

Lukas Haselböck

French spectral music in the context of contemporary philosophy*

1.

Without doubt, Gérard Grisey and Tristan Murail are among the composers who have most influenced the musical scenery of France within the last decades. The increasing relevance of their new musical thinking, sometimes labelled as *musique spectrale* (a term which was not favoured by Grisey and Murail themselves and often led to misunderstandings), could be observed especially from the beginning of the 70s, when Grisey started to point out the problems of serial music in interviews and articles. The fundamental aim of their musical aesthetics was a reaction against the neglect of human perception in the serial music of the 50s. According to Grisey, serialism had mixed up the map with the territory.¹ The initial point of the compositional process should not be a conceptual system but the inner quality of sound, the territory of music. This aim should be realised with the support of modern technique.

On one hand the involvement of modern technique in contemporary composing seems to be a logical step, but on the other hand it causes new problems, especially in the relationship between technique and sound: Spectral composers generate sounds by immense technical effort. But their music does not betray this effort. On the contrary: it seems to imitate nature. As

* This article was originally written in German. The English version was realized with the collaboration of Jolyon Laycock, Oxford.

¹ Gérard Grisey, "Tempus ex machina. Reflexionen über die musikalische Zeit", in *Neuland/Ansätze zur Musik der Gegenwart* (Bergisch-Gladbach, Neuland), 3, 1982/83, p. 190.

Lukas Haselböck

a consequence of this paradoxical situation, spectral music came in for much criticism, especially in German speaking countries. At the centre of this controversy was one of the crucial questions of spectral music: the relationship between the technical aspect of the compositional process and the resulting reality of sound which seems to conceal the inner technical complexity. It was therefore criticized as naturalistic.

In this situation I propose to focus my discussion on new tendencies of music philosophy in Germany and France during the last decades. This could perhaps lead us towards a modified view of the aesthetics of spectral music.

2.

In the history of musical aesthetics one question has always caused great debate, not only among authors of the philosophic tradition, but also among contemporary authors such as Kern, Seel, Sonderegger, Wellmer and others: How can aesthetic perception be described? Can aesthetic perception be understood in the context of joy of cognition or as a game with its own subversive rules?² Within the latter, the “anti-hermeneutic” perspective,³ Wellmer tries to subsume two aspects which in a musical context are often regarded separately: formal abstraction and materiality of sound. Nevertheless, this differentiation cannot be ignored because in another passage of his article Wellmer speaks not just of two, but of three ways of forming musical coherence (“drei verschiedene Formen der musikalischen Zusammenhangbildung”): elements of sound, formal-structural elements and elements of signification (“klangliche, formal-strukturelle und

² See Albrecht Wellmer, “Das musikalische Kunstwerk”, in Andrea Kern and Ruth Sonderegger (ed.), *Falsche Gegensätze. Zeitgenössische Positionen zur philosophischen Ästhetik*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2002, p. 133–175.

³ Wellmer, « Das musikalische Kunstwerk », p. 156.

sinnhafte Elemente”).⁴ Thus, before concentrating on the opposition between the aesthetics of truth and the aesthetics of the game, it would be equally important to discuss the opposition of structure and sound.

In this context I would like to mention Martin Seel’s *Ästhetik des Erscheinens* which was first published 2000. According to Seel, the aim of aesthetic perception is not to single out the constituents of the object (“den *Bestand* des am Objekt Vorhandenen” zu eruieren),⁵ but to comprehend the interplay of phenomena which appear simultaneously (“das *Spiel* der gleichzeitig am Gegenstand aufscheinenden Erscheinungen” zu verfolgen).⁶ The fixed form or structure is not important but, rather, the way it is embedded in the whole: in space and time and its accidental constellations.

In spite of the many differences between Seel’s theory and French postmodernism there are some interesting parallels with the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze or Jean-François Lyotard. Like Seel, Deleuze tries to understand forms not as a mental superstructure – not only in *Logique du sens* (1969), but also in *Mille Plateaux* (1980), which was read by most of the composers of the *musique spectrale* – but to achieve an approach to the work of art as a whole, to the specific sound of musical duration. Art as a movement, as a process, a game: in spite of the many differences, this could be understood as a common denominator of the contemporary aesthetic discourse in Germany and France.

⁴ Wellmer, “Das musikalische Kunstwerk”, p. 160.

⁵ Martin Seel, *Ästhetik des Erscheinens*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2003, p. 84.

⁶ Seel, *Ästhetik des Erscheinens*, p. 84.

3.

The influence of Lyotard and Deleuze is also visible in the musical thinking of Grisey and Murail, for example in Tristan Murail's essay *Questions de cibles*, where he aims to minimize the relevance of fixed forms: "L'artiste ne cherche pas d'écrire l'objet, mais à refléter le sentiment créé par imprégnation de cet objet. On ne perçoit pas des objets absolus mais des relations entre les choses, des différences".⁷ Murail's compositional technique is not primarily concerned with single elements and their relationship, but with the whole. Instead of developing an element through separation, combination and so on, he tries to establish globality. Like a sculptor, the composer works with the whole material he sees before him from all perspectives. In the end, he achieves a final result in which all the details are consequences of a more precise view of the whole. How can this aesthetic aim be realised within a compositional process?

To approach this question, I would like to discuss an example: *Désintégrations* for tape and 17 instruments (1982–83),⁸ a piece in which Murail is also concerned with globality of sound. At the beginning of the piece, Murail tries to establish a *rallentando* which lasts about three minutes and includes two simultaneous progressions of spectral aggregates ("spectral aggregates" means that Murail is composing chords, but that these chords can be analyzed as harmonics. In regard to such paradoxical harmonic structures, Murail speaks of *harmonie-timbre*). In the first three minutes of the piece, these aggregates move in a process from harmonicity to inharmonicity. At the very beginning, the spectral aggregates take the form of pure, spectral sounds but in the end, the progressions coalesce in a complex, bell-like sound.

⁷ Tristan Murail, *Modèles & artifices*, ed. by Pierre Michel, Strasbourg, Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2004, p. 46.

⁸ Details of the following analysis are taken from Murail, *Modèles & artifices*, p. 127-138.

French spectral music in the context of contemporary philosophy

The initial point of the compositional process is not a single element, but the whole area between A and B. This area is defined by the horizontal axis (time, measured in seconds), and the vertical axis (durations). The lines which connect A and B are moving upwards. Therefore the durations of the aggregates get longer and longer and, at a certain point, the progressions are bound to combine. How is it possible for Murail to achieve a *rallentando* by drawing connections from A to B? Theoretically, it would be possible to draw straight lines, but if he did so, the process would not include those irregularities which are so important for our human experience of a *rallentando* (in the music of Murail, time should be regarded as a flexible field of human experience, an interplay between the predictable and the unpredictable). As a consequence, Murail prefers logarithmic connections between A and B. The computer makes it possible to establish a logarithmic process that corresponds to a supposed “human feeling of *rallentando*”. This compositional process is realised by trial and error. With the help of the computer, it is very easy to make slight changes in the algorithms and to discover how the resulting progression of sounds corresponds to our experience, to make changes and to try again, and so on. In his essay, Murail writes that, by this process of trial and error, we are entering a new field of research: algorithm and intuition.

By listening to this passage, our ears will perhaps confirm that A and B are connected by a logical process. The reason for this can also be found in the movement from harmonicity to inharmonicity. If we look at the development of harmony in the first three minutes of *Désintégrations*, the aggregates are first characterized by their pureness because they are parts of spectra over the fundamentals A# and C# played by instruments. These aggregates move gradually from harmonicity to inharmonicity. The deeper regions of sound are revealed, and in the end the spectra move away from their initial purity. They become, so to speak, “dirty”. Several harmonics are transposed

Lukas Haselböck

to other octaves, and in the end only high harmonics remain. Therefore, this passage can be associated with the sound quality of a tam-tam.

This process is supported by instrumentation. In the beginning, we hear only instruments such as flutes and clarinets which do not have very rich overtone structures and thus support the harmonicity of the spectra. We continue with the horn *con sordino*, the strings *sul tasto* and *ordinario* and the oboe in the high register. The aggregates get richer. At the end of the process, when the two movements of aggregates meet, the bassoon and the horn (sans sourdine) begin to play. Now, we get a more complex sound because these instruments have rich harmonic spectra themselves. Thus, the instrumental harmonics are juxtaposed with the harmonics of the harmonics. Out of this spectral richness, Murail draws further consequences: The tape extends the harmonics of the instruments up to the 23rd harmonic. This results in a brilliant cluster. Murail achieves a complete fusion of sound and, as a result, the instruments and the tape can hardly be distinguished from one another: Modern technique helps to obscure the separation between instruments and technical equipment.

As a result of this analysis, we arrive at our initial question: In regard to duration as well as to harmony the process is very complex and could hardly be realised without the help of modern technique. Nevertheless, the music seems to conceal its technical aspect. As far as the musical result is concerned, lines of demarcation are often eliminated, the process forms a continuous flow, a perfect growth, and the listener is reminded of nature itself. What we hear is an inseparable whole, but full of changes, like the natural phenomena in which Murail was interested, for instance sunset in *Treize couleurs du soleil couchant* (1978). As a result, we can observe the paradox of humanization by means of modern technique. Technique, paradoxically, tends to make possible the “mimesis of the nature of sound”, replacing abstraction with musical experience.

4.

But is it possible to realise such a perfect co-existence between technique and nature in a work of art? There are several commentators who pointed out this paradoxical relationship. For example, Peter Niklas Wilson has shown that composing as a form of participation in the nature of harmonic spectra seems to be an illusion. Nature cannot be imitated but only transformed. And even a composer who attempts to transform nature by means of technique first has to deal with some basic decisions which, according to Wilson, depend on several factors.⁹

If we look at the history of music, we can see that the futile quest for the fundamentals of nature in music has a long and complex tradition. On the one hand, composers from Rameau to Hindemith and many others developed their own paradoxical view on what they regarded as the nature of sound. On the other hand, these composers were able to transform these paradoxical tensions into creativity within the compositional process. Therefore, we can maintain that in music there has never been a coherent view of nature. What is important is the relationship between the reproduction of nature and the making of music.

Composers like Grisey knew about these tensions. In his music, the so-called spectral music, the spectrum itself has only

⁹ “Welchen Klang wähle ich als Objekt meiner Beobachtung? Mit welchem Instrumentarium rücke ich ihm analytisch zu Leibe? Welche Aspekte des Beobachteten sind mir wichtig? Wie simuliere ich die beobachtete Klangnatur? Welche Art von Klangprozessen, Klangdeformationen interessieren mich? In welchem Größenverhältnis ‚mikroskopiere‘ ich das Beobachtete?” (Peter Niklas Wilson, “Unterwegs zu einer ‘Ökologie des Klänge’. Gérard Griseys Partiels und die Ästhetik der Groupe de l’Itinéraire”, in *Melos*, 2/1988, p. 41).

Lukas Haselböck

a minor importance. According Jerome Baillet's book, Grisey has transformed the temporality of a spectrum into the structure of a whole composition only once in his life (in the famous piece *Partiels*, 1975). In all the other cases, the relationship of the spectrum to the whole, of microcosm to macrocosm, is an artificial one.

The consequences of this surprising fact can be seen in compositions like *Vortex Temporum* (1994–95). Here the reality of sound can hardly be associated with spectra, and in his last text *Vous avez dit spectral?* (1998),¹⁰ Grisey asks whether the spectrum has any relevance for his music. Therefore, the term spectral music, like many other terms, can only offer a vague description of a technical procedure, but hardly of the variety of music itself. Spectral music is an interplay between musical observation and musical transformation. Therefore, for spectral composers, as we have seen in *Désintégrations*, nature can only be called an initial point, and technique only a secondary tool for composing: The important decisions are in the hand of the composer who makes music on the basis of human experience between predictability and unpredictability. Grisey: "I am not a naturalist, but I need points of reference".

5.

Therefore, not only formal concepts but also the materiality of sound needs to be established by a certain kind of subtle conceptual thinking (we can see this in the work of composers as diverse as John Cage, Morton Feldman or Gérard Grisey). Nevertheless, our initial question still remains and could now be re-introduced: How can musical aesthetics be regarded: in the context of cognition or as a game with its own subversive rules?

¹⁰ Gérard Grisey, "Vous avez dit spectral?", in *Contemporary music review*, Spectral music issue, 1998.

Can spectral music also be associated with existential questions? Or can it, because of its continuous flow and its perfect growth, be criticized as pseudo-naturalistic?¹¹

If one tries to define the goals of the aesthetics of truth by establishing a relation to the world and to hermeneutically interpretable sense, the aesthetics of spectral music can *not* be identified as a counterpart of these aesthetics: “music is music”, contemplative sound, musical effect. These concepts would be too restricted to understand the multifarious features of spectral music. In order to comprehend the richness of spectral aesthetics, it could again be helpful to take into account the considerations of contemporary philosophy.

In his widely known book *Zur Dialektik von Moderne und Postmoderne* Albrecht Wellmer writes about the surprising similarities between Adorno and Lyotard. The pre-occupations of both philosophers show a tendency towards non-figurative art: While Adorno seems to prefer the aesthetics of truth, Lyotard is primarily concerned about the aesthetics of effect. In the context of these considerations, Wellmer maintains that our task should be to achieve a synthesis of these two dimensions – the semiotic and the energetic – in order to understand music as a field of tensions, but on the level of musical sense: art as “a second nature which begins to speak”.¹² Although this aim seems to be very hard to realise, Wellmer succeeds by pointing out certain problematic constellations between modernism and

¹¹ In this context, we could be reminded of Clytus Gottwald’s remarks in which he criticized the alleged hedonism of minimal music.

¹² “Die Aufgabe wäre demgegenüber, Semiotik und Energetik, Bedeutung und Wirkung der Kunst so zusammenzudenken, daß mit der Verabsolutierung einer der beiden Seiten zugleich ihr Gegensatz entfiel. Das ästhetische Objekt wäre zu verstehen als ein Kraft- und Spannungsfeld, aber auf der Ebene des Sinns; und als ein Sinnzusammenhang, dessen verstehender Nachvollzug einer Abstrahlung von Energie gleichkommt: Kunst als zweite Natur, aber eine Natur, die zu sprechen beginnt” (Albrecht Wellmer, *Zur Dialektik von Moderne und Postmoderne. Vernunftkritik nach Adorno*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1985, p. 63).

postmodernism. By sketching the metaphor of a “second nature which begins to speak” he tries to understand our human aim which is to establish a transition between sense and the subversion of sense. I would like therefore to go on to associate certain aspects of these considerations with the three basic attitudes of perception as described by Martin Seel in his *Ästhetik der Natur* – contemplative, corresponsive and imaginative perception – and with the creative development of Grisey and Murail.

In this development we can identify a first period where contemplation, the purification of musical language, plays a major role. In the 70s, Grisey emphasizes the attitude “Music is music, and nothing else”. This attitude could be exemplified by compositions such as *Les Espaces Acoustiques* (Grisey) or *Sables* (Murail). The famous sentence of Pessoa “The world was not invented to reflect upon itself” seems closely related to this kind of artistic thinking. The structures of sound in compositions like *Les Espaces Acoustiques* tend to confront the listener directly with the contemplation of space and sound.

Nevertheless, at the same time, this concept is gradually becoming modified. Sheer contemplation does not seem to be the only appropriate device for experiencing the richness of spectral music. Therefore we have to take into account Martin Seel’s second and third categories of corresponsive and imaginative nature. The concept of corresponsive nature is concerned with the atmospheric aspects of nature in its relevance to our human life. As a first approach to this aspect, in his widely known article *Tempus ex machina*, Grisey speaks about hermeneutic aspects of the musical process. Musical processes, he says, tend to be removed from the gestures of daily life. Therefore they provoke a fascination with the unknown (“le splendeur du ON”).¹³ Thus spectral sound can also inspire hermeneutic interpretations.

¹³ Grisey, “Tempus ex machina”, p. 200.

French spectral music in the context of contemporary philosophy

Later, in the 90s, Grisey discovered the magic power of the human voice which represents aspects of life (for example in an orchestral work which is based on a painting by Piero della Francesca, *L'Icone Paradoxe*, and in his last work, *Quatre chants*, where we can even see tendencies to illustrate parts of the text). These associations with paintings, literature and other non-musical aspects seem to oppose the purism of the early Grisey and could be explained by the aesthetics of imagination.

Of course, these three possibilities of aesthetic perception can interact within one single interpretation of a work of art. If we hear the beginning of *Désintégrations*, we are invited equally to contemplate the music itself, to experience the atmosphere which it evokes, and to imagine musical associations.

6.

If we try to recapitulate and to subsume this immense variety of approaches to spectral music, we come to the conclusion that spectral aesthetics cannot of course be reduced to sheer contemplation. One of our main tasks as listeners of spectral music could be to follow this steady exchange of contemplative, corresponsive and imaginative perspectives. Like a landscape which, according to Martin Seel, is defined through the lack of unity, spectral music is characterized by multi-perspective. The listener of spectral music is confronted with a variety of possibilities, as far as aesthetic perception is concerned, with a fascinating game which will never be reduced to a single dominating point of view: a game at the threshold of perception, a “second nature which begins to speak”.