Is there a Québec sound?*

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This article approaches the definition of the important term 'acousmatic' by reference to its origins in the sound studios of the French National Radio. The links from France to Québec are outlined and the Québecois acousmatic school, largely based in Montreal, is introduced. Aspects of a typical piece are discussed, and the author is able to answer the title question positively.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, Québec's growing presence in the electroacoustic world has been widely acknowledged. Amongst the various electroacoustic musics that have contributed to the reputation of this country in the last decade, many observers would agree that it is the acousmatic genre that has produced the most significant work. It is in this genre that Montréal composers have particularly excelled, to the point where some speak of a Montréal 'school' – the use of this term may not be fully appropriate considering Québec's creative output, yet this designation is not completely unfounded. While it may seem exaggerated to suggest that Montréal has been the centre of a radical upheaval and of a new acousmatic compositional approach, there is nonetheless an exceptional dynamic to be found within a group of composers whose originality has attracted attention to this city.

But what of this term 'acousmatic'? Although no longer a subject reserved only for specialists, it may be useful to review the foundations and concepts of this art which, for some, remain unclear. Here then is an introduction to the subject, extracted from one of my recent articles (Dhomont 1995) – please excuse any redundancies – which may serve, nonetheless, to shed new light on acousmatic issues.

2. ALL SOUNDS CREATED EQUAL

Announced by several precursors in the first decades of this century (Russolo, Cahill, Trautwein, Martenot, Theremin, Cage, Varèse, etc.), electroacoustic music (not named as such at the time) was born in the sound studios of the RTF (French National Radio) in 1948, in Paris, with *musique concrète*. Its inventor, Pierre Schaeffer (who recently passed away) had the considerable merit of formulating the practical and theoretical notions for a music that required a new way of thinking about composition, and created a new sound world through the use of equally original production techniques. Indeed, in *musique concrète*, materials are selected from our sound environment, without *a priori* judgement.

All sounds, regardless of their origin, are of equal value and can be musically organised. These elements, the sound objects,[1] originally of an acoustic or electronic nature, are recorded, then processed, edited, mixed (note the analogy to techniques used in cinema) and 'orchestrated' in the studio, through the use of an ever-evolving technology. Finally, and this is the most important point, the organisation of complex 'spectromorphologies' (Denis Smalley), far removed from the 'musical note', cannot be fully realised with traditional conceptual tools; a change of such profundity requires new compositional strategies, and very different aesthetic and formal preoccupations than those found in traditional instrumental composition.

This original compositional method begins with the concrete (pure sound matter) and proceeds towards the abstract (musical structures) – hence the name *musique concrète* – the reverse of what takes place in instrumental writing, where one starts with concepts (abstract) and ends with a performance (concrete). Consequently, *musique concrète* pieces ask of their listeners that they un-programme their hearing (accustomed to the matrix of pitch scales, harmonic relations, instrumental timbres, etc.) and develop an attitude of active listening based on new criteria of perception. This music is also called concrete because it is fixed on tape through the recording process ('sono-fixation', M. Chion), in the same way that an image is fixed on a canvas or a film (François Bayle refers to sound images).

Two years after the birth of *musique concrète* (1950), electronic music, realised through sound syn-

* Translated by Ned Bouhalassa, a composer and teacher of electroacoustics in Montréal, with assistance from Kevin Austin.

[1] It is important to make the distinction between the sound object (perceived sound) and the material object (original source).

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thesis, emerged from the WDR Studios (West German Radio) in Cologne. Antagonistic at first, the schools of *musique concrète* and electronic music finally shared their sources and techniques, and were globally identified as electroacoustic music.

Since then, this single term has come to designate an infinite number of sound realisations with little in common, aside from their reliance on electricity; it refers to popular music (electronic instruments, synthesizers, samplers), serious research institutes (CCRMA, GRM, IRCAM, MIT . . .), works on tape, instruments and tape, live electronic music, interactive works, etc. 'The term Electroacoustic Music has expanded to such a degree that it has become a meaningless catch-all', wrote Michel Chion in 1982 (Chion 1982: 9). Today, this expression reveals little of what we may expect to hear, and its use is analogous to applying the term 'acoustic music' to define the entire instrumental repertoire of a given period. For these reasons, a group of composers, descendants of the school of *musique concrète*, found it necessary to find a term that clearly designates the genre in which they work,[2] and which calls for a particular reflection, a methodology, an unlimited sound pallete, a craft, a syntax, and specific tools. This term is 'acousmatic'.[3]

3. SOUND DETACHED FROM ITS SOURCE

The term 'acousmatic' refers to a theoretical and practical compositional approach, to particular listening and realisation conditions, and to sound projection strategies. Its origin is attributed to Pythagoras (sixth century BC) who, rumour has it, taught his classes – only verbally – from behind a partition, in order to force his disciples to focus all their attention on his message. In 1955, during the early stages of *musique concrète*, the writer Jérôme Peignot used the adjective 'acousmatic' to define sound which is heard and whose source is hidden. By shrouding 'behind' the speaker (a modern Pythagorean partition) any visual elements that could be linked to perceived sound events (such as instrumental performers on stage), acousmatic art presents sound on its own, devoid of causal identity, thereby generating a flow of images in the psyche of the listener.

In order to avoid any confusion with performance-oriented electroacoustic music, or music using new instruments (Ondes Martenot, electric guitars, synthesizers, real-time digital audio processors, etc.), François Bayle introduced the term 'acousmatic music' in 1974. This term designates a music of images that is 'shot and developed in the studio, and projected in a hall, like a film', and is presented at a subsequent date.[4] Bayle has stated that, 'With time, this term – both criticised and adopted, and which at first may strike one as severe – has softened through repeated use within the community of composers, and now serves to demarcate music on a fixed medium (*musique de support*) – representing a wide aesthetic spectrum – from all other contemporary music' (Bayle 1993: 18).

Today, the act of hearing a sound without seeing the object from which it originates is a daily occurrence. This happens when we listen to a CD, a radio programme, or when we communicate by phone, etc. In fact, we are unsuspecting acousmatic practitioners. Yet, in these examples, it is not the message that is acousmatic but rather the listening conditions for the communication of that message. Mozart, as he wrote the symphonies which we now hear in our living rooms, was not thinking of the CD but rather of live performances by an orchestra; on radio or disk, '. . . the announcer and the orchestra are absent, and yet they exist or, at least, existed during the recording, and that's the only thing that counts' (Bayle 1993: 51). In order to be designated as acousmatic, a composition should be conceived for an acousmatic listening environment, giving priority to the ears. This fundamental distinction is not always clearly understood by neophyte listeners.

The term 'acousmatic music' (or art) designates works that have been composed for loudspeakers, to be heard in the home – on radio or on CD/tape – or in concert, through the use of equipment (digital or analogue) that favours the projection of sound in three-dimensional space. However, though the concert may provide the ideal presentation for an acousmatic work, it is not a *sine qua non* criterion for its existence; like books collected for our home libraries, the quality of today's commercial recordings allows us to have at our disposal a wide repertoire of pieces. Moreover, and in contrast to recorded instrumental performances, an acousmatic work on CD is an exact duplicate of the composer's master. While the CD may serve only as a (good) reduction of an instrumental concert, the acousmatic concert serves as an impressive enlargement of a work composed on a fixed medium. One who has not experienced in the dark the sensation of hearing points of infinite distance, trajectories and waves, sudden whispers, so near, moving sound matter, in relief and in colour, cannot imagine the invisible spectacle for the ears. Imagination gives wings to intangible sound. Acous-

[2] As many others have done in other genres: serial, minimalist, spectral, rock, country, etc.

[3] Michel Chion would rather keep the term *musique concrète*, since it is well entrenched. The main objection that he has faced is that it refers to a historical period. Although *musique concrète* is alive in its contemporary form, it is likely that a renewal of terminology may trigger a similar renewal of its theory.

[4] Sometimes referred to as cinema for the ears (this analogy should not be taken literally).

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matic art is the art of mental representations triggered by sound.[5]

4. SOUND IMAGES

This review of the principal aspects of acousmatic art would be incomplete without a mention of two fairly recent fundamental concepts, that of acousmatic art's musical function, and the notion presented earlier in this article, and first coined by François Bayle, of the 'sound image'. Today, if the term 'acousmatic' is used more and more to designate a genre within the family of electroacoustic music, it can also serve, at a more elaborate descriptive level, to distinguish different musical activities. The term 'electroacoustic' could refer to the means of production of this music, to its fabrication, while 'acousmatic' could designate its mode of perception, and consequently, its conception; Bayle suggests that, 'Electroacoustic and acousmatic are distinct or opposed in terms of register of play and register of listening, like doing and hearing, and in fact, as musical functions. An extension of the instrumental field, the 'electroacoustic' potential brings forth new sound sources, new modes of energy, of play, of gestures. The 'acousmatic' register, an extension of the field of perception, brings to the fixed sound the logic of auditory and mental images' (Bayle 1993: 54). The 'sound image', or 'sound-i', as coined by Bayle, is that of the raw sound, recorded and fixed onto a medium (tape, hard-disk, etc.), like moving images recorded on film. These sound images can then be reproduced and transformed in various ways by the use of electroacoustic tools: 'An image is first and foremost modulated energy, which can be saved in a permanent or modifiable state. For an image can be modified, since we have its trace in our possession.'[6]

5. THE 'ACOUSMATIC' SCHOOL

Exhumed by Peignot and Schaeffer, reappropriated and refined by Bayle, defined and commented upon by Michel Chion, François Delalande and Jean-Christophe Thomas, and illustrated most often by French composers, the term 'acousmatic', as well as the notion it represents, find their origins in France; they are founded on Schaefferian phenomenological concepts, extend *musique concrète*, and symbolise the aesthetic views of composers either belonging to or following the tradition of France's Groupe de Recherches Musicales de Paris (GRM). For quite a long period, acousmatic art did not reach out beyond the borders of its country of origin, but the last few years have seen the emergence of a number of very active affiliates in several places[7] – Québec is one of these.

Indeed, there is a clear link between the Québecois acousmatic style and the characteristic approach of the GRM; this is a fact which is known and heard. This very identifiable style has developed principally in the francophone milieu, and it is considered – with sympathy or irony, depending on one's viewpoint – as 'very French'. There are, of course, historical reasons that explain this phenomenon: a common language and favourable links have encouraged cultural exchanges; Québec's francophone composers were some of the first to be interested in the evolution of *musique concrète* and, unlike their American neighbours, they did not restrict its application to cartoons, choosing even to follow the courses offered in Paris. In 1959, Gilles Tremblay studied under Pierre Schaeffer at the ORTF (Broadcasting Office of French Radio), and later, during the late sixties, Micheline Coulombe-Saint-Marcoux and Marcelle Deschênes attended classes at the GRM. While François Guérin would take Jean-Etienne Marie's course from 1975–7, during that same period, Bernard Bonnier became Pierre Henry's assistant, and Yves Daoust and Philippe Ménard worked and studied with the Groupe de Musique Experimentale de Bourges (GMEB). Having become professors in Montréal and Québec City's universities and conservatories, several of these composers proceeded to transmit the knowledge that they had acquired with the French groups; most significantly, they cultivated in their students and public an interest for music whose primary material may consist of any sound source, since 'all sounds are created equal', and that does not necessarily make reference to traditional musical concerns like melody, metre, harmony or instrumentation. At the same time, these professors did not relinquish their North-American ties, and it is more than likely that this 'musical bilingualism' contributed greatly to the creation of Québec's electroacoustic identity.

All these reasons may explain why, upon my arrival in Montréal in 1978, I met several composers and teachers who were very informed on the subject of the French electroacoustic 'schools', and were curious about the aesthetic possibilities of this medium. For my part, I had brought several recent tape pieces from Europe, my experience of and theoretical writings on acousmatic art, and, last but not least, solid personal convictions about this practice.

[5] For more information, please refer to Bayle's previously cited work, as well as the following: Chion, M. 1991. *L'art des sons fixés ou la musique concrètement*. Fontaine, France: Editions Metamkine/Nota-Bene/Sono-Concept; and, Vande Gorne, A. 1991. *Vous avez dit acousmatique?* Ohain, Belgium: Editions Musiques et Recherches.

[6] Queau, P., quote by Bayle, F., in *Grandeur nature*, *musique des paysages et des êtres vivants*, radio programme, 1980.

[7] Austria, Belgium, Colombia, England, Québec, Scotland, Sweden, etc.

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These must have been contagious, for I was soon asked to present several lectures on this theme at the Université de Montréal, and to illustrate these notions through the presentation of selected pieces in concert. This was followed with an offer to teach composition courses, and, in the many years since, the students' curiosity and interest in a teaching based on Schaeffer's 'reduced listening'[8] and on mechanisms of perception[9] have contributed to the creation of an 'acousmatic' calling. Indeed, for some, this compositional approach has, in all likelihood, been a turning point, and has eventually allowed them to anchor their personal skills on a clear understanding of the sonic morphologies and novel structures which they manipulate. I bring up these personal memories in order to clarify the role that some have attributed to me in the growth of electroacoustics in Québec, a role that, since I have exerted some influence in regard to acousmatic art, I accept without false modesty, but that must also be brought back to reasonable proportions; for, aside from the pioneers mentioned earlier in this article, there are in this country, and most notably in Montréal, very active composers who represent a variety of electroacoustic approaches (live and tape, electronics, interactive, environmental, multimedia, etc.).[10] I have decided to limit myself to a presentation of several aspects of Québec's situation in regard to acousmatic art which may explain its originality.

6. ACOUSTIC AND ELECTRONIC SOURCES

As I stated earlier, the value of Québec's present contribution to acousmatic art should be measured in terms of its affirmation of the genre, not viewed as a revolution. The Montréal composers do not put the art to test, do not engage in the removal or subversion of its idiosyncrasies, rather, they follow the great Schaefferian tradition, using certain key works of the repertoire as their models. In fact, it is their verve, creative freedom, a certain generosity in their language, as well as a *sui generis* 'colour' (discussed in greater detail below) that brings distinction and strength to their discourse: by bringing forth a little oxygen from virgin spaces and the energy of undiminished enthusiasm, their discourse is an authentic renewal of the genre.

But, can Montréal's 'spirit' be described by isolating its main components? Can we bring to light certain fundamental stylistic elements? Yes, partially; and this is what I am attempting in this article. However, though these elements may seem pertinent for the definition of several composers' 'way' of creating, they are not up to the task of revealing the very essence that gives meaning to their works, and, in all honesty, it is not easy to decide whether the answer lies in the composers' novel manners of execution or virtuosic use of traditional methods.

As is the case with most acousmatic works, materials obtained through the recording of acoustic sources (a legacy of *musique concrète*) are at the centre of many Québecois works, and in many instances, the actual search for source material precedes any compositional attempt. The relation of the microphone in sound to the camera in film is particularly obvious in these works and, in fact, young composers from this part of the world are quick to be inspired by cinema, a close cousin of acousmatic art, as we all know. Captured by the microphone, sounds can sometimes remain in their original state – either in the context of works whose development is reference-based (like the soundscapes of Claude Schryer, Daniel Leduc, etc.), or that have an abstract character (very typical of the works of the talented Gilles Gobeil[11] or, in some cases, Jacques Tremblay) – or be put through a series of processes that radically alter their morphology and result in drastic and troubling metamorphoses. In this alchemy of recorded sounds, digital tools, speeding past their analogue counterparts, are formidably efficient; they give the majority of composers[12] the ability to transform fixed Baylian sound images in unheard-of ways. At the same time, American pioneers of electronic music, the Canadian Hugh Le Caine and his ingenious inventions, Stockhausen and the Cologne school, also exerted an early influence on electroacoustic activity in Québec, and left a considerable mark. Undoubtedly, technical and scientific, methodical experimentation – in contrast to intuition and Cage-like chance – is also part of the North-American tradition. In addition, sound synthesis, that is, the creation of sounds generated by electricity and the control of their acoustic parameters, has always had a predominant role in North America. Québec is no exception, but these practices are mostly those of the anglophone composers[13] that,

[8] Phenomenological method of perceiving sound which consists in listening to the intrinsic attributes and characteristics of a sound, omitting any reference to its origins.

[9] Initiated by M. Deschênes, continued by F. Guérin, systematised at first by F. Dhomont, and now by R. Normandeau and S. Roy.

[10] Represented by several composers, including S. Arcuri, K. Austin, A. Belkin, Y. Daoust, J. F. Denis, M. Deschênes, P. Dostie, A. Lanza, C. de Mestral, R. Minard, N. Parent, J. Piché, B. Pennycook, L. Radford, G. Ricard, D. Saindon, A. Thibault, etc. (incomplete list).

[11] This composer's latest work, *Le vertige inconnu*, is a fine example of the use of raw sound taken out of context and recycled in a completely new structure.

[12] Like Ned Bouhalassa, Christian Calon, Marcelle Deschênes, Yves Daoust, Louis Dufort, Michel Frigon, Gilles Gobeil, Monique Jean, Daniel Leduc, Robert Normandeau, Jean Piché, Mario Rodrigue, Stéphane Roy, Martin Tétreault, Jacques Tremblay, Marc Tremblay, Pascale Trudel and/or Roxanne Turcotte.

[13] However, some francophone composers, like Jean-François Denis, Jean Piché and Alain Thibault, amongst others, rely principally on synthesised sound.

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to this day, are more likely to realise electronic music.[14] For their part, the acousmatic composers have ignored the instrumental possibilities of the synthesiser (particularly its tempered keyboard), relying instead on its many resources as a polyvalent and anonymous generator of 'spectromorphologies'. This integration of the electronic sound as one of the main elements in a given piece is not only characteristic of the work of composers from Québec – this practice is found in most acousmatic-related work – but it is more prevalent here than in other countries (along with some of the music from Sweden, for example, or in the work of Britain's Denis Smalley).

This gentle crossbreeding may be explained by the fact that, contrary to what took place in Europe, and particularly in France, Québec has never witnessed a conflict between *musique concrète* and electronic music composers. In many countries, the infamous controversies that divided Paris and Cologne seem to have sown treacherous seeds that, though their effect has attenuated with time, have fostered atavistic and reciprocal distrust. Not having developed a historical allergy to electronic sounds, Québec's acousmatic composers have an acquired taste for them and, by having to pass the test of reduced listening, have managed to avoid creating banal and 'raw' synthesizer sounds. Undoubtedly, this has become part of the recognisable sound with which they are identified.

7. MULTIPLICITY OF SOURCES, PROLIFERATION OF SOUNDS

There can be no doubt that there is a 'Québec' sound. The importance given to gestural invention and contrasts of energy, the clarity of the foreground/background mix, the detail in the creation of the materials and nuances – these are some of the defining traits of the Montréal style: a sound that is well defined, transparent, warm, often sensual, organic. The composers Christian Calon, Gilles Gobeil, Robert Normandeau, Mario Rodrigue or Stéphane Roy, all possess a subtle ear and are, amongst others, representative of this particular approach to sound. Though this meticulous attention to the sound materials may be generally regarded as a strong point, some have criticised what they consider to be an indulgence in the 'beautiful sound', reaching a certain mannerism. Indeed, these composers, in some cases clearly part of today's neo-baroque trend, do not always refrain from an accumulation of materials, overload and ornamentation. But one must admit that, in this, they excel. To condemn their approach is to show a lack of appreciation for the structural complexity embodied in their sound's ostensible elegance. Though it may be fair to say that a seductive sound may sometimes mask the composer's lack of musicality, this critique does not apply to the works that have made the reputation of the 'Montréal school', where sound and meaning are interlinked – a fact easily proven through analysis. Ironically, this critique may find a growing number of targets within the electroacoustic milieu if the current trend towards an amalgamation of engineering and composition is allowed to persist. By facilitating the task of creating sound events of great richness, digital technology satisfies the needs of the most unimaginative composer, who generates insignificant sound effects. It takes more than a series of arbitrary acoustic oddities to create and bring coherence to one's discourse; in these kinds of inventories, form and meaning are often left behind. One of the most convincing aspects of Québec composers' success has been their ability to avoid falling into this trap by conciliating the hedonism of the sonic signifier with the weight of the musical signified.

The multiplicity of sounds is not the only sign of the baroqueness ('postmodern impurity'?) of Québec's acousmatic discourse. A propensity towards the inclusion of other musical genres (most notably popular, rock, ethnic, etc.), and the use of means and formats borrowed from different media (ad clip, zapping, comics, telephone, radio, internet, etc.) are other characteristic traits of this music, along with an interest in the soundscape and sound ecology. Electroacoustic music from Québec, more than in Europe, is focused on the 'here and now' and speaks of the present. Their narrative is often presented as a tale, and reflects real life. In some works, the polymorphic intrusion, coded at times, of everyday sounds in a context that is first and foremost atemporal brings a particular 'colour' of our time that is not as prevalent in the French model. This might be explained by the fact that, like most North Americans, Québecois are children of the modern age, more attracted to the sounds and culture of their period than to the echos of a past which is, after all, not that old. And yet, in their linguistic isolation, they are also listening to the francophone world, and to 'old' countries in general, and the dynamic hybridisation of these influences generates a very tasty flavour of acousmatic music.

8. MORE THAN SOUND: MEANING

Beyond their erratic characteristics and particularities (not meant to be taken literally and applied across the board), I believe that what really makes these works stand out is not some common, national

[14] There are more and more acousmatic works being realised by Montréal anglophones, notably from those individuals studying at Concordia University, with Kevin Austin, Ned Bouhalassa, Mark Corwin and Laurie Radford. Randall Smith, a very talented anglophone from Toronto, is also an exceptional example of this phenomenon.

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stylistic traits, but rather internal coherence (balance between discourse, structure and materials), which gives them meaning, and a conviction in their poetic message. One must avoid relying on folklore to explain works which explore musical concerns and principles of writing common to all, and which find their source materials in sounds from all over the world.

Beyond its Québecois accent, this music touches us because, for some unknown reason, conditions favourable to its epiphany have appeared at the same time and in the same city. That city is Montréal.

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