

# The Miniaturist

The intuitive keyboard sketches of **Dominique Lawalrée** have moved from cult ambient curiosities to tender explorations of faith



**Dominique Lawalrée** was just 26 years old and not long out of music college when an apparition of the Virgin Mary appeared to six Herzegovinian schoolchildren in the small town of Medjugorje, in what was then still the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. He had already set up Editions Walrus record label, released six albums of his own compositions, and caught the eye of Gavin Bryars, Wim Mertens and Brian Eno. It would be another 13 years before Lawalrée made the life-changing journey to Medjugorje himself in 1994. "I experienced a profound relation with God," he told me via email of that fateful pilgrimage, "and my life did change after that."

So, too, did his music. His heroic rate of releases slowed to a crawl. And something of the tenor of his music changed too. Quite why or in what way "is difficult to explain", he says. "I think that my compositions since 1994 are the result of more work. What I'm sure of is that I have got other sources of inspiration."

Lawalrée's music inhabits a hard to classify, in-between sort of place: not quite rock and not quite jazz. It was "seen as experimental and non-commercial", he says, and hence unappealing to mainstream labels, but it was also far away from the dominant classical avant gardes of the time – with little in common with the complexity of the post-Darmstadt crowd, nor quite comfortable amid the process oriented 60s school of Glass, Reich, Riley and so on. He found some fellow feeling with Bryars, whom he met while performing at a music festival in Brussels in 1978. Otherwise, he socialised with jazz musicians like Marc Moulin, sculptors like Baudouin Oosterlynck and painters like Claude Lyr. He describes

his compositional process as "at the same time a concept and an intuition" – figures are drawn from improvisation, inspired by something he's read or by meditation, and then carefully varied and developed.

A new archival programme on Catch Wave Records is compiling Lawalrée tracks from 1978–82, back when he was still a young man. Listening again to those works, anticipating the release of this first widely available album of his music, Lawalrée felt himself "brought back to that period" with the force of what he terms "a rare feeling". That very phrase might just as well describe the music gathered here: fleeting, tender creations, pitched somewhere between Erik Satie, Rachel Grimes and Laurence Crane, each one a perfect miniature for mostly acoustic and electric keyboard instruments, played by Lawalrée himself. These compositions showcase an unusual sensitivity, an odd kind of tactility, a rare feeling.

Born near Brussels in 1954, Lawalrée learned to strum before he could walk. He remembers vividly crawling to his parents' kitchen cupboard as a baby, emptying its contents to reach a single prized item: the egg slicer. "I would pass my fingers on the steel 'strings'," he recalls, "listening to the sound just like a guitar player would do, and said 'sic, sic', referring to the word music."

He was a child of irrepressible musical instincts, infuriating his piano-playing father by singing along to his renditions of Beethoven sonatas, and penning his first composition at just nine years old. "I don't know why," he says, when asked what inspired that first étude. "It's nature for me," he shrugs, "just like breathing, eating, sleeping!"

Largely self-taught as a composer, Lawalrée

studied music education at the Institut Supérieur de Musique et de Pédagogie (IMEP) at Namur in Belgium. "It was quite a conservative education," he tells me. Frustrated, he would give his own lectures to fellow students about the latest developments in contemporary music. He continues to teach music to this day, publishing dense technical analyses of Led Zeppelin and The Beatles music along the way. "I like a lot of different kinds of music and I do listen a lot," he says, though he cautions, "it doesn't mean that I'm influenced by all the music." He sees the progressive rock of Soft Machine impacting more on his own sound than "Whole Lotta Love" or "When The Levee Breaks".

He was still at IMEP when, in 1976, he decided to set up his Editions Walrus and release *Infinitudes*, a suite of three long cuts that now fetches around £50 on Discogs. "It was impossible to get a producer interested in the music I did," he says simply. "The only way was to have my own label. At that time," he continues, "this was unusual. But today, this is a way that many people use." The label was co-founded by Lawalrée and Jean-Pierre Hermand, an old friend who grew up with him in the Auderghem district, southeast of Brussels. Hermand went on to engineer every release on Editions Walrus up until the early 80s.

Lawalrée continues to compose regularly to this day; mostly, now, for chamber ensemble. He describes himself as a glutton for new music and new ideas. But for the most part, his focus remains the same. "My way of composing," he insists, "is the same as 30 years ago." □ Dominique Lawalrée's *First Meeting* is released by Catch Wave/Ergot. He performs at London's Cafe Oto this month: see Out There Robert Barry