

Pierre Schaeffer

Polychrome portraits

Institut national de l'audiovisuel

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ISBN 978-2-86938-210-7

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## *Vestigial Schaeffer*

In America, Pierre Schaeffer barely survives. Unless one reads French (and Schaeffer's French is anything but easy to non-native speakers) access to his writing is limited to a few scant sources<sup>1</sup>. His pedagogy is not taught, universities have not substituted the *sofège* for basic classes in ear-training and musicianship, the phenomenologically-inflected "sound object" (*l'objet sonore*) is cited more often than truly investigated, while his compositions are treated as examples rather than artworks. He has simply become overwhelmingly historical—in other words, irrelevant. This obsolescence is betrayed in the monikers with which he is qualified: inventor, originator or pioneer. His insignificance is evidenced by his perpetual relegation to the footnotes.

The situation appears slightly different in other English-speaking lands. A small group of scholars have produced a handful of studies, investigating a variety of aspects of Schaeffer's thinking<sup>2</sup>. Much credit is due to the British journal *Organised Sound*, the only publication where Schaeffer's thinking and legacy are consistently engaged. These individual studies are welcome; however, lacking translations of the original sources, the individual interests of scholars and the projects to which they are committed shed light upon only particular adumbrations of Schaeffer's work. The sum of these adumbrations does not reconstitute the totality of Schaeffer's interdisciplinary thinking. Even amongst the most interested parties, myself included, Schaeffer's reception can only be described as atomistic.

Primarily, Schaeffer is known in America as:

- An historical figure in the history of 20th century music, the "inventor" of *musique concrète*.
- As the figure who introduced the term acousmatic into modern parlance.
- A seminal, but perhaps musically irrelevant figure in the history of sampling and turntablism.

Secondarily, he is known as:

- A theorist of listening in the phenomenological tradition
- A theorist of the sound object
- A proponent of analytical techniques for ear-training and the analysis of electronic sound
- A media theorist who investigated the relationship between musical instruments and sound reproducing machines.

Of course, it is commonsense that the fetishism of these individual adumbrations

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<sup>1</sup> Please consult the list of translations at the end of the article.

<sup>2</sup> A brief and incomplete list in English would begin with: Carlos Palombini, Douglas Kahn, Leigh Landy, John Dack and Denis Smalley, *et alia*.

could be overcome if one were to simply read Schaeffer in the original. Yet given the situation that Schaeffer barely survives in America, that the state of his reception is atomistic and partial, that Schaeffer's thinking engages a variety of disciplines that do not communicate well with each other, the conditions are not amenable to a holistic understanding. Composers and scholars who actually spend their time engaging with Schaeffer's writing and work invariably end up re-inscribing this state of affairs. Moreover, for those not already in the fray, discovering Schaeffer's works often involves a strange trajectory.

I first became acquainted with Pierre Schaeffer during my studies in graduate school. Naturally, I was aware of Schaeffer's reputation as the inventor of *musique concrète* and knew some of his music, like the famous *Étude aux chemins de fer*. However, I recall an odd conjunction of events which made me suddenly aware of Schaeffer's *Traité*. I attended a lecture at CNMAT given by François Paris and Michel Pascal, where Pascal gave a brief history of the GRM, playing excerpts of works by Parmegiani, Ferrari, Henry and, of course, Pierre Schaeffer. He also spent some time talking about the theories of Pierre Schaeffer and describing the main points of the *Traité*. I recall being curious about Schaeffer, but abandoning it with disappointment when I discovered that the *Traité* was 700 pages long, written in an idiosyncratic style difficult for non-native speakers, and lacking an English translation. Not long afterwards, my curiosity was peaked again, when reading Roger Scruton's *Aesthetics of Music*, where I came across this passage:

In listening, Schaeffer argues, we spontaneously detach the sound from the circumstances of its production, and attend to it as it is in itself: this, the 'acousmatic' experience of sound, is fortified by recording and broadcasting, which completes the severance of sound from its cause that has already begun in the concert hall... The acousmatic experience of sound is precisely what is exploited by the art of music. (Scruton 1997: 3)

Upon re-reading it now, I find this passage astonishing, for a few reasons. Here one re-discovers Schaeffer in the strange context of a conservative analytic philosophy of music, playing a central role as a theorist of the acousmatic. Opening with this argument, Scruton's appropriation of the "acousmatic experience" of sound as *the central tenet of the ontology of music* is nothing if not astonishing. Has Schaeffer, this neglected figure, accurately placed a finger on music's nerve? Furthermore, Scruton develops the thesis of the acousmatic experience of sound, expanding its scope from electroacoustic music to the concert hall, in order to establish stringent criteria that Schaeffer's own compositions would fail to meet. For Scruton, the acousmatic experience of sounds damns *musique concrète* to non-musical meaninglessness because the latter's emphasis on the material properties of sounds is unable to support an intentional order of movement-in-sounds. At the same time, is it not precisely Schaeffer who teaches us how to listen to sounds and hear in them an order of intentionality? Was it not Schaeffer who denied an appeal to the positivism of acoustics, by swerving away from the priority of the signal, and placed listening upon a properly phenomenological ground?

Given this uncanny reanimation of Schaeffer in Scruton's text, it is simply astonishing to note the manner in which Schaeffer's thinking intersects Scruton's at an oblique angle. But who, in America, would even recognize the strangeness of this encounter? Without translations of Schaeffer's work, how is a casual reader of the philosophy of music to distinguish Scruton's Schaeffer from the author of the *Traité*? Moreover, how is one supposed to discern the complicated pattern of agreement and disagreement between these two Schaeffers?

Outside of the context of electro-acoustic composition, analysis and *soffège*, there exist scholars and researchers in the humanities, like Scruton, who would be extraordinarily interested in Schaeffer's thinking, if only it were available. Analytic philosophy of music is not the only discipline that has seen tremendous expansion in recent years. In the wake of various critiques of ocularcentrism, cultural studies and other humanistic discourses in America have undergone an "auditory turn," generating a burgeoning interest in the history and theory of the senses, in listening as a distinct field of inquiry, in non-specular phenomenology, in the history of audition and new techniques of auditioning history. These are all discourses that could fruitfully benefit from an engagement with Schaeffer's fundamentally interdisciplinary thinking—and occasionally do.

For example, Jonathan Sterne's excellent study, *The Audible Past*, extensively researches the cultural origins and construction of sound reproduction. Like Scruton, Sterne addresses Schaeffer's concept of the acousmatic, characterizing Schaeffer in a way that is quite typical of his American reception: "Pierre Schaeffer, the composer who pioneered *musique concrète*, argued that sound reproduction technologies produced 'acousmatic' sounds—sounds that one hears without seeing their source." (Sterne 2005: 20) Sterne then associates acousmatic sound with the "schizophonia" of Barry Truax and R. Murray Schafer, which similarly produces a "split between the original sound and its electro-acoustic reproduction."

By placing so great an emphasis on the splitting of sources and reproductions, Sterne suggests that the pathos involved in acousmatic or schizophonic conceptualizations of sound implicitly assumes face-to-face communication as the essential paradigm of communication. The challenges of technologically reproduced sound are exaggerated because they are beholden to conceive of themselves as a negatively defined lack or distortion of this paradigm. He writes, "The acousmatic or schizophonic definitions of sound reproduction carry with them a questionable set of prior assumptions about the fundamental nature of sound, communication and experience. Most important, they hold human experience and the human body to be categories outside history." (Sterne 2005: 20) Sterne's project critiques these assumptions, in order to re-conceive sound reproduction as a unique form of culturally constructed communication, affording possibilities of listening that are indissociably mediated by culture and capital.

Like Scruton, Sterne's account both does and does not adequately deal with Schaeffer's thinking. On the one hand, Sterne is correct to argue that acousmatic sound is ahistorically conceived—Schaeffer does not identify acousmatic sound as an historical artifact of modern technology. In the *Traité*,

Schaeffer conjures up the myth of the Pythagorean curtain, a veritable primal scene of acousmatic sound, in order to theorize it within a phenomenological horizon that dates back to ancient Greece<sup>3</sup>. In addition, Schaeffer's histrionics over the heroic "anti-natural effort"<sup>4</sup> involved in reduced listening are, perhaps, self-serving—the difficulty of this effort would justify the necessity of the *Traité* and the institution of a new *solfège*. On the other hand, Sterne incorrectly ascribes a set of assumptions to acousmatic sound that are simply not those of Schaeffer, but more closely resemble "schizophonic" accounts. As any reader of the *Traité* knows, Schaeffer is highly interested in investigating the specific affordances of mechanically reproduced sound, and does not assume face-to-face communication as its paradigm. The Pythagorean curtain, in addition to separating sources from reproductions, ostensibly effaces the ubiquity of face-to-face communication by encouraging new modes of listening, like reduced listening (*écoute réduite*). In fact, if we accept Schaeffer's Pythagorean narrative, the modern anamnesis of reduced listening and its correlate, the sound object, is *recognized* only within the sphere of acousmatically reduced sound afforded by sound reproduction technology. Simply put, acousmatic sound fundamentally alters listening in ways that are independent of face-to-face communication. In agreement with Sterne, Schaeffer is intensely interested in the unique ways in which reproduced sounds shape listening, albeit in a language and philosophical framework far from the historical constructivism of Sterne.

The oblique angle at which Schaeffer's thinking intersects with Sterne and Scruton suggests a surprising possibility: perhaps, the best chance for the survival of Schaeffer in America is not to be found in the niches of electroacoustic composition, analysis and *solfège*, but in philosophy, cultural studies and other discourses in the humanities. In fact, this would testify to Schaeffer's interdisciplinary originality. To posit that Schaeffer barely survives is also to say that he is not yet extinct. This vestigial survival demonstrates an intrinsic resiliency. Yet, without a translation of the *Traité* and other works, Schaeffer's thinking will remain simply vestigial for all but a few composers and theorists. But vestiges, despite inhospitable conditions, resist. Perhaps, with translation, Schaeffer's thinking will provide a site of stimulation and resistance in the American academy. Not unproblematic, Schaeffer is still one of the best theorists of sound and audition we possess.

Brian Kane, New York, 2008

3 For example, Schaeffer writes, "Moreover, between the experience of Pythagoras and our experiences of radio and recordings, the differences separating direct listening (through a curtain) and indirect listening (through a speaker) *in the end become negligible*." (Schaeffer 1966: 93) Elsewhere, I have argued that Schaeffer's ahistoricism is connected to his phenomenological method. (Kane 2007).

4 Concerning reduced listening, "I must *free myself from the conditioning* created by my previous habits, by passing through the test of the *époque*. It is never a question of a return to nature. Nothing is more *natural* than obeying the dictates of habit. It is a question of an *anti-natural effort to perceive that which, previously, determined my consciousness without my knowing it*." (Schaeffer 1966: 270).

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