



Vocation: Composer - An Interview with Sophie Lacaze

How does one become a composer? What are the different stages in the composition process? How can the world around us inspire us to create musical works? These are the questions we asked French composer Sophie Lacaze.

by Julie Mooser (31.01.2023)



Sophie Lacaze

Homepage: <http://sophielacaze.com/>

Sophie Lacaze is a French composer born in 1963. Her works range from solo pieces for instruments, chamber music, and orchestral works to operas and compositions with band. They are regularly performed worldwide.

 [All Scores by Sophie Lacaze](#)

The Beginnings as a Composer

How did you start studying composition?

One morning, I must have been 14 or 15 years old, I woke up with the certainty that I would become a composer. A strange idea because even though I had always been attracted to the world of sounds and loved music, I rarely had the opportunity to go to a concert, knew no professional musicians, let alone composers... Besides, I played works by composers, not by women composers, and of course they had been dead for a long time because at the time there was no contemporary music in the conservatories.

But I decided to become a composer without asking myself any questions... I think that's what you call vocation...

Then I studied engineering... And only at the age of 26, much later, could I start studying composition. And there I realized that I had not been mistaken... Music became my life.

Does talent and inspiration suffice to become a composer, or must you study?

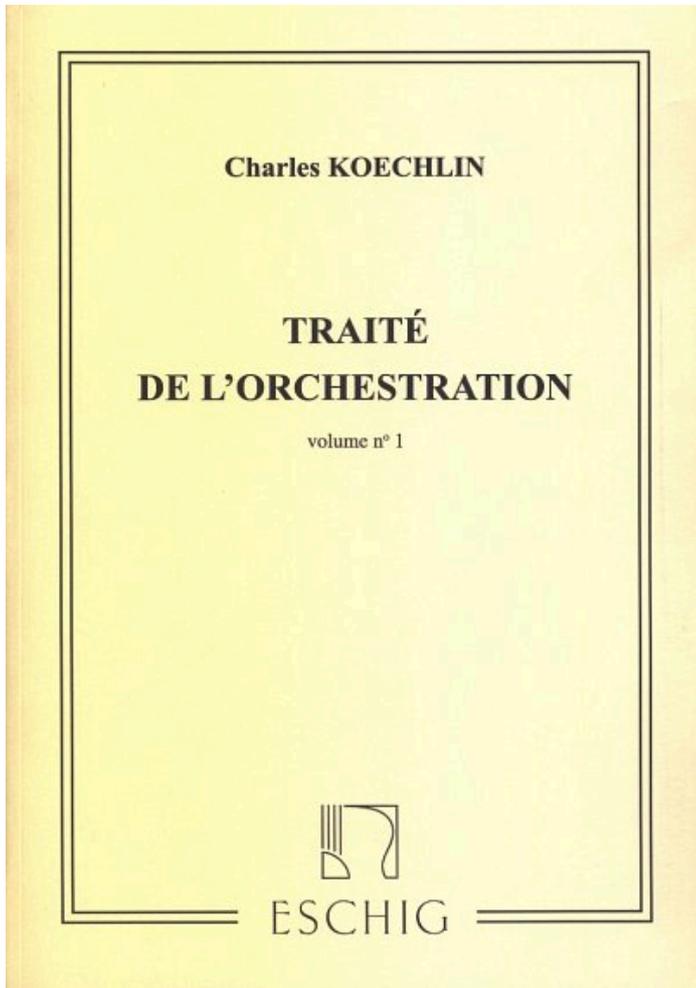
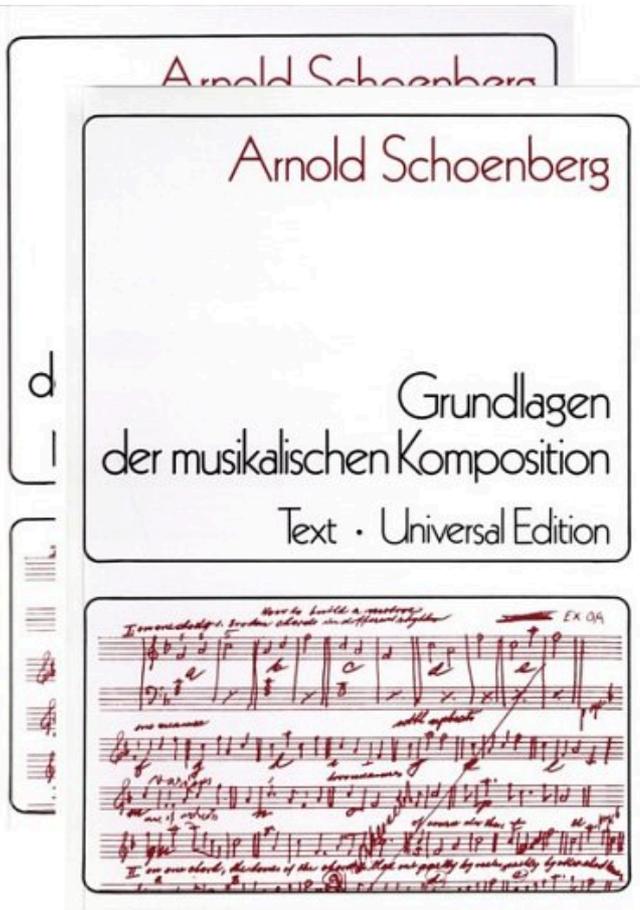
Edison said, "Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration." I think that also applies to creativity. Everyone has ideas, and everyone can have good ideas. But then they need to be worked on, shaped, organized, developed (or not), etc. And without technique, without know-how, it is impossible to create a high-quality work.

In music composition, you can learn the basic techniques in class with one or more teachers. In my opinion, this is essential for a good start. You also have to listen, analyze, work, research, read... a lot.

How have your teachers influenced your work?

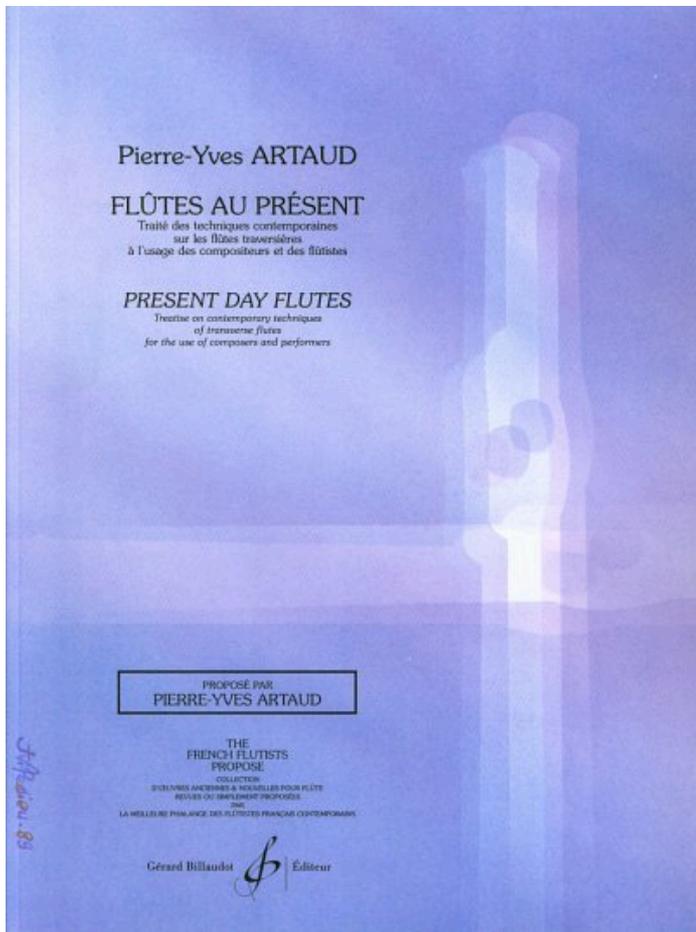
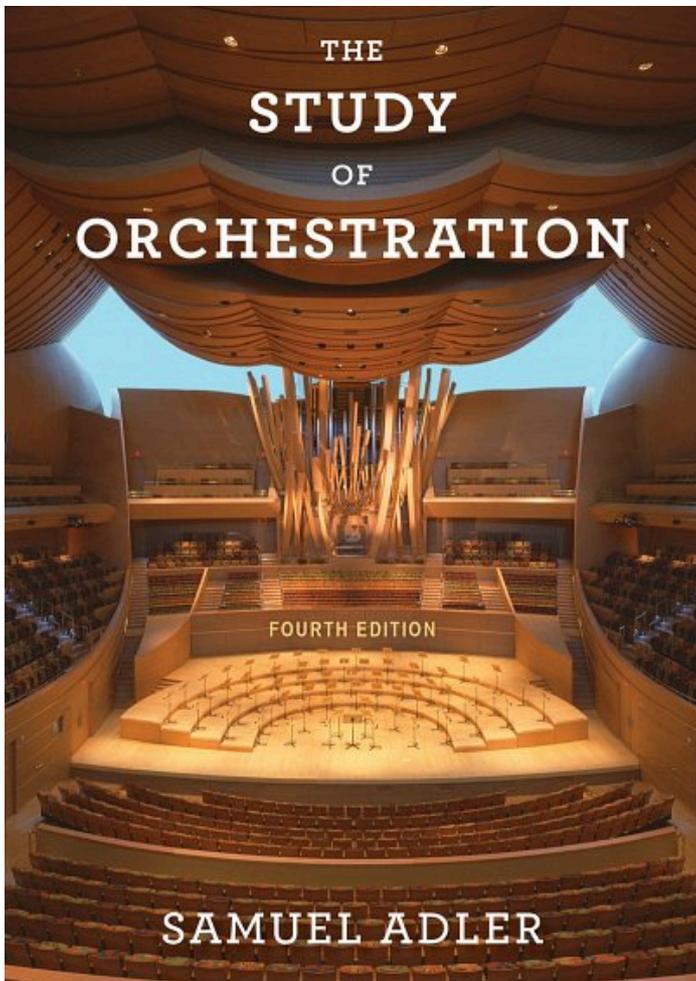
No teacher has influenced my work, some even seemed a bit puzzled by my artistic decisions. One of them, Antoine Tisné, immediately understood what my concerns were and grasped my interest in timbre. He advised me to read a certain orchestral score, to analyze a certain score, to compose for a certain instrument, and accompanied me in my first sound research.

Some standard works on composition and orchestration recommended by S. Lacaze's teachers:



Arnold Schönberg, Die Grundlagen der musikalischen Komposition

Charles Koechlin, Traité de l'Orchestration 1



Pierre-Yves Artaud, Flûtes au Présente

Samuel Adler, The Study of Orchestration

Composition

What is the first step in the composition process?

I think that this is very personal and depends on each individual. For me, I first search for what will be the source of my inspiration. I never write music out of nothing, I can't do that. So it can be a poem, a painting, an image, a sound, a legend, and so on.

How long does it take you to write a piece?

It depends on the instrumental lineup and the length of the piece, but I am definitely very slow. And although I write only a few notes (my music is rather minimalist), everything is very carefully thought out and considered. Pitch, rhythms/durations, intensities, and timbres, I treat all four parameters of music equally and with the same rigor. And this takes time, especially since I regularly try out new timbre combinations that I have to test with the performers before incorporating them into the score.

Do you have a preferred lineup for composition?

Yes, absolutely... the orchestra! With its absolutely beautiful and rich sound palette, it is a true pleasure to write for a symphony orchestra. Unfortunately, opportunities to write for orchestras are rather rare for a composer these days.

You were an engineer before becoming a composer. Does this first career still accompany you in your work as a composer?

Once an engineer, always an engineer! I have a very Cartesian mind and have kept the need to rationalize everything. You can't hear it when listening, but my music is very mathematical. Fibonacci sequence, golden ratio, symmetries, homotheties,... are part of the fundamentals of my composition technique.

Was there a key moment for the start of your career?

I think my career really began in 2009 when I received the [Grand Prix Lycéen des Compositeurs](#). Until then, I was completely unknown in the contemporary music scene in France. But this award changed that.

Works

The culture of the Aboriginal people has greatly inspired your work. How did you incorporate this into music?

I discovered the culture of the Aboriginal people during my first stay in Australia in 1998. The Aboriginal people are very connected to nature, they serve it and live their lives according to the cycles of nature. This stay made me aware of a number of things that quickly became essential to me. Ecology is one of them, even though I already had an environmental awareness, and some of my works are deliberately oriented towards ecology, such as *Voices of Australia*. But I was also drawn to the music of the Aboriginal people, their dances, and their ritual ceremonies, which reminded me of the essence of musical art, its origins, and its original purity. All of this seemed fundamental and essential to me. My music had to return to the origins of music, to what this art was created for - ritual, invocation, dance. And purity. This is what I am still searching for today.

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You have composed several pieces for beginners. Is pedagogy important to you?

For an artist, it is essential to pass on knowledge. I have taught a lot, especially at university, not only composition and orchestration but also music history and contemporary music interpretation. I have noticed that too few musicians or future musicians have played contemporary works by the time they reach university. That is why I think it is important to introduce contemporary music at a young age.

Is contemporary music accessible to all audiences? How can it be made more accessible?

There is not one contemporary music, but many contemporary musics, with styles and aesthetics that can be very different depending on the composers who write them. Their works can often be confusing because the harmonies or sounds used are unusual. It was the same in all eras. At the beginning of the 19th century, Beethoven's music was not always understood and appreciated by the public, or even by the musicians who had to play his last string quartets!

"New" ears, not yet accustomed to classical music or the stereotyped music that can be heard everywhere, such as children's ears, can immediately appreciate a contemporary work. In general, it is desirable to provide some listening keys before the concert, regardless of the audience, as it facilitates the perception and understanding of these new musical languages. Contemporary music is accessible to everyone when it is of quality, and when it is explained.

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In recent weeks, several of your works have been premiered in front of a live audience for the first time, including "Soupirs d'étoiles" by the BBC Symphony Orchestra. How do you feel before such moments?

As a composer, the creation of a work is always an important and emotional moment. But it is true that when it is a piece for orchestra, and it is a wonderful orchestra like the BBC SO playing for you, it is an extremely intense moment of emotion and great happiness.

What are your upcoming projects?

I am starting to write a chamber opera, with a libretto by Alain Carré, which will be staged by Pierre Thirion-Vallet. This is a project that is very close to my heart, with its theme in line with my environmental concerns, and an absolutely wonderful team of artists.

Then, I will be composing a work for 10 musicians (wind quintet + string quintet) and two pieces for advanced students at a conservatory. My year 2023 is very busy.

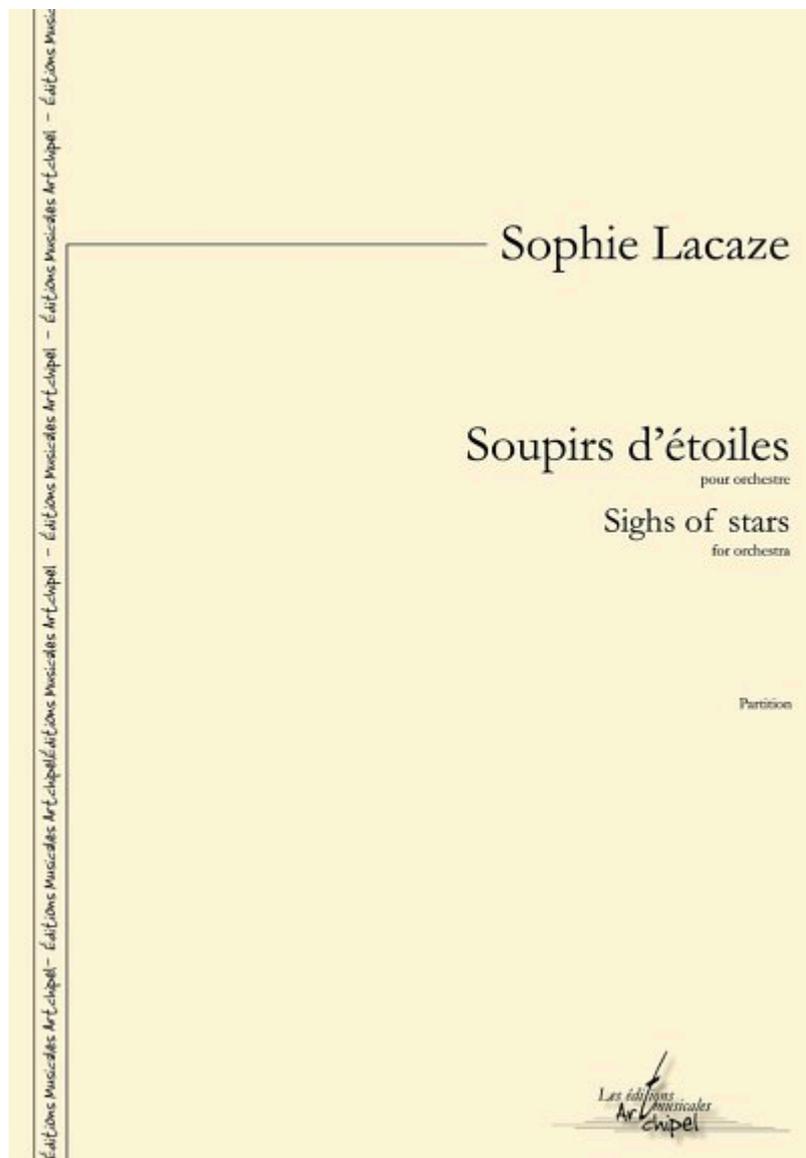
What advice would you give to someone who wants to become a composer?

I would tell them that it is a difficult profession, but one that brings a lot of joy. And if they really want to do it, they should not hesitate!

If you could only recommend one musical work to our readers, from any era, which one would it be?

That is an extremely difficult question, as there are so many magnificent works... But I might choose one of the works that is on the Voyager Golden Record that the Americans sent on their Voyager I and II spacecraft: the Prelude and Fugue in C major, No. 1, from Book II of **Johann Sebastian Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier** performed by Glenn Gould. It is sublime.

Editor: Julie Mooser



Soupirs d'étoiles

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