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*Bildunterschrift:* Scene from the film *Nostalghia* of 1983: ‘Sound should always float, whether it’s music, a voice, or only the wind.’ (Andrei Tarkovsky)

## **Twelve Ways to Enjoy Solitude**

### **Jazz musician François Couturier releases his musical reminiscences of film director Andrei Tarkovsky**

by **Konrad Heidkamp**

The camera moves silently toward the half-open door, approaching a bed across rain-soaked wooden floorboards. A glass of water stands on a chair beside the bed. It moves toward the middle of the screen, quivering from the swell of a rattling train that causes everything to vibrate. The camera pans across three heads – a sleeping woman, a child, a man – and pans slowly back across them as the rattling swells to a murderous roar. A scrap of the Marseillaise is heard amidst the pandemonium. We are in *Stalker*, a film by Andrei Tarkovsky. For a long time it will be the only music we hear.

Hardly any film director devotes so little importance to music as Andrei Tarkovsky. Few give so much space to silence and noise, allowing rain or footsteps to substitute for the rhythm and sound of music. Apart from his masterpiece *Andrei Rublev* (1962-6), the only music heard in his films is by Bach, Pergolesi or Purcell; everything else is either a brief snippet or electronically generated, closer to noise than music. The album *Nostalghia – Song for Tarkovsky* is thus all the more surprising. It is music to honour Tarkovsky, not to reinterpret him. The French pianist François Couturier, an admirer of the films of this Soviet director, composes elegies and songs without words, creating soundscapes with Jean-Marc Larché on the soprano saxophone and Jean-Louis Matinier on the accordion, together with cellist Anja Lechner. The group sounds as if it has existed for years, not as if the four musicians had just met for the first time.

This CD should not be mistaken for a filmscore or for second-hand classical music, the well-scrubbed sounds that feed our ‘easy listening’ classical channels. Nor should we confuse it

with the current trend toward movie music – jazz guitarists playing to Buster Keaton films, pop groups interpreting Sergey Eisenstein, wind bands accompanying Fritz Lang. *Song for Tarkovsky* demonstrates something completely different: that music and film are mutually contradictory, yet intrinsically related. Couturier strikes a single note on the piano, and it fades away with such seductive slowness that no second note is necessary. Then a second note comes anyway, and a third, forming a minor-mode soundscape, the ideal place for people who want to be alone but can't. The accordion enters, yearningly, abrasively, a second voice that transforms solitude into melancholy. The name of the piece is *Le Sacrifice*, dedicated to Tarkovsky's like-named last film of 1984.

They play twelve pieces in various combinations. Some are dedicated to actors, such as Erland Josephson (*Nostalghia* and *Sacrifice*) and Anatoli Solonitsyne (*Andrei Rublev* and *Stalker*), or the cameraman Sven Nykvist (*Sacrifice*). Some simply evoke colours from Tarkovsky's films – cello-brown, muted piano-green, the pebble-grey of the accordion, flashes of light from the soprano saxophone. Anyone who wants to may detect the hand of the producer Manfred Eicher in the luminous sounds – the floating soprano saxophone borne birdlike on the winds, the silence seemingly lurking behind every note. Predictable? Godard always makes the same film, Walser always writes the same book, Chaplin always stumbles at the same spot. It's the way they wander between reality and metaphysics that we love. As Federico Fellini once put it: the holy man stands here, the ordinary bloke there, the artist somewhere in between.

Several of the dream motifs are taken from a sonata by Alfred Schnittke, the 'Erbarme dich' from Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*. But standing in the foreground is a musicality nourished at other wellsprings. Couturier, born near Orléans in 1950, has played with jazz musicians such as John McLaughlin. He has been equally at home with *avant-garde* improvisers and the *oud* player Anouar Brahem. Here and there, in various formations, he met Jean-Louis Matinier and Jean-Marc Larché. The cellist Anja Lechner, a member of the Rosamunde String Quartet, moves just as freely across musical boundaries. She feels as closely attuned to Dino Saluzzi as to Misha Alperin or Gurdjieff, to whom she dedicated the moving *Chants, Hymns and Dances* with the pianist Vassilis Tsabropoulos. It is their attitude that has brought them together, not their backgrounds.

Those who find the sorrowful rage of Tarkovsky's films too dank ('The object of art is to prepare human beings for their death and to strike them in their innermost core') will be surprised by the long-breathed lyricism of *Nostalghia*, by the bright, hope-filled pieces that fill this album. It is as if the poetry of his films predominates, not their stern gaze at the world around us. When Tarkovsky died in 1986 at the age of 54, twenty years ago this December, there was a flurry of articles, biographies and essays. It soon gave way to the same sort of public silence that has descended upon Robert Bresson or Ingmar Bergman. But those who, like Couturier, have seen a film such as *Andrei Rublev* will search unimpressed for works that leave us at once touched and disconcerted. Everything else is lost time.

'Film as dream, film as music. No other art penetrates our consciousness, our feelings, the deep, dark recesses of our soul, as directly as film.' Thus Ingmar Bergman, speaking as a soul-mate of Andrei Tarkovsky, who repeatedly explains, in his volume of essays *Sculpting in Time*, how simplistically music seems to reduplicate the plot or shore up the emotions. One could almost forget 'that the world already sounds very beautiful by itself, that cinema doesn't need music at all once we truly learn how to listen'. So he slowed down our visual and auditory faculties, searching for the 'inner time of silence'. He consistently avoided music lest it endanger the power of his imagery. Tarkovsky takes water as harmony, faces as melody, and camera movement as meter, transforming film into music. Because music and film are intrinsically related, he has to treat music tenderly – or leave it alone.

At the end of *Stalker* the child sits at the table, the man lies on the bed, the woman is standing. The rattling of the train comes closer, drowning out everything else. Beneath it, as if from a scratchy radio, we hear a burst of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* – a 'poetic refrain', Tarkovsky calls it, a lyrical reminiscence. *Song for Tarkovsky* cannot hope to be anything more than that. It is more than enough.

François Couturier: *Nostalghia* – *Song for Tarkovsky* (ECM 1979)