



Proceedings of the International Conference

PIERRE SCHAEFFER:

mediArt

Thinking Concretely about Pierre Schaeffer

by Leigh Landy

We know of Schaeffer as an author, scientist, artist and facilitator of many sorts of activities and will all have personal views about his achievements and heritage. The conference announcement linking Schaeffer to sampling is fascinating as it is a celebration of his vision as well as a condemnation of the major aspect of his philosophy. This tension is not unfamiliar to me. In wondering how he would be thinking at the age of 100, this paper will suggest that some of the more extreme Schaefferian views related to *musique concrète*, such as *l'écoute réduite* might have been re-investigated in light of the dynamic evolution of the art of sounds. In other words, this paper will celebrate today's diversity in sonic art whilst emphasising Schaeffer's revolutionary position but also diplomatically querying some of his views that limited the potential of his own newly invented art form.

Getting Started

I believe I might alienate a few listeners by commencing with the following remark: I have often heard the view that Pierre Schaeffer's earliest works of *musique concrète* were his most accessible. A similar remark has been used in terms of John Cage's pre-indeterminate works as well. Why might this be so? The casserole cover, the train, the piano sounds, the coughing, the loops, etc. form part of the response in Schaeffer's case. The innovative approach with familiar materials such as the prepared piano with the resulting pleasant sound is relevant when discussing Cage.

In both cases, the composers were making links with lived experience and that is why, in particular, new listeners find those works accessible and often engaging as well. With this in mind, the notion of *making connections* whilst creating innovative art will act as an important focus of the following presentation.

A Conversation with Pierre Schaeffer at the age of 100 (*en anglais pour ce symposium*)

I unfortunately never met Schaeffer. When I arrived at the GRM as a doctoral student, it was François Bayle who greeted me on behalf of the organisation along with the charming Croatian composer who invited me, Ivo Malec. I was not to return there until after Schaeffer's death. Therefore the following conversation is entirely a projection of the interviewer. Nonetheless, I have to admit that the title I've given this talk was wrong! It really is: "Thinking Concretely with Pierre Schaeffer". Please note that I feel completely at ease in having this conversation, for I am aware of Schaeffer's work with Mozart that was televised in 1979. (Bayle 1990, 120)

LL Sir, I have been informed that I have only 18 minutes to hold this interview given my 20 minute slot. Let's jump in right away then. Can you please tell me why many people find your early etudes and the collaborative *Symphonie pour un homme seul* most accessible amongst your works?

PS Frankly, no I can't. Those early pieces were what you might expect: first attempts at something that needed years of development before it reached maturity, like a good

French wine. They were challenging to make due to the state of the technology that we had on offer, but were they not, perhaps, a bit unsophisticated?

LL I think it might have to do with the fact that you included so many familiar items in the pieces like one might when considering a potential new musical genre for the radio: repetitive rhythms, familiar sounds such as instruments, trains and the like. Your departure was hugely radical, yet perhaps less distant from lived experience than the music that was about to be made at Darmstadt or the NWDR studio in Cologne.

PS I see your point, but believe that this reading of history is somewhat superficial. *Musique concrète* came of age when the theory I put together in the *Traité* and elsewhere was first published. In other words, there was *musique concrète* before I had formalised my ideas regarding Tartyt and Tarsom (Schaeffer 1977: 459, 584-587), although the seeds were already planted in my "A la recherche..." (Schaeffer 1952), and that which came after it and, I believe, the real *musique concrète*, that which I consider more mature, was of the second type.

LL I understand – one of the biggest misunderstandings about the term you created, *musique concrète*, had to do with the fact that most people thought your goal was to present concrete material, but this was only a phase on the way to its being abstracted (Schaeffer 1952:35 and 1973: 16-17). Tartyt, Tarsom and reduced listening were all elements relating to that process. Isn't that true?

PS Absolutely so.

LL Please allow me to take this one step further. In your borrowing and modernising the term, acousmatic, you were focusing on receiving theaural information without any visual aids.

PS Again, you are right.

LL But it would seem to me that the acousmatic process was one of sharpening our listening to focus on and identify the aural information better. Abstracting sounds so that their source and cause are either inaudible or of less importance than the perception of sonic – as opposed to contextual – details is, in my view, a step away from Pythagoras's view of the acousmatic.

PS Monsieur, I shall not be forced into a corner about this major aspect of my thinking related to *musique concrète*, in particular at an event celebrating my 100th birthday. Look at the difference between, say, the fine works of *musique concrète* made around the appearance of my *Traité* and that awful anecdotal music of Luc Ferrari, the *phonographies* of François-Bernard Mâche and those horrid soundscape compositions, mainly coming from Canada. Is it not patently obvious that such works are risible?

LL I would admit to their being more difficult to be received as musical works in traditional terms, but then again many *musique concrète* pieces caused the same issues to inexperienced listeners and they must have been important to you, too, I would imagine, thinking of the types of radio public you were used to.

Let me try looking at this from another angle. Wasn't the invention of this music, one based on the combination of Varèse's famous words, 'organised sound', the history of the application of sound on the radio and rapidly developing technology that could be found useful towards musical production, intended for a fairly broad public based on a potentially huge area of musical approaches?

PS Young man – and you are only slightly more than half as old as I am – you are putting words into my mouth and heaven knows I wrote enough explaining my ideas and my ideals to have them rewritten at this point. Yes, of course, I saw *musique concrète* as a vast space, but if you make the space too vast, how might things ever fit together? I rejected Ferrari's anecdotal outings due to the fact that they were not really serious; furthermore, those pieces were more Dadaist in nature than anything I ever wanted to be called *musique concrète*.

LL In other words, one should be careful with humour. Did you therefore want to create a new form of art music for the learned public?

PS For better or worse, what you say is true.

LL But you must have known that contemporary music after the war was of little relevance to society.

PS I was in Paris and the public was large at the time, in particular when it came to music for the radio. The young Stockhausen and Boulez, whatever I thought of their music and their personalities, were both to become big celebrities, weren't they?

LL Oh my dear, it is I who is now being asked questions. I would suggest that what you say is true, but less so than it was for Stravinsky or for Brahms. More importantly, I would suggest that they were the last living composers seeking immortality.

PS Fascinating, but I doubt you are right and we have moved far from your original questions, I believe.

LL Perhaps you're right. I am primarily interested in how you intended *musique concrète* to allow listeners to make connections and find access to the music. What is your view to the following: *musique concrète* was the invention of a visionary, but one who was rather dogmatic about certain things.

PS Such as ...

LL We know about your distrust regarding digital composition – or as it was called at the time – computer music; yet computer music, dated as the concept is, was simply historically inevitable. Someone had to invent the music of sounds sooner or later. Marinetti and Russolo gave it a good try, but it was you who really understood a major portion of music's future and we are all highly grateful to you for that. Similarly, digital music was inevitable. Returning to dogma, your solfège and associated music theory for *musique concrète* may not be as methodical or formulaic as was Schoenberg's and Webern's serialism or Darmstadt's post-serial composition, but it was still modernist in terms of its do's and don'ts.

PS I opened doors with this music.

LL Indeed, and Pierre Henry closed quite a few of them early on – tee hee, until he was told that we weren't supposed to hear the door anymore given your strong view concerning *l'écoute réduite*.

PS But no one really hears doors in that piece; it's an early reduced-listening piece.

LL With the title, *Variations pour une porte en un soupir*, I would suggest that this indicates the opposite! I would have thought that *musique concrète*'s invitation to use any sort of sound or musical object would place it more in the postmodern camp.

PS Please let's not waste my centennial on yet another debate about those two horrible words, modern and postmodern.

LL I accept. I'll try to put it in another way. Dogma in modernist music was one of the key reasons it lost a good percentage of its public.

PS We will run out of time if we discuss that subject, but you may have a point there. Let's look at the brighter side of things. You kindly published an issue of your journal, *Organised Sound* celebrating 60 years of *musique concrète* and 50 years of the GRM. Those anniversaries represented quite a feat, didn't they?

LL Absolutely and much of that success is due to your vision. However, are you aware of the works that are created and performed at the GRM and at Radio France these days? Are you also aware of when such music is played on France Musique?

PS I may be 100 years old, but I really like the 'listen again' function on the internet, so who cares about the starting time of Christian Zanési's and his colleagues' broadcast in the middle of the night once every week or so?

LL Once a week is a strange fate for such an important type of music, I would have thought, but then again the BBC only has one scheduled weekly programme of *any* sort of contemporary music weekly, so marginalisation is alive and well ... except on the internet.

PS You also asked about the music being made, performed and broadcast at the GRM these days. There seem to be fewer people saying *musique concrète* currently and even Michel Chion's 'musique des sons fixés'. Nonetheless, apparently acousmatic music is alive and well.

LL This is all true, but an increasing amount is being performed live due to the rising speeds of our technology and the content of many new GRM works includes identifiable sound objects.

PS Please don't use my terminology when stepping outside of my theory, young man! Those are sounds, not sound objects or even musical objects of which you speak.

LL Still a bit dogmatic, eh, but it was your theory after all. Your music has permeated popular music, what the French call *électro*, and a good deal of other forms of music as well. I suppose you know that I, too, added a term as I felt that current terminology inadequately described my own music. I have coined the term sound-based music (called 'la musique des sons' in French) and defined it as follows: "sound-based music typically designates the art form in which the sound, that is, not the musical note, is its basic unit" (Landy 2007, 17). I have even suggested that a sound-based music paradigm coexists alongside what I call a note-based paradigm having been influenced by the writings of your former colleague, GRM musicologist, François Delalande. For me, all of this music, including what you consider to be dreadful anecdotal music, belongs together. Much of it is not related to art music or pop music regardless of whether they have roots in one or both. It is a vast space in which almost all *musique concrète* fits.

PS Why in heaven's name would you ever split up *musique concrète*?

LL I haven't really, but some have opted for a note-based approach in electro-acoustic music, the more common term, over the years and I simply listen to that type of music based on my note-based experiences more than my sound-based ones.

PS I never admitted it, but some of those mixed music pieces we performed did appear a bit confused in terms of what they were attempting to achieve.

LL Fortunately a number of composers have been highly successful with their mixed works. Sound-based music is a means of celebrating your vision and that is why it was

invented. It is, despite those exceptions I mentioned, and there are only a few, intended to be more inclusive. You do realise that many people, including artists with roots in popular music, who know nothing of Tartyp, Tarsom and reduced listening cite you and some of your colleagues such as Henry, Bayle and Parmegiani as a major influence. Musicians supporting what is known today as sampling culture often make sound-based music. The number of such musicians continues to grow as more and more people are introduced to it on the internet, in schools, in clubs, in computer games and so on. So the establishment, by that I mean the broadcasters, print media and educators, don't really know what to do with your vision, but it has been completely integrated into today's world of shared sounds and remixes.

PS I believe it is you who often speaks of music history working in three phases: thesis (the known), antithesis (the reaction) and synthesis. Perhaps I presented one antithesis, be it a very important one, and what you describe is the synthesis. In your introduction, you mentioned John Cage. He was another antithesis composer as was Webern I would think.

LL Indeed! And it is due to all of your radical, revolutionary views that music in the last century was entirely transformed, be it also with the help of technology and the development of the electronic media.

PS So what do you think of my Tartyp and Tarsom then?

LL They were part of the first major writing that focused on listening as opposed to construction. A new sonic listening was added to the more natural, contextual one in terms of the reception of sounds treated artistically. It led to the GRM and thousands of musicians around the globe making acousmatic works in honour of your ideas and others to extend your theoretical concepts such as Denis Smalley. You provided me, as an educator, with a system to assist people in hearing things different ways. In short, it was part of your taking the concrete to the abstract and thus was part of the antithesis you presented. As someone embracing Hegelian synthesis, I can't live without it, but will also not allow myself to be restricted by it. My view is: long live l'écoute réduite et l'écoute intensifiée.

I wonder, therefore, if you had been able to look into a crystal ball to see how developed and diverse today's sound-based music would become, would you still have stood by your strong, yet restricting theoretical ideas.

PS Naturally. I wasn't narrow, but knew that one needed to have something to support or reject as this vast tsunami of new musical activities erupted. I could not predict the enormous impact of what is known as sound art, nor would I ever imagine the cult surrounding some noise musicians. I set up a new art form for the radio with its related concert practice and all of the debates that evolved from that. I may be seen to be dogmatic today, but all of those reactions to my work might have drowned in anonymity in a vast new arts space had not one area, namely *musique concrète*, been demarcated.

LL You sound like the knowledgeable Zen masters of whom Cage spoke, seeing the future without forcing it to happen. I am ever so envious. Let's go back a moment and return to this issue of whom you wanted to address with this music. On the one hand, there was that potentially massive radio public and, on the other, the rather modest art music public.

PS This is an important question and I indeed felt that through experimentation with sounds on the radio, something new could evolve. Ironically, the land of the greatest impact for radiophonic experimentation was that of our neighbour, Germany, the land of that elektronische Musik I so detested. They evolved the Hörspiel so magnificently, although I am not certain how big that audience ever became. Frankly, I am of the view that had I attempted to create a new public ex nihilo, I would have been doomed to fail, so the contemporary music public was the one I chose. You with your synthesis speak of something beyond art and pop music: this was not achievable in the early years. Again, time was needed for that musical evolution to take place.

LL And thank goodness it has. One last question, be it a difficult one. One of your last interviews before this one (with Tim Hogkinson in 1986) could have been named, *je regrette* in which you speak highly negatively of the past. You said in this interview: "There is no progress". Can you please explain this to us?

PS My daughter was playing pop music 24/7 and I felt that the music of sounds had failed and that the music of do-re-mi was to succeed inevitably. Now we have coexistence, so my life was by no means wasted as I confessed in that interview. Whether people will call it sound-based music or sound-based art will be clarified in the future. Sound-based whatever it is exists and is alive and well.

LL And it is you whom we all thank for that. Today, the music of sounds can make loads of connections, not least by way of *musique concrète* as you envisioned it. There is no question about that. Many thanks for this conversation, maître Schaeffer.

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