restoring to Nature a hundredfold
what she had here made one.

And heaven watched the splendid corpse
like a flower open wide—
you nearly fainted dead away
at the perfume it gave off.

Flies kept humming over the guts
from which a gleaming clot
of maggots poured to finish off
what scraps of flesh remained.

The tide of trembling vermin sank,
then bubbled up afresh
as if the carcass, drawing breath,
by *their* lives lived again

and made a curious music there—
like running water, or wind,
or the rattle of chaff the winnower

loosens in his fan.

Shapeless—nothing was left but a dream
the artist had sketched in,
forgotten, and only later on
finished from memory.

Behind the rocks an anxious bitch
eyed us reproachfully,
waiting for the chance to resume
her interrupted feast.

—Yet you will come to this offence,
this horrible decay,

you, the light of my life, the sun
and moon and stars of my love!

Yes, you will come to this, my queen,
after the sacraments,
when you rot underground among
the bones already there.

But as their kisses eat you up,
my Beauty, tell the worms
I've kept the sacred essence, saved
the form of my rotted loves!

“Une Charogne” from *Les Fleurs du Mal* by Charles Baudelaire
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DANIEL ROTHMAN was born and trained in New York City, has briefly lived in France, and presently lives in Los Angeles, where he teaches composition at the California Institute of the Arts. His interest in acoustic phenomena, extended instrumental techniques, world-music performance practices, and electronic signal processing converge through exploring their expressive possibilities as a clarinetist, and are reflected in the characteristics of his ensemble and its members. His music is widely performed at music festivals throughout Europe, where *Cézanne's Doubt* received its premiere, and the United States, where it has received subsequent performances. Among many commissions and awards are *Fool Wind* (1997), for the opening of the new German Center for Art and Media Technology (ZKM, Karlsruhe), and a National Endowment for the Arts commission in 1996. His work has been supported by residencies at IRCAM, the Mills Center for Contemporary Music, DIEM, and the experimental studio Des SWF in Freiburg, where a long, rewarding association has led to the production of much music.

The Rothman Ensemble includes electronics wizard Kent Clelland, cellist Ted Mook, clarinetist David Smeyers, and trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith, who bring together a diversity of musical sensibilities. Its very blend of backgrounds embody the spirit of our music-making.

Kent Clelland, a composer, saxophonist, and former CalArts student, has a brilliant imagination for signal processing.

Ted Mook plays with new music ensembles throughout the East Coast. He has recorded over two dozen works, including Partch's *17 Lyrics of Li Po* (Tzadik 7012), Lois V. Vierk's *Simoom* for eight multi-tracked cellos, and Ezra Sims's *Solo* (with its 72-note-per-octave source scale), that betray his affinity for the subtle and esoteric in unusual tunings and sonorities.

David Smeyers lives in Cologne and is a founding member of *ensemble avance* and Das Klarinettenduo. His recent CD of the complete clarinet music of Giacinto Scelsi (cpo 999266-2) adds to a growing list of recordings that includes Carter, Kurtàg, Lachenmann, Stockhausen, Wolpe, and Xenakis—many of whom who have written for him. He plays all of the clarinets from the contrabass to the tiny A flat piccolo, saxophones, and the Hungarian *tàrogató*, and has edited a book with Beate Zelinsky, *Studies for Playing Contemporary Music for Clarinet* (Pro Musica Nova, Breitkopf & Härtel).

Wadada Leo Smith, multi-instrumentalist, composer, improviser, is a microcosm of the past thirty years of the creative music scene, having played with Lester Bowie, Anthony Braxton, Don Cherry, Joseph Jarman, George Lewis, Roscoe Mitchell, etc. etc; his music has been played by the AACM Orchestra, the California EAR Unit, the Kronos Quartet, and the San Francisco Contemporary Chamber Players. Recent recordings appear on ECM (*Kulture Jazz*) and Tzadik (*Tao-Njia*).

Thomas Buckner, for whom *Cézanne's Doubt* was written, is a vital force in contemporary vocal music. Although well known for his work with Robert Ashley, he has worked with a wide variety of composers that include David Behrman, William Duckworth, Alvin Lucier, Roscoe Mitchell, Annea Lockwood, Morton Subotnick, and Henry Threadgill. He has recorded for Elektra/Nonesuch, the Knitting Factory, Lovely Music, and OO Discs, and was recently awarded a Letter of Distinction by the American Music Center for his contribution to contemporary American music.

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Daniel Rothman (b. 1958)
Cézanne's Doubt 80528-2

A chamber opera for solo voice, clarinet, trumpet, cello, audio & video processing

video processing and projection by Elliot Anderson and Jim Campbell
text by Daniel Rothman, based on Cézanne's letters and *Une Charogne* by Charles Baudelaire

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| 1 | 25:59 |
| 2 | 11:20 |
| 3 | 22:19 |

Thomas Buckner, singer
David Smeyers, clarinet
Wadada Leo Smith, trumpet
Ted Mook, cello
Kent Clelland, electronics

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