

The Making of *Nimbus*, by Composer Gina Biver and Poet Colette Inez

Meeting Colette

In 2010, while at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts -- an artist residency in the mountains of Virginia -- I met a poet named Colette Inez. We had much in common -- a zest for a creative life, a feisty feminist nature, and even a Catholic upbringing and later abandonment of the church for the spirit and solace we found in nature. We lunched together at the fellow's table and went for walks on the bucolic property of the residence.



Once we both returned to our homes, she to New York City, and I to Northern Virginia, we kept up our friendship through letters -- many of which I would read to my children at the dinner table because of the beauty of her prose. The year after we met I created a piece of music based on her poem "Empress in the Mirror", which was premiered by Fuse Ensemble in New York. I found Colette to be the most remarkable woman -- vibrant, humorous, grounded, wise, liberated, self-made, humble, and kind. She wore a red hat and bright lipstick the day we met and I remember thinking I wanted to be like her when I grew up.



Colette's Childhood

It wasn't long after meeting her that she shared her extraordinary story with me. Colette explained that she was the love-child of a French-American Catholic priest (a well-known and highly respected Monsignor) and a French scholar (the young researcher assigned to assist him).



As an infant, Colette was abandoned at a Belgian orphanage where she was raised in austere conditions by strict Catholic nuns. She lived there until the age of eight.

Colette at the orphanage L'Institut de Puericulture, Rue Chant d'Oiseaux Brussels, Belgium. (right)



After these formative years, she was brought to the United States to live with a foster family. Little did she know that the men who came to pick her up had been sent secretly by her father, the priest. She would not discover this until several years later when she struck out on her own to find her family.

The life she had with her foster family was quite difficult -- even harrowing at times. Only through her own astonishing resilience, intelligence and chutzpah, plus a few kind adults along the way, did she find the means to break out on her own after high school and work her way through college.



When she began her search for her parents, she was able to see her birth certificate through those gentlemen who had come to retrieve her from the orphanage. On it, as was the law in Belgium, was her mother's full name, Marthe Dulong, and that she was from Nérac, France.

As Colette describes in her memoir, "The Secret of M. Dulong" (University of

Wisconsin Press), her mother never openly admitted she had birthed a child. Even in her old age, to her family she referred to Colette only as her “friend from the U.S.” Marthe swore Colette to secrecy until her death, and Colette obliged.



Grave of Marthe and Jeanne Dulong at Espiens, near Nérac, France. The tomb is devoid of any cross out of respect and admiration for their father Jean Dulong, an anticlerical. It is the only one in the cemetery without one.

Colette’s cousin Jean-Jacques told me that after Marthe died in 1991, his father Maurice “received a letter from Colette where she told him the truth about who she was. In it was this photo.” (below, left)



After the initial shock wore off, his father said to him “How happy my uncle would have been if he had known he was a grandfather!” The Dulong were indeed not the type to dwell on such details when it comes to a child’s future.

Shunned by her parents because of the scandal their illicit relationship, if discovered, would create, the young Colette was hidden away. But the girl grew into a woman who lived to tell the tale and create a beautiful life for herself. Colette Inez became an award-winning poet, often drawing inspiration from her story, channeling her anger at her father and the church and finding a place for her longing for family. She went on to publish eleven books on poetry and a memoir. She taught for many years at Columbia University and won numerous prestigious awards including the Guggenheim, National Endowment for the Arts and Rockefeller Grants. Her work was included in hundreds of poetry anthologies and textbooks. She found love with Saul Stadtmauer, her husband for over fifty years, a kind and wonderful man with whom she flourished. Both writers lived a meaningful, creative life together in New York City, enjoying concerts, readings, and nature in Central Park.



Having tea in Colette's favorite cafe near her apartment, December 2016. (above)

Nimbus, Conceived

During a trip to New York in December 2016, Colette and I met for lunch in the Upper West Side neighborhood where she lived with her husband Saul. I told her I was interested in applying for an artist residency at Moulin à Nef in Auvillar, in the southwest of France. She reminded me that her mother's family hailed from an area nearby. On my way home on the bus from New York, I was inspired while reading her gift of a collection of her poems entitled "Spinoza Doesn't Come Here Anymore" (Melville House 2004); specifically her poem "My Priest Father's" and the idea started to form.

By spring of 2017, I wrote to Colette to say that I would like to create a work based on her early life, and ask for her blessing. I was concerned that dredging up her parents would be painful for her and absolutely wouldn't have done it if that were the case. She was intrigued by the idea, with only one stipulation: she didn't want it to be dark and depressing. I readily assured her that I saw it as a work of transformation, resiliency, the creative force behind anger and the creative power of love.

As I read through the stack of poems Colette mailed me -- those that dealt with her thoughts on her father, on the incredibly shameful and buried feelings her mother had about the relationship, and on her own memories of life at the orphanage -- I was struck by her frequent use of the word *clouds* within these poems. Colette told me that she found solace in nature, in the trees and especially the

sky. Of these poems she wrote about her early years and her imaginings of her parents' moments together, I chose seven, all containing a reference to clouds. Our *Nimbus* was taking shape. The title *Nimbus* came about when Colette and I realized we had simultaneously come up with it – enjoying its dual meanings of grey clouds (like so much of her family life shrouded and hidden from her), and the more Catholic connotation of the nimbus, or halo, bringing in a nod to the struggle of her parents, a priest and a devout Catholic scholar.

Forever in search of visual components to my work, I immediately thought of Ethan Jackson, another artist I met while on retreat at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts – the same place I had met Colette ten years earlier. For the live performances, I envisioned *Nimbus* as an artistic collaboration between Colette, visual artist Ethan Jackson and myself. It would become a work for chamber ensemble, voice and spoken word. Ethan's work with camera obscura, time-lapse landscape, sky imagery and interactive digital video techniques would create a visual representation/projection of the clouds and a space in which *Nimbus* might exist – tying it all together and realizing a third element to our music/words collaboration.

In June of 2017 I set off to New York, driving from our home just outside of Washington, D.C. to visit Colette and her dear husband Saul in their apartment just off Central Park. I set up my recording equipment and recorded her reading the seven poems I had chosen from the set of a dozen or so she had mailed me. I didn't know how exactly I would use the recordings, I just knew I wanted them.



In front of Colette and Saul's apartment, Upper West Side of New York (left)

The view from inside their apartment (below)





Colette, reading her poems for *Nimbus* while I record.

While I was there, I also recorded her reading “Empress in the Mirror,” since a piece I composed several years prior to that was inspired by that poem was to be on our upcoming album (Fuse Ensemble 3, Ravello Records). I spent the rest of the evening enjoying my most gracious hosts for dinner, wine and much laughter.



Saul Stadtmauer, Colette Inez and me in their apartment in New York. (right)

After the recording, we enjoyed several months of collaboration by letters, phone calls and an occasional email. I then applied to the VCCA France residency. Writing

this music in southwest France, so near Nérac, the hometown of her mother's family would be relevant, meaningful, inspiring. I spoke with Colette in early December to let her know I would stop by while in New York, and asked if she got the John Cage book and cookies I had mailed her for Christmas. But driving there, my car broke down and I was stuck in New Jersey, so I called to let her know I wasn't going to make it into the city. She said she would miss seeing me but actually wasn't feeling that well, and had a bit of a cough.

Losing Colette, Working on *Nimbus* with Saul

On February 7, 2018, upon realizing she hadn't returned my last letter or the email I sent -- I called her home phone. After several attempts, Saul picked up and told me with unbearable sadness "she is no longer with us." Colette had passed away on January 16, 2018 at the age of 87. It was understandably very difficult for Saul to talk; he told me he would call me the following week to talk, and I was so glad when he did.

After that, Saul and I spoke often. One of the first things he asked me was whether I would continue with our collaboration, which of course, I said I would. Honoring Colette in any way I could helped with the sadness of losing her. I only hoped I could do it justice. As the weeks passed, Saul and I chatted regularly. For Valentine's Day I mailed him some scones I'd made and when he called he said "they came at the perfect time, and now I know you will be in my life." He was incredibly helpful with the project, and I loved having him become a part of it.

Saul suggested I contact Colette's cousin Jean-Jacques Dulong, a lawyer and writer who lives in Paris. The only problem, Saul said, was that he didn't speak English. Saul was surprised and relieved when I told him I was fluent in French, having lived for three years in Paris when I was in high school. Jean-Jacques and his father, Maurice Dulong, (now deceased first cousin of Colette) had held Colette in high esteem. As Colette shared in her biography "The Secret of M. Dulong," Maurice had helped her piece together her family history -- one that had been deliberately hidden from her (by her ashamed mother Marthe) for much of her life -- and she adored him.

Jean-Jacques, Nérac and Auvillar

I tremendously enjoyed corresponding with Colette's cousin Jean-Jacques, who is gracious, friendly and quite an amazing writer and historian. While still an active lawyer, he often spent weekends in Nérac. I told him of my artist residency at Auvillar, France (through the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and VCCA-France), and after a few more very amicable phone calls, he invited me to stay in their family residence (the childhood home of Colette's mother Marthe) in Nérac, a short drive from Auvillar. I was speechless, and so grateful for the opportunity to meet him, and to stay and begin writing the piece there in Nérac. I would spend the first couple of weeks at the Dulong home, and then move on to the Moulin à Nef Artist Residency for the remainder of my stay.

Composing Nimbus at the Dulong House by Its River

On August 1, 2018 I flew into Toulouse airport, rented a car and drove an hour and a half through the beautiful countryside of southwestern France. Nérac, in the Lot-et-Garonne section within the Gascon countryside, is a city long in history. It was the ancient capital of kings of Navarre and France's most popular King Henri IV of Albret.

Driving through the fertile hills of southwest France. (right)



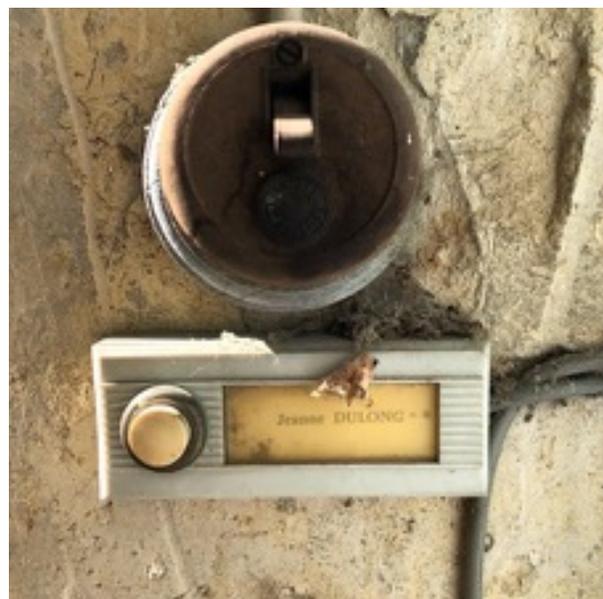
Into the town of Nérac and down the hill toward the river Baise. (left)

Arriving in Nérac, I was greeted warmly by Jean Jacques in his courtyard, and I immediately sensed a feeling of déjàVu from having read Colette's memoir ("The Secret of M. Dulong" from University of Wisconsin Press). Standing in the courtyard she had described, walking through the door and into the house where Colette's mother Marthe lived with her family, made the very air feel surreal, rich, pregnant with possibilities.



Front courtyard of the Dulong residence. (left)

Ancient doorbell that bears Aunt Jeanne Dulong's name. (right)





View of the house and its terrace, seen here just below the church steeple. (left)

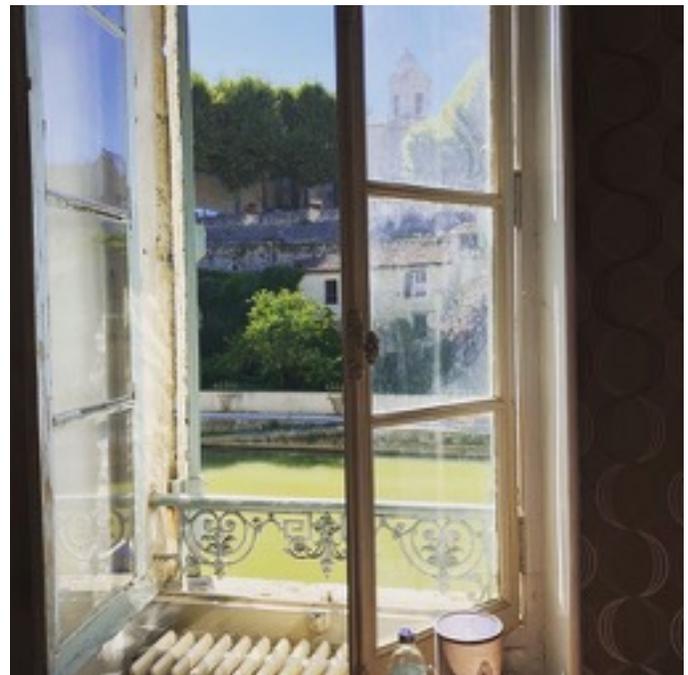
The door, ajar. (right)



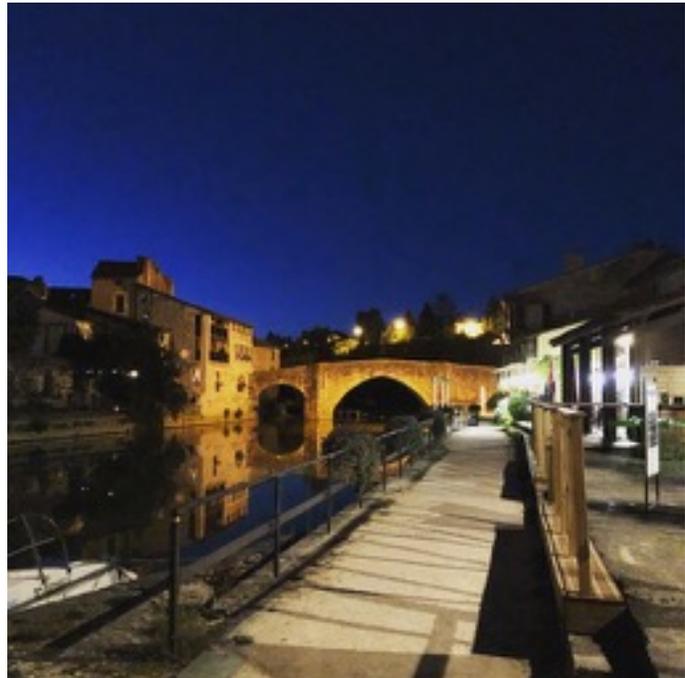


The next few days were spent exploring the town and its environs with my amazing hosts, absorbing as much as I could. Jean-Jacques said he was glad I could come now, since he was planning a renovation of this historic house that had been in his family for more than a hundred years. In the evenings, I began to sketch the first pieces of *Nimbus*, starting with My Priest Father's words.

The view from my room. (right)



The view from my window at night.



As the music started to flow, I spent more and more hours in my room, working. Sometimes sweet Nixia would come in to keep me company.



Saul Stadtmauer

One afternoon, we were taking a drive through the countryside with Jean-Jacques and his friend Anne. We were on our way to attend a Molière play at an outdoor theater on the grounds of a 12th-century castle when I was startled by the ring of my cellphone. Windblown and wondering if I should answer, I saw the caller ID was from New York and got a sinking feeling. It was Saul's nephew Gary calling to tell me that Saul had passed, just six months after his beloved Colette. Gary said he was with him when he died and that it was very peaceful. He asked me to please share the news with the Dulong family.

I thought of how the week before I left D.C. I had sent a package of cookies I baked to Saul with a note, thanking him for all he had done for me. I expressed how much I was looking forward to composing *Nimbus* at the Dulong home and how it wouldn't have been possible without him. I also assured him I was following through to complete the project, and that we already had a date to premiere it in Washington D.C. I promised we would then bring it to New York for him to enjoy. But I was devastated that neither Colette nor Saul would get to hear it, and even more so that I would not get to see either of them again in this life. Waves of gratitude and love for all that we shared and for all the years, letters and creative collaborations I had shared with Colette that enriched my life in so many ways.



Colette and Saul on a trip to France during her Guggenheim year.



Dejeuner with Jean-Jacques, Dulong terrace.
(left)

Dulong family on the terrace, 1973. From right: Maurice, Jean-Jacques, Jeanne, a family friend, and JJ's mother Liliane on the same terrace. (below, right)

I like to imagine Colette fitting in with the Dulong clan, a family of intellectual free-thinking men and determined women (albeit more religious than the men) for whom literature was paramount. Jean-Jacques's mother Liliane Choukroun, (who



would have been close in age and Colette's cousin by marriage) was also a woman of letters, a fiery and independent woman, and a professor of literature who frequented intellectual circles of French Algeria. Liliane was a longtime friend of Albert Camus who remained her friend until his untimely death in 1960. Camus called her "Eliane" in his first book "A Happy Death." Jean-Jacques thought it

was such a pity Colette and his mother lost, for many years, the opportunity to be together. Below, Jean-Jacques talks about his family and their history in southwest France:

“The roots of the Dulong family go back hundreds of years to the country of Albret in the region of Gascony in southwest France, where the town of Nérac is the historic capital. Colette’s grandfather Jean Dulong was born in 1866 and was a professor of history and geography when he married Marie Cailleau, daughter of an important landowner in the region, a notable whose family had been Protestant before converting to Catholicism during the 19th century as was common.

A notable Nérac citizen of radical-socialist tendency — center-left of the political spectrum — Jean became Deputy mayor of Nérac in charge of culture in the 1920s, particularly in charge of the opening of the municipal museum in the former castle of the Albret family of which the king of France, Henri IV was the descendant (he had made Nérac his political capital during the wars of religion when he was the leader of the French Protestants).

If Jean Dulong was anticlerical and a free thinker, on the other hand, his wife was a practicing Catholic and raised their daughters in the Christian faith.

His two daughters Jeanne and Marthe (Colette’s mother) followed higher studies in the years 1910/1920, which was very rare for young girls. The eldest, Jeanne, even went to the United States during the war of 14/18 to improve her English at a university in Kansas. She ended her professional career in the 1960s as deputy director at the Ministry of Labor. Anglophile and very patriotic, she was part of a Resistance network in Paris during the war. She remained celibate all her life and tried with mixed success a literary career as a writer and translator.

Colette’s mother Marthe was admitted to the prestigious competition of the Ecole des Chartes which could and should have offered her a very good career. A woman as intelligent and cultivated as she was withdrawn and probably extremely shy; very religious with mystical and probably ascetic tendencies (we found in her affairs after her death a cilice and a scapular). She became at 25 years of age the secretary who turned out to be very particular to an American monsignor much older than herself, from a paternal family of Bordeaux origin and who was a recognized scholar specializing in medieval manuscripts. He died in the late 1930s. He was certainly the man of her life and probably the only one.

Within our family Marthe was considered an oddball. We never broached any subjects that could upset her such as religion. Marthe had spent 40 years of her life in Oxford within the English aristocracy where she translated manuscripts. She became more like them: modest, reserved, and sometimes quite cold. She spoke French with almost a British distinction.

Colette had her place in a family where she would have found affectionate and attentive maternal grandparents and also an aunt, Jeanne, with whom she would undoubtedly have gotten along with wonderfully. Would Colette have become a different woman? Probably not, but the New York poet might have been a Parisian poet... In the end, poetry would have won in any event.”

—Jean-Jacques Dulong, November, 2020



Jean-Jacques drove me all over the area. I recorded hours of audio that included church bells, services inside churches, birds and lots of rain outside my window and in the courtyard of the house, people walking and talking in streets busy with traffic. I brought my trusty zoom recorder everywhere I went. In fact, you can hear JJ's voice repeating "abandonné" mixed in between priests chanting and parishioners responding during the electronic intro of Part Bull, Part Priest which features our percussionist Scott Deal.

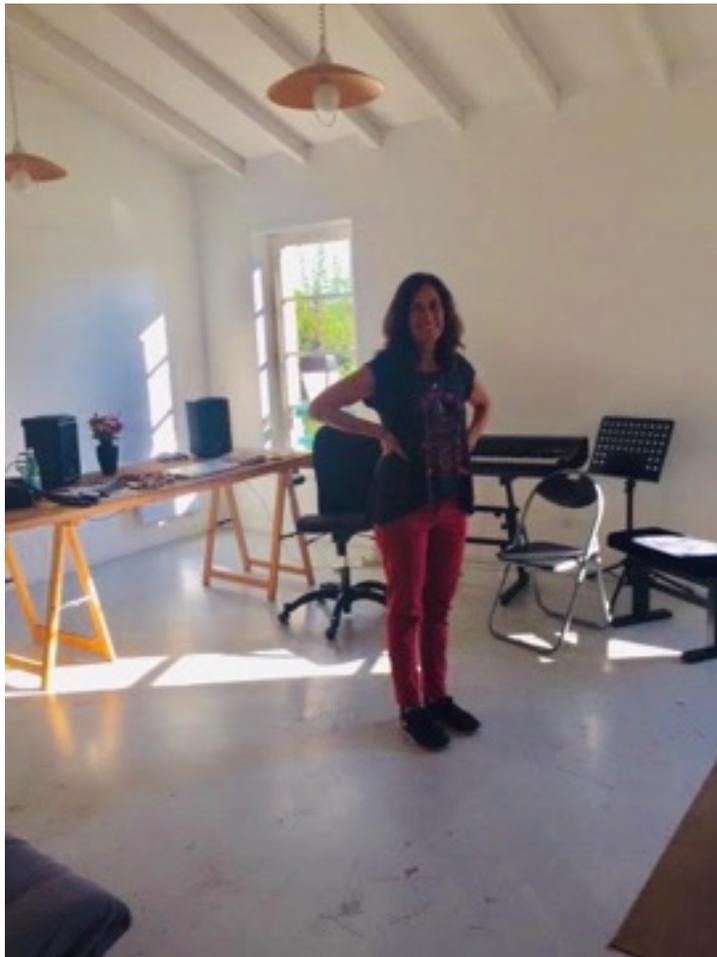
Then the inevitable day came when I had to leave Jean-Jacques and the town of Nérac to head for the artist residency I had planned before Saul so kindly connected me with the Dulong family. Not wanting to wear out my welcome, after a couple of weeks we said our goodbyes (with promises to "rejoindre" soon) and I drove an hour to Auvillar to finish composing the rest of *Nimbus* at the Moulin à Nef artist residency, a part of VCCA-France.



Moulin à Nef Artist Residency, Auvillar, France. Front view of the building (above) and back gardens, complete with grapevines laden with fruit. (right)



I was offered a beautiful space in which to compose, an inspiring place where I was able to finish my work on *Nimbus*. It was in this space that I created the seventh miniature “Fish Dinner with Oysters Stripped of Their Pearls” for piano, bass and vibraphone.





My studio during the day. (above) Open Studio, with Cheryl Fortier from VCCA-France, other artists and friends from town. (below)



All good things must come to an end, and my return flight to the U.S. loomed near. Being in France during the summer of 2018 was one of the most remarkable experiences of my life, and for that, I will always remain grateful to Saul, Colette, VCCA-France, and Jean-Jacques Dulong.





View from Dulong residence, kitchen window (seen on *Nimbus* album cover).

Spring 2019

After several months of refining, *Nimbus* was finally ready for rehearsals and its first performances. *Nimbus* premiered in Washington, DC on April 5, 2019 at Georgetown University's Friday Music Series, with another performance at St. Stephens and the Incarnation Episcopal Church on Saturday, April 6, 2019. Live performance links are below.

Gina Biver and Fuse Ensemble are excited to have released *NIMBUS* on Neuma Records.

A New York premiere will happen once the pandemic ends! As Colette would say STAY AMAZED!

With love and gratitude,

Gina Biver
November, 2020



Group shot of Fuse Ensemble after Nimbus performance in Washington, DC, April 2019



PERFORMANCE LINKS:

Premiere performance of NIMBUS at Georgetown University's McNeir Auditorium in Washington, D.C., with live interactive video projections by Ethan Jackson: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3TkgHYUeEw>

Performance of Nimbus at St. Stephen and the Incarnation Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C.
Live interactive video projections by Ethan Jackson: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2j4yr0MEAsI>

ARTIST LINKS:

Colette Inez

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/colette-inez>

<https://poets.org/poet/colette-inez>

<https://www.vcca.com/in-memoriam-colette-inez-1930-2018/>

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