
Book review

Pierre Schaeffer, *In Search of a Concrete Music*, translated by Christine North and John Dack (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012) ISBN 9780520265745.

Pierre Schaeffer's *À la recherche d'une musique concrète* has always been an important book for historians and researchers in electroacoustic music. It was the first book to describe the origins of *musique concrète*, Schaeffer's initial compositions and early critical successes, and to offer an aesthetic justification for the practice. Its contents have been paraphrased in almost every history of electronic music since.

Now in a masterful translation by Christine North and John Dack, *In Search of a Concrete Music* will be available to a much wider audience. The translation is elegant, capturing the proper tone of Schaeffer's text. Schaeffer reads in English as he does in French: the prose is deliberate, often prolix and rhetorical, yet capable of building suspense or arriving at striking conclusions; witty, dry, self-deprecating while also confident, academic and argumentative; roving from sharp-edged and crisply worded phrases to labyrinthine constructions. In the translators' note, special care is taken to indicate the handling of significant terms such as *concret/concrète, sujet/objet, expérience* and *allure*. These terms denote much more in French than their English cognates, and first-time readers are advised to pay attention to the translators' discussion of Schaeffer's usage.

The book is organised into four parts, taking the reader from the initial, tentative experiments in composition to Schaeffer's first formulation of a concrete music theory. The first two parts are presented in the form of a journal, covering the period from 1948 to 1951. The journals begin with the very first intuitions for a 'symphony of noises', and describe the origins of *musique concrète*, from failed experiments to production of the *Cinq études de bruits, Symphonie pour une homme seul* and *Orphée*. The historical veracity of the journals is to be taken with a grain of salt, for there are large interpolations of commentary and recollection added by Schaeffer in 1952, the original year of publication. One must assume the early material was edited, with some entries emphasised at the expense of others. Part III,

'The Concrete Experiment in Music', is a large essay on the aesthetics of *musique concrète*, which positions it in relation to contemporary music of the early 1950s, in particular serialism and electronic music. The essay articulates some basic postulates concerning the sound object, Schaeffer's central theoretical entity. Part IV, 'Outline of a Concrete Music Theory', written with André Moles, defines the basic terms of a nascent concrete music theory and consolidates the early discoveries and concepts of Parts I–III. Schaeffer employs information theory as his method.

When described schematically, as in the previous paragraph, *In Search of a Concrete Music* appears to trace the development of *musique concrète* from practice to theory. One might also be tempted to apply this model to Schaeffer's career in *musique concrète*, following a trajectory from composer to researcher. In this view, the technical discoveries and compositional results of the early Schaeffer, described in *In Search of a Concrete Music*, promise the theoretical system of the *Traité des objets musicaux*. Thus, a story about the early and late Schaeffer comes into being: the famous 'cut bell' and 'closed groove' recordings slowly unveil the presence of the 'sound object'; the sound object, as Schaeffer would write in the *Traité*, 'is never clearly revealed except in the acousmatic experience' (1977: 95); and, to go full circle, the phenomenology that grounds the description of the acousmatic experience and the full disclosure of the sound object was already anticipated in the early work, since Schaeffer notes that, 'back then, we often did phenomenology without knowing it' (1977: 262).

Is this story correct? It has been hard to challenge, since the central figure to authorise it was Schaeffer himself. It has been retold in secondary sources, from Michel Chion's *Guide des objets sonores: Pierre Schaeffer et la recherche musicale* to François Bayle's *Musique acousmatique*, to the liner notes to the new edition of Schaeffer's *L'Oeuvre musicale*. Yet, to read *In Search of a Concrete Music* is to discover a very different story, before the permanence and solidity of the sound object was established. The first journals describe Schaeffer's struggle not with the disclosure of the sound object but with defining it altogether.

While the word 'object' is present like an *idée fixe* from very beginning, the referent of that object

changes from page to page. In its first, tentative formulation the sound object denotes the physical-causal source of the sound; later, it will denote the sound itself, separate from its source or cause. Sometimes the term disappears, replaced by other terms such as the ‘sound fragment’, which designates a bit of sound lifted from the continuity of a disc’s spiral groove and deposited into the inescapable repetition of a ‘closed groove’ recording. At other times, the sound object is contrasted with the sound fragment. These shifts in terminology, improvised attempts at the ontology of *musique concrète* and incipient formulations of a concrete music theory reveal the hesitation and tentativeness of those first experiments in *musique concrète*. The joy of reading *In Search of a Concrete Music* is that one gets to follow Schaeffer on that search before it acquired a fixed orientation and definitive conclusion – before the history was set in stone.

When the sound object finally settles down, it is only with the help of the information theorist and cyberneticist, André Moles. The sound object, as described in Part IV, ‘Outline of a Concrete Music Theory’, is identifiable on the basis of certain redundancies in the acoustic signal, tracked in terms of its standard parameters: duration, frequency, amplitude, spectrum, and so on. On this basis, Moles and Schaeffer put forth an initial attempt at a typology and system of classification of all possible sounds. While this systematic goal is shared with the *Traité*, the differences cannot be underestimated. Schaeffer and Moles’ ‘Concrete Music Theory’ depends on an analysis of the acoustical signal and an identification of its distinctive patterns. The information theoretic approach should, in principle, lead to the possibility of automatic, even cybernetic, classification of sound based on the signal. But this is not the case with the acousmatic approach, which relies on the phenomenon of listening alone, never ceding priority to the signal. In the words of the *Traité*, ‘One forgets that *it is the sound object, given in perception, which designates the signal to be studied*, and that, therefore, it should never be a question of reconstructing it on the basis of the signal’ (1977: 269). The later Schaeffer is absolutely clear that acousmatics must be contrasted with acoustics, describing the contrast as follows:

In the sense of acoustics, we start with the physical signal and study its transformations via electro-acoustic processes, in tacit reference to ... a listening that grasps frequencies, durations, etc. By contrast, the acousmatic situation, in a general fashion, symbolically precludes any relation with what is visible, touchable, measurable. (1977: 93)

The perceptual paradoxes and psychoacoustic findings that litter the pages of the *Traité* are there to make precisely that point.

Another point of contrast between *In Search of a Concrete Music* and the *Traité* concerns the classification of sound objects. In the late 1950s and 1960s, the typo-morphology of sound objects functioned as a grounding for compositional projects, such as the *Étude aux sons animés* or *Étude aux allures*. Compositions were designed to *demonstrate or exhibit* the morphological properties of a class of sound objects. In the early work, the need for categorisation arises practically. *In Search of a Concrete Music* documents Schaeffer’s attempts to generate scores, or to create notation for his concrete works. *Musique concrète* seemed deficient in that, unlike instrumental music or even the serial-influenced electronic music being made in Germany, it lacked scores and systems for developing pre-compositional plans. But there were pressing practical questions to answer before doing so: what kinds of scores should be written? How should one notate, identify or name a sound? When attempting to make a score or transcription of a concrete work, as described in the second journal, Schaeffer vacillated between classifying sounds based on their sources (as in a traditional orchestral score) or on their effects. He offers examples of hybrid scores that have both aspects. The problem is made even more vivid when, imagining the composition of *Orphée*, Schaeffer is on the hunt for a particular sound, ‘a sudden intake of breath’ (83). Three days later, after a mad search through various catalogued recordings, Pierre Henry recovers the disc. ‘The notorious record “sudden intake of breath” has been found. This human – so inhuman – breath is based on a rolling tin can’ (84). How should the disc have been classified? As a recording of breath, or as a recording that *sounds like* breath? As a source or as an effect?

The problem of a concrete notation was also linked to the problem of creating large works. Many passages in *In Search of a Concrete Music* describe the struggle to create works of large scope, capable of developing the compositional language of *musique concrète* on the foundation of the *Cinq études*. Schaeffer, indigenously a writer, first reaches towards words not sounds. He imagines elaborate programmes for his two large early works with Pierre Henry, the *Symphonie* and *Orphée* – both of which are detailed in the pages of *In Search of a Concrete Music*. The programmes themselves are fascinating documents. However, they were never realised as such; both the *Symphonie* and *Orphée* come together at the moment the programmes are abandoned, when the concatenation and juxtaposition of sound against sound leads to hidden and unexpected affinities. Schaeffer’s reliance on *l’expérience concrète*, which must be understood as both *experimentation* and an appeal to the listener’s *experience*, ultimately leads him away from rigid ground plans towards more spontaneous constructions, following on the model of

the *Étude pathétique*, composed nearly instantaneously and described in ecstatic terms. In the high era of pre-compositional schemes, one is surprised to discover that improvisations in the studio were used as source material in many concrete works. While it is well known that Boulez' piano improvisations were used to create the *Étude violette* and *Étude noire*, *In Search of a Concrete Music* draws attention to other instances of the practice, such as Pierre Henry's prepared piano performance on *Bidule en ut*, and Jean-Jacques Gruenwald's impressionistic responses to Schaeffer's manipulated orchestra in the *Diapason Concertino*.

In contrast to the Schaeffer's later theories, the ambitious *Symphonie* and *Orphée* were not designed to encourage an *écoute réduite*. Yet, even after abandoning their programmes, the compositions seem to maintain their aesthetic commitments. I use the word 'commitments' in the plural, to underscore the variety of connections that Schaeffer draws between *musique concrète* and other artistic movements in pre- and post-war French aesthetics. Again and again, Schaeffer shuns the 'explicit', in the name of expressing universal, archetypal ideas. In terms of content, *musique concrète*, with its focus on sound, shares an emphasis on the pre-linguistic and pre-conscious as imagined by the *lettristes* and surrealists. In terms of form and programme, it displays a neo-classical return to clarity, economy and an emphasis on mythic themes, such as the Orpheus story. The compositions emphasise the 'primitive', with their ample use of percussion, prepared pianos, rhythmic repetitions and vocal invocations of imaginary rituals. (Schaeffer's neglected score to the film *Masquerage* is a good example.) Across the pages of *In Search of a Concrete Music*, Schaeffer engages various terms for articulating the project of a concrete music by invoking comparisons with abstract painting, with Paul Valéry's famous meditation on seashells, or with the splitting of the atom. Even while critiquing dodecaphony, Schaeffer flirts with it, in the *Courante* from the *Suite for 14 Instruments*, and in his affirmations of serial operations with magnetic tape

in the 'Antiphones' and 'Vocalise' from Pierre Henry's *Microphone bien tempéré*.

If I have focused on the historiographical implications of North and Dack's translation, it is because I am writing for the audience at *Organised Sound*. This is an audience interested in composing and theorising acousmatic music, and in understanding its origins and history, and concerned with electro-acoustic music's relations with distinctly Schaefferian issues of music and phenomenology, the sound object, modes of listening and a concrete music theory. While *In Search of a Concrete Music* will be an important text for this audience, I predict that this will not be the audience that is most deeply impacted by its appearance. I think it will be far more important to the growing field of 'sound studies' (or auditory cultural studies) and to sound artists. Schaeffer has been an occult figure in this world. While his historical importance has been recognised, there has been little available for them to read other than the few pages on 'Acousmatics' translated from the *Traité* in Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner's anthology *Audio Culture*, and a few other translations in old journals, UNESCO publications and Masters' theses. Moreover, none of these previously translated texts are comparable to the range of material present in *In Search of a Concrete Music*. It is a singular text. What other book traces the creation of a new style of music, or traces such a thorough investigation of the challenges and prospects of a music made from recorded sounds in such detail and with such directness? In its sheer fecundity, *In Search of a Concrete Music* opens up a set of questions about sound that we are still in the midst of answering. What kind of inspiration will new readers of Schaeffer find in the pages of *In Search of a Concrete Music*? We will all have to wait and see.

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REFERENCE

Schaeffer P. 1977. *Traité des objets musicaux: essai interdisciplines*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.