

THE SWORD SONG

Staged performance

by Pier Lamandé

“

In this new show, Aedes exploits what has always made the ensemble's distinguishing feature: its ability to explore all repertoires, whatever the style or period, and its desire to draw them together in original new programmes. Here Aedes invites Japanese martial artist and actor-singer Masato Matsuura to join them at the frontier between choral singing and Nō dance-drama.

Despite the clichés we hear about it, Nō is a subtle art form in which drama, singing and dance are mingled. With the addition of Masato Matsuura's sword fighting, Nō becomes a kind of initiation: the sword slices and opens, symbolizing both the end and a beginning.

Mathieu Romano and stage director Pier Lamandé have conceived an original plot based on the Five Elements of Japanese culture, in which a man (Masato Matsuura) retires from his fellow men (the choir) in order to return to them as a better person. One after the other he consults earth, water, fire, wind, void and plenitude with his question: what is my place in this world?

This programme in five acts is based around a selection of vocal masterpieces: Veljo Tormis' *Curse upon Iron*, a shamanic piece which uses sword dancing to induce a trance ; Schubert's famous *Song of the Spirits over the Water* and *The hurdy-gurdy man* from *Winterreise (Winter Journey)* ; the choral version of Richard Wagner's *Im Treibhaus* or the magnificent atmospheric piece by composer Evelin Seepar... The voices of Aedes's singers and the Nō actor meet and exchange, the ensemble borrowing from Yokyoku while Masato Matsuura helps himself to some Western choral repertoire from his place within the choir.

Two famous melodies, representative of the Western and Japanese cultures, will link the works together through multiple variations. Aurélien Dumont's piece for choir, Nō artist-sword dancer and two instruments, will be the central pillar of this performance, revealing to the listener the music of the elements which links us to the world.



Programme

In 5 acts

PROLOGUE

Richard Wagner

Im Treibhaus

(choral arr. by Clytus Gottwald)

Common thread

A Western choral melody
O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden
(H. L. Hassler / J. S. Bach / Paul Simon)

A traditionnal Japanese melody
Sakura

EARTH

Franz Schubert

Der Leiermann,

excerpt from *Winterreise* D. 911

(arr. for an a cappella choir and cello)

FIRE

Veljo Tormis

Curse upon Iron

WATER

Evelin Seppar

Seesama meri

WIND

Aurélien Dumont

Kazegaku

EMPTINESS / FULLNESS

Alfred Schnittke

Psalms of Repentance, No. 12

CONCLUSION

Johann Hermann Schein

Die mit Tränen säen

excerpt from *Israelis Brunnlein*

Franz Schubert

Gesang der Geister über den

Wassern (arr. for an a cappella

mixt choir, cello and percussion)

Philippe Hersant

Quiétude de l'âme

excerpts from *Instantes limites*

1h25 with no interval

Aedes

Mathieu Romano

conductor

Masato Matsuura

Nō artist

1 percussionnist

1 cellist

Pier Lamandé

stage director

Antoine Traver

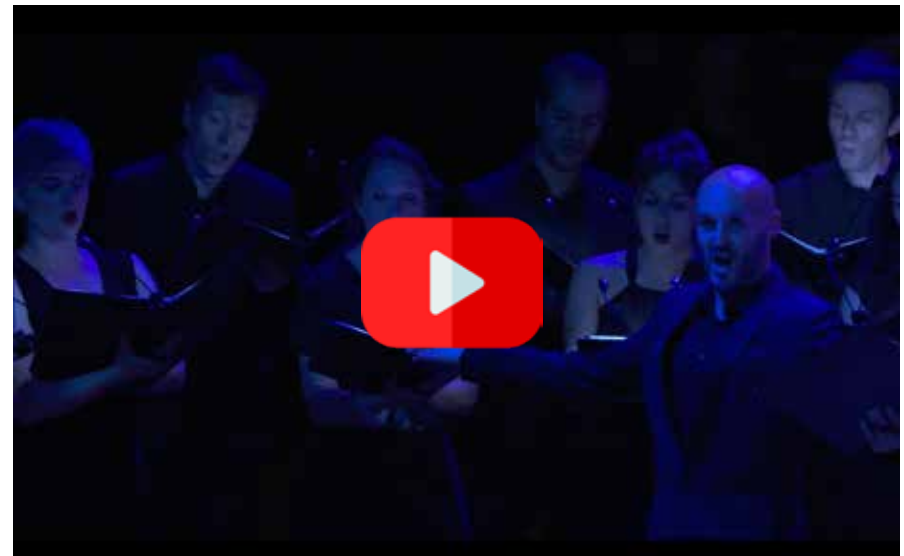
light designer

**Coproduction Aedes,
Opéra de Reims, Atelier
Lyrique de Tourcoing**

Programme presentation



Veljo Tormis, *Curse upon iron*



Technical information

Total number of people on tour: 33

Artistic staff

28 people on stage

24 singers
2 instrumentalists
1 Nō artist
1 conductor

1 stage manager
1 light designer

Technical staff

1 general stage manager
2 production managers

Estimated planning

D-1

arrival of the artistic and technical teams
set-up (light setting)
lighting

The day of the concert

1 technical service
1 rehearsal
1 performance

Full technical details available on request

Introduction | Mathieu Romano

From the very beginning, Aedes' policy has been to enrich its repertoire by **premiering works which engage with both different musical genres** (such as French popular song and musicals) and different cultures represented by guest artists and personalities : the famous flamenco singer Rocío Márquez, for example, in *Lamento*, a programme at the crossroads between flamenco and choral singing, and for our 2024-2025 season, martial artist Masato Matsuura in a show which mingles classical and contemporary vocal works with the arts of Nō dance-drama.

As I looked more closely at Nō and in particular at **Utai** – traditional recitation with a distinctive vocal technique at once powerful, rough, flexible and guttural – I found **fascinating links with works from Western music**. One example is the 'shamanic' *Curse upon Iron* for choir and drum by Estonian composer Veljo Tormis, which, like Nō, makes use of both physical and spiritual voices. In this, the central work of the programme, Masato Matsuura will deploy his **spectacular sword-fighting art**, revealing its role as an initiation : the sword slices and opens, symbolising both the the end and the beginning.

Contrary to the clichés we often hear about it, Noh is an ancient and subtle art form. Our aim is to examine this tradition by comparing it with **famous choral works** as well as the **premiere of a composition by Aurélien Dumont**, inspired by the figures of Akeji, a Japanese calligraphic artist who became a hermit in order to return to it as a better person. This encounter became a journey of cultural exploration.

This new work, conceived together with stage director **Pier Lamandé**, takes note of the 'speed' society lives at, asking the question : **How can we live along with other people whilst respecting our own temporality?**



A human community (the choir) is confronted with a conflict, a dilemma where each of them has to make a choice. Masato Matsuura represents the man who retires to a place where there is neither disagreement nor schism nor violence. **Throughout this musical quest he will question his founding principles, that is the Godai or Five Elements of Japanese culture** : water, earth, fire, wind, and a fifth element comprising both the void and plenitude. Each 'Act', devoted to one element, involves both choral and Utai works and the ways in which they overlap : the Ensemble borrows from Nō repertoire when Masato Matsuura is invited to sing so-called Western repertoire with the choir.

Artist statement | Pier Lamandé

All the pieces we have chosen have a philosophical aspect : Tormis' *Curse upon Iron*, Schubert's *Song of the Spirits over the Water* and the close of his *Winterreise* (*Winter Journey*), the choral version of Mahler's *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* (I am lost to the world), all masterpieces which speak of the soul's presence in the world, or make hope possible, as in Johann Hermann Schein's motet *Die mit Tränen säen* (They that sow in tears shall reap in joy).

Each of these works represents in its own way one of the five elements: The incantation on which Tormis' *Curse upon Iron* is based invokes fire through a trance ; Schubert illustrates 'his song of the spirits' with fluid writing imitating the movement of water, whilst the last song of his *Winterreise* evokes both void and plenitude with its starkness and silences. The tangible depth of Schein's motet reminds us of the earth, while in the multiplicity of rising and falling vocal lines in Mahler's Lied we hear the rushing voice of the wind.

As a leitmotif for this journey, I chose a chorale melody by Hassler, frequently rearranged, notably by Bach in his *St Matthew Passion*, with a different harmony each time to take us from one act to the next, ending with an original version by Paul Simon. Aurélien Dumont's work for choir, two instruments and Noh artist-sword dancer is the central pillar of the programme, revealing to the listener the music of the elements which lets us connect with the world around us.

We often find ourselves changed, ,struck, called into question by a reality which is hard to understand. The challenges of the present day can make us withdraw into ourselves, refuse to evolve at all, or feel terrified into attack or rejection. Many of the most ancient and seminal tales from different cultural traditions invite us to dive deep into the well of wisdom and clarity which is this unknown, to encounter other people in their humanity.

Perhaps it is possible, by following the example of Akeji, a contemporary Japanese hermit-artist at the gates of our world, to augment this reality by taking time to question it and look at our own complexity. What if the key were to absorb the fears which paralyse us, to get back to grips with our needs, to redetermine our fundamental principles? What if we needed to reconnect with our roots and our heritage in order to negotiate the future better? Choose union in the face of rejection?

This being thus takes shape in the midst of a world whose speed and superabundance are choking him. He learns to **slow down his experience of the world**, to examine each of the elements of which he is composed. **Between tradition and modernity, he explores every facet of each them in the hopes of rebuilding a whole in which he wants to find an active role.**



In Japanese tradition, in order to find the essence of the five elements, the sword slices through space, redefining each section thereof : water, earth, air, fire and the void. This last is also the home of plenitude and the creation of all things. Thus our hero, by exercising his martial art, finds a way to reforge his existence and put everything in its right place. Our programme is an invitation to follow this path and look at the possibility of a less warlike future.

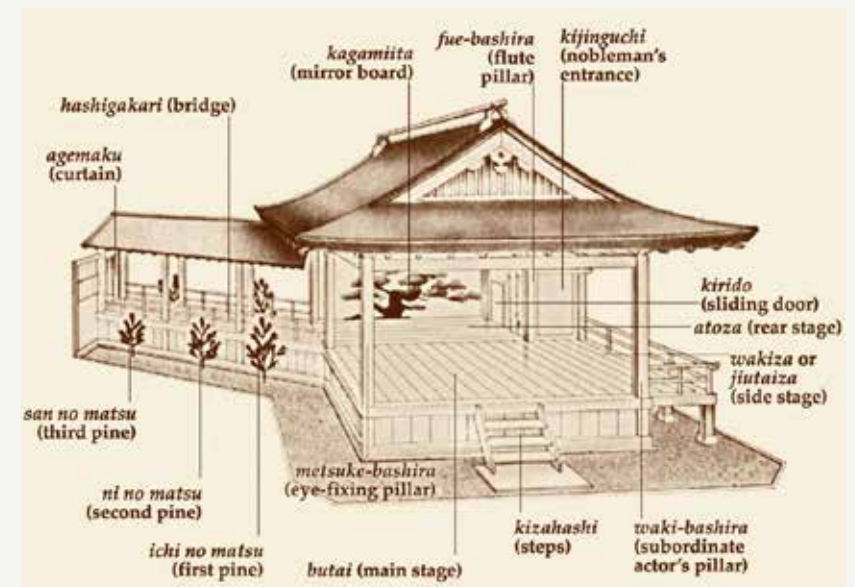
It is a unique experience when a No artist and a choir meet on the stage.

The sheer geographical distance between them is already a source of wonder. **The common elements between the two cultures** are proof that their albeit different approaches weave the same pattern of questions about the meaning of our existence in this world. **Both cultures, through their myths and narratives, sacred and profane, attempt to give perspective in which to examine our time.**

Thanks to his writing and his cultural duality, Aurélien Dumont adds a particular resonance to the quest of our central character. Each tableau draws its material at once from the sources of heritage and their resonance in the present. The strength of this method is to present, particularly through new **contemporary works**, the questions which the artists on the stage are asking themselves. Drawing on their traditions, they work together, using this encounter to call into question the very practice of their art. This allegory is echoed in the physicality of their art, the shifting of their harmonies and the consonance of their narratives.

The simple staging rewrites the various tenets of Noh traditions into Western concert hall settings. The auditorium and its aisles become this 'bridge', linking the invisible with physical space of our quest on the stage. The main stage is structured between the world of recitation and, on the edge, the world of musicality. The latter may be used by the choir without having to leave the stage, but remaining as mirror-witnesses of the central character's quest. And the whole company of artists represents both this plural and complex humanity, and also a wide variety of both individuals and performers on the stage.

Beyond all these specifics, The Sword Dance is the tale of individuals geographically poles apart, but whose fundamental quest is to be on the same stage, building a common future there, exploring an unknown space together, united in the face of the challenges which face us.



Masato Matsuura



© All rights reserved

Artist Masato Matsuura was born in Japan and trained as a Nō actor by Tetsunoyo Kanze VIII, National Treasure. A Noh actor and dancer, then, but also a contemporary theatre performer.

He practises a variety of martial arts, including Kenjitsu and Aikido, his work devoted to finding a method which unifies body and soul, as well as martial arts and performance.

In 2006 he settled in Paris, founding his own school, the Ecole Sayu Dojo, also established in Brussels. Here he teaches a variety of arts, exploring forgotten energy healing techniques, and he is regularly invited to teach abroad. He is in frequent demand to run courses and demonstrations at the Paris *Maison de la culture du Japon*.

In 2017 the cellist Dominique de Williencourt invited him to adapt Debussy's *Prelude à l'après-midi d'un faune* in Noh form, inspired by Nijinsky, for the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.

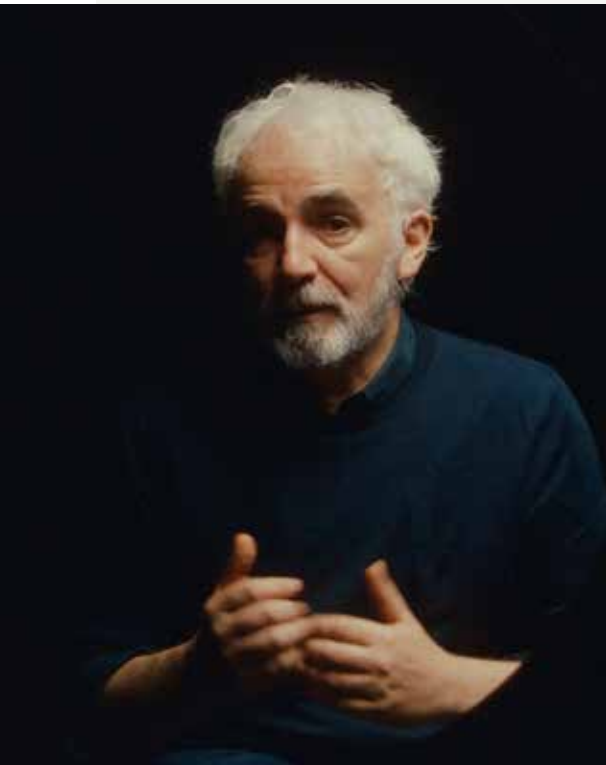
Other recent shows:

Sleeping (2019-2020), directed by Serge Nicolai and Yoshi Oida

Goldberg Nō (2021), with Frédérick Haas, Philharmonie de Paris

Medea, Nō (2023) in French, directed by Maxime Pierre, Théâtre de l'Alliance française

Pier Lamandé



© All rights reserved

Actor, director, collaborative artist and dramatist, Pier Lamandé forged his career alongside such experienced artists as Thomas Jolly, Stanislas Nordey, Valérie Lang, Éric Ruf, Christine Letailleur, Philippe Berling and Arthur Neuzyciel.

He is currently working with a new generation of artists whom he met along the way: Étienne Gaudillière, Anthony Thibault, Louise Dudek, Anaïs Müller and Bertrand Poncet. Pier leads a large amount of research into the place of the artist in society, using the seasoned works of writers such as Heiner Müller, Sarah Kane, Peter Handke, as well as younger, contemporary figures like Gwendoline Soublin, Vincent Fontano or Sarah Pèpe.

He continues to work on new productions with Thierry Thieu Niang, Guesh Patti and, most recently Lino Mérion and Salim Seuch in their latest premiere Krump. He was artist and pedagogical advisor to the Théâtre National de Bretagne's Drama School, and recently worked with groups 46 and 47 of the

Théâtre National de Strasbourg for four new shows to the words of Sonia Chiambretto. On top of his teaching in theatres, he runs workshops for a wide variety of different audiences.

He has been a senior lecturer at Poitiers University on the Assistant Stage Director, Dramaturgy and Stage Direction MA course for the last ten years. For him, always, theatrical productions are a place in which to seek exchange and vitality.

Mathieu Romano



© All rights reserved

A versatile conductor continually searching for new experiences, as at home in the orchestra pit as on the concert platform, Mathieu Romano exploits his profound understanding of the voice – both solo and choral – and the orchestra to tackle every genre, from baroque and symphonic to contemporary music.

He studied for his Masters in orchestral conducting at the Paris Conservatoire with François-Xavier Roth, Susanna Mälkki and Zsolt Nagy. He subsequently worked as assistant conductor with David Zinman, Dennis Russell Davies, François-Xavier Roth, Paul Agnew and Marc Minkowski.

He works with many ensembles such as Les Siècles, the RIAS Kammerchor, the National Youth Orchestra of France, the NFM Choir, Orchestre des Pays de la Loire, the Latvian Radio Choir, the Caen Orchestra and the Radio France Choir. He conducts opera projects, notably at Opéra Comique (with Orchestre de chambre de Paris, Maîtrise Populaire de l'Opéra Comique and Les Frivolités Parisiennes) and contemporary projects with the Ensemble Itinéraire.

In 2022 he was appointed Artistic Director of the new Pôle Régional d'Art Vocal of the Hauts-de-France region and musical director of the Choir of the Lille Opera.

The world's most distinguished concert seasons have seen him direct his Aedes ensemble. Listeners and critics alike have heaped praise on his many and varied recordings of *a cappella* music.

Amongst his other projects as an advocate of accessibility and musical education, he directed one of the South-West DEMOS orchestras (orchestras devoted to access to music for all) from 2017 to 2020. He has launched training projects for amateur musicians, children and promising young musicians as part of the Aedes ensemble's residency at Saint-Riquier Abbey. His musical achievements have earned him the title of *Chevalier dans l'ordre des Arts et Lettres*.

Aedes

Founded by Mathieu Romano in 2005, Aedes is the fruit of a collective adventure, its members motivated by the same passion for choral music to devote themselves to its service by their fidelity to the ensemble.

The ensemble's explores music from the Baroque period via unaccompanied 20th and 21st century music right up to contemporary works. It is well known for the originality of its staged or semi-staged programmes, for its collaborations with artists from other backgrounds (dance, drama and the visual arts) and for the jaunts it takes into other musical genres such as French chanson and flamenco. For the 2024-2025 season, Aedes invites martial artist and Nō actor Master Masato Matsuura to join them in creating a new programme which brings together two different thousand year-old traditions through singing, drama, arms and dance.

The ensemble's powerful stage presence has earned it invitations to perform in France's most distinguished opera houses : it has performed at the Philharmonie de Paris, the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, the Opéra Comique, the Paris Opera, the Théâtre du Châtelet, and the Palais de Chaillot. Festival engagements include Aix-en-Provence, La Chaise-Dieu, Besançon, Radio France Montpellier, and the Rencontres Musicales de Vézelay. Abroad, it has been invited to perform at the Vienna Konzerthaus and Musikverein, in Amsterdam, Krakow and Grenada's International Music and Dance Festival.

At the core of the Aedes' repertoire are 20th works and premieres of contemporary music. Its rich and varied recordings of sacred and secular a cappella music from this period have won praise from listeners and critics alike.

Its performances of vocal and instrumental masterpieces see the ensemble working with other distinguished groups such as Les Siècles, the Ensemble Intercontemporain, the Orchestre de Paris, the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, and the Latvian Radio Choir.

Faithfully committed to the generous spirit at the heart of this adventure, Mathieu Romano's singers devote themselves to sharing choral music everywhere, with everybody.

Based in the Somme *département*, Aedes is recognized as a "pôle culturel ressource", setting up ambitious training projects and promoting choral singing throughout the Hauts-de-France region.

Its program of cultural activities includes concerts in health and care establishments, as well as training courses in singing and choral conducting for young professionals and amateurs alike. It supports the development of vocal practice in schools and contributes to the training of an academic choir for teachers, in partnership with the Académie d'Amiens.

The 2025-2026 season will mark the 20th anniversary of Aedes. It will feature a host of projects emblematic of the ensemble's expertise, including the release of Francis Poulenc's complete *a cappella* works in autumn 2025.



© William Beaucardet



CONTACT

Anne-Sophie Pernet | General manager

annesophie.pernet@ensembleaedes.fr

+33 7 63 52 41 39

ensembleaedes.fr

