

ARTICLE

ACOUSMATIC UPDATE BY FRANCIS DHOMONT

This article is reprinted from CONTACT!, the journal of the Canadian Electroacoustic Community. It was originally written in response to a request to Francis Dhomont to provide an article on acousmatic art which would be relevant to both "beginners" and "experts". The editor is most grateful to Francis Dhomont and to Ian Chuprun of the CEC for giving permission to reproduce this article.

Laying the Foundation

First announced by several precursors in the first decades of this century (Russolo, Cahill, Trautwein, Martenot, Theremin, Cage, Varèse, etc), electroacoustic music (not named as such at the time) was born in the sound studios of the RTF [French National Radio] in 1948, in Paris, with musique concrète. Its inventor, Pierre Schaeffer, had the considerable merit of formulating the practical and theoretical notions for a music that required a new way of thinking about composition, and created a new sound world through the use of equally original production techniques. Indeed, in musique concrète, materials are selected from our sound environment, without prejudice.

All sounds, regardless of their origin, are of equal value and can be musically organized. These elements, sound objects (1), originally of an acoustic or electronic nature, are recorded, then processed, edited, mixed (note the analogy to techniques used in cinema) and 'orchestrated' in the studio, through the use of an ever-evolving technology. Finally, –and this is the most important point– the organization of complex "spectromorphologies" (Denis Smalley), far removed from the 'musical note', cannot be fully realized with traditional conceptual tools; a change of such profundity requires new compositional strategies, and very different aesthetic and formal preoccupations than those found in instrumental music composition.

This original compositional method begins with the concrete (pure sound matter) and proceeds towards the abstract (musical structures) –hence the name musique concrète – in reverse of what takes place in instrumental writing, where one starts with concepts (abstract) and ends with a performance (concrete). Consequently, musique concrète pieces asks of its listeners that they un-program their hearing (accustomed to the matrix of pitch, scales, harmonic relations, instrumental timbres, etc) and develop an attitude of active listening based on new criteria of perception. This music is also called concrète because it is fixed on tape through the recording process ("sono-fixation", M Chion), in the same way that an image is fixed on a canvas or a film. François Bayle refers to sound images.

Two years later (1950), electronic music, realized through sound synthesis, emerged from the WDR Studios (West German Radio) in Cologne. Antagonistic at first, the schools of musique concrète and electronic music finally shared their sources and techniques, and were globally identified as electroacoustic music.

Since then, this single term has come to designate an infinite number of sound realizations with little in common, aside from their reliance on electricity; it refers to popular music (electronic instruments, synthesizers, samplers), serious research institutes (CCRMA, GRM, IRCAM, MIT...), works on tape, instruments and tape, live electronic music, interactive works, etc. "The term Electroacoustic Music has expanded to such a degree that it has become a meaningless catch-all ", wrote Michel Chion in 1982. (2) Today, this expression reveals little of what we may expect to hear, and its use is analogous to applying the term acoustic music to define the entire instrumental repertoire. For these reasons, a group of composers, descendants of the school of musique concrète, found it necessary to find a term that clearly designates the genre (3) in which they work, and which calls for a particular reflection, a methodology, a craft, a syntax, and specific tools.

This term is acousmatic (4). It refers to a theoretical and practical compositional approach, to particular listening and realization conditions, and to sound projection strategies. Its origin is attributed to Pythagoras (6th C. BC) who, rumour has it, taught his classes –only verbally – from behind a partition, in order to force his students to focus all their attention on his message. In 1955, during the early stages of musique concrète, the writer Jérôme Peignot used the adjective acousmatic to define a sound which is heard and whose source is hidden. By shrouding 'behind' the speaker (a modern Pythagorean partition) any visual elements (such as instrumental performers on stage) that could be linked to perceived sound events, acousmatic art presents sound on its own, devoid of causal identity, thereby generating a flow of images in the psyche of the listener.

In order to avoid any confusion with performance-oriented electroacoustic music, or music using new

instruments (Ondes Martenot, electric guitars, synthesizers, real-time digital audio processors, etc), François Bayle introduce the term acousmatic music in 1974. This term designates a music of images that is "shot and developed in the studio, and projected in a hall, like a film", and is presented at a subsequent date. (5) Bayle has stated that, "With time, this term — both criticized and adopted, and which at first may strike one as severe — has softened through repeated use within the community of composers, and now serves to demarcate music on a fixed medium (musique de support) — representing a wide aesthetic spectrum — from all other contemporary music." (6)

Today, the act of hearing a sound without seeing the object from which it originates is a daily occurrence. This happens when we listen to an orchestral symphony on our home sound system, when we listen to the radio, or when we communicate by phone, etc. In fact, we are unsuspecting acousmatic artists. But in these examples, it is not the message that is acousmatic but rather the listening conditions for the communication of that message. Mozart, as he wrote the symphonies which we now hear in our living rooms, was not thinking of the CD but rather of live performances by an orchestra. In order to be designated as acousmatic, a composition should be conceived for an acousmatic listening environment, giving priority to the ears. This fundamental distinction is not always clearly understood by neophyte listeners.

An Art of Time Occupying Space

The term Acousmatic Music (or Art) designates works that have been composed for loudspeakers, to be heard in the home —on radio or on CD/tape— or in concert, through the use of equipment (digital or analog) that allows the projection of sound in 3-dimensional space. However, though the concert may provide the ideal presentation for an acousmatic work, it is not a sine qua non criteria for its existence; like books collected for our home libraries, the quality of today's commercial recordings allows us to have at our disposal a wide repertoire of pieces. Moreover, and in contrast to recorded instrumental performances, an acousmatic work on CD is an exact replica of the composer's master. While the CD may serve only as a (good) reduction of an instrumental concert, the acousmatic concert serves as an impressive enlargement of a work composed on a fixed medium. One who has not experienced in the dark the sensation of hearing points of infinite distance, trajectories and waves, sudden whispers, so near, moving sound matter, in relief and in color, cannot imagine the invisible spectacle for the ears. Imagination gives wings to intangible sound. Acousmatic art is the art of mental representations triggered by sound. (7)

Certain Objections

Sometimes, people complain that there is nothing to see at acousmatic concerts. That may be because there's much to hear, often unheard-of sounds. Our focus is limited; if our senses are reacting to a strong stimulus, our attention to other stimuli will diminish. Given the priority of the visual in our present society, at a time when it is no longer certain that music 'is created for the purpose of listening', the public's need for the spectacular does not leave room for the kind of concentration that befits a good audition: 'the eyes block the ears' (is it really coincidence that a blind person's hearing is often very good?). It is for this reason that acousmatic composers, inspired by Pythagoras, limit the amount of stimuli at their concerts. Instead of offering us glimpses of its existence, the act of hearing without seeing (Bayle) allows our mind to concentrate on the music itself.

Another critique that is often leveled at this rebellious sonic art: where are the instruments and the performers? If there are no performers, can we still call this music? As an example, allow me to quote Nil Parent, from an article in a recent issue of Contact! [Fall, 1994]: "Music is an art of performance, that is to say, by definition, an art in the image of time, unstorable." (8) This statement is questionable, and I have often discussed it. What has become of this supposed intangible credo? Have we ever questioned the inevitability of the fact that music, since the beginning of time, has only come to us by way of generations of performers? Instead of accepting that it is so 'by definition' (a concept yet to be proven), should we not instead question history itself?

Of course, music originates from oral expression and instrumental gestures. But, soon after its birth, man needed to find ways of reproducing it, of storing it; laborious efforts were made at developing notation. In order to save this ephemeral art form, this volatile phenomenon from extinction, man had no other solution than to turn to performance or, in other words, to a musician's translation of conventional symbols. Today, in fact, we confuse the end with what was once the means: because throughout history, music has had only one way to exist —through performance— it has come to be identified with performance. Though it is obvious that this situation is what has allowed music to become an accomplished art form, the idea that this fact is unchangeable is a limitation imposed by prejudice and force of habit. We must at least admit that an invention that allows us, after several millennium, to capture, store, and reproduce sound phenomena (like what film allows us to do to movement), has truly changed our relation with time. By allowing composers to 'stop sound', by giving them the possibility of getting back sound organizations in their precise original state, in precise detail, and exactly where they left off, recording techniques offer music new areas to investigate, as well as new ways of realization. What will reach the listener is not a music that approximates the intentions of the composer, but rather, exactly what he intended, with all its material characteristics. This music no longer depends on performance, nor does it act as its substitute.

In passing, I would like to reply to Nil Parent, in regards to the supposed 'devastating progress through accumulation' that he makes reference to in his article, which, though not lacking in quality, ties nevertheless too many problems to a single cause. While he calls for the "urgent reevaluation of the performer (9) that the return to 'directness'

implies" (10), I would like to remind him that recording must not be such a terrible medium, if Glenn Gould, not what one would call your 'average' performer, chose it over live performance.

Perspectives

Since music, considered for many years an art of performance, can now also be presented in the form of a fixed medium, like cinema, why should we not investigate this new creative space? Let's stop comparing it to a 'performing' art. It is not the sheer physical presence of performers that guarantees the authenticity of a work, but rather what is transmitted in the act of hearing; in that sense, live music is no more or less alive than music on a fixed medium; both can take on meaning if their message reaches us. In fact, though McLuhan may disagree, the message is not the medium, but rather the message.

We will soon celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of musique concrète. The evolution of this art is measured by the abundance of the repertoire that is now available. But theories concerning this art change quickly and we are only now beginning to explore its resources. Here and there one can find conferences, concert series and festivals dedicated to this art, particularly in Europe; more and more articles and books are appearing and helping to shape new approaches to composition. This is undoubtedly a new artistic path for the upcoming century; it can no longer not be taken into consideration.

Notes

1) It is important to make the distinction between sound object (perceived sound) and material object (resonating body).

2) Chion, M., 1982, La musique électroacoustique, PUF, Paris, P.9

3) As many others have done in other genres: serial, minimalist, spectral, rock, country, etc.

4) Michel Chion would rather keep the term musique concrète, since it is well entrenched. The main objection that he has faced is that it refers to a historical period. Although musique concrète is still alive in its contemporary form, it is likely that a renewal of terminology may trigger a similar renewal of its theory.

5) Sometimes referred to as cinema for the ears (this analogy should not be taken literally).

6) Bayle, F., 1993, Musique acousmatique, propositions... positions, Buchet/Chastel—INA-GRM ed., Paris, P. 18

7) For more information, please refer to Bayle's previously cited work, as well as the following: Chion, M., L'art des sons fixés ou la musique concrètement (1991), Fontaine, France, Éditions Métamkine/Nota-Bene/Sono-Concept; and, Vande Gorne, A., Vous avez dit acousmatique? (1991), Ohain, Belgium, Éditions Musiques et Recherches.

8) Parent, N., 1994, Contact! 8.1: Play. The Decline of a Musical Culture, CEC, Montréal, P. 50.

9) Is there really such a need for reevaluation of the performer in our media-star epoch?

10) ibid

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