

Music from the outside, notes on *phonography*.

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“Is there a music of the passing lorry?” wondered John Cage¹. The question is not as naïve as it may sound because noises have only recently started to appear in music. Even today, the fact that a 30-ton truck might bring a musical emotion comparable to that of a violin constitutes an aesthetic upheaval that is still shaking music to the core.

The introduction of noises in music has had a slow-earthquake-like effect throughout the twentieth century, one that was triggered by the *Art of Noise manifesto* by Futurist composer Russolo and pushed along by the electronic and concrete inventions, until it shook us into questioning our musical doctrine. Through these experiences, the simplistic classification of musical knowledge, in the tonal system and the instrumental prerequisite, has opened up to an infinitely vaster world with the arrival of a new fact: *sound*. With the exploration of the phenomenon of sound, which many have embarked upon, traditional notation no longer suffices while the way in which we *listen to music* has also changed. Passive up and until then, only able to learn and to recognize, our ear was forced into activity, so that it could discover and even invent music in the noises.

Unlike the expression “point of view”, there is no “point of hearing” to evoke the multitude of technical or aesthetical elements on which modern and contemporary audio experiences are developed. If there was, however, it would point to a form of music that is no longer a labelled reward of a musician’s toil but one that could already be conceivable in the musical becoming of sounds. A music that would be the realization of our quest for musicality and not the - preferably brilliant - application of formulas we have learned.

Phonography

On the other hand, the musical lexicon has recently been enriched with the term “phonography”, which has its roots in a well over one-century-old invention by Thomas Edison, the phonograph, one of the first devices capable of “writing sounds” and reproducing them². Thus, and in contrast to photography (“the writing of light”), which name soon came to stand for both the technical process and the artistic discipline, we had to wait for more than one-hundred years before the early technical vocabulary of sound reproduction gained a term with an aesthetical sense. In the midst of the issues of a music of the soundscapes that has not yet managed to rid itself of its geographical attributes (as terms such as “acoustic ecology” or “field recording” prevail³), it also belongs to the order of musical knowledge, but this time the matter of *knowing how* is about listening rather than doing.

Mainly in North America, the term *phonography* is put forward to define a discipline and a “musical scene” in its own right. Its definition also signs a manifesto: “phonography (literally “sound-writing”) refers to field-recording. This entails the capture of any event that can be reproduced and represented as sound. Auditory events are selected, framed by duration and method of capture, and presented in a particular format and context, all of which distinguishes a recording from the original event during which it was captured. In this respect, phonography is analogous to any other form of recording. It is distinct from

recording in general only to the extent that the capture of sound is privileged over its production. This bias reflects an attempt to discover rather than invent.⁴”

What nowadays emerges under the names of *phonography* or *field recording* simultaneously embraces and distinguishes itself from the very musical issue. At the same time, phonography is developing via a practice borrowed from ornithological science, from cinematography or a photographic gesture, and emerges, as a cultural artefact, in the spheres of musical productions and sound projection. But above all, it retains a clear though imprecise relationship with *Musique Concrète* ⁵.

Even though the attempts at phonography that emerged over the past fifteen years ensued from less well defined and challenged underpinnings than *Musique Concrète* when it got its name, one can similarly understand it as the beginning of an uncertain path towards “music itself” as Pierre Schæffer had intended it to be⁶. Without trying to pinpoint the exact level at which *Musique Concrète*, by Schæffer’s own admission, failed on that path, the time lapsed in the meantime seems to have made it impossible to pursue this quest based on established disciplines (such as music and science in the case of *Musique Concrète*). Likewise, an interdisciplinary approach, which Schæffer saw as the driving force behind the revival of music, also seems prohibitive. So, phonography is discreetly getting its breath back from a certain *Musique Concrète* to whisper that it is not about making music with railway engines and bird twitter, so as to distract ourselves from all too familiar instrumental tones, but that there is music, pure music, to be found among railway engines and birds.

Without the pillars of interdisciplinary research, without being able to carry the clear affirmation of a transformation of the ear in the neutrality of musical and non-musical sounds, phonography is easing its way along the path *Musique Concrète* opened up and, instead of revealing the password to the ideal of an aesthetic revolution, only reveals its confusion. The never-ending confusion of an utterly musical emotion which cannot find its own place between the established musical frontiers but which remains beyond and outside.

This idea of the outside is conjured up by Chris Watson when he presents the sounds of animals he recorded during the 80's and 90's: “They are real, whether we can hear them or not, they are amplified details of signals that lie outside our reach, outside the circle of fire.⁷». What sets *Outside the circle of fire* apart from zoological research is Watson’s confusion and aesthetic emotion, the way he is affected by the sounds he captures. Here, just like in *La Selva*⁸ by Francisco Lopez, the zoological and technical information only highlights this confusion and does not teach us anything about the true sources of the sounds, but it materializes the childlike wonderment at the possibility of transmitting the secret of a music, not by resorting to some abstract solfeggio formulas but by depicting nine vultures feeding on the carcass of a zebra.

The camera lucida of music

It is within this eternal emotion, which is musical outside of music, that phonography aptly finds the soundness of a wording that conjures up photography and opens the door to its *camera lucida*. Like Roland Barthes’ analysis of photography, the musical emotion in

phonography happens with a *punctum*, with the detail that “pierces” me and affects my perception, that troubles what I know⁹. A peripheral detail in a photograph by Kertész gets Barthes to look at the image, which he sets out to retrace, in a different light; an elusive moment when listening to a piece by Jean-François Laporte¹⁰, as the successive metallic echoes make my perception of the noise from a compressor tilt towards musical emotion.

With phonography, we are dealing with a music that is not *a priori* definable, pre-defined, but only *possible*, through the perception of an indeterminate environment, and *punctual*, in its advent, when it is really as one with the emotion it stirs up. Here, music can no longer be confused with the farandole of its products, the list of its knowledge and the wealth of its expressions: medium and language, instruments making and technology, concert and home listening are set back within the circle of their musical becomings, and maybe for the same reasons as reality itself, where compressors begin to sing to the attentive ear.

And when such an audio production becomes music, it is to *affect* music and the musician’s play itself, as much as for Gilles Deleuze and François Zourabichvili, the thinker needs “something that *forces* him to think, that rattles him and drives him towards research; instead of a natural disposition, a fortuitous, contingent incitement which ensues from a *meeting*. (...) the irruption of a sign that jeopardizes coherence or the relative thought horizon he found himself in up and until now.¹¹».

For Deleuze, creating, “the genesis of the act of thinking within thought itself”, implies the irruption of a sign that violates thought, “that rouses it from its natural astonishment¹²». And we can accredit the phonographer and the Deleuzian thinker with this singular ability to exercise their power of being *affected*, which does not necessarily mean passivity as Deleuze specifies, “but *affectivity*, sensitivity, feeling¹³”.

So, an encounter with a phonographic work, is, when it happens, also the moment at which we meet music itself, when our relative horizon expands with the infinite possibilities of listening and, as it would be within easy reach, with the elusive strangeness of sounds.

In the meantime, the nature of the relationship with the composition has changed, and so has the position of the composer, who fades away behind a gesture of incitement to search for the musicality of the sounds of the world. The author of phonography alternately assumes the roles, which are never clearly defined, of a smuggler, an explorer or a noise technician, perhaps by welcoming the delicate paradox Cage revealed towards the end of his life with the same kindness : “I’ve never heard any sound without loving it : the only problem with sounds is music¹⁴”.

This article has been published in 2006 in Quebec, as part of the “noise” issue of the art review Esse (issue #59). It was intended as an introduction to “phonography” and as a short study of some of its theoretical aspects. It had, therefore, a “popularization” touch to its writing. Since then, however, sound arts have begin to get themselves a place of their own among the contemporary arts and the problematics of field recording and phonography have grown in complexity and density. It would be interesting to further the reflection with new ideas and practices that have appeared over the last years, such as the idea of “microphony”, which precisely questions the relation to the instrument and

medium. Yet this following text might still sound relevant today: first, because for about a decade, sound arts are experiencing a technical revolution with the democratisation of affordable recording equipment that is very much comparable to the history and development of photography during the twentieth century, especially with the appearance of what Pierre Bourdieu called a “middlebrow art”; and second, because the legitimization of sound practices among the media arts seems to also have for an effect of postponing the question of how, noticeably through its kinship with *Musique Concrète*, phonography practices are likely to transform our conception and perception of music. With the occasion of this publication and the Field Festival in Brussels, I am hoping that this short article can stand for a valid contribution to the reflection about an art that is not only a genre. — S.R.

1 Quoted in Richard KOSTELANETZ, *Conversations avec John Cage*, Éditions des Syrtes, 2000.

2 It should be borne in mind that the “phonograph” Léon Scott invented in 1856, 20 years before Edison devised the phonograph, was only able to create visual images of a sound and did not have the ability to play it back. For a detailed history of recording techniques, see David L. MORTON Jr., *Sound recording*, 2004, Greenwood Press.

3 Literally “recording of space”. The terms *sound ecology* and *field recording* were more commonly used in order to differentiate between any of the offerings in the tradition of soundscape products aimed at listeners’ well-being.

4 Isaac STERLING, *What is Phonography?*, 2001, in <http://www.phonography.org>.

5 François-Bernard Mâche is accredited for having coined the term “phonography”, using it to define the presence of unadulterated soundscape recordings within an electro-acoustic composition.

6 Cf. Pierre SCHÆFFER, *Traité des objets musicaux*, 1966, Éd. Du Seuil, and *De la Musique Concrète à la musique même*, 2002, Dissertation of the book. As a “sound researcher” rather than a composer, Schæffer reverts in his written work to the elaboration of concepts like “Musique Concrète” and “Experimental Music”, which according to him were at the heart of research that vowed to rethink “music itself”.

7 Introduction to the disk by Chris WATSON, *Outside the circle of fire*, 1998, Touch Music.

8 Fransisco LOPEZ, *La Selva*, 1998, V2_Archief. In contrast to the concise and subjective information from Watson, the details about the tropical forest in *La Selva* are particularly precise and abundant; here Lopez brings his musical performance together with his profession of biologist and ecologist.

9 Roland BARTHES, *La chambre claire*, 1980, Publ. by l'Étoile & Gallimard. Barthes differentiates and underpins the possibility of the *punctum* by the co-present term *studium*, which represents the combined knowledge when we look at a photograph, which goes beyond what we see in the photograph but which also comes from how we see or remember the reality that is represented, etc. Likewise, when listening to a field recording the *studium* ensues from our musical knowledge and our experience with the noises of the world, and approaches the desired neutrality of the sounds of *Musique Concrète* in another way.

10 Jean-François LAPORTE, *Mantra*, 2000, Métamkine. A 1997 recording of the compressor used to keep the skating rink in Saint-Hubert, Québec, at the correct temperature.

11 François ZOURABICHVILI, *Deleuze, une philosophie de l'évènement*, 1996, Puf.

12 Gilles DELEUZE, *Proust et les signes*, 2003, Puf.

[13](#) Gilles DELEUZE, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, 2003, Puf.

[14](#) John CAGE, *Je n'ai jamais écouté aucun son sans l'aimer...*, excerpts from a paper presented in Perugia in 1992, 2002, La Main Courante.