

After-thoughts

Tristan Murail

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Asking people to listen to a piece of music takes some of their time, some of their life: the composer is stealing a little bit from the life of each listener. Is this the reason why contemporary music is so much less popular than the contemporary visual arts, which are certainly no easier to comprehend? While watching an exposition, the public maintains control of their time. If they don't like it, they can leave at any point. While with music, the composer's time is necessarily imposed upon the listener. This creates an enormous responsibility on the part of the composer.

This responsibility means that music can neither be purely experimental nor can it eliminate all elements of research. It should always provide interesting, and even *new* (daring though the word seems to us today) propositions, while remaining perceptible so that it can be received by the listener. This must be true even when the composer is looking for extreme novelty or complexity: somewhere there must exist a common ground where the composer and his audience can share an angle of approach.

This leads to a certain number of consequences. Composers should not be satisfied with music that is simply there to please. They should not allow the style of their music to be dictated by fashions, the easy acceptance of institutions, of orchestras, or of the regular concert going audience. These are not sufficient reasons for writing music, for stealing from the life of another. Unfortunately a number of trends are more and more prevalent in composition today which either ignore the problem of communication, or which — resting on the ambiguous notion of post-modernism and on pseudo-musicologic or pseudo-philosophic discourses — are in fact not much more than disguised academicism.

We are often told that the *avant-garde* is behind us, that we have achieved so much distance and perspective that only a 'post-modern' attitude remains possible. However, in my daily work as a composer this idea is disproved. I continue to search for new ideas and materials. Some of this research is on a technical level — clearly the case when speaking of developing new computer programs or new ways to facilitate the comprehension of sonic analyses — but another type of research that I perform daily is purely musical and aesthetic, looking for ways of effectively using the material which I discover to create new sonic/musical objects. By 'new', I mean something that I want to say but have not already said, and which no one else has said either. You cannot express original ideas by recycling old material: new thoughts need to be formulated with new material. Our vision of the world has become so historical now that when we speak of the *avant-garde*, we automatically think of the *avant-garde* of the nineteen fifties. But if we stick to the etymology of the word, by definition there always will be an '*avant-garde*' or our civilization is dead. Let's stop being ashamed of this notion!

This position may seem ironic, since at a certain point the 'spectral movement' was seen as a reaction against the '*avant-garde*'. And clearly it was a reaction against certain composers who believed that they were *the* *avant-garde*. But, in reality, it was a reaction against their refusal to make even the slightest concessions to the phenomena of auditory perception. Abstract combinations on paper are not musical research. As a result, we fought against this type of musical behavior. However, we were not the only ones to criticize that music which was so prevalent during the late-sixties and early seventies. Advocates of the music I referred to above as disguised academicism accused the so-called '*avant-garde*' of emptying the concert halls and alienating the listeners through their decadence and excesses and, in a certain manner, their criticism was justified. However, one need not respond to these criticisms as they have.

The first pieces associated with 'spectral music' made only cursory attempts to use spectra since, at the time, we lacked the technological and scientific tools and information. In early pieces, like Gérard Grisey's *Partiels* (1975) for 18 instruments, the use of spectra is very timid: there is only a pseudo trombone spectrum. Most of these early pieces made use of simulations of electronic systems such as ring-modulation and echoes, or the harmonic displacement or compression of abstract harmonic series. In the first piece that captured my personal style — *Mémoire-érosion* (1976) for French horn and instrumental ensemble — the main model is a feed-back system. The piece is not really spectral, in that there are no spectra in it. However I tried to take into account the spectra and timbres of the instruments in constructing the harmony for certain passages (for example, making use of the strong 12th and 17th — 3rd and

5th partials — of sul ponticello notes played on string instruments) and to develop an auditory continuum between timbre and harmony. But what is especially noticeable in these early pieces is the, already present, notion of process.

Historically, the ideas of process and continuous change came before the real *spectral* work. For me, this fascination with transforming objects and creating hybrids was always there: it's almost congenital. I think retrospectively that this idea, coupled with the importance I (and others) place on working with harmony in a way that completely controls it — giving strength to the formal construction — were the basic ideas of spectral music. This was really a very new way of writing music and was perhaps what most shocked a certain part of the musical establishment. Formally, the music was built on principles completely different from other widely accepted techniques. Development by proliferation, which is so easily recognized, was abandoned as was the systematic use of oppositions and dialectics. This was even more shocking than the unusual sonorities and I now think that this was the most novel aspect of spectral music. Contrary to often heard superficial opinions, I have often seen my pieces make more impact on the public through their form than as a result of the harmonic or timbral refinement, which (one must face reality) only a few people really appreciate; although, of course, there is a striking aspect to the timbre which is certainly not lost on the public. I do, however, believe those refinements are indispensable for the reasons mentioned above: we're stealing people's time and, so, must give them a very high quality musical time in return — a time where even the smallest details are carefully perfected (like in a Japanese garden), even those details which are not immediately visible.

The initial goal, which motivated our extensive timbral and harmonic research, was the desire to develop the capacity to control the finest possible degrees of change. Having achieved this, however, we began to feel that the music had perhaps become too directional and predictable; we then had to find a way to re-introduce surprise, contrast and rupture. Contrary to the widely held view, they were never truly absent; even in the earliest pieces, like *Partiels*, there are quite a few unexpected turning points. In *Gondwana* (1980) for orchestra, which is considered a typical piece from this period, there is continuity, but there are also ruptures and many other types of transition: passing of thresholds, reversing of the direction of motion, triggering of 'catastrophic' changes, abbreviated processes where only some of the steps in a process are present, etc. Even in these early works, there is clearly more than pure mono-directional and continuous evolutions. The increased formal discontinuity that was to develop in the music should, therefore, be viewed more as a development than as a renunciation.

As time went on, we also sought to introduce, with much care and hesitation, ideas which were closer to the traditional dialectic. This also applies to melody. It took me a very long time to re-introduce truly melodic elements into my music, because I was afraid of returning to past melodic clichés, falling back into formulas of theme and variation of all sorts. I wanted to find very personal melodic contours, and this is one of the hardest things to do, since, today, everything melodic is connotated to a frightening degree. On a formal level, too, it is not my goal to return to the Romantic dialectic, nor to develop fragmented forms that would simply be a return to the formal conceits of the fifties. The solution lies elsewhere. There must be a logic and a continuity behind the apparent fragmentation. This is what I have tried to achieve in recent years: a more versatile and mobile form (more dialectic even, if one insists upon viewing things from that angle) capable of linking together the ideas of contrast, tension-resolution and many other formal devices, while retaining an underlying musical logic. Harmony has been an important asset for building more complex structures that, nonetheless, retain perceptual clarity in their formal development.

Unlike the evolution of formal elements, where we have moved considerably away from our point of departure, spectral harmony has steadily grown and flourished aided by ever improving technological and scientific support. When I speak of harmony, I refer to something very specific. What has been called frequencial harmony (*editor's note*: see appendix I of previous issue, Volume 19, Part 2). I think this term is more accurate than 'spectral' harmony since it includes harmonies far beyond just spectrum. Through this approach to harmony, it is possible to create harmonies (or timbres), which are completely invented, through analogies to the spectra found in nature. Most of my pieces, in fact, are built on structures which are not direct spectral observations: this is what I call frequencial harmony. These harmonies are conceived outside the domain of equal temperament, even tempered quarter- or eighth-tones and form an unlimited harmonic realm, which happens to be contiguous to timbral space; thus placing us in a domain where harmony and timbre are more or less the same thing. There are often striking sonorities in 'spectral' pieces that many people attribute to some arcane craft of orchestration we have developed. They don't understand that those sonorities are in fact created through the harmonies, the notes, the *pitch*s. Or rather, that pitch structures and orchestration have become one and same thing.

I realize now that, over the years, I have struggled to develop an awareness and an expertise in this domain of harmony that few people have taken the trouble to seek. I am very surprised that this harmonic dimension has so completely disappeared from composers' preoccupations when, in fact, it is so rich and powerful. I can recall, in the eighties,

other composers going so far as to mock me for worrying too much about harmony: this was simply not done. This attitude is reflected in many of my students; their most common deficiency is the lack of harmonic awareness. They write music which may have strong gestures, but which ultimately does not function over time because the harmony fails to support the form. Harmony, through its relation to form, gave tonal music its strength; nowadays, it has too often been reduced to a simply decorative function. The mere existence of pitches even seems to be a nuisance for certain composers. I think it is time to reconsider the role of harmony and timbre within formal constructions — and this does not only apply to 'spectral' styles.

Only now have I begun to feel as if I have obtained the technical means to achieve my dreams of adolescence: I imagined certain ambitious works, but lacked the capacity to realize them. With a piece like *L'Esprit des dunes* (1994), for ensemble and electronics, I feel that I have succeeded in doing something that I could have easily dreamed of doing when I was twenty or even younger. In a piece like that, there is a clear research on the level of pure technology but there is also a musical research into the combination of sounds; this may not be immediately apparent, but so much the better. And while the 'poetic' side of the piece probably has an even greater impact than the spectral contents, the 'poetry' depends utterly on their careful construction. Creating this sense of research, newness and 'avant-garde' while still maintaining a coherent and comprehensible musical discourse is my real goal.