

# UNDERNEATH LISTENING

The “discovery” of *musique concrète* signalled a decisive paradigm shift in musical composition. It implicitly revealed a component of music which, up until then, had for the most part been approached only in the shadow of a monolith that dominated all possible musical becomings. This vast, imposing monolith is the marker of the “abstract” empire of music, which triumphantly reduces music to values, parameters, signs, i.e. writing, and listening to reading. In choosing to locate the “concrete” sonorous as the starting point of a potential musical “writing”, Pierre Schaeffer reverses the process, redefining the territory of musical composition. No longer will composition be a matter of choosing parameters—intensity, pitch, duration—and, on their basis, establishing relations, constructing progressions, articulating motifs. Neither will it any longer be a matter of a more “modern” approach, that of defining formulas, elaborating protocols, enumerating orders, inventing new systems. In short, it will no longer be a matter of thinking in terms of a score, a sequence, a model, a narrative, which will then be actualised by musicians and will become music. Instead, the composer will get to grips directly with sounds, seizing hold

of them, shaping them, constraining them, allowing them to flourish, creating a music on the basis of the sounds' own potential. Music is no longer planned out in terms of parameters, it is discovered within sound, released from inside sound.

This defines what is specific to the concrete approach to music: that the music reveals itself through sound, not through language. Of course, as soon as one talks about construction, combination, choice, technical gesture, one is talking about language, and writing. And of course, Pierre Schaeffer himself produced a whole body of work defining a method, constructing a music theory. Yet this work, as important and necessary as it was, does not contradict the principal reality constitutive of *musique concrète*: that it repudiates any perfected formulation, and can never be reduced to a text. For it bears within it the qualities of sounds, both beneath and beyond any possible parametric translation.

Although it may involve certain techniques, may adopt certain methods, develop certain strategies, come about as part of a project, or even be based on a text, concrete composition also always develops by way of something that breaks through language, what we might call a *making-hearing*. Making-hearing is the retroactive loop between a gesture or manipulation and the auditory reception of the results of that action. There is nothing unusual about this loop between an action and a sensory reception that evaluates it in real time. It is the painter's eye immediately estimating the success of his brushstroke, the sculptor's hand that feels out a size, a shape, and also the ear of the instrumentalist gauging the right note or nuance and modifying their

playing as a result. In this sense, through recording techniques and the development of the electroacoustic chain, *musique concrète* arrives at a process of production that other disciplines have always followed.

Music leaves behind its programmatic dimension. It is no longer a plan, a list of orders, a string of instructions. It becomes a potential force, a territory to be conquered, a space to inhabit or to populate with sounds. So although the concrete approach is indeed oriented toward the musical, it also bears within it, like a kind of contraband, another dimension, a dimension that precisely resists the traditional common acceptation of what music must be—namely, “communicable”. For *musique concrète* brings with it an incommunicable force that resides in the “sonorous” part of sounds, that is to say in the intrinsic characteristics of the sound which were neither anticipated nor fabricated, but which are inalienable from it: the unsublimated concrete, the inarticulate cry, that in language which is no longer of language: the accursed share of the audible. Such qualities cannot address themselves to our listening, in so far as they do not form a code, and contain no message. But they are there nonetheless.

There is a world that falls short of what listening knows how to decode, knows how to talk about. A chthonic world where nothing as yet shows itself. And yet this ungraspable sonorous, these inarticulate sounds, these borborygma-sounds that embed themselves in a musical discourse, are not nothing. They are the equivalent neither of noise nor of silence. They are incomprehensible, inappreciable, but they are active, and even expressive. They act upon our ears, playing

a part in the unleashing of emotions, contributing to the blossoming of affects.

There are many different ways of enjoying music. One is to listen to the *voice* of music, listening to what it has to tell us. In this case, we hear a narrative, a context, we identify an aesthetic position, we read a manifesto, an homage, a critique, we can make out references, a world, an influence, we identify landmarks, procedures, techniques, machines, trends. In short, we make a *reading* of the music. Another, opposed way of listening is to approach music as a landscape. We no longer decode it. We travel across it, we find it, discover it, lose it, lose ourselves within it. A silent, solitary activity, this kind of listening is never really shared. We can do it together, like a ritual, but we cannot speak it, exchange it, or make a transaction of it. For in this kind of listening nothing is written. It errs and drifts, emerges and sinks along with the sounds, at the behest of the music's unfolding and evanescence. Here nothing is imprinted, nothing is asserted. What is explored here is a music in troubled waters, a landscape-music...

But how can we allow ourselves to be carried away by listening as a leaf is carried away by the wind? How can we hear music the same way we see a landscape? And can we listen to music as we listen to the sound of the sea? It may be objected that the eye already structures the landscape, that the landscape is itself already a cultural construct. In part, perhaps, but in part only. To reduce a landscape to a text and nothing but a text is an error:

[T]he given is not a text, it possesses an inherent thickness, or rather a difference, which is not to be read, but rather seen; and this difference, and the immobile mobility that reveals it, are what continually fall into oblivion in the process of signification<sup>1</sup>

The landscape is not just a representation of space, a description carried out by an eye and structured by a language. It is also the real space within which we find ourselves. In the experience of a landscape, beyond the representing of the space there are the direct sensations it imparts to us. The experience of the landscape is a non-dialogical experience, a local point of encounter between a being-in-the-world and the world. And similarly, listening is not destined to only ever be a deciphering, a reading. The traditional experience of listening to music tries all too often precisely to reduce itself to this kind of deciphering. It seeks to read the *reasons* of this music, and to thereby establish a common language with it. So what is primarily at stake in such listening is the recognition of a community of signs, or more exactly a community of sounds that emit signs. The aim of such listening is to receive a discourse mediated by a succession of sounds organised in time, according to customs and functions known and recognised in advance with the sole aim of making it *speak*.

Now, to listen to music as one listens to a spoken language is already to constitute oneself as an interlocutor.

<sup>1</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, tr. A. Hudek and M. Lydon (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2011), 3.

One enters into a dialogue, a prehension of the world-as-intelligible. But if, on the contrary, the music one is listening to *says nothing*, in the same way that a landscape does not speak *unless one makes it speak*, then listening becomes something different. It becomes a spectral listening—a listening that concerns not so much the timbral quality of sounds, as its name might suggest, but rather a hearing of sound as evanescent, as failing to emit any sign, as elusive, barely existing.

This type of listening exposes the hidden, sometimes forgotten dimension of all music: that it must give itself to be heard, that it must undergo a conversion into vibration in order to fully reveal itself. It is this placing-into-vibration, this inexpressible supplement of soul that belongs to the sonorous, an unqualifiable supplement irreducible to any code or text, that constitutes the mystery of music, and its force.