DALLA MUSIQUE CONCRÈTE ALLE NUOVE GENERAZIONI: UN'INTERVISTA CON NICOLAS DEBADE SULLA FILOSOFIA, LA PEDAGOGIA E LA PRATICA AL GRM

From Musique Concrète to New Generations: An Interview with Nicolas Debade on Philosophy, Pedagogy and Practice at GRM

A cura del comitato di direzione

Abstract (IT): A cura del comitato di direzione della rivista scientifica d.a.t. [divulgazioneaudiotestuale], questa intervista con Nicolas Debade è stata realizzata durante una visita alla Maison de la Radio et de la Musique in occasione della mostra Exposition Galaxie Schaeffer.
L'iniziativa nasce dal desiderio di approfondire la conoscenza degli spazi e delle attività che animano il GRM e di offrire ai lettori un resoconto dettagliato del suo lavoro, con particolare attenzione agli aspetti innovativi della produzione, della diffusione e della conservazione e valorizzazione del patrimonio artistico legato alla *musique concrète*.
Parole chiave: musique concrète, musica acusmatica, pedagogia dell'ascolto, GRM Tools, musica elettroacustica.

Abstract (EN): Prepared by the direction committee of the scientific journal d.a.t. [divulgazioneaudiotestuale], this interview with Nicolas Debade was conducted during a visit to the Maison de la Radio et de la Musique on the occasion of the Exposition Galaxie Schaeffer.
The initiative stems from the desire to gain deeper insight into the spaces and activities that animate the GRM, and to offer our readers a detailed account of its work, with particular attention to the innovative aspects of production, dissemination, and the preservation and enhancement of the artistic heritage associated with musique concrète.
Keywords: musique concrète, acousmatic music, pedagogy of listening, GRM Tools, electroacoustic music.

FROM MUSIQUE CONCRÈTE TO NEW GENERATIONS: AN INTERVIEW WITH NICOLAS DEBADE ON PHILOSOPHY, PEDAGOGY AND PRACTICE AT GRM

Conducted by the Direction Committee

Introduction

Since its foundation in 1958 by Pierre Schaeffer, the Groupe de Recherches Musicales (GRM) has stood as one of the most influential centers for the exploration of sound and listening in the post-war period. From the first experiments of musique concrète to the contemporary development of acousmatic and electroacoustic practices, GRM has continually redefined the relationship between technology, composition, and perception. Over the decades, its activities have expanded to include not only research and production, but also preservation, dissemination, and pedagogy - making it a crucial point of reference for generations of composers, sound artists, and theorists. In this spirit, the direction commitee of d.a.t. visited the Maison de la Radio et de la Musique in Paris during the Exposition *Galaxie Schaeffer*, to meet Nicolas Debade, composer, researcher, and educator at GRM. The conversation that follows explores the group's current directions and pedagogical mission: how GRM sustains the legacy of its founders while opening new paths for the study and practice of listening in the 21st century. Through Debade's reflections, the dialogue traces the philosophical underpinnings of musique concrète, the evolution of its tools and concepts, and the importance of fostering a living culture of sound that bridges past and future, research and creation.

(The conversation began with a question about GRM's dual mission - preserving an extraordinary archive while supporting the emergence of new generations of composers).

You have surely a huge archive, but also you are promoting new composers and new music.

Yes, exactly. We have a very deep repertoire of more than 2000 works, but at the same time we are actively promoting new composers.

To give space to new composers, GRM created the series *GRM Portrait*[1]: a split vinyl where each side is dedicated to a new generation composer with new works originally presented during our concert season. We usually release three or four portraits per year, alongside recollections and some re-editions.

How does GRM balance its work on the archives with the promotion of new composers?

Our main goal—among the several missions of GRM—is to promote electroacoustic and acousmatic music. We do this by encouraging the new generation to listen to earlier works, to gain knowledge of what the pioneers created, and also by continuing to support the contemporary scene, with a strong focus on new creations.

But GRM is also part of INA, which means that working with archives and audiovisual heritage is one of our essential missions. This includes the conservation of physical media, but also editorial choices that allow us to present these works in new contexts — for example through concerts and discographic re-editions, through teaching and research, on video through our YouTube channel[2], and also via our radio program on France Musique. Every Sunday we have a weekly rendez-vous: Alexandre Bazin, together with François J. Bonnet (our director) and Joseph Ghosn, presents new

[1] *Portraits G.R.M*, Bandcamp, https://portraitsgrm.bandcamp.com.

[2] Grm, canale YouTube, *https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCj99IcsqKSVp0Xr7LyhTOZA*.

experimental music with an open and curious spirit. Alexandre is also involved in producing documentaries on specific topics.

So we try to maintain a balance between these two dimensions. One possible weakness could be to focus too much on our heritage and neglect the younger generation. But GRM has always been a structure looking more toward the future than the past. We are fully aware of our history, but we also want to stay open to new generations, to new technologies, to new ways of making music—rather than locking ourselves in like a castle, solely upholding what we already have.

You maintain a pedagogical approach that opens the history of GRM to the world, from past to present, while also giving a new generation the opportunity to experience it directly. For young composers, spending time at GRM is crucial. Today electronic music can easily be produced at home, but coming here introduces other dimensions of musical creation and innovation.

The relationship between young composers and those who already knew and worked with these tools is, in my view, extremely important. That is why I am particularly interested in the pedagogical approach now being developed in Italy. For example, new books are being published, such as the Italian translation of Pierre Schaeffer's works (by Schacke editions, curated by Massimiliano Viel), as well as *Acusmatica. Un'arte sonora* by Franco Degrassi. These are significant contributions to the study of musique concrète. After seventy years of electronic music, there is now a strong need to study the different schools and traditions that developed throughout the 20th century.

In my own studies, musique concrète was often grouped together with the Cologne school and the Studio di Fonologia in Milan, but in reality, they were very different. The point is not about nationalism, but about the specific cultural sensibility expressed through sound. French music, German music, and Italian music of the 20th century are distinct from one another. Today, in the 21st

century, the situation is very different: music has become open to the world and accessible to everyone.

At the same time, however, the 21st century must recognize the power of the 20th century pioneers, who faced and overcame crucial technical challenges in their music—such as with the *Sillon Fermé*. These innovations remain of great importance, because they represent a kind of subversive originality within their national and cultural contexts.

So it's very important the necessity of this music.

Yes, but more than the tools themselves, what matters is the emergence of new concepts, new ways of making music—things that were simply not possible before. The idea of fixed sound, for example, opened possibilities that couldn't exist earlier. You can't create a loop without a technical medium, but what's essential is not the tool in itself—it's the concept it enables, whether it's the *sillon fermé*, a looped tape, a delay, or whatever form it takes. It's the same with reversed sound: you can't have it without sound being fixed. What I find fascinating is that beyond technical solutions, what really happened was the introduction of new ideas. Very often we hijacked technologies, pushing them to do things they were not originally designed for. Take synthesizers, for example. Oscillators were initially designed just to tune systems, not to make music. But by pushing these tools beyond their intended function and capacity, we found ways to invent new music. So, from our perspective, the real point is not just about technology—it's about the concepts and the new ideas of what music can be. That is what truly interests us as researchers.

In this regard, we would like to ask which strand of contemporary philosophy you consider most closely connected to GRM's current practice.

While studying *musique concrète*, I was struck by the many affinities with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, where the link seems particularly evident. Looking at the present, however, which philosophical approaches might be most relevant to GRM today? For instance, one might think of Timothy Morton or

object-oriented ontologies, but I am not sure whether these represent the most appropriate connection.

More broadly, and according to your own experience, how would you describe the relationship between *musique concrète* and pedagogy—especially the pedagogy of listening?

I will try to give a comprehensive answer, because in a way all these aspects are connected. As you know, *musique concrète* and the theory of acousmatic music are directly linked to the act of hearing and listening. Pierre Schaeffer carried out extensive research on this subject, often from a phenomenological standpoint, drawing on Husserl and other thinkers.

At the same time, François Bayle, Bernard Parmegiani and their entire generation were deeply influenced by Gaston Bachelard. Parmegiani, in particular, was strongly engaged with his writings.

Today, at GRM, we come from different perspectives and backgrounds, yet we are all, in some sense, children of that philosophical lineage—while also being connected to other strands of thought. Personally, I feel close to Gilles Deleuze's philosophy in general. Right now, I can think especially about his reflections on virtual spaces and the *ritournelle*. But of course, it is not only about my own perspective: research here is the result of collective work. With François J. Bonnet, for example, his works deal more on the intricacies between phenomena, perception and the discourses that describe them. I would say his thinking might be influenced by Foucault.

My own academic background is in art science and sociology. I really got interested in Deleuze as mentioned, but also in Jacques Rancière's *émancipation*, John Dewey's empirism and also Bernard Stiegler's views on technology. In sociology I was also inspired by Howard S. Becker's *Arts World* and *Outsiders*, but also interested in Richard Peterson's work on omnivorism, which put on another perspective on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of distinction. These approaches resonate with the emergence of today's experimental music scene, which constantly crosses boundaries between the underground, the pop world, and the academic avant-garde—treating all these sources

as potential sonic material. What can unite these diverse traditions, in my view, is an empirical approach centered on listening. This is the real focal point of how we engage with music today: less concerned with aesthetics, sound categories or tools, and more with the act of listening itself. It is about going beyond "I hear music" to "I listen to music," and exploring what this experience truly means.

This is also the purpose of the Acousmonium and the way we design our concerts. By surrounding the audience with nearly sixty loudspeakers, we create an uncommon listening environment, an orchestra of speakers in which listeners become immersed. The aim is not spectacle, but a radical focus on sound and music, inviting us to ask: what does it mean to listen to music, and—perhaps even more fundamentally—what is music?

From our perspective, one of the main problems in Italy is the lack of a structured pedagogical approach to listening, especially one that can be transmitted to pupils from an early age. What I particularly appreciate in the French system is precisely this educational dimension: pupils are encouraged to develop a connection with sounds from childhood, which is crucial. This music, as Pierre Henry himself suggested with *soupir* and *pause*, is deeply connected to the experience of childhood. Yet in Italy, the first time one usually encounters this kind of music is only when deciding to study it formally.

There are very few opportunities to begin such an approach earlier. The pedagogical perspective—together with the studies of scholars such as Delalande—is extremely important. In my own teaching, first at the Conservatory and now at the Academy of Fine Arts, I try to encourage my students to have this kind of experience, because listening itself must remain central.

Music cannot be recognized only in the concert hall; it must be recognized as part of daily life, since concerts are just one aspect of our broader experience of sound. I hope I am being clear: my conviction is that GRM should continue to pursue its

pedagogical mission, because it has the potential to spread, almost like a contagion, across other countries. This is vital not only in France, but also for the Mediterranean context more broadly. We should not forget, for example, the importance of *Wire Recorder Piece* by Halim El-Dabh experience, or the pioneering works realized in Egypte, which still carry deep significance.

We have to recognize not only the importance of *son fixé*—the fixed sound—but also the importance of listening itself. In fact, *son fixé* is what ultimately brings us back to listening. This is, I believe, the central mission of GRM: to foster listening, to bring people closer to music through the act of listening. It is the very essence of our purpose as a research center, and we deeply believe in this approach—not only for children, but for everyone.

François Delalande, at his time at GRM from the 70s, carried out a great deal of research in this field, exploring it from a cultural perspective, which was extremely valuable. Of course, it is essential to teach children how to listen, so that they become adults who already know how to listen. But from my perspective, it is not only a question of education; it is also about revealing ourselves, giving ourselves the opportunity to reconnect with our own sensibility, and providing tools—conceptual tools—that allow us to do so. This is what we try to transmit to students.

At GRM I am currently working on both research and pedagogy. I propose workshops and lectures, alongside others who also contribute according to their expertise. In addition, we aim to collaborate with universities, and at the moment we co-direct a Master's degree with Gustave Eiffel University, in the east of Paris. We try to blend theorical and practical approaches, trying to learn how to compose acousmatic music and how to use new digital tools ; and at the same time, to share Schaeffer's heritage about theory of listening and on the phenomenology of music, and so forth. The aim is to give students tools and criteria not only to describe and express sound, but also to engage more deeply with it as composers and as listeners.

What matters is not to present Schaeffer's theory as something fixed, but to show how he built it—so that composers can use these tools creatively, both to make music and

to listen to it. After all, I believe this was Schaeffer's real intention when he published his works: to open a door. Once that door was open, and others began to follow the path, he moved on to something else. In that sense, he gave permission for others to express themselves, even in interdisciplinary ways—graphically, verbally, and so on. Of course, this can be challenging. At first, students or listeners may be skeptical, or hesitant. If you play a piece of music to someone without musical training and then ask for their impressions, they are often afraid to say what they feel. People tend to limit themselves to simple judgments—"I like it" or "I don't like it", or to share what it reminds them. But that is not what really matters. What becomes truly interesting is when we go further, when we explore the reasons behind our reactions, when we learn to articulate what we perceive.

This is what we try to encourage through listening: a form of expressivity and sensitivity that brings together emotion and analysis. And I believe this is precisely what Schaeffer intended with his theory of listening: not a rigid system of the *objet musical* or the seven criteria, but an open framework that allows us to deepen our understanding of what it means to listen.

When you design projects of this kind, such as the university program on pedagogy, do you conceive them primarily on the basis of your own interdisciplinary background, or do you also collaborate with philosophers and other scholars?

Most of the GRM team can participate in workshop or courses, but some of our lessons are with composers, who of course have a philosophical point of view on music, and with sound designers with specific technical skills. My contribution is mainly to provide as a context the historical perspective of the 20th century, since students may lack that background. They are very curious, and of course today they have access to everything, but precisely for that reason it is difficult to go deeper. When everything is available, the real challenge is to make choices, to build one's own path through musical history, and to know where to begin and in which direction to go.

And regarding the outcomes of this project: do you find it more challenging to work with students who already have a musical background and play an instrument, or with those who have no prior knowledge of music at all?
I wouldn't really say it is a challenge. From the outset, we try to place everyone at the same point, since we start working with the study of musique concrète. Even for those who already have musical training, the real difficulty can sometimes be the need to "unlearn" what they know, and to begin again from the basics. In practice, I have never encountered strong resistance—students are usually open and motivated—so I don't find it particularly problematic. We combine this with a focus both on the history of acousmatic music, from its origins up to the present, and on developing new ways of listening and making music. Looking ahead, over the next two years, our goal is to establish new partnerships in Europe, so that I—or colleagues from GRM—can work with universities and conservatories to develop further workshops in this field.

I would also suggest establishing connections with the Academies of Fine Arts in Italy, and not only with the conservatories. They are actually very open to this kind of collaboration. At the moment, in Italy, we are beginning to introduce PhD programs both in the conservatories and in the Academies of Fine Arts—something that, I believe, is also happening in France. In this sense, there is a shared European direction. The issue is that within conservatories, *musique concrète* and electronic music tend to remain of interest only to a relatively small group of students. By contrast, in the Academies of Fine Arts these topics can engage a much broader audience. People are increasingly open to working with sound installations and experimental music. I think the situation has somehow reversed compared to the 20th century. Back then, painters and musicians were often interested in the visual arts; in the 21st century, however, many fine artists have turned their attention to music, largely because of the problem of time: sound offers a temporal experience that has become central. In the 20th century

avant-garde, there were already connections—for instance, with composers like Schoenberg—but today we see many visual artists who are also remarkable musicians. The idea of "sculpting sound" carries a visual dimension, yet it is equally perceived through listening. This cross-pollination is therefore crucial. From our perspective, philosophy also plays a role here. The "second avant-garde" of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, with figures like Deleuze and Foucault, rejected traditional ontology and sought to reinvent it through art. They were finding new ways to stimulate concepts. And the very idea of a "concept," in our understanding, is not only something to be "seen" (*oráō*, from the Greek), but also something to be sensed more broadly - smelled, tasted, experienced with all five senses.

We must also remember the influence of postmodernist theories and context, which reshaped the terrain, especially with the reconfiguration of our society through the digital revolution, both technologically and the communication field. We cannot simply observe if we are still in postmodernism, or further it. The border between visual art and music might be difficult to draw like it was before. It is the same with music genres.

Another interesting aspect I should mention is the way philosophy informs our development of digital music technologies. With the GRM Tools, for example —or before that, SYTER—, our goal was different from projects like Max/MSP or Music V. We wanted to create tools that were immediately accessible—almost "plug and play"—so that anyone could quickly generate sound, manipulate it, and experiment.

This links back to what I said earlier: bringing music forward by experimenting, by reshaping perception, by organizing sound differently. It is about making things, listening to them, receiving feedback, and interacting with the result. In that sense, I find it very close to Deleuzian's *agencements*. And ultimately, it corresponds to what Schaeffer called *faire et entendre*: making and listening.