



Anja Lechner
François Couturier
Moderato cantabile

ECM NEW SERIES

Komitas
Gurdjieff
Mompou

Moderato cantabile

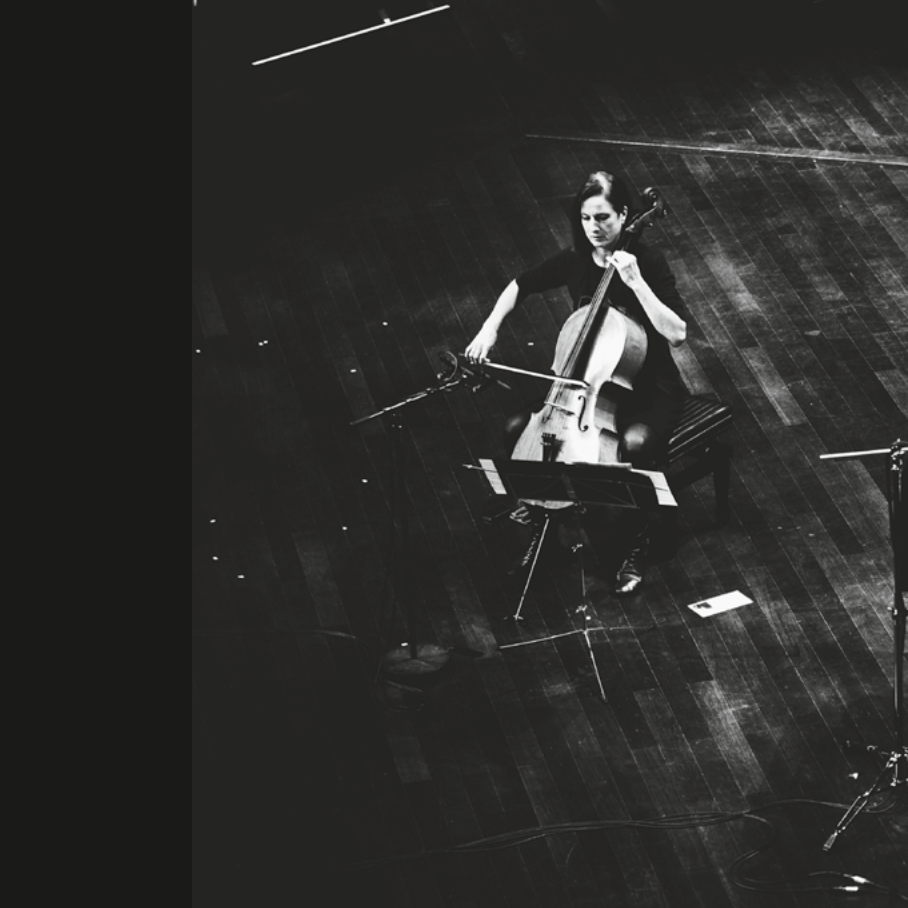
Anja Lechner, violoncello

François Couturier, piano

- 1 George I. Gurdjieff (1866–1949)
Sayyid chant and dance no. 3
Hymn no. 7 6:42
- 2 François Couturier
Voyage 5:27
- 3 Komitas (1869–1935)
Chinar es 6:29
- 4 Federico Mompou (1893–1987)
Canción y danza VI 5:12
- 5 Federico Mompou
Música Callada XXVIII
Impresiones intimas I 5:59
- 6 François Couturier
Soleil rouge 3:36
- 7 François Couturier
Papillons 7:27

- 8 George I. Gurdjieff
Hymn no. 8
Night procession 6:44
- 9 George I. Gurdjieff
No. 11
Federico Mompou
Fêtes lointaines no. 3 4:47
- 10 Federico Mompou
Impresiones intimas VIII "Secreto" 5:04

Arrangements by Anja Lechner and François Couturier





Moderato cantabile

“It means moderately and melodiously”, Marguerite Duras reminds us repeatedly in her novella *Moderato cantabile* (later filmed by Gurdjieff-influenced director Peter Brook). Melody, always pointing beyond itself, is at the heart of this recording, which brings together, in arrangements by Anja Lechner and François Couturier, works from the perimeter of music history. Here are pieces by the hermetic Catalan pianist-composer Federico Mompou, the Greek-Armenian philosopher and seeker-after-truth George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff, and the Armenian priest-singer-musicologist-composer Komitas Vardapet. New music by Couturier counterbalances the spiritual implications of a programme which leans Eastward in some of its particulars. Occidental and oriental colours are interwoven throughout this music. In part it represents a journey over what Mompou called “the narrow mountain path” of composition, but in the end all trails lead back through Paris. Mompou, Gurdjieff and Komitas were exiled, voluntarily or otherwise, in and around Paris through the 1920s and 30s, and Couturier lives in its suburbs today.

The Barcelona-born Mompou spent more than twenty years in the French capital, shyly attempting to keep a low profile, occupying his free time, as he told one journalist, with “meditation and the movies”. Simultaneously Gurdjieff, on a grander mission, was endeavouring to raise the world’s spiritual condition at his Institute for

the Harmonious Development of Man near Fontainebleau. Music and “temple dances” – the famous Gurdjieff Movements – were amongst his toolkit for awakening sleepy, slothful humankind to the existence of other levels of consciousness. Meanwhile, Komitas Vardapet, the pioneer of modern Armenian music, was in residency at a mental hospital.

Gurdjieff is said to have visited Komitas at the Paris asylum of Villejuif, where Vardapet was long incarcerated, suffering from what would now be termed post-traumatic stress disorder, the outcome of experiences endured during the Turkish invasion of Armenia. Komitas’s life as a composer was over by this point, but his music, which had explored the interconnections between Armenian church music and folk song and developed new forms from both, was certainly well-known to Gurdjieff. Moreover, Gurdjieff’s close associate, Ukrainian composer and pianist Thomas de Hartmann, had played Komitas’s music in concert, including performances in Yerevan, and written articles in praise of it.

The extent to which G. I. Gurdjieff was himself “a composer” remains open to debate. He has not yet made it into the Grove Dictionary. For all Hartmann’s loyal attestations (“it is his music, not mine”), without the pianist as intermediary and transcriber posterity would have had very little “Gurdjieff music” to ponder. The compositional

method belongs to legend: Gurdjieff humming or whistling or playing with one finger fragments of tunes recalled from his Transcaucasian or Central Asian wanderings and Hartmann completing and harmonizing them on the fly. Gurdjieff's inability or unwillingness to phrase a melody the same way twice posed special challenges and called for many small decisions, but more than two hundred pieces were composed or assembled in this manner. The Gurdjieff music, as handed down, was unavoidably shaped through Hartmann's sensibilities: sounds from the East filtered through the mind and hands of a resourceful western musician.

The Hartmann transcriptions have generally been considered the definitive text by distinguished interpreters including Keith Jarrett, whose 1980 recording *Sacred Hymns of G. I. Gurdjieff* created a wave of new interest in Gurdjieff's world. The conventional understanding that these were pieces for solo piano remained largely unchallenged until Anja Lechner recorded *Chants, Hymns and Dances* with Vassilis Tsabropoulos in 2003. Lechner had first heard the Gurdjieff music in the Jarrett renditions, but experience of music-making in Armenia – including collaboration with Tigran Mansurian – had brought new perspectives, and a clearer sense of historical and regional context.

When first playing Gurdjieff, Lechner intuitively shaped a kind of “vocal” role for the cello, rediscovering the sung melody in these

pieces, making them songs again. Armenian arranger Levon Eskenian heard *Chants, Hymns and Dances* and a light bulb went on in his mind. He founded the Gurdjieff Folk Instruments Ensemble in Yerevan to return the music to its inspirational sources, with versions of the pieces for traditional instruments. One can imagine that this chain of transmission might have delighted the master. Information conveyed – like a Caucasian version of Chinese Whispers – from the philosopher’s memory to a Ukrainian composer to an American jazz musician to a German classical soloist and then back to Armenian folklore. Some might see the hand of fate in this, the music kept alive and protected until it could return home: in the Soviet era Gurdjieff’s work had been suppressed, like that of many religionists, occultists or free-thinkers. In fact the pieces, remarkably robust, invite many interpretations. Lechner has also recorded some of them with extended improvising in trio with Tsabropoulos and percussionist U.T. Gandhi on the album *Melos* (2007).

The Lechner/Couturier versions of Gurdjieff pieces, derived from Armenian, Greek, Middle Eastern and Asian tradition, are different again, and free-spirited in their own way, reflecting the special understanding of the musicians. Although *Moderato cantabile* is the participants’ first recording as a duo it follows a decade of shared work in musical contexts including the Tarkovsky Quartet, formed to address the inspirational world of Russian filmmaker





Andrei Tarkovsky, as well as an alliance in *Il Pergolese*, in which songs and themes of Neapolitan composer G.B. Pergolesi are recast for improvisational interaction. Oblique approaches to the material have worked well for these players, who have arrived at their present-day standpoints from different points of the musical spectrum. If Lechner's repertoire priorities remain the classical tradition and contemporary composition, she has also devoted time and energy to the non-classical, exploring the roots and branches of tango and Andean folk music with Dino Saluzzi, improvising on Russian themes with Misha Alperin and Arkady Shilkloper, or following the line of influence that runs from Armenian folksong through Komitas to Mansurian. (A connection which the performance of Komitas's "Chinar es" illuminates.)

François Couturier began his musical journey inspired by both classical music and jazz. Over time he has moved ever further from strict definitions of the latter. Years spent in the company of Tunisian oud master Anouar Brahem seem to have reinforced a contemplative element in his own idiom as player, composer, arranger. A reflective patience is characteristic of much of his work. In his music, with or without a score, themes tend to be slowly unfolded and developed. His compositions are "evolutionary", open to change in the moment, and his improvisations maintain a lyrical awareness and sense of form. Unlike many improvising contemporaries he is un-

afraid to broach the brink of silence – making him perhaps a natural interpreter for Mompou’s “Música Callada”.

Federico Mompou endorsed Chopin’s view that simplicity was art’s ultimate goal, the place you got to after playing a multitude of notes and finding them lacking. This order of simplicity could only be hard-won, there were no shortcuts; the notes would only resonate after all difficulties were exhausted. Mompou demanded of himself and his students “maximum expression with the greatest economy of means”. The motto might easily be adapted to jazz. One thinks at once of Paul Bley and Thelonious Monk (both early heroes for Couturier) who, in their very different ways, have taught much about the dynamics of space in music, and the paradoxically liberating power of restraint. Couturier has in the past experimented with Mompou’s music with jazz piano trio instrumentation.

Writing from a contemporary music performer’s perspective, Herbert Henck, who recorded a landmark version of “Música callada” in 1993, captures very well the experience of journeying through Mompou’s evaporating sound world: “Almost all the pieces were short but they seemed to continue beyond their conclusion. Ties on the final notes led symbolically into emptiness, fading and losing themselves in the instrument and the surrounding space. I began to feel that these mixtures of melting tonal colour, vibrating and floating in a way that defies notation, were central points in the mu-

sic where previous material accumulated and was transformed from being material and sensual into something immaterial and spiritual...” Mompou’s inviting of the silence was inspired by his reading of St John of the Cross, the 16th century Christian mystic who seems closest to the Sufi poets, with his descriptions of revelatory experience: “Night as serene as the rising of the dawn / The silent music, the resonant solitude / The feast which revives and invites love.”

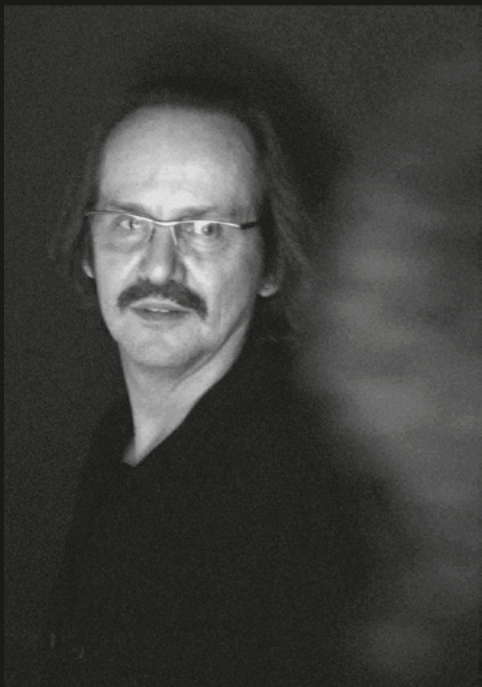
Couturier and Lechner make duo music out of Mompou’s solo piano meditations, but keep the mystery intact, also by means of some intriguing transitions. The 28th (and final) episode of “Música Callada”, for instance, slow and solemn, segues seamlessly into “Impresiones intimas I”, Mompou’s first published work, like time’s arrow travelling backwards. The bracketing of Gurdjieff’s “No. 11” – its mysterious melody from the volume *Asian Songs and Rhythms* – with Mompou’s “Fêtes lointaines” is another bright inspiration. Written in 1920, this recollection of distant festivities has a dreamlike quality, with hints of pealing bells (as important for Mompou as they would be for Pärt) and children’s dances.

“We are starting out anew,” Mompou said, “and the road is long. My contribution can’t be to position the first stone at the junction of solemnity and humility. But I hope my stone will be one of the mountain of stones used to shape the cathedral of the future.” On

the question of interpretation he encouraged freedom: "I believe that the music belongs to the true interpreter, the true artist. Here is the music. What does it suggest to you?"

Anja Lechner and François Couturier answer the question in their own way on *Moderato cantabile*.

Steve Lake





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