

L'Objet Sonore Maintenant: Reflections on the Philosophical Origins of Musique Concrète

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Abstract: Pierre Schaeffer, theorist, composer and inventor of *musique concrète*, borrowed heavily from phenomenology when describing his privileged theoretical entity, the sonorous object (*l'objet sonore*). This paper briefly describes how Schaeffer arrived at his conclusions concerning sonorous objects, and its affinities with contemporaries (John Cage) and disciples (Murail and Grisey). Four objections are raised which question the cognitive, philosophical and aesthetic conclusions implicit in *l'objet sonore*, and an argument is put forward for abandoning the ontological framework behind Schaeffer's theorizing.

Pierre Schaeffer's *Traité des objets musicaux* bears the subtitle "essai interdisciplines." Second only to music, phenomenology plays a central methodological role in Schaeffer's text. An avid and astute reader of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Schaeffer used the method of transcendental-phenomenological reduction (or *epoché*) to arrive at his privileged theoretical goal—a full description of the sonorous object (*l'objet sonore*).

1 Schaeffer's Phenomenology

All phenomenological reduction begins from the naïve or natural standpoint:

I find continually present and standing over against me the one spatio-temporal fact-world to which I myself belong, as do all other men in it and related in the same way to it. This "fact-world," as the world already tell us, I find to *be out there*, and also *take it just as it gives itself to me as something that exists out there*. (Husserl, *Ideas*, 96)

In the natural standpoint we are situated as subjects within an external world, interacting with objects. We possess no doubts about the existence of the objects with which we interact. By no means is the natural standpoint naïve in a pejorative sense of the word; any claims about the world that posit physical subsistence to exterior objects are contained within the natural standpoint, including the physical sciences. For instance, if you are an anatomist describing the workings of the eye from a physiological point of view, you may claim that the red that we see is, actually, neither red, nor blue or nor green. Red, blue and green are merely the result of the interaction of different frequencies of light striking a retina, being transmitted as electric impulses along an optic nerve, and interpreted in the brain. Although this may be correct as a physiological description of the external world, it still remains naïve in this sense: it accepts, without examination, a belief in the exterior world. As Schaeffer states, "Le discours élaboré de la science est fondé sur cet acte de foi initial" (Schaeffer,

266).

This is not to criticize the results of science as useless or mistaken. In fact, "to know it [the external world] more comprehensively, more trustworthily, and more perfectly than the naïve lore of experience is able to do...is the goal of the *sciences of the natural standpoint*" (Husserl, 96). The transcendental-phenomenological reduction, or *epoché*, brackets out the physically subsistent and exterior world in order to describe the essential structures of lived human experience. For this reason, phenomenology differs from skepticism. Schaeffer (following Husserl) compares and distinguishes the *epoché* from the Cartesian method of doubt: "Mettre en doute l'existence du monde extérieur, c'est encore prendre position par rapport à lui, substituer une autre thèse à de son existence. L'*epoché* est l'abstention de toute thèse" (Schaeffer, 267).

The acousmatic reduction, although still within the naïve standpoint, is a preliminary step towards the reduction to the sonorous object.

Larousse defines acousmatic as follows: "*Acousmatique, adjectif: se dit d'un bruit que l'on entend sans voir les causes dont il provient*" (Quoted in Schaeffer, 91). To be quite literal, there is nothing in this definition that requires the transcendental-phenomenological reduction; all that is necessary for the adjective acousmatic to be correctly predicated of some sound is that the cause of the sound be hidden. In fact, the definition implicitly asserts that *there is* some external cause which is producing the noise, and that the visibility of this cause is somehow hidden. For Schaeffer, the acousmatic experience still allows for the attempt to identify sources, however, it bars access to visible, tactile and physically quantifiable assessments of sounds. *The acousmatic experience reduces sounds to the field of hearing*. Schaeffer, addressing this explicitly, describes what happens when one attempts to identify sources solely within the field of hearing: "Surpris souvent, incertains parfois, nous découvrons que beaucoup de ce que nous croyions entendre n'était en réalité que vu, et

expliqué, par le contexte” (Schaeffer, 93).

For Schaeffer, the mechanical reproduction and transmission of sounds ushered in an acousmatic world. The recording of a horse’s gallop across the Pampas, played back in the heart of Paris, is an example of acousmatic sound. Now, of course, we *recognize* the sound as a horse galloping, we can easily trace the sound back to its index. Yet, acousmatic sounds opened up a possibility for Schaeffer that afforded a mode of listening more rigorous than merely the acousmatic renunciation of causes.

The further goal is the reduction of signification; sound is always in danger of being apprehended as something other than itself. Take, for example, the recording of the galloping horse. Here, “Il n’y a pas d’objet sonore: il y a une perception, une expérience auditive, à travers laquelle je vise un *autre objet*” (Schaeffer, 268). The sonorous object is only attained when sound no longer functions as a medium for signification.

Acousmatic sounds give indirect access to *l’objet sonore*, and its corresponding mode of listening, *l’écoute réduite*. In reduced listening, we no longer listen through the recording in order to discover its index, nor use the sound as in intermediary for some informative thing (an object, a person, an interlocutor or his thoughts). “C’est le son même que je vise, lui que j’identifie” (Schaeffer, 268). Sound, holding itself at the threshold of the transcendental-phenomenological reduction, asserting no claim about the exterior world, and maintaining its stubborn integrity in the face of occultation by signification, is *l’objet sonore*.

Disclosed only at the end of a two-step reduction, the sonorous object possesses a paradoxical feature: although methodologically final, the sonorous object is ontologically first. “It is necessary to re-visit the auditory experience, to re-grasp my impressions, to re-discover through them

information about the sonorous object” (Schaeffer, 270). All this re-visiting, re-grasping, and re-discovering supports the claim that *l’objet sonore* is revealed as the “originary experience” of phenomenological investigation (Schaeffer, 270). It is the “thing” discovered by following Husserl’s dictum, “back to the things themselves.” Being posited as the condition of the possibility of aural apprehension (whether musical or otherwise), the sonorous object is the necessary metaphysical substrate of all signification, indexicality, or reference. It is that thing which bears any and all sonic properties.

2 Contemporaries and Disciples

The goal of Schaeffer’s theorizing is clear: to create a musical aesthetic where sound-as-such is made audible. In this respect the aesthetic of sonorous objects articulates a view held by both Schaeffer’s contemporaries and disciples. Compare this passage from John Cage:

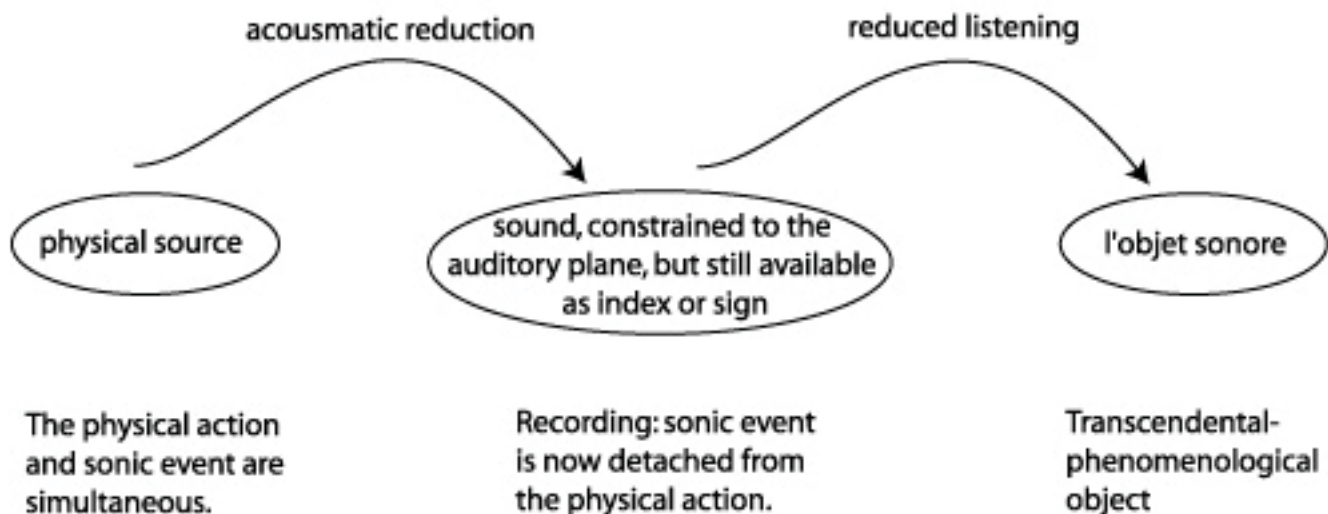
A sound does not view itself as thought, as ought, as needing another sound for its elucidation, as etc.; it has not time for any consideration—it is occupied with the performance of its characteristics: before it has died away it must have made perfectly exact its frequency, its loudness, its length, its overtone structure, the precise morphology of these and of itself. (Cage, 15)

And this passage from Tristan Murail:

The composer does not work with 12 notes, x rhythmic figures, x dynamic markings, all infinitely permutable—he works with sound and timbre. Sound has been confused with its representations. (Murail, 158)

Figure 1: A two-step reduction from the naïve standpoint to the sonorous object

SCHAEFFER'S SCHEMA



Or this passage from Gérard Grisey, where he describes his music as *transitoire*:

...because it radicalizes, first of all, the dynamism of sound understood as a field of forces, and not as a dead object [un objet mort] and that it aims, second of all, to sublimate the material itself to the benefit of pure sonorous becoming. (Grisey, 291)

In short, Schaeffer shares an aesthetic with other composers who believe in the existence of a musical *ding-an-sich*. For Schaeffer, Cage and the Spectralists, music ought to be just sounds as such, stripped of anything we may be tempted to call “meaning”.

3 A Critique of *L’objet sonore*

With this thumbnail sketch of *l’objet sonore* in place, I would now like to raise four objections: 1) By remaining faithful to the phenomenological method, Schaeffer also demonstrates one of phenomenology’s disadvantages, namely, a tendency to ontologize: the endpoint of Schaeffer’s reductions is to arrive at the essential, the general, the substrate, the thing shared by all sonic events. All sounds are reduced to a metaphysically posited bearer of properties, which *de jure* can be no physical thing. The goal of phenomenology’s reduction to essences is to move beyond the contingent cultural and historical factors in sonic apprehension. Schaeffer clearly shares phenomenology’s drive towards the metaphysically eternal, and ever present.

2) It is important to remember that Derrida’s earliest deconstructive work was directed against phenomenology, exposing the “metaphysics of presence” which directed its conclusions from behind the scenes. Obviously, there is no space here to give a full account of Derrida’s critique, nor reconstruct its application to new music. Let this short example suffice: in Baillet’s monograph on Grisey, the Spectralist project is lauded for being a “rejection of the arbitrary.” As opposed to the unmotivated permutations of Serialism, Spectral music is motivated (hence, non-arbitrary) through remaining as close as possible to the temporal and harmonic properties of spectra.

On touches here upon one of the major traits of Grisey’s esthetic which one can define as a rejection of everything arbitrary. This does not concern the elaboration, the composition of music, which reveals fundamentally the creative choice, but rather the manner in which music develops in time. (Baillet, 39)

Can a work legitimately be described as motivated, merely by projecting the brief, fluctuating life and death of a sonorous object onto the global temporal scale? If harmonic spectra (and their temporal properties) are Spectralism’s stand-ins for the sonorous object, it is essential that we pose the question whether this music is truly motivated, or merely ideologically duped into believing so, due to its

tacit commitments to the “metaphysics of presence.”

3) Another line of attack has been articulated by aestheticians and theorists like Roger Scruton, Andrew Bowie, Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff, who are interested in the metaphorical and cognitive dimensions of music. From this perspective, the only relevant musical features are those reducible to an elaborate system of metaphors or categories, which we project upon sounds; metaphors of space, direction, progression, goal-orientation, contour, causality, vitality, and so forth. Interestingly enough, this argument accepts the acousmatic reduction, disregarding the physical causality of sounds, but ultimately defends an *a priori*, rule-based or categorical conception of music—the perfect Kantian complement to the sonorous object as *ding-an-sich*. However, this position is also open to a critique of “psychologism,” typically concerning itself with a conservative defense of tonal music, and unable to garner a convincing account of musical aspects such as timbre, mass, grain, and so forth.

4) Finally, I believe that it still remains unclear what exactly it means, experientially, to perceive a sound-as-such. Can we imagine an instance where a sound is apprehended apart from any and all aspects? If this simple criterion fails, it jeopardizes the entire project of the sonorous object.

4 In Lieu of Reductions

To be fair, it must be said that *l’objet sonore* was, for Schaeffer, primarily a theoretical entity, to be distinguished from his more practical, aspect-laden *objets musicaux*. Although, contrary to Schaeffer, I believe that there are no un-musical objects, I agree that aspect-descriptions are quite necessary, simply because I am of the view that there is no perception that is not perceived under the guise of some aspect. In fact, a goal for new music (one that is especially applicable to new electro-acoustic composition) is *to bring uncommon aspects*, continually apprehended but seldom noticed, *into audibility*. In addition to frequency, duration, amplitude, timbre, and their various morphologies, one can imagine an open-ended list of aspects such as mass, grain, allure, density; modes of iteration like discrete, iterative, continuous, discontinuous, stable or unstable; morphological shapes like turbulence, weak-break, open-close, siren/wind, creak/crack, shatter, explosion, bubble; and innumerable others.

These last set of descriptive terms are borrowed from Trevor Wishart, who rejects the acousmatic premise by arguing for an electro-acoustic musical practice founded on two central principles: gesture and landscape. Without a strong connection between physical causality and sound it is impossible to make gestural knowledge musically relevant. In addition, knowledge of the physical world and its workings is essential in picking up significant cues about metaphorical and meaningful landscapes projected in electro-acoustic composition. Rather than segregating

physical causality from the apprehension of sounds, turning sounds into either *dingen-an-sich* or psychological categories, the entire acousmatic framework and reduction to sonorous objects, with its commitment to the ontological priority of metaphysical presences, needs to be rejected.

Aesthetics does not require a reduction from the natural standpoint to some logical or essential grounding; aesthetics begins and ends from within the natural standpoint. As conscious subjects, always already within a world replete with rich, semantically dense aspects, the grounding is simply the indubitable fact of perception. This does not mean that the task for new music is merely transfiguring the commonplace; the commonplace can take care of itself. Rather, a real task is to create works that, through intentional, imaginative and intelligent construction, organize and balance sonic invariants with cognitive categories so as to bring uncommon, yet continuously apprehended aspects into audibility.

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Note: unless cited, all translations from French are mine.