

## **Philippe Manoury, L'invention de la musique (2017)**

*L'invention de la musique* is Philippe Manoury's inaugural lecture as Chair of Artistic Creation for 2016-17 at the Collège de France, delivered on 26 February 2017.

Manoury begins by thanking the Collège for including his discipline, which he believes is increasingly confined to entertainment but should be regarded as an art, even a science. Presenting his own work as a composer and situating it within the broader contemporary scene, he invites his listeners and readers to consider music as "a form of thought about sound, both speculative and perceptual" (p. 1). Music "is a world in itself" (p. 2), impossible to translate into words. Going against a famous quotation from Stravinsky, Manoury argues that music can express the real world, but that the affects provoked by it arise not from what it evokes, but from its intrinsic forms. Musical meaning for Manoury is "a particular contexture that engages our entire sensory and intellectual being" (p. 3). Composition, he asserts, is a matter of "breathing sense into sound" (p. 5); not all of his work involves electronics, after all.

How can sound be apprehended? Manoury identifies four means of sound-production, of which three are acoustic (breath, percussion, and friction) and one electronic. Then there is their physical constitution as signals, divisible into three groups among which composers constantly navigate: harmonic sounds, inharmonic sounds, and noises. Physical knowledge of sound structure has underpinned the practice of composers from Jean-Philippe Rameau to the spectralists, and research along these lines continues today.

How can one manipulate the complexity of sound, expressed in so many different parameters, within a musical composition? At this point, Manoury devotes several pages to his approach to the triad of sound, writing, and orality. Graphical representation of music, as a form of symbolic notation, diverges from the physical reality of sounds but has facilitated the creation of large structures throughout history. Is it possible to imagine a symbolic notation for electronic music? Here Manoury introduces the notion of orality, inseparable in his opinion from writing: in written music, notation cannot fully represent all the sound phenomena (dynamics, for instance), and this fact opens the door to orality. In electronic music, Manoury has turned this indeterminacy in the realisation into a compositional procedure, dubbed the "virtual score", in which electronic synthesis is modulated by real-time analysis of the singer's vocal characteristics (he gives an example from his *En Écho* (1992), for soprano and real-time electronics). Whereas notation is deterministic, this orality introduces an element of indeterminacy. Manoury is fond of compositional mechanisms that combine both, as illustrated by his work *Le Temps*,

*mode d'emploi* (Time: A User's Manual, 2014), for two pianos and real-time electronics, in which the pianists' written score is randomly interrupted by computer-generated chords. Such a musical form - and, more generally, all those presented by contemporary music - might seem overly complex; but isn't it simply their novelty that limits our ability to anticipate the course of the music, by comparison to older works whose forms are not necessarily any simpler but that we know by heart?

Manoury concludes his lecture by considering the treatment of space, an issue that he sees as fundamental today. The question is more than one of technological possibilities: space is also intrinsic to any emission of sound from a point, and distance as well as configuration add musically intriguing ambiguities. Manoury has indeed been working on pieces for an orchestra spatialized around the audience, such as his *Trilogie Köln*. These approaches align with the call to embrace invention that, quoting Stravinsky, he addresses to composers: "We have a duty to music, namely to invent it."

**Alain BONARDI**

30/08/2023

Trans. Tadhg Sauvey

### **Further reading**

Lessons by Philippe Manoury at the Collège de France (2016-2017):

<https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/philippe-manoury/course-2016-2017.htm>

Concert at the Collège de France (2017-06-16):

[https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/philippe-manoury/Concert Temps et Musique.htm](https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/philippe-manoury/Concert_Temps_et_Musique.htm)

To quote this article: Alain Bonardi, "Philippe Manoury, L'invention de la musique (2017)", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 21/02/2025, <https://dicteco.huma-num.fr/book/62870>.