
Acousmate: History and de-visualised sound in the Schaefferian tradition

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The word ‘acousmatic’ has a strange and complicated history. Recent Schaefferian accounts have replicated François Bayle’s sketch of the ‘histoire du mot’ from his *Musique acousmatique* – in particular, the assumed synonymy between ‘acousmatique’ and ‘acousmate’. However, this synonymy is mistaken. The word ‘acousmate’ was first coined in an article from 1730 to describe a strange noise heard one evening in the small French village of Ansacq. A discussion of the article follows, which shows how the word is unrelated to the Pythagorean acousmatics, and how its author understood his ‘acousmate’ in the context of contemporary natural science. Additionally, a sketch of the term’s changing signification in three discourses – scientific, psychological and literary – is presented. The goal of this article is to articulate a set of problems concerning the historiography of acousmatic listening in the Schaefferian tradition. These problems include: 1) the need to authorise a practice of *musique acousmatique*, which has limited historical investigation to moments where the word ‘acousmate’ or ‘acousmatique’ appear in the archive; 2) a mistaken assumption that ‘acousmate’ and ‘acousmatique’ are synonymous, which has forced together historical moments that are not in fact affiliated; 3) an adherence to this affiliation, which has foreclosed the opportunity to consider acousmatic listening as a set of culturally and historically specific practices concerning the relationship of seeing and hearing.

1. INTRODUCTION

François Bayle defines ‘acousmatique’ as ‘a situation of pure listening, without attention being distracted or supported by visible or foreseeable instrumental causes’ (Bayle 1993: 179). A necessary condition for pure listening is that seeing be neutralised and dissociated from hearing.¹ The Pythagorean curtain (or veil) is the iconic figure of such pure, de-visualised listening. According to Bayle, ‘Pythagoras (6th cent. BC) invented an original device [*dispositif original*] for attentive listening by placing himself behind a curtain [*rideau*] when lecturing to his disciples, in the dark, and in the most rigorous silence. *Acousmatic* is the word used to designate this situation – and the disciples who thereby developed their technique of concentration’ (Bayle 1993: 180). Although this

quotation appears in an entry entitled ‘Acousmatique, histoire du mot’, it is not intended to be genuinely historical; rather, the purpose is something else entirely.² Within the tradition of *musique concrète*, the Pythagorean veil has been deployed to organise a set of mimetic identifications. The composer occupies the position of Pythagoras, unfolding a musical discourse or projecting a sonic message into the dark, while remaining hidden. The audience occupies the position of the *akousmatikoi* (the ‘hearers’, ‘listeners’ or ‘auditors’) who receive the discourse while remaining outside the veil, listening with concentration to the emissions of the invisible master. The loudspeaker, the mixing console and the technical tools of the studio occupy the place held by the Pythagorean veil. By describing Pythagoras as the inventor an ‘original device [*dispositif original*]’, Bayle grants to the ancient philosopher the aura of an engineer, which supports the extensive technical equipment required for the production of *musique acousmatique*. Before Bayle, Pierre Schaeffer first described the Pythagorean veil as a *dispositif* in order to make the identification of ancient and modern explicit: ‘In ancient times, the apparatus [*dispositif*] was a curtain; today it is the radio and the methods of reproduction ... that place us, modern listeners to an invisible voice, under similar conditions’ (Schaeffer 1966: 91). Past and present are stitched together in a pattern that effaces historical, cultural and technological differences. The loudspeaker reanimates an acousmatic horizon, originally disclosed by the ancient technology of the Pythagorean veil. Being modern, we have rediscovered that we were always already ancient.³

These mimetic identifications are mythic. According to Jean-Luc Nancy, myth operates as a ‘founding

¹Bayle echoes Pierre Schaeffer, who also treated the separation of hearing and seeing as a condition for the acousmatic reduction. See Kane (2007), section 3.2.

²There is no evidence to support Bayle’s assertion that the curtain was used to develop techniques of attentive listening in the disciples. The claim that Pythagoras lectured in the dark has only one ancient source. Diogenes refers to a set of evening lectures by Pythagoras; however, the passage includes no mention of the veil and explicitly mentions that some were lucky enough to see Pythagoras (Diogenes 1925: VIII. 15). It seems improbable that Pythagoras lectured behind a literal veil while also employing the veil of darkness.

³For more on the ahistorical aspects of Schaeffer’s thought, see Kane (2007), section 7.1.

fiction, or a foundation by fiction', deployed to organise the interests of a community (Nancy 1983: 53). The practitioners of *musique concrète* invoke Pythagoras in order to pronounce their own origin. It is an act of auto-poiesis or self-foundation. The tale of the Pythagorean veil is the primal scene of de-visualised music, retroactively founding an *arché* and projecting a *telos*. Moreover, Nancy argues that myth functions even in *the accounts one gives of the transmission of that founding fiction*. 'The scene is equally mythic when it is simply the apparently less speculative, more positive scene of the transmission of myth' (Nancy 1983: 53).

Accounts concerning the transmission of the word 'acousmatic' have been consistently univocal in the Schaefferian tradition, generally following the outlines sketched by Bayle in the appendix to his book *Musique acousmatique* (1993: 179–181).⁴ His account binds together two broad phases: 1) a phase concerning the word 'acousmatique', which draws upon Pythagorean sources and the history of philosophy to present a picture of the Pythagorean school, the veil, the disciples, rituals of silence, and so forth; 2) a phase concerning the word 'acousmate', which focuses on two early poems of Guillaume Apollinaire and their reception by the poet Jérôme Peignot. But how do these two phases fit together? What is the relationship between 'acousmatique' and 'acousmate'?

In what follows, I will investigate the relationship between 'acousmatique' and 'acousmate' as a way of addressing a set of problems that plague 'historical' accounts of acousmatic listening and acousmatic sound in the Schaefferian tradition, namely, 1) that the need to authorise or legitimate a practice of *musique acousmatique* has fixated historical investigation onto moments where the word 'acousmate' or 'acousmatique' appear in the archive; 2) that that fixation, based on the assumption that 'acousmate' and 'acousmatique' are synonymous, has forced together historical moments that do not in fact form a tradition; 3) that the adherence to this mythic tradition has foreclosed the opportunity to consider acousmatic listening as a set of culturally and historically specific practices concerning the relationship of seeing and hearing.

2. ACOUSMATE VERSUS ACOUSMATIQUE

The poet Jérôme Peignot was the first person to use the word 'acousmatique' in describing *musique concrète* and deserves the credit for introducing the word to Pierre Schaeffer (Gayou 2007: 104). It is likely that Peignot discovered the word by reading Apollinaire, who wrote two youthful poems entitled

'Acousmate'. Apollinaire's ideas would not have been foreign to Peignot who, in his own *typoèmes*, pursued typographical experimentation along the lines opened by Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*. Yet, Apollinaire's 'Acousmate' poems are quite immature works. They exhibit neither the daring typography of the *Calligrammes* nor the radical montage of the conversation poems. The 'Acousmate' poems, like much of Apollinaire's writing in the period before he came to Paris at the turn of the century, cultivate their subject matter from 'the ruins of the past' (Davies 1964: 29). Such ruins often came in the form of words, and Apollinaire collected definitions of rare specimens, like 'pandiculation', 'dendrophones' and 'Argyraspides'.

A definition for 'acousmate', copied from the *Dictionnaire* of the Académie française, is found in Apollinaire's notebooks:

ACOUSMATE, s. m. Bruit de voix humaines ou d'instruments qu'on s'imagine entendre dans l'air. (ACOUSMATE, noun. The sound of human voices or instruments that one imagines hearing in the air.) (*Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* 1762)

Like the definition of 'acousmatique' that Schaeffer borrows from Larousse – 'a sound that one hears without seeing what causes it' – an 'acousmate' could be understood as describing an audible sound produced by invisible sources (Schaeffer 1966: 91). The potential invisibility of an 'acousmate' is amplified by the definition's modal characterisation – it is a sound that one *imagines* hearing. If the source is imagined, as in an auditory hallucination, one might simply assume its invisibility. But, by definition, an 'acousmate' is not necessarily invisible. One could plausibly imagine seeing the source of the sound alongside hearing it in the air.

Perhaps Peignot, upon finding the word 'acousmate' in Apollinaire, picked up his copy of Larousse and found, right next to it, the word 'acousmatique'. Indeed, in Larousse's *Grand Dictionnaire universel du 19e siècle* (1900) the words are found in successive entries:

ACOUSMATE s. m. (a-kouss-ma-te) – du gr. *akousma*, ce qu'on entend). Bruit imaginaire, bruit dont on ne voit pas la cause, l'auteur.

ACOUSMATIQUE adj. (a-kouss-ma-ti-ke – rad. *acousmate*). Se dit d'un bruit que l'on entend sans voir les instruments, les personnes, les causes réelles dont il provient.

— Subst. Nom donné aux disciples de Pythagore, qui, pendant l'espace de cinq années, écoutaient ses leçons cachés derrière un rideau, sans le voir, et en observant le silence le plus rigoureux.

(ACOUSMATE masculine noun (a-kous-ma-te – from Greek *akousma*, that which one hears). Imaginary sound, a sound where one does not see the cause, the author.

⁴Bayle's account is replicated in Chion (1999: 19 note 5) and Dhomont (1996a, 1996b: 24 and 2001: 261).

ACOUSMATIQUE, adjective (a-kouss-ma-ti-ke – root, *acousmate*). Pertaining to a sound that one hears without seeing the instruments, people or real causes behind it.

— noun. Name given to the disciples of Pythagoras, who, for five years, would listen to his lectures hidden behind a curtain, without seeing him, while observing the most rigorous silence.)

If Peignot slid from ‘acousmate’ to ‘acousmatique’, Larousse encouraged it. In the Académie’s definition, there is no mention of the visual status of the object *imagined* to be heard. Larousse, on the other hand, adds to ‘acousmate’ a clause concerning the invisible status of the cause of the sound, and thus effaces what might be a crucial sensory difference between an ‘acousmate’ and an acousmatic sound. Additionally, Larousse offers an etymology that makes it appear as if both forms of ‘acousmatique’ are derivations from ‘acousmate’. (Shortly, we will see why this is incorrect.)

Bayle – along with Michel Chion (1999: 15 note 5), Francis Dhomont (1996a and 2001: 261) and Marc Battier (2007: 196) – tacitly accepts Larousse’s identification of ‘acousmate’ and ‘acousmatique’. In his ‘histoire du mot’, Bayle introduces snippets from Apollinaire’s ‘Acousmate’ poems with this clause – ‘Note in the *Poèmes retrouvés* of Guillaume Apollinaire, 1913, this ‘rediscovery’ [*re-trouvaille*]’ (Bayle 1993: 180) – the implication being that the real find in Apollinaire’s collection is simply the discovery of the word ‘acousmate’, and thus the rediscovery of the ancient acousmatic tradition. Apollinaire becomes a crucial node in the transmission of this ancient horizon, by prolonging the term ‘acousmatique’ through its synonym ‘acousmate’. Thanks to Apollinaire, Peignot can pass the term onto Schaeffer. *Yet, if ‘acousmate’ is not synonymous with ‘acousmatique’ then what exactly did Apollinaire re-discover? Why not focus the attention on Peignot? Isn’t he the one that makes the more significant retrouvaille, by giving Schaeffer the word ‘acousmatique’ and initiating its mythic icon, the Pythagorean veil? If we are truly being presented with an historical account, then Apollinaire’s role can be little more than accidental – at most, incidental.*

3. BATTIER’S ARGUMENT

Marc Battier (2007) makes a case for keeping Apollinaire in the story. He argues that the central experience of phonography has less to do with the reproduction of sounds than the separation of sonic sources from their audible effects, which occurs at two levels: first, the source is separated from its effect and the latter is captured as a ‘physical inscription’; then separation of source and effect is evident at playback, where the listener is given the responsibility for ‘reconstituting the sound image which traces the

sound of [the] origin’ (Battier 2007: 196). It is in these two tendencies, inscription and reconstitution, that ‘one finds the sources of the creation of phonographic sound’. Battier does not conceive of phonography as *initiating* the separation of auditory sources from effects; rather, the experience of such separation *predates* the invention of recording. For Battier, the history of this kind of sonic experience is associated with the word ‘acousmate’. This is why Apollinaire is significant; the self-named ‘poète phonographe’ of the 1910s gives voice, in his ‘Acousmate’ poems, to pre-phonographic experiences of ‘voices without bodies’ and ‘sounds without their causal source’ (Battier 2007: 196).

Battier considers three moments in Apollinaire’s career that can be understood as anticipations of Schaeffer’s theories.

1. In *Le Roi-Lune*, Apollinaire imagines the Moon-King sitting at a keyboard where, through the use of microphones, he transports the sounds of the world into his chamber. Running his hands over the keyboard, the king plays a ‘symphony, made by the world’ (quoted by Battier 2007: 190). The phrase evokes Schaeffer’s desideratum to make a ‘symphony of noises’ (Schaeffer 1952: 12).
2. In December of 1913, Apollinaire made a trip to the Archives of the Voice, where he recorded himself reciting three poems. Upon listening, he experienced an uncanny effect: ‘After the recording, they played my poems back to me on the apparatus, and I did not recognize my voice in the slightest’ (quoted by Battier 2007: 191) Battier describes Apollinaire’s uncanny reaction as an experience of ‘blind listening’ (191).
3. Battier cites a passage from André Salmon, Apollinaire’s friend, which underscores the way that recorded sound makes ‘very profound and delicate [aural] perceptions’ of the voice available, perceptions that are stifled when heard in their usual context, emitted from the mouth of the speaker. Salmon writes, ‘Thus at the second hearing we heard ourselves ... for the first time’ (Battier 2007: 191). Battier intends the reader to understand this phrase as anticipating Schaeffer’s claim that the acousmatic situation creates new conditions for listening – that we were often deceived about what we hear due to the context.

When the poet René Ghil went into the studio, Apollinaire experienced a similarly chilling and uncanny effect upon hearing Ghil’s disembodied voice, describing it as ‘aerial music’ (Battier 2007: 191). Battier emphasises this little phrase, for ‘aerial music’ links the pre-technological world of Apollinaire’s early ‘Acousmate’ poems – where shepherds listen to angelic voices or a melancholic poet hears a quiet, absent voice – directly to modern phonography. Identifying the experience of an *acousmate*

with that of phonography, Battier argues that both experiences inhabit a horizon defined by the separation of source and effect. He writes,

This term ['acousmatic'], henceforth used in reference to the musical work of the GRM, has to be extended through the notion of 'acousmate', which gave a mystical dimension to the phenomenon of hidden sound. Sound technologies have increasingly reinforced the idea of acousmate as a number of great mystics have given witness, supporting our listening to voices without bodies. Voices without bodies: this addresses itself to the idea that with sound technology one can transport or reproduce sound without its being associated with the material that produced it. Historically, the idea of 'acousmate' is linked to mysticism. (Battier 2007: 196)

In the past, shepherds may have heard the angelic voice, but 'this is the role now played by phonography, to make voice without bodies or sounds without their causal source heard' (Battier 2007: 196). Apollinaire's poetry prefigures a technological experience yet to come.

Battier develops the mystical connotations of the word 'acousmate' by citing a tantalising passage linking the term to St Cecilia, the patron saint of music. The passage appears in a volume from 1807, in which various definitions from the Académie's *Dictionnaire* are selected, critiqued and commented upon. Battier cites the following:

Biographers have written that St Cecilia, ready for her martyrdom, heard within herself the songs of angels from which derives her title as the patron saint of music. If this historical point is correct, St Cecilia was in a state of *acousmate*, or of enchantment, for these two words in the language of learned metaphysicians, are essentially synonymous. Both designate a mental condition, which few physiologists know how to distinguish. The condition is rarely morbid, sometimes endemic; but those who suffer from it, when they are not saints, have often imputed it to witchcraft. (Quoted in Battier 2007: 196)

What could be more mystical – and more acousmatic – than the moment when St Cecilia hears the angelic choir while turning her eyes from the earthly musicians? By connecting St Cecilia to the term 'acousmate', Battier establishes a tradition of musical listening that is predicated on an essential trait, the separation of physical sources and audible effects. The separation inscribed in the experience of recorded sound is now extended back to its founding moment. St Cecilia functions as the icon of this tradition. Paralleling Schaeffer's use of an 'originary experience' to situate the loudspeaker in the horizon of the Pythagorean veil, Battier locates the 'originary experience' of acousmatic listening inside the ear of St Cecilia.⁵

⁵On Schaeffer and the notion of an 'originary experience', see Kane (2007), Section 7.1.

4. ACOUSMATE AND THE *ACADÉMIE FRANÇAISE*

It would indeed be symbolically powerful for *musique acousmatique* if a tradition supported the notion that Cecilia heard an *acousmate*. But that is not *quite* what Battier argues; rather, he claims that Cecilia does not *hear* an acousmate but is *in a state of acousmate*. There is a subtle swerve in the meaning of 'acousmate' from an object – the *sound* of voices and instruments heard (or imagined to be heard) in the air – to a 'mental condition', a particularly auditory form of mystical experience. According to Battier, one can be in a 'state of *acousmate*, or of enchantment' (Battier 2007: 196).

Battier's historical source comes from a volume entitled *Remarques morales, philosophiques, et grammaticales, sur le dictionnaire de l'académie françoise*, which he incorrectly attributes to Antoine-Augustin Renouard (Battier 2007: 196). The author is not Renouard, but Gabriel Feydel, who published the work under the pseudonym P* P* P* on Renouard's press in 1807. The volume is organised alphabetically, and systematically reproduces entries from the Académie's *Dictionnaire* in order to contest particular definitions. Feydel challenges the Académie's definitions of two words dealing with mysterious mental afflictions, *acousmate* and *incantation*. I reproduce the passage in full:

Acousmate. Masculine noun. Sound of human voices or instruments that one imagines hearing in the air.

Incantation. Fem. noun. Name that one gives to the absurd ceremonies of swindlers who pose as magicians.

Remark. Biographers have written that St Cecilia, ready to receive her martyrdom, heard inside herself the song of angels; whence she has been given the title, patron saint of musicians. If this story is true, St Cecilia was then in a state of *Acousmate* or *Incantation*; for these two nouns, in the language of learned metaphysicians, are essentially synonyms. Both designate a mental affection that few physiologists know how to distinguish; affections seldom morbid, sometimes endemic, but for those who suffer from it, when they are not saints, often ascribed to the power of witchcraft.

When Sganarelle, the lumberjack posing as a doctor, threatens to give a peasant a fever, he boasts of a power that makes the peasant apprehensive, and of which the academicians happily do not believe. But the academicians, whose duty is at no point to believe that a man can give another man a fever by looking at him askance, have nevertheless committed an inexcusable fallacy if they contradict the existence of the fever. The Académie française has implicitly done this by the manner in which they have written their entry on incantation. (Feydel 1807: 9)

In Feydel's first paragraph, he argues that *acousmate* and *incantation* are synonymous – they both refer to

mental states that cannot be effectively distinguished. If Feydel can establish this point, then he can accuse the Académie of offering a definition of ‘acousmate’ that does not question its veracity as an intentional state while simultaneously offering a definition of ‘incantation’ that does. To illustrate the fallacy, Feydel selects an example from Molière’s *Le médecin malgré lui*. Sganarelle, posing as a doctor, lacks the ability to give a fever to a peasant, because a fever is not the kind of thing that can be transferred by a cocked glance. But just because Sganarelle lacks such powers, one should not deny the existence of fevers altogether. In Feydel’s analogy, Sganarelle occupies the same place as a magician; just because the Academy is sceptical of the power of a magician to invoke a state of incantation, does not mean that they should deny the existence of such states.

Feydel’s publication evoked a biting witty response by André Morellet, *philosophe* and a member of the Académie:

The critic claims that these two terms *acousmate* and incantation are essentially synonymous; and that one did not recognise this claimed synonymy. The Greek term ‘acousma’ signifies the thing, the noise that one hears. Incantation employed by fake sorcerers can have many diverse and different ways of producing sounds for those upon which they practise their art.

After this grammatical observation the critic speaks to us of St Cecilia, *who hears inside herself the songs of angels, and passes from that, one knows not how, to speak truthfully: when Sganarelle threatens to give a peasant a fever, he boasts of power of which the academicians happily do not believe; but they have nevertheless committed an inexcusable fallacy if they contradict the existence of the fever, which is implicitly done by the manner in which they have written their entry on incantation.*

The Academy has not spoken of Sganarelle or of any fever given by magicians. One does not know [how] ... after this article, the Academy could appear to deny the existence of a fever. (Morellet 1807: 13–14)

As Morellet implies, Feydel is a bit feverish in his critique. First, the term *acousmate* is related to the Greek term noun *acousma*, ‘the thing heard’. It refers to a sound heard in the air, not the mental state of the listener hearing that sound. Feydel elides this difference, and assumes a synonymy that was never claimed by the Académie. And Morellet is correct; the peculiarity of Feydel’s thinking is apparent when one looks at the historical usage of the term ‘acousmate’, for I have been able to locate no other passage which invokes being in a ‘state of acousmate’ other than Feydel’s. The association of St Cecilia with the term ‘acousmate’ is idiosyncratic and unsupported by historical usage as well. In fact, an *acousmate* has little to do with music, St Cecilia or mystical unions;

rather, it is much more closely associated with extraordinary visual spectacles like eclipses, meteor showers and aurorae. If it were not an oxymoron to say so, perhaps an *acousmate* could be defined as an ‘auditory phenomenon’.

5. PHILOSOPHY, PHYSICS AND THE COINING OF ‘ACOUSMATE’

The word ‘acousmate’ first appears in the pages of the *Mercur de France*, in December of 1730. It is coined in an article by M. Treüillot de Ptoncour, the Curé d’Ansacq, concerning an extraordinary, supernatural auditory event. Ansacq is a small village in a hilly, wooded region of France, about forty miles north of Paris. According to the Curé, on the evening on 27 and 28 January 1730, an ‘extraordinary noise like human voices’ was ‘heard in the air by several people in the parish of Ansacq’.

Saturday, Jan. 28 of the present year, a noise pervaded the parish of Ansacq, near Clermont en Beauvoisis; that the preceding night several Individuals of both sexes heard in the Air a prodigious multitude like human voices of different sounds, sizes and brightness, of all ages, of all sexes, speaking and crying all at once, without the Individuals being able to distinguish what the voices said; that among this vocal confusion, one recognized and distinguished an infinite number who emitted lugubrious and lamentable cries, like people distressed, others cries of joy and peals of laughter, like people amusing themselves; several added that they clearly distinguished among these human voices, allegedly, the sound of different instruments. (Treüillot 1730: 2807)

The majority of the article reproduces depositions undertaken by the Curé with the townsfolk, followed by a series of reflections.

From the villagers’ testimony, details about the mysterious sound emerge. Charles and François Descouleurs, two middle-aged labourers, heard the sound while returning to Ansacq late at night from the neighbouring village of Senlis. While travelling along the north wall of the town, Charles reports being ‘suddenly interrupted by a terrible voice, at a distance of five paces’ (Treüillot 1730: 2812). Another voice resembling the first could be heard at the other end of the village. Then, a confusion of voices broke out in the space between – voices of elders, children, men and women, speaking in an unintelligible jargon, accompanied by the sound of instruments. While some voices appeared to come from quite high in the air, ‘about twenty or thirty feet’, others were emitted from about the height of an ordinary man or even from the ground. The whole event ended in ‘peals of delicate laughter, as if there had been three or four hundred people who began to laugh with all their force’ (2814). The volume was so loud that the

brothers report struggling to converse over the din. On the opposite side of the village, Louis Duchemin, a glove seller, and Patrice Totüilly, a bricklayer, were travelling from Ansacq to Senlis, and reported hearing the same event as the Descoullieurs brothers. After stopping briefly to listen more closely, they hastily continued onward to Senlis, determined to keep their distance from the sound.

Villagers inside the town walls also reported hearing the noise. Sir Claude Descoullieurs, the retired guard of the town's gate, reported that the sounds were loud enough to wake him. By the time the aged Sir Claude dressed himself and headed out to his courtyard, the 'aerial troupe' was already quite distant. But when asked about the sound, Sir Claude offers one of the more colourful descriptions, comparing it to a 'Fair' or 'demonstration', where 'two or three thousand persons form a kind of chaos or confusion of human voices, of women, of elders, of young people, and children' (2818–19). Alexis Allou, a churchman in the town, reports being awoken by his wife, and heading downstairs to see about the noise. After opening the door, Allou heard 'an innumerable multitude of people, some expressing cries of bitter words, others cries of joy', all accompanied by the sounds of instruments. The sound travelled along the road towards the town church. Nicolas Portier, a labourer, reports a similar experience of being awoken by the noise, which was so loud that his dogs threw themselves at the door in terror. Other depositions from townsfolk report similar experiences of being rudely awoken, noting the movement of the sound along the road towards the church and a similar composition of voices and instruments.

In the series of reflections that flank the depositions, the Curé imagines that his noise might capture the attention of the populace and scientific community in the same way that the appearance of extraordinary astronomical events, known as *Phénomènes*, did a few years earlier. In 1726, the aurora borealis could be seen in a spectacular display all across Northern Europe. The aurorae were so remarkable that it caused a panic amongst some crowds in France, triggering the government to commission an investigation by Jean-Jacques Dortous de Mairan to discover the causes. Mairan's book (1733) became the most widely known book on the subject of aurorae in the first half of the eighteenth century. While the popular imagination saw ominous signs in the aurorae, burgeoning natural scientists saw an opportunity to offer explanations and dispel folk anxieties. The Curé had phenomena of this variety in mind when publishing his account, encouraging the *Mercur*'s readers to explain the extraordinary sound through the application of skilful reasoning. To that end, the Curé even attaches a 'topographic

description' of Ansacq, to aid 'those who believe themselves to be able to explain this by natural causes and to exercise their Physics and their Philosophy' (Treüillot 1730: 2823).

In presenting so much material about the Acousmate d'Ansacq, the Curé was participating in a typical practice in early eighteenth-century natural science, where scientific data and accounts were widely shared (Fara 1996: 247). Just as the circulation of eyewitness accounts of the aurorae aided Mairan's work in establishing a history of such phenomena, and thus afforded him the means to establish recurrent cycles which would facilitate prediction of the events, the Curé was making information known to those who might be interested in investigating parallel extraordinary sonic events. And, similarly, the Curé developed vocabulary to aid in the identification and specificity of such events. According to Patricia Fara, 'Natural philosophers developed a new vocabulary for providing detailed accounts of aurorae, thus consolidating their claims to intellectual possession of a phenomenon governed by the laws of nature' (1996: 244). The coining of the word 'acousmate' fulfils this function:

Everyone knows that Phenomenon [*Phénomène*] is a Greek word, which has been Gallicised as much as any other, because one cannot find in our language full of terms a word energetic enough to express by itself objects that appear extraordinarily in the air. Our language does not furnish us with many expressions to designate the extraordinary sounds that exist, nor those that might be heard [*où qui pourraient se faire entendre*]. But as the latter [i.e. extraordinary sounds] are less common than the former [i.e. Phenomena], no one has been shrewd enough thus far to Gallicise a Greek word to express it.

Doesn't the event in question authorise me to do it myself, and to appeal in the same way to what the Ancients called Phenomena [*Phénomènes*], the extraordinary objects that appear in the air; can't I, for the same reason, designate the surprising and prodigious sound by the word, *Akousmène*, or to speak more properly Greek in French, *Akousmate*? The first [i.e. *Phénomène*] signifies a thing that appears extraordinarily; the second would signify a thing that makes itself heard extraordinarily. (Treüillot 1730: 2824–5)

The word 'akousmate' is intended as an auditory parallel to the visual 'phenomenon'. Etymologically, *phenomenon* is derived from the Greek verb *phainein*, which means to cause, to appear or to show. The word retains a visual basis and cannot be easily applied to auditory events. Since Eudoxus, there was an established tradition of using 'phenomenon' to refer to spectacular astronomical events. Moreover, the Curé's justification for his coinage clarifies one odd feature of the word. The '-ate' ending is uncommon in French. But it is apparent that the Curé knows his Greek grammar, and is simply transcribing the

plural Greek noun ‘akousmata’, the things heard, into French.

As an aside, ‘akousmata’ has a special meaning in the Pythagorean tradition. It refers to a set of maxims, coded utterances and allegories that are often attributed to Pythagoras, known as the ‘Golden Wisdom’. It has been a standard practice since Aristotle to venture interpretations of the *akousmata*, and the practice played a central role in the appropriation of Pythagoreanism as a tool for cultural revision in neo-Platonist philosophy and early Christianity.⁶ One might jump to the conclusion that there is a long lineage that links ‘acousmatique’ to ‘acousmate’ via the Pythagorean *akousmata*, which would justify Bayle’s identification of the terms. However, this must be dismissed. The Curé coins the term solely based on his knowledge of Greek grammar; there is no evidence to suggest that he intends the word to possess any Pythagorean connotations. The Curé’s *akousmata*, although perhaps mysterious or supernatural, are definitely not coded utterances or allegories. They encrypt no esoteric wisdom, participate in no ritual initiations, and conceal no Orphic mysteries. The only thing mysterious about them now concerns their physical causal basis.

6. THE DEBATES IN THE *MERCURE*

For next fifteen months, the acousmate was hotly debated in the pages of the *Mercure*. The first response is from an anonymous Burgundian: ‘I believe willingly that there is no physical explanation to discover in all of this, and I think that, as Saint Paul assured, the air is full of demons’ (*Mercure de France*, February 1731: 336). The cause is supernatural and should be taken as proof of the hubris of natural scientists and savants: ‘Perhaps God permits the reality of the event at Ansacq to oblige philosophers to admit that aerial spirits exist’ (336). But the profession of faith is tempered by a more rational question: if this is indeed evidence of demons or aerial spirits, shouldn’t there have been precedents before the events at Ansacq? The Burgundian encourages historians look into the matter, and relates a few personal anecdotes of past experience with similar sonic oddities.

In March 1731, another anonymous writer attributes the cause of the *acousmate* to a human source – a ventriloquist. The author argues that a good ventriloquist, poised inside the town wall, could have easily produced the confused noise of the Acousmate

d’Ansacq. By travelling along the wall he could create the illusion of the sound moving across the town, in front of houses, and towards the church. The author of the next response, one Monsieur de la R., challenges the ventriloquial hypothesis on the grounds that no ventriloquist can produce the polyphonic effects heard by the townsfolk.

One person alone can be in a room, behind a screen, making a considerable and varied noise of sounds that imitate the voices of men, of women, of children and of different animals; if one mixes into it skillets, tongs, etc., the confusion of all these things might be able to imitate the din of a house full of noises. But this could not represent in the same instant several mixed voices. (*Mercure de France*, May 1731: 1028–9)

After debunking the ventriloquial hypothesis, M. de la R. offers his own explanation, based on the experience of his friend, Monsieur P***, a physicist. In the middle of the night in early October 1730, M. P*** claims to have been awoken by an *acousmate* similar to that at Ansacq, filled with the sound of voices and instruments. Following the sound to various locations, but never finding the source itself, M. P*** returned to the front steps of his house only to be struck by a new *acousmate*, which sounded like ‘many whistles of different tones’, first filling the air with sound then ‘dying out as it receded like a wave’ (1033). The transformation of voices into whistling tones gave the physicist a clue regarding the source of the sound – air masses. Moreover, the location of these sounds was in a wine-growing region in the southern France, topographically similar to the environs surrounding Ansacq. The source of the acousmate is attributed to natural causes, ‘billows [of air] striking in different ways [the landscape’s] uneven surfaces, now flat, now convex and now concave’ (1034).

In line with the hypothesis about air billows, the rest of the explanations in the *Mercure* are natural scientific in character. The debate devolves into a discussion between two figures, M. Laloüat de Soulaines, an advocate to the French government, and M. Capperon, the former headmaster at Saint Maxent, who had a small reputation for work in natural science. Laloüat attributes the source of the sound to corpuscles of air which, when placed under various kinds of atmospheric conditions, burst and produce all variety of motion; upon striking the ear, the corpuscles can sound like any number of things – voices, instruments, laughter and so forth. Capperon claims the sounds are caused by the action of ‘cold fermentation’ occurring in the bowels of the earth; again, under extraordinary atmospheric and geological conditions, the motions caused by fermentation can strike the ear and sound like a variety of sources. Throughout the latter half of 1731 and early 1732,

⁶The most comprehensive treatment of the *akousmata* is Burkert (1962: 166–207). On the appropriation of Pythagoreanism in the age of the Church Fathers, see Dawson (1992). For more on the origins of the Pythagorean veil and its relation to the *akousmata*, see Kane (2008), section 2.

Laloüat and Capperon rebut each other, each trying to demonstrate how the other's theory is incapable of explaining away the mystery of the Acousmate d'Ansacq.⁷

Needless to say, the mystery remains unsolved; no definitive cause is attributed to the acousmate and the public's interest faded. The term is not to be found in any of other issues of *Mercur* in the years immediately following, other than a humorous reference to the event in 1738 (*Mercur de France*, September 1738: 1986–7). I have been able to find only one other attempt to solve the mystery of the Acousmate d'Ansacq. On 18 November 1901, a paper was read by one M. Thiot before the Société Académique d'Archéologie, Sciences et Arts of Oise, the *département* where Ansacq is located. Thiot, revisiting the *acousmate*, attributes the source of the sound to a strong 'polysyllabic echo' caused by the high, flat façade on the town's *château* (Thiot 1901: 69–72).

7. THE EXPANSION OF THE SEMANTIC FIELD

What happens to the word 'acousmate' after the controversy in the *Mercur* dies away? Its meaning develops along two vectors. The first vector preserves the original sense of the term – an extraordinary but literal object of hearing. The Abbé Prévost captures this sense in a dictionary of French words 'whose meaning is unfamiliar'. In the edition from 1755, the Abbé enfold the original sense of the word into his definition:

Acousmate, s.m. A term newly formed from the Greek, to describe a phenomenon that makes heard a great noise in the air, comparable, one says, to that of several human voices and diverse instruments. The *Mercur* of 1730 & 1731 provide a description of an event of this nature, occurring near Clermont en Beauvoisis. (Prévost 1755: 18)⁸

We see the second vector in the *Dictionnaire* of the Académie – that same volume which formed the centrepiece of the debate between Feydel and Morellet. Recall, the Académie defined as *acousmate* as: 'Noise of human voices or instruments that one imagines hearing in the air'. Rather than define it as a real sound, ontologically akin to phenomena like the aurora borealis, the Académie demotes the *acousmate* to a hallucinated or imagined sound.

These two vectors of signification penetrate the various disciplinary contexts in which the word is

found. In particular, three contexts of reception – scientific, psychological and literary – shape the signification of the word. In the scientific context, the original signification of the Curé is preserved. An *acousmate* is an extraordinary sonic event, which demands a causal explanation. In a long chapter from the *Traité historique et critique de l'opinion* concerning the production of sound and the motion of air, Gilbert Charles Le Gendre positions the Acousmate d'Ansacq in a long line of extraordinary auditory events, combing the pages of Pliny, Livy, Clement and various historians for instances. No longer a terrifying event, the *acousmate* becomes a case study in the extraordinary workings of nature (Le Gendre 1758: 290ff.).

In the psychological literature of the nineteenth century, 'acousmate' is used as a technical term to describe the object heard in an auditory hallucination. The *Nouveau dictionnaire de médecine* (Béclard et al. 1821) defines an acousmate as 'a noise that one believes to hear in the air, and which is purely imagined. Uncommon.' As a medical term, the word finds its way into English, appearing in 1881 as 'an imaginary sound' (Power and Sedgwick 1881), and generates a series of 'acousma-' words, coined to describe various sorts of auditory hallucinations. For example, the 1881 volume contains *acousma*, 'a species of depraved hearing in which sounds are imagined as if they were really heard'. A 1907 volume introduces a slew of new 'acousma-' words: Acousmatagnosia, the failure to recognise sounds due to mental disorder, mind-deafness; Acousmatamnesia, the failure of the memory to call up the images of sounds (Dorland 1907). These 'acousma-' words are all associated with the pathology of listening rather than the physiology of the ear or the physics of sound.

In the literary context, 'acousmate' takes on the signification of an uncanny, supernatural event – a creepy effect without a cause – that can invoke a feeling of terror or dread, or a state of awe. In 1805 the word appears in a frightening tale by Le Gorse entitled 'Le sabbat des esprits', with all the requisite *mise-en-scène*: an uninhabited castle, inexplicable events, ominous inscriptions, trembling limbs and trapdoors. In a scene inside the throne room, there is a sudden sound: 'One could almost call it an *acousmate*, for the excellent actors in this magic symphony were skilfully veiled by the sumptuousness of ornamental decoration, that one might believe it came from the air' (La Gorse 1805: 339–340). This association of *acousmates* with uncanny or supernatural events is also preserved in studies of folklore and religion, which explored the mythological association of *acousmates* with witches' sabbaths and the Dance of the Dead.⁹

⁷The debate between Laloüat de Soulaines and Capperon appears in *Mercur de France*, June 1731: 1516–31, July 1731: 1637–1649, August 1731: 1841–1854, November 1731: 2572–2580, and March 1732: 416–427.

⁸Other contemporary dictionaries replicate aspects of the Abbé's definition, preserving the original sense of the coinage. See 'acousmate' in P. Charles Le Roy (1764) and Pierre-Charles Berthelin (1762).

⁹See Langlois (1852) and Carnoy (1884).

8. CONCLUSION

Within this literary reception of the term ‘acousmate’ one can perhaps make sense of Feydel’s insistence on an ‘acousmate’ being a mental condition akin to incantation rather than an object of hearing, one that is associated with St Cecilia. If so, this contextualisation of the term ‘acousmate’ might allow us to nuance Battier’s reading of Feydel’s passage. Battier is not mistaken to say that the term ‘acousmate’ is related to ‘voices without bodies’ and ‘sounds without their causal source’. But a relation is not an essence – it is a moment. Feydel’s response to the Académie could have been understood as part of a non-essentialising account of acousmatic sound that interprets moments of ‘sounds without their causal sources’ and ‘voices without bodies’ in historically and culturally specific situations, not as part of a mythic ‘originary experience’.

In fact, I would argue that the historical accounts of acousmatic sound have been led astray by remaining overly fixated on the words ‘acousmate’ and ‘acousmatique’. For fixation on the words has forced together moments that do not form a single tradition; the need to maintain this tradition, to provide a ‘foundation by fiction’, perpetuates the mistaken assumption that ‘acousmatique’ and ‘acousmate’ are synonyms when they are, at best, homonyms. Rather than rely on the words ‘acousmate’ or ‘acousmatique’ to provide historical orientation, what would it be like to tell a history of acousmatic sound that treated the words as two names (among others) that refer to a set of cultural practices concerning the relationship of seeing and hearing? Perhaps we could re-conceptualise acousmatic listening as a set of techniques for manipulating the senses; we could be guided by moments from a long history of sensation where de-visualised listening is *privileged for culturally specific and historically situated ends* (and the invention of *musique concrète* would be one of those instances); we could write a history that eschews all claims about the essence of acousmatic sound (so, no ‘originary experiences’ associated with the Pythagorean veil or St Cecilia) in favour of a cultural history of listening that remains faithful to historical agents’ attempt to make sense of acousmatic sound in whatever terms were available to them – whether philosophical, metaphysical, mystical, technological, scientific, religious or aesthetic.

Imagine a scenario where the Curé coined a different term to describe his extraordinary auditory phenomena – some other odd word to entice Apollinaire. Perhaps Peignot would have used it to describe his experience of *musique concrète* and, thus, we would never have had the Schaeffer’s restitution of the Pythagorean veil. Yet, the experience of de-visualised listening would still remain. It is the cultural and historical specificity of those experiences that should matter in a history of

‘acousmatic’ sound. If Schaeffer owes something to Apollinaire, or Diderot, or Pythagoras – all names included in Bayle’s entry on the ‘histoire du mot’ – that debt must be spelled out in terms stronger than that of assumed etymological filiations. The important question is this: how does a practice of acousmatic listening get *localised, configured, and deployed in specific situations to perform some kind of cultural work?* ‘Acousmatic’ is just a name; it could have been called, among other monikers, ‘de-visualised listening’, ‘blind audition’ or ‘sound unseen’.

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