

Gérard Grisey, Writings (2018)

In 2008 Guy Lelong, in collaboration with Anne-Marie Réby, published the first anthology of the major writings of Gérard Grisey, *Écrits ou l'invention de la musique spectrale* (*Writings, or, The Invention of Spectralist Music*, MF, 2008, 378 pp), grouping together all of the composer's essays published during his lifetime as well as numerous unpublished ones recovered notably in the composer's archives, conserved today by the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel. Ten years later an expanded edition appeared (*Écrits*, MF, 2018, 430 pp), eliminating the subtitle along with the photo album on glazed paper, but adding a group of unpublished letters to Jocelyne Grisey-Simon (the composer's partner between 1966 and 1986), the acoustician Michèle Castellengo, and the musicologist Jean-Noël Van der Weid. What follows refers to this augmented edition, which like its predecessor divides the composer's writings into six categories: "Writings on his Compositional Principles", "Writings on His Works", "Miscellaneous and Occasional Pieces", "Interviews", "Letters", and "Journal Extracts".

The first part, "Writings on his compositional principles", includes seven theoretical essays in chronological order. With the exception of the short "Vous avez dit spectral ?" ("Spectralism, You Say?", 1998), which casts a backward glance on the spectralist adventure, they reflect on the foundations and characteristics of Grisey's musical thought and were all written during the period of the composition of the cycle *Les espaces acoustiques* (*Acoustic Spaces*, 1974-85). The first, "The Future of Sound", is taken from a lecture given in 1978 at the twenty-ninth Internationale Ferienkurse für neue Musik in Darmstadt. Originally published in German, this essentially theoretical text reveals certain aspects of Grisey's approach to composition: acoustic analysis of sounds, processes of mutation from one sound to another, contracted versus dilated time, etc. The two following texts—"À propos de la synthèse instrumentale" ("On Instrumental Synthesis") and "Réflexion sur le temps" ("Reflections on Time")—written one year later, were both unpublished and drawn from the composer's archives. These three fairly short texts (between three and six pages) prepare the next three: "La musique: le devenir des sons" ("Music: The Future of Sounds"), "Tempus ex machina (réflexions d'un compositeur sur le temps musical)", and "Structuration des timbres dans la musique instrumentale" ("The Structuring of Timbres in Instrumental Music"), far more consequential and often enriched with score extracts. Naturally, one finds numerous redundancies between these two series of texts, in content as well as the titles, so much so that the reader unconcerned with scrutinising the composer's evolution in minute detail could proceed directly to the later ones which are, according to the publisher, the "most developed theoretical manifestos of his musical thought" (pg. 391). Here, without getting lost in overly technical considerations, the composer reveals the theoretical and aesthetic underpinnings of his language and gives a few hints at the creation of his works: the contributions of research on acoustics and

psychoacoustics, ways of structuring musical time, deployment of processes of gradual transformation, dialogue between the microphonic and macrophonic universes, development of instrumental synthesis.

The second part of the volume, "Writings on His Works", gathers together programme notes written by the composer for the premiers of his works. *Les Espaces acoustiques* (1974–85) serves as a landmark, the publisher having chosen to present the pieces chronologically, beginning with *Charmes* (1969), and to group them into three broad periods according to whether they were composed before, during, or after the emblematic cycle. These programme notes are by nature relatively concise, but in them the composer nevertheless gives very precise information for apprehending, in broad outline, the construction and form of his pieces.

The third part, "Miscellaneous and Occasional Pieces", brings together Grisey's recollections and reflections, many of them unpublished and unfortunately not dated. The publisher has elected to group them arbitrarily into four categories: "Questions sur la musique", "Avec l'itinéraire", "Problèmes d'institution", and "Sur trois compositeurs et un peintre". The nature of the texts remains quite heterogeneous, as much in form as in content. Some relate to the extracts from his private journal, others treat of the importance of sound, the place of percussion and technology in music, acoustical research, the collective L'itinéraire, and so on. Grisey's personality makes itself felt throughout these divers reflections, which testify notably to his interest in non-European music and musical acoustics but also his critical perspective on institutions, musicology, and the teaching of composition.

In the fourth part figure the interviews which, aside from the first (unpublished, dating from 1974), took place after 1985 and appeared in various specialist periodicals as Grisey's notoriety finally began to be consolidated. A multitude of subjects are approached across these nine interviews: the composer recalls his student years, emphasising the influence of Messiaen, Ligeti, and Stockhausen in the formation of his language; he reflects on his American experience from his time teaching composition at Berkeley in the early 1980s; he describes the general principles that define the spectralist attitude; he focuses on certain of his works, such as *Le Noir de l'étoile* (1989–90) or *L'icône paradoxale* (1992–4). These interviews also form a perfect complement to the theoretical essays and programme notes and enable one to fully appreciate the foundations and evolution of his language without ever entering into overly technical considerations.

The fifth and sixth parts of the work bring together letters sent by Grisey to his intimates and excerpts from his private journal. The passages relevant to the private sphere and having nothing to do with music have of course not been reproduced. These texts shed light on Grisey's personality and the musical world of his times. In the first journal extract, dating from 1963, one discovers the mystical temperament of the young composer, a fervent believer ("I listened to Mozart's *Idomeneo* and was suddenly overcome by a wild desire to plunge myself back into prayer and silence", journal entry of 15 January 1973, pg. 365). One comes to appreciate the labour represented by composition for this ascetic, and the awe and consolation when he completes a score ("After months of work, after long,

unrelenting weeks without a break, I am finishing the third movement of *Vortex Temporum*. What happiness! I have never worked so much. Never, either, has time so gripped me by the throat" (journal entry, Spring 1996, pg. 373). The addition in this new edition of numerous fragments of letters sent to Jocelyne Grisey-Simon between 1966 and 1984 is precious for retracing the course and vagaries of his professional career before being named professor at the Paris Conservatoire.

At the end of this volume figures a sizeable appendix comprising a short biography of the composer, a catalogue of his works, a list of commercial recordings, and an indicative bibliography including the principle books, articles, films, and radio broadcasts devoted to him. In this dossier too the publisher has chosen to insert the résumés and supplementary information for the texts presented in the volume. This critical apparatus not only mentions the provenance of the texts but also adds details that might have served to introduce each part of the book, or at least might have appeared in footnotes in order to minimise the need to flip back and forth between this appendix and the texts themselves. It is a shame that the publisher should not have added an index of works in addition to the index of names, which would have made it possible to find one's bearings more easily amidst the composer's various writings. This anthology nevertheless remains as essential as it is indispensable for all musicians, researchers, and music lovers interested in understanding the foundations and key issues of the musical thought of Gérard Grisey and, more broadly, the spectralist attitude that left such a mark on the history of music in the twentieth century and continues to influence new generations of composers.

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