

# Denis Levailant

by David Sanson

## Biography

French composer and pianist Denis Levailant is one of today's major musical talents.

Since 1973, this French composer and pianist, born in Paris in 1952, has managed to develop a personal, highly varied oeuvre, covering a vast range of expression (opera, ballet, symphony orchestra, chamber ensembles, choruses, soloists, electro-acoustic, radio pieces...), allying the rhythmic energy of jazz and popular musics to a new orchestral colour in the French tradition, appealing to all audiences.

He began studying the piano at the age of six, recorded Ravel's *Valses nobles et sentimentales* when he was 12 and played Mozart concerti with his professor, Magdeleine Mangin, who also initiated him in the basics of writing (harmony, counterpoint...).

In the early 1970s, he abandoned the classic course, having decided to acquire the broadest possible professional experience. Fascinated by dance, jazz, improvisation and the circus, from this 'in vivo' training period he would draw the material for his book *L'improvisation musicale* (1980), which has become a reference on the subject. In 1973, he also wrote his first radio work, *Circus Virus*, for the Atelier de Création de France Culture, and this was the beginning of a long creative collaboration with the radio, which would lead to his winning the RAI Prize for Speakers at the Italia Prize in 1988. During the same period, he earned a Master's in philosophy (1974).

At the beginning of the 1980s, he embarked upon the adventure of live entertainment and, with his company, Bleu 17, created musical spectacles combining singing, theatre, magic, instruments, lighting and sound in new forms. Since *Deux Pièces à Louer*, premiered in 1983, he has written some 18 singular shows marked by a powerful imaginative universe, up to the most recent, *Un petit rien-du-tout tout neuf*, first performed at the Théâtre du Rond-Point (Paris) in April 2006. Some of these have created a considerable stir, in particular *Les Passagers du delta*, first performed in trio with the American jazz musicians Barre Phillips and Barry Altschul, and his opera *O.P.A. Mia (My Tender Bid)*, premie-

red in 1990 at the Avignon Festival, directed by André Engel with costumes and sets by Enki Bilal.

He has enlarged his palette of expression by participating in the beginnings of digital sound treatment (at the INA-GRM, the Music Research Group of the National Audiovisual Institute), applying these new techniques to instrumental writing: from *Piano Transit* (1983) up to the recent *ElektroSpacePiano* (2003), by way of *Drama Symphony* (1995), this research has remained constant in his work. With *Les Pierres noires*, for mixed chorus (1984), he began original research on harmony and vocal polyphony, which he has continued to go into in greater depth.

These productive years also witnessed numerous collaborations with choreographers (D. Bagouet, D. Petit, C. Marcadé, B. Lefèvre...) and stage directors (in particular, Alain Françon).

At the onset of the 1990s, he devoted most of his creative efforts to symphonic and instrumental writing, this resulting in important works such as his Piano Concerto *Echo de Narcisse* (1995), String Quartet No.2 *Le Clair, l'Obscur* (1997), Concerto for Orchestra *Paysages de Conte* (1998) and the *Tombeau de Gesualdo*, for counter-tenor and 12 mixed voices (1994).

In 1995, the Ensemble Intercontemporain and the Louvre commissioned him to write music for Fritz Lang's last silent film, *Frau im Mond*. In 1999, he created a new full-length spectacle, *Eloge de la Radio*, first performed at Radio France's 'Présences' Festival in 2000. In 2005, he composed *l'Opéra de la lune*, for orchestra and narrator, based on a story by Jacques Prévert.

In 2002, the Paris Opera commissioned a symphonic ballet, *La Petite danseuse*, which met with great success at the Paris Opera in 2003 and has been revived in 2005 and 2010. In 2014 he was composer in residence in fifteen State Universities in USA, for lectures, master classes and concerts.

His collaboration with publisher Frédéric Leibovitz allowed him to see most of his catalogue recorded and regularly synchronized in television and films the world over: most recently, he had music synchronized in *Blue is the warmest Colour* (Palme d'Or at the 2013 Cannes Festival) and in the Rihanna's video *Bitch Better Have My Money* (2015).