

# PIERRE HENRY. THE POETICS OF NOISE

A P O D C A S T B Y F R A N C E S C O A D I N O L F I

There are noises that annoy, disturb, others that refer to special moments in an existence, still others that mark everyday life: transforming them into sound by plastically modelling them has been the great merit of concrete music, of “musique concrète”, a creation of 1948 by Pierre Schaeffer, a composer and telecommunications engineer, enriched and enhanced in the absolutely visionary compositions of Pierre Henry, his friend and collaborator.

The revolutionary importance of the two artists has been enormous; the possibility of cutting, modifying and transforming sound with any software is now taken for granted. Actually it would be unthinkable without an antecedent such as concrete music, which in turn will also and above all be at the basis of the idea of sampling, for example, in hip hop, rock or more experimental or mass electronic music.

The real, concrete noises of Schaeffer and Henry therefore break through the time barrier and ideally continue to inhabit all those pieces that over the decades have incorporated existing sound sources, reusing and transforming them. And not surprisingly that Pierre Henry will declare in 1997: ‘We invented an alphabet that then became a language’. Before the two artists music was born exclusively in the head of the composer who then translated it into notes; concrete music changes the perspective, it is the real sound that becomes a musical instrument, modified in timbre, intensity and pitch.

It can be the noise of a rattling train or the whistle of a train conductor, two fundamental ingredients with which, for example, in 1948 Pierre Schaeffer will create the first work of concrete music, *Étude aux chemins de fer*; in that year with a magnetic tape recorder and a microphone he goes to the Batignolles railway station in Paris, records what is flowing before his eye and what he is listening to: it is the beginning of a genre, of a new

sound practice. Working at the French national radio, he had already done a lot of experiments with turntables turned into real musical instruments; he was interested in understanding what could happen by playing a record at different speeds, slower or faster or the other way around; but it is with the tape recorder that he goes further, he understands that he can record even the most unusual sounds and noises, he can turn them into notes on a staff and from there create real compositions. In practice, as mentioned, sound has become an object that can be manipulated, something concrete, precisely.

Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry met for the first time in 1949 in the studios of French radio. There was a 17 year age difference between them. Schaeffer was a theorist, he was meticulous, dogmatic, he reasoned like an engineer and a scientist. Henry, 22 years old at the time, studied at the Paris Conservatoire with Olivier Messiaen, he is very interested in new sound experiments, he is a practical boy, open to the most varied and imaginative artistic solicitations, with a soul more like a composer than Schaeffer.

Already in 1947, as John Cage had taught him, he was adjusting pianos by modifying the sound with objects inserted between the strings, and assembling unusual instruments; he would say: ‘Touching, tapping, hitting, brushing... I ended up installing a whole complex of instrument-objects in my house. All these devices allowed me to invent new sounds, to find quite unusual effects. And so I decided to become a composer. With different sounds. To be an inventor of sound’.

Despite being diametrically opposed, the two artists’ goal is the same, to explore all the possibilities offered by concrete music. Together with the sound engineer Jacques Poullin, they spent whole days in the studios of RTF, the public body responsible for radio and television in France between 1949 and 1964, where they collected a huge amount of sound objects, of musical samples to use, cut, edit, modify; they used recorders

and turntables with which Henry was unbeatable, so much so that Schaeffer would describe him as a kind of turntable genius in his diary.

Their first major collaboration was *Symphonie pour un Homme Seul* from 1950, a sequence of 12 movements made from recorded and manipulated sounds. It is a fundamental work that will anticipate the development of electronic music, sound design and sampling. A work that changed the way of conceiving music, highlighting how any sound may become musical material. The idea was to recreate a possible sound journey in a man's day. Hence a vertigo of noises and real, concrete sound; footsteps, knocks, breaths, laughter, shouts, fragments of the human voice and duly manipulated percussive sounds.

The work breaks with the idea of the traditional orchestral symphony not only because it does not use conventional musical instruments but because it proposes a new and revolutionary listening experience. He realised, as Schaeffer would say, his dream of slipping into a body with a microphone to capture unheard sounds.

A score that can therefore be perfectly combined with and especially with body movement, and it is no coincidence that in 1955 Maurice Béjart, with whom Henry would collaborate for decades, made one of his best-known choreographies from it. *Symphonie pour un Homme Seul* is a work that provides Henry with his future aesthetics of reference, it is he who transforms the raw sounds assembled by Schaeffer into a more articulate musical structure, it is Henry who with his classical musical training and his sensitivity for rhythm and sound dramaturgy creates in that score and in many other later works concrete soundscapes that will profoundly influence electronic and experimental music and much pop and rock music.

From Pink Floyd, for example, who displayed a wide range of effects in their records - and who with Roger Waters resorted to so called "body sounds" in the soundtrack of the documentary *Music from 'The Body'* - to Kraftwerk and all subsequent electronic music. Frank Zappa also greatly appreciated Henry, who in turn gave him credit for incorporating free jazz within complex

musical structures: 'He didn't influence me - the French composer told - but he made me think about music in a different way and this led me to a new use of electronics.'

That Schaeffer had a more theoretical approach, with a strong focus on sound itself and its perception, can also be perceived in *L'Oiseau RAI*, a complex composition from 1950 inspired by the chirping of the well-known little bird used by RAI [Italian State broadcaster] for radio breaks and interludes; a chirp produced with a kind of music box, a small wooden box equipped with a mechanism that can be operated with a key.

The instruments used by the composer will only be turntables and tape recorders. Concrete music was subverting again decades of study, starting with that of Ludwig Koch, a German who had migrated to Britain and made the first recording of a bird's trill as early as 1889. Koch was dedicated to recording and cataloging sounds of nature, in time he would become a prominent BBC radio broadcaster and help to build up the broadcaster's Library of Natural Sounds.

Schaeffer, therefore, was in his own way part of a long tradition of sound, so to speak, ornithological, which between 1956 and 1958 would lead, for example, the composer Oliver Messiaen to compile a *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, a list of sounds to be played on the piano prepared by listening day and night to birdsong in the natural environments of the French province.

And so on to The Beatles' *Blackbird*, a song included in their 1968 *White Album* in which the quartet employed the song of a blackbird taken from the sound effects sampler of the Abbey Road studios, nothing shocking when one considers that years earlier Ottorino Respighi had included the recorded song of a nightingale in *Pini di Roma*, his 1928 instrumental page. And one could go on considering that the passion for birdsong is lost over the centuries.

Pierre Henry was also familiar with those chirps, he had spent his childhood in a small village 15 kilometres from Paris at the edge of a forest by whose sounds and noises he had always been fascinated. It would be these

sound images of nature layered in the artist's mind that would inspire him and induce him to examine and investigate the unexpected and the unknown more and more.

He told that nature had been his first shock: 'I always imagined the sounds of nature, they were a source, they allowed me to hear new sounds within myself'. In other words, to create a musical language based not on pure acoustic perception, on the sound object itself - as Pierre Schaeffer favoured - but on the expressive and compositional aspect inspired and induced by sound.

In 1951, the year in which Pierre Schaeffer founded the Groupe de Recherches de Musique Concrète within RTF, the two artists surpassed themselves: they created an initial version of *Orphée* for French radio, a work in which they reinterpreted the myth of Orpheus according to the stylistic features of concrete music; two years later, *Orphée 53*, a second revised version of the work, also destined for French radio, would prove to be one of the most innovative scores in concrete music, a work in which dramaturgy and experimentation merge unprecedentedly; and inside, *Le Voile d'Orphée*, a composition by Pierre Henry, often performed individually, whose centrepiece is the opening sound of a veil being torn, symbolising the final separation of the two lovers, Orpheus and Eurydice.

*The Veil of Orpheus*, whose initial sound would also inspire a series of works by Cy Twombly years later, was to be the first example of concrete symphonic music, in the sense that it used 'concrete sounds', real sounds, in the same way that an orchestra might have used traditional instruments; and this work too, in a second shorter version, would be choreographed by Béjart.

Then in 1958, the year in which the Groupe de Recherches also opened up to electronic music, the two composers' paths diverged; Schaeffer reproached Henry for not dedicating himself enough to research and for concentrating too much on the practical application of that research. Henry would say that for Schaeffer concrete music was a kind of musical philosophy: 'I, on the other hand, wanted to take it out of the laboratory and open it up to the world, take it to a wider audience.

We argued a lot and in the end he fired me, which was not so terrible because I opened my own studio'. Only many years later they would see each other again.

In the meantime, Henry began to connect the dots of a sound universe in which, until then, concrete music, with its sound sources recorded using a microphone, and sounds synthesised by purely electronic means by Stockhausen and other composers in the studios of public radio in Cologne coexisted, separate and in opposition.

In this sense, 1956 was to be the year of the great turning point, when Henry spoke of electroacoustic music and created *Haut Voltage* a work in which concrete and electronic music coexisted, effectively overcoming the dialectical opposition between the two worlds. Decades of memorable compositions followed, including *Le Voyage*, inspired by the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and in 1967 *Messe pour le temps présent*, a musical piece in collaboration with Michel Colombier, composed for Maurice Béjart's ballet of the same name, a real bridge between avant-garde and pop culture.

This was also thanks to tracks such as *Psyché Rock* or *Jericho Jerk*. In 1969 it was the turn of *Ceremony*, subtitled *An Electronic Mass*, a record in collaboration with the rock band Spooky Tooth, which at the time would leave the band itself and their fans perplexed, but which over the years would reveal absolutely unpredictable sonic implications with electronics.

And so it was until '97 when *Messe's* tracks were remixed by several DJs and producers and extensively sampled in the hip hop music. But by that time, Henry had long since become the spiritual father of a plethora of genres related to the world of electronic music, including techno, an area that always counted him among its influences, but to which he would never feel too close, not appreciating, for example, the excessive use of repetition and fixed rhythmic structure typical of the genre. Furthermore, while recognising the relevance of technology in modern sound, he considered the most popular electronic music to be a form of entertainment, whereas his works were designed for totally immersive sound experiences.

Not designed for dancing or immediate consumption, but for 'deep listening'. Works that knew no rules or predetermined patterns, with the artist actively participating in the public performance of his works, often manipulating and altering sounds in real time and changing the arrangement of the loudspeakers, which he felt should be transformed into real musicians.

Hence the concept of mass, of liturgy, recalled in the titles and subtitles of many of his pieces, the idea of a modern secular rite in which manipulated voices and electronic sounds could contribute to creating a highly spiritual atmosphere. And it is no coincidence that Henry often mentioned Bach's *Mass in B minor* among the greatest sacred works ever composed, as his greatest influence.

And so it was until May 2017 when, two months after the artist's death, his *Messe de Liverpool*, commissioned in 1967 by the Cathedral of Christ the King, the main Catholic place of worship in the city, but not completed in time for its inauguration, will finally be performed. It is Henry's dream come true, a true reinterpretation of the Christian Mass in an electroacoustic key, performed, controlled and mixed live in that same cathedral by his long-time collaborator, Thierry Balasse, using 40 loudspeakers.

Compared to his mentor Pierre Schaeffer, who had practically stopped composing after 1960, Henry never stopped: in 1982, he received his first public grant from the French Ministry of Culture, giving birth to Son/Rè, the studio in which he continued to construct and deconstruct sounds as he had theorised many years earlier, in an essay from 1947.

In the pages he noted how it was necessary to 'destroy music', to break with tradition, to free himself from the constraints of academic music based on scores, harmonies and conventional instruments in order to create a new sound language. This is why his works still remain disconnected from a specific spirit of the times, continuing to shock, confuse and inspire a lot of artists; and above all to restate that sound has been released and that anything is possible.

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