

The Oxford Handbook of Spectral Music
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CHAPTER

Introduction

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Abstract

This chapter, written by the editors, introduces the contents of *The Oxford Handbook of Spectral Music*. Beginning with a brief account of how spectralism entails a compositional paradigm shift—a shift from pitch-based thinking towards conceiving of musical sound on the micro scale—the chapter goes on to discuss how the handbook deepens scholarly understanding of the historical and stylistic situation of spectral music. The handbook does so in particular through new research on stylistic forbears for the first wave of spectral composers, information about performance practice, and statements by a younger generation of composers inspired by spectral composition. The chapter continues by pointing to three salient themes within the handbook: an expansion of the precursors to spectralism, a renewed focus on space and spatialization, and the increasing turn toward ethnic materials. Finally, the handbook's sections are outlined: spectralist precursors; spectralisms; spectralist performance practice; critical and material perspectives; and composers' viewpoints.

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Situating Spectralism in the Twenty-First Century

Spectralism has gone international. A school of compositional thought originally associated with the five young male composers behind the ensemble *l'Itineraire* in Paris in the 1970s now haunts the halls of the American Ivy League.¹ It has been the subject of academic conferences from Cambridge to Istanbul. Pieces by spectral composers are widely programmed, and are reviewed in august publications.² The past couple of decades have even seen incursions in popular culture: there is a new (at the time of writing) set of plug-ins for the digital audio workstation Ableton Live, popular among DJs and producers worldwide, called “Spectral Textures”;³ the famous metal band Sunn O))) included spectralist orchestral elements on its 2009 album *Monoliths and Dimensions*;⁴ and spectral music has been identified as a trope associated with particular genres in music for movies and television.⁵ All of which is a long way from the concert halls of Paris.

What constitutes a spectral “style” of composition has always been frustratingly diffuse. Those genre-defining elements that can be clearly identified—the mutation of one sound aggregate into another, an attention to the overtone series, computer analysis of real sounds as generative material for acoustic composition, an interest in time and time perception, mining psychoacoustic research for aesthetic inspiration—all have precedents before *l'Itineraire*. The problem seems to have become even more difficult in recent years: so much of today’s music, whether in concert halls or dance clubs, is characterized by an omnivorous hybridity, and artists identifying spectralism as an influence may bear only oblique audible similarities to each other. Jonathan Cross states the problem succinctly: “Can we any longer usefully speak of spectral music at all, beyond a very particular moment in Paris in the 1970s?”⁶ Cross appeals to a stylistic pluralism, with the pluralized “spectralisms” signifying this diversity. Spectralism persists as a concept, a pregnant metaphor, and a sibilant keyword, signaling the haunted and the ethereal: all that lies beyond the merely seen. *The Oxford Handbook of Spectral and Post-Spectral Music* aims to complicate the question of what gave birth to spectral music, what defines it, and what its future holds in the twenty-first century.

In his keynote address to *Spectralisms: An International Conference* at Oxford in 2017, the composer and scholar Julian Anderson wistfully noted that he missed the music’s early days, when this new school had yet to be defined, save in a rather vague, philosophical way, one that embraced a host of approaches united only by their focus on the quality of sound and the phenomenology of perception.⁷ From his vantage point, a variety of earlier works and traditions served as both conscious and unconscious influences on the primary French tradition, and many tributaries continue to flow outward from those works of the 1970s and 1980s that constitute a settled—if shifting—canon.

As is often the case, one can best understand the meaning of the term spectral music by returning to the sources. Hugues Dufourt’s brief 1979 article “Musique Spectrale” marks the name’s first appearance in print. Written that year as a personal program essay for a Parisian concert series, “Musique Spectrale” clarifies Dufourt’s intentions in adopting this epithet.⁸ “Spectral” does not in the first place signify the use of harmonic or inharmonic spectra as compositional models; rather, “spectral” indicates that the composer’s conception of their material has shifted from the traditional everyday scale of discrete pitches to the scale of transient forces that occur beneath pitch and constitute pitch (as well as all other sound phenomena). In the 1960s, composers such as Giacinto Scelsi and La Monte Young had begun to create music based on the fact that what we usually hear as simple unitary pitch is in fact a complex field of frequencies. Dufourt, theorizing this psychoacoustic situation and how it should inform the composer, argues that what composers need in the first place is a shift in conceptual attitude. The apotheosis of the pitch-focused worldview was serial music; in light of psychoacoustic science, Dufourt suggests, it is time to move beyond that.

Dufourt's theoretical strategy is to create a parallel with analogous changes of paradigm in the hard sciences. Classical physics, as codified by Newton, operates at an everyday or macro level and explains accurately the interaction of bodies, forces, and gravity. By its own terms it seems to be comprehensive. However, as became clear in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, underneath the everyday scale of classical physics was an invisible or micro scale (henceforth, that of modern physics) comprising areas such as particle physics, relativity, quantum mechanics, and thermodynamics. One can consider a concrete example of what this shift meant. In the framework of classical physics, operating at the everyday (or macro) level of phenomena, debates raged about whether light behaved as a wave or as a particle. However, in the framework of modern physics, operating at the atomic (or micro) scale, light (and, in subsequent study, matter) were shown to have properties of both a wave and a particle depending on the circumstances of observation. In short, what occurred was a reformulation of our worldview in terms of a different scale; that different scale in turn entailed the formulation of new values and appropriate terminologies.

This is what occurs with pitch in spectral music. And this is the sense of the epithet "spectral": this is composition whose measurements occur, in the first instance, not at the pitch scale but at the spectral scale (which is the sub-pitch scale). Spectral music, Dufourt writes, is music that acknowledges and engages the change of scale; that responds to the change of scale not by reactionary reversion to neo-tonalism or entrenched post-serial complexity, but by working towards the formulation of a new set of compositional values. Those new compositional values and their ongoing working-out are what we call spectralism.

Accordingly, from a stylistic point of view the resultant music is open. As with any good manifesto—and in contrast to the musicologist's desire to pin things down—Dufourt's essay is deliberately non-prescriptive. Dufourt does not mention any composers by name, nor does he specify any particular compositional techniques. Dufourt's reasoning in this regard was doubtless so that the new compositional approach outlined should be elastic enough to include himself, Grisey, Murail, and others, including composers who had not yet emerged.

The contents of this book, covering composers, performers, practices, and ideas, can be considered an attempted mapping of the ramifications of the spectral paradigm to date. Those ramifications, as with branches and brambles and roots and offshoots in the natural world, continue to extend and work themselves out. Hence the importance of a volume like this: given spectralism's inherent potential, this book's scope and plurality is precisely its strength. Any attempt at homogeneity does spectralism an injustice; any attempt at over-simplifying spectralism should, from the point of view of musicology, be resisted.

Themes in the Handbook

A great deal of work in this handbook aims to deepen our understanding of the historical and stylistic situation of spectral music, with new research on stylistic forbears for the first wave of spectral composers, information about performance practice, and statements by a younger generation of composers inspired by spectral composition. Across the essays in this handbook, however, we note several trends.

The essays in this handbook argue for a dramatic expansion of the precursors to spectralism. Vivianna Moscovich in her early and vital introduction to spectral composition wrote that "the forerunners of this composition technique in music are, in chronological order: Debussy, Varèse, Scelsi, and Messiaen."⁹ This handbook elucidates many additional sources whose impact on the first spectral composers was indelible, if at times oblique: these range from Alexander Scriabin's mystical obsessions with sonority, to James Tenney and the American just-intonation tradition, to Pierre Schaeffer's experiments with tape music and his corresponding philosophies of listening.