

Notes on my friendship with Henri Chopin

I first met Henri towards the end of the 1970s. He had a stall at a book fair in Cambridge. Henri also gave a performance of some of his sound poetry. Although I was already interested in Concrete Poetry and produced a tape/slide on it for one of my college assessments, I had never heard anything quite like it. I actually tripped over one of his cables, and this led me to chatting with him. It was one of those occasions when there was an immediate mutual liking, and he invited me over to Ingatestone. I can't remember whether Jean was at this book fair or not (I think she was there, but can't be sure).

At the time, I was a full time student (of Communication Design) at the Faculty of Art and Design, North East London Polytechnic (now University of East London), and living in Stratford, east London, so Essex was quite close. I visited Henri and Jean a few times at Ingatestone. I remember lunch outside on a sunny day, and Jean, who was English but had lived with Henri in France for many years, telling me that she had to cook French style, because the shock of English food to Henri would have been too great.

It was not long after this they moved to Leigh-on-Sea. I visited them more times at Leigh-on-Sea than Ingatestone. A general memory is of a very smart and impressive terraced house in a suburban street. As at Ingatestone, Henri and Jean were very friendly, kind and generous towards me. They would invariably include me in a beautifully cooked meal. When I came to leave, Henri would present me with a gift: a print or his latest publication and/or a recording. They were both fun, but also took seriously the creative work Henri was producing and the particular positions he took in visual and sound poetry.

An impression I had was that, while living in England, Henri was much in demand for performances and/or exhibitions in other European countries (and further afield, e.g. Australia). He seemed to have always just returned from somewhere or was about to leave.

Particular memories I have of Leigh-on-Sea include the following: it was there that Henri informed me that he had swallowed a miniature microphone on a thread, to record the inside of his own body. When I asked him what it sounded like, he replied, "It sounds like a factory. It sounds like Ford's at Dagenham." He then played it for me, and it did.

I must have visited Henri and Jean at Leigh-on-Sea in 1981, since I recall Henri being very enthusiastic and happy about François Mitterrand being elected President of France for the first time, and he had sent a letter of support.

On a more personal note, it was in Leigh-on-Sea that Henri and Jean taught me how to reverse into a parking space. We were in their car, and I mentioned it was something I had never been able to do. They said words to the effect "if you can't do that in Paris, then you might as well give up on life." They then showed me how it was done, and it worked: from that moment I could do it.

After a year's teacher training in south London, I moved, in 1982, to Grimsby, where I worked as a lecturer at a further education college on courses for the young unemployed. When visiting Leigh-on-Sea after that, I remember sitting round the lunch table and asking Jean's advice on how best to approach people who were illiterate (she was a Head of Department in the same sector).

While in Grimsby, I was informed by Henri that Jean had died. This came as a shock and upset me a great deal. Due to work commitments I couldn't get to the funeral. I wrote to Henri apologising, and he replied with a card saying "Don't worry, it was a black farce." I'm very annoyed at myself, because I can't find that card.

After Jean died, Henri moved to Paris, and I lost contact with him for a few years. I was at the point of trying one final Christmas card, and thankfully he wrote back (it was one of the explanations I had suspected: he had moved apartments, and my previous cards hadn't reached him). Once back in touch I wanted to do something for him (something in return for all the kindness he had showed me over the years). I was quite well established in Grimsby, and "patch funded" a visit to Britain for Henri at the end of 1990. This included performances in Grimsby, Hull and Lincoln, with a final performance in London at The Voice Box (as the literature venue within the Royal Festival Hall next to the Arts Council Poetry Library was then known).

I had the funding to hire a sound technician and his equipment, and the three of us travelled around together. I saw Henri at work testing tape recorders and speakers: he was a perfectionist who always knew what he wanted. The Grimsby performance was on the Lincoln Castle, which was once the Humber ferry and had become a floating pub. I helped, with another person, carry down to the bar area, where Henri would perform, a paralysed man. We then brought down his wheel chair, and he was quite happy scooting around. At a later date I discovered it was Robert Wyatt (the drummer/vocalist of Soft Machine etc), who, apparently, was a fan of Henri, and lived in Louth, a market town about 15 miles away.

It was during this 1990 visit, at my house in Grimsby, that Henri composed the typewriter poem dedicated to me. He produced it in front of me, and his years of experience meant he had an impressive speed and dexterity: inserting the paper both vertically and horizontally. However, parallel to

this must have been a level of spontaneity: otherwise how could he produce variations and unique artworks?

Just prior to the visit, Henri gave me two of his typewriter poems to publish as postcards, for this I received funding from Lincolnshire and Humberside Arts.

The final performance in London showed there were still enough people around interested in Henri to sell out the venue. I remember seeing Bob Cobbing turn up and shake hands with Henri (which was good since they had different approaches to sound poetry, and had their disagreements).

From then on, I kept in touch with Henri, and once met up with him in Paris. When he moved to Norfolk to live in a grandad flat at the house of his daughter and son-in-law, I visited him a few times there, once staying a weekend. He was still active producing sound poems and artworks.

From the mid-90s onwards I worked at De Montfort University in Leicester with Nicholas Zurbrugg, who became a close friend. Nicholas knew Henri better than me and had organised Henri's visit to Australia. In late 2000, Nicholas organised a weekend at De Montfort which brought together Language Poets (the "star" being Charles Bernstein (who came over from America), and Concrete Poets, including Emmett Williams, Bob Cobbing and Henri. I drove to Norfolk to bring Henri to Leicester and took him back. Unfortunately, Nicholas died the following year.

So, those are a few notes...but of course I have other memories of this incredible person and artist.

Robert Richardson

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