

## Tristan Murail (b. 1947): An Overview of the Writings

Tristan Murail, a major figure of French spectralism, has produced a relatively large amount of musical writing since 1980. His literary output largely dates to the 1980s, thus forming a pendant to the compositions of his first period, in which he affirmed new creative avenues together with other composers linked to the ensemble L'Itinéraire. Murail expounded very clearly his techniques, poetics of sound, and ideas on perception in four fundamental texts: the essays [“La révolution des sons complexes”](#) and [“Spectres et lutins”](#), both derived from lectures at the Darmstadt summer courses in the early 1980s, and [“Questions de cible”](#) (1989) and [“Écrire avec le live-electronic”](#) (1991). These offer reflections on his compositional practice, particularly stimulating and instructive ones for the time, highly specific and illustrated with numerous examples from exemplary works such as *Mémoire-Érosion*, *13 Couleurs du soleil couchant*, *Gondwana*, and *Désintégrations*. They touch on a range of questions and themes: composition based on sound-structure, spectra, the compositional process, the incorporation of complex sounds and noise, the influence of electroacoustics, the properties of what he calls “the new materials”, frequency modulation, time and duration, the relation between the musical work and the score, the incorporation of electronics, etc.

A more recent essay, [“En y repensant”](#) (originally published in English as [“After-Thoughts”](#), 2000), looks back on the evolution of the career of composer and revisits certain important themes (such as process, form, and harmony), while also discussing works that remain capital in his estimation, including *L'Esprit des dunes*.

Murail has devoted two invaluable texts to Giacinto Scelsi, whose music and person were important to him in his youth. He writes of an “encounter” between Scelsi and his own generation (thinking particularly of L'Itinéraire), especially with regard to the exploration of sound.

Another part of Murail's writings consists of transcriptions of lectures given in July 1992 at the Académie du Centre Acanthes in Villeneuve-lès-Avignon. Here, addressing himself to young composers, his purpose was to sensitise his audience to key questions such as musical sound, timbre, musical discourse and language, temperament and microintervals, sound as a formal model, and so on. Starting from very specific observations on Scelsi's *Anahit* and Jonathan Harvey's *Mortuos Plango, Vivos Vovo*, he explains how he composed *Gondwana*, *Désintégrations*, *Territoires de l'oubli*, and *Allégories*. These lectures were backed up with much concrete detail and also punctuated by general reflections on issues such as the role of computer-assisted composition, the musical atom, and the musical object.

Finally, Murail's thought and compositional principles appear in yet another guise in his commentaries on his works and in the interviews that he has given at various points in his life. Among the latter, we might mention the ones conducted by Danielle Cohen-Lévinas (*Les Cahiers de l'Ircam*, vol. 1: *Composition et environnements informatiques*, IRCAM/Centre Pompidou, 1992); Eric Denut (*Musiques actuelles, musique savante. Quelles interactions ?*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2001); Pierre Michel (*Compositeurs d'aujourd'hui*, Paris, IRCAM/Centre Pompidou, 2002); Véronique Brindeau ("[Le sentiment musical](#)", *Extrait d'accents*, 2006); and, most recently, Gaëtan Puaud (*Tristan Murail. Des sons et des sentiments*, Château-Gontier, Aedam Musicae, 2022), in which the details of the composer's biography come through most clearly.

All of Murail's essays and lectures reflect the novel ideas of the Itinéraire composers (and therefore parallel, while also complementing, the writings of Gérard Grisey), who were reacting against post-serialism on the level of perception, technique, and sound. A partial successor to Messiaen, Scelsi, and Ligeti, Murail affirms through his very clear and precise writings a sort of manifesto of his poetics, a poetics liberated from the combinatorial procedures that he criticised even as practised by his teacher Messiaen. His writings do not offer a theory with universal pretensions, unlike those of certain composer-theorists (Stockhausen comes to mind), but they are very instructive in light of the experience of his compositional practice at its different stages. The desire for balance between the spirit of research, novelty, and the maintenance of a "coherent and comprehensible musical discourse" comes through very often in these texts, which are important to the history of twentieth-century music.

### **Pierre MICHEL**

22/10/2023

Trans. Tadhg Sauvey

### **Further reading**

Thierry Alla, *Tristan Murail - la couleur sonore*, Paris, Michel De Maule, 2008.

*Tristan Murail*, textes réunis par Peter Szendy, Compositeurs d'aujourd'hui, Paris, Ircam/Centre Pompidou/L'Harmattan, 2002.

[Tristan Murail. Modèles et artifices](#), textes réunis par Pierre Michel, Strasbourg, Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2004.

Tristan Murail, « [OpenMusic in my life](#) : (mon expérience et pratique de la CAO) », « [Nature du bruit et bruits de la nature](#) », conférences données aux étudiants du Cours de l'Ircam le 28 février et le 1<sup>e</sup> mars 2018. Enregistrements accessibles à la Médiathèque de l'IRCAM.

Gaëtan Puaud, *Tristan Murail. Des sons et des sentiments*, Château-Gontier, Aedam Musicae, 2022.

To quote this article: Pierre Michel, "Tristan Murail (b. 1947): An Overview of the Writings", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 21/03/2025, <https://dicteco.huma-num.fr/person/63184>.