

Jean-Claude Risset, Du songe au son. Entretiens avec Matthieu Guillot (2008)

This book presents the musical and scientific work of Jean-Claude Risset through a series of interviews. Though a good number of studies by or about him already existed, Risset, and especially his compositions, remained little-known outside of research on music since 1945. There are few recordings on disc or online, and even these only present a limited range of his works. His name remains associated mainly with the development of digital sound, of which he was a pioneer.

In these interviews, Risset looks back on his entire career. The result is a memoir of musico-scientific life in France and the United States, with attention to the evolution of technology and to the figures involved in research (whether musicians, scientists, theorists, pedagogues, or all of the above). The book therefore represents an important source for the history of digital sound.

The first part of the book is indeed historically conceived. The first of its four chapters introduces the fields in which Risset worked and the topics involved in them, including language, perception, grammar, research (and institutions), tools (orchestral, technological), and the longevity of works. The second emphasises the duality of his formation – both scientific and musical – and shows its importance for the development, during his two stints at Bell Laboratories between 1964 and 1969, for the development of the first digital sounds, a process involving synthesis of trumpet sounds, auditory illusions, and the constitution of a catalogue of digital sounds, and in which perception had an important role. The next chapter covers Risset's return to France and efforts to promote digital sound and musical research there, especially at IRCAM where he was the director of the computer department since its creation, as well as his disagreements with fellow composer-researchers such as Pierre Schaeffer, Pierre Boulez, and Luciano Berio who failed to appreciate the importance of these subjects. Finally, the last chapter presents various reflections on topics in research, science, technology, and composition – real time, chaos, the subjection of technology to market forces, the place of composers and researchers in society, etc.

The second part of the book is devoted to Risset's compositions, divided into three categories: mediated works, purely instrumental works, and mixed works (based on a scenario). Several representative pieces are given for each category, not necessarily well-known ones. Finally, the book finishes with substantial appendices: a catalogue of Risset's works (by genre), a select bibliography, and a discography.

The first part offers a good introduction for anyone wanting to study Risset's writings and take a methodical approach to this particularly rich and diverse corpus. However, the originality of these interviews lies above all in the second part. Too often Risset is seen as merely a researcher or musicologist, one of the

creators of digital sound; we forget that this research was successful only because his solid musical education (in piano and composition) gave him an ear sensitised to timbre. His creativity stimulated his scientific intuition, enabling him to formulate hypotheses that would stand up to experimentation.

Only a few works by Risset have been recorded, can be heard on the Internet, or have been studied in publications by musicologists or the composer himself. Thus this second part of the book is particularly valuable. Risset's discussion of his music constitutes a good introduction for anyone wanting to study it in more depth.

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Deuxième partie : Œuvres (sélection de compositions)

- Œuvres sur support
- Œuvres purement instrumentales
- Œuvres mixtes : scénarios
- Remarques finales

Annexes

Further reading

VEILT Anne, *Falling notes, when Jean-Claude Risset transformed acoustic and music (1961-1971) / La chute des notes, lorsque Jean-Claude Risset transformait l'acoustique et la musique (1961-1971)*, Sampzon, Delatour, 2010.

Portraits polychromes, n° 2 : « Jean-Claude Risset », Paris, co-édition INA-GRM/CDMC, 2/2008 (139 p.), avec des articles de Pierre-Albert Castanet, Daniel Teruggi, Fabien Lévy et Jean-Claude Risset, un entretien avec Olivier Meston, un catalogue des œuvres, une discographie et une bibliographie. Traduction anglaise parue en 2013, INA-GRM.

Jean-Claude Risset - Écrits - Volume I : Composer le son, Repères d'une exploration du son numérique, Paris, Hermann, 2014.

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