

Did You Say Spectral?

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KEY WORDS: Spectral Music; time; form.

Coming into being in the mid Seventies, curiously around the same time as fractal geometry, spectral music offered a formal organization and sonic material that came directly from the physics of sound, as discovered through science and microphonic access.

No musicians were waiting for spectral music to use or to highlight the use of sonic spectra, just as none waited for dodecaphonic techniques in order to compose chromatic music: but just as the series is not a question of chromaticism, spectral music is not a question of sonic color. For me, spectral music has a temporal origin. It was necessary at a particular moment in our history to give form to the exploration of an extremely dilated time and to allow the finest degree of control for the transition from one sound to the next. The series had disassociated the parameters, turning upside down the concepts of verticality and horizontality, of harmony and melody. But in serial music, the interplay of permutations becomes an obstacle to memory, it forbids radical renewal along with all the types of surprises, excesses and deviations that tonal music offers to its listeners. In short, serial music neutralizes the parameter of pitch; this involuntary neutralization, however, allows the concentration and emergence of new techniques which have become necessary to avoid monotony. Take, for example, the heterophonies of varying harmonic and temporal densities, the choices of instrumentation and the combinations of timbres, the explosion of registers, or the games of adding and removing ornamentation.

What is radically different in spectral music is the attitude of the composer faced with the cluster of forces that make up sounds and faced

with the time needed for their emergence. From its beginnings, this music has been characterized by the hypnotic power of slowness and by a virtual obsession with continuity, thresholds, transience and dynamic forms. It is in radical opposition to all sorts of formalism which refuse to include time and entropy as the actual foundation of all musical dimensions. Strengthened by an ecology of sounds, spectral music no longer integrates time as an external element imposed upon a sonic material considered as being 'outside-time,' but instead treats it as a constituent element of sound itself. This music forces itself to make time palpable in the 'impersonal' form of durations; apparently far removed from spoken language, but doubtlessly close to other biological rhythms which we have yet to discover. Finally, it is sounds and their own materials which generate, through projections or inductions, new musical forms.

To conclude this apologia, I willingly add eroticism, that of hearing along with that of the garden of delights; whereby pleasure (delectation as Poussin would have said) is the result of a perfectly parallel relation between the perceiving body and the conceiving spirit. Due to a veritable mania for sonic fusion, could one not go so far as to speak of regression? (in the psychoanalytic sense, of course) Finally, this utopic desire for a musical language articulated on scientific facts, the recurring dream of an art-science, creates a link between the composer-inventors of spectralism and the artists of the Quattrocento.

Let us rapidly evaluate some of the notable consequences which concern more than just orthodox spectral composers (read fundamentalists)!

Harmonic and timbral consequences:

- More 'ecological' approach to timbres, noises and intervals.
- Integration of harmony and timbre within a single entity.
- Integration of all sounds (from white noise to sinusoidal sounds).
- Creation of new harmonic functions which include the notions of complementarity (acoustic, not chromatic) and hierarchies of complexity.
- Re-establishment, within a broader context, of the ideas of consonance and dissonance as well as modulations.
- Breaking out from the tempered system.
- Establishing new scales and — over time — a melodic re-invention.

Temporal consequences:

- More attentive attitude towards the phenomenology of perception.
- Integration of time as the very object of form.
- Exploration of 'stretched' time and 'contracted' time, separate from that of the rhythms of language.

- Renovation — over time — of a supple metric and the exploration of the thresholds between rhythms and durations.
- Possible dialectics between musics evolving in radically different times.

Formal consequences:

- More 'organic' approach to form by self-generation of sounds.
- Exploration of all forms of fusion and the thresholds between different parameters.
- Potential for interplay between fusion and continuity, on one side, and diffraction and discontinuity, on the other.
- Invention of processes, as opposed to traditional development.
- Use of supple, neutral sonic archetypes which facilitate the perception and memorization of processes.
- Superposing and placing in and out of phase contradictory, partial, or implied processes.
- Superposition and juxtaposition of forms flowing within radically different time-frames.

Twenty years later, the composers who started this movement have evolved towards very different horizons and it is no longer the time for the terrorism of utopias. However, something of that formidable adventure has kept them moving forward; far from any return to the more or less well assimilated traditional musics which have been the refuge for lost voyagers and the consolation of those who were born neither for adventure nor for discovery — when that return was not simply motivated by the desire for demagogic indulgence! We have passed a point of no return and the consequences for musical languages are sufficiently clear that other generations of composers have become interested. We can not know what musical history will decide to keep from our itinerary, but we have participated in and we live that adventure with joy and enthusiasm, since it is not necessary to sink into past-ism or into a servile imitation of our illustrious predecessors to remain in the service of music. The spectral adventure has allowed the renovation, without imitation of the foundations of occidental music, because it is not a closed technique but an attitude. Also, all ideas of rupture with musical tradition seem illusory to me. Le Corbusier said, architecture magnifies Space. Today, as in the past, music transfigures Time.