A house of composers

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An interview is a strange format for a research review; however, it is sometimes a quick and effective way to present a problematic. In this case, Christian Zanési interviewed by Évelyne Gayou gives a perspective of the future activities of the GRM from an institutional perspective as well as in relation with the new electronic tendencies, thus answering the major question of the social function of a research and production institution today.

Christian Zanési, you are assistant director of the GRM with many responsibilities, including the programming of concerts. For the last several years we have seen in the programmes musicians who come from the world of techno music. Can you please explain this choice?

Actually, we should speak in terms of *electronic music* rather than *techno*. If we describe musical activity from the angle of music's functions, we avoid the trap of elitism and keep a more open mind. There are musical forms such as techno that are made to move the body to, for dancing, others which accompany religious rituals or initiation rites, functional music, as we say, and other music – which is the sort that interest us – purely for listening to. We produce works that are listened to for their shape, their texture and style, and for the individual quality of their composers.

Some years ago it was difficult to properly evaluate an artistic movement that quite autonomously was in the process of development. A movement that used nearly the same tools as ours, which would address itself to pure listening in executing a refined and profound work of recorded sound. One spoke then, in turning back to a phrase from the 1950s, of 'electronic music'. And I told myself that the time had come to open the doors of our studios, to meet musicians, and to find out what we have in common. Certain experiences and concerts followed, and this allowed us, while tackling different aesthetics, to renew and enlarge our public.

To put into the same programme on the same evening in a great established auditorium music by Pierre Henry, Luc Ferrari and Ryoji Ikeda, or Denis Dufour, Alva Noto and Matmos brings out our mutual ambition – the discovery of sound.

We therefore arrive at the common hub: the invention of sound. In 1997, in conversations with the then director of the GRM, François Bayle, the philosopher Bernard Stiegler had proposed this phrase to characterise the remarkable work brought about during the last several decades. Sound as an expression value, sound as artistic signature, sound as the mirror of its era. With these concerts, we are completely in a realm that represents a paradigmatic shift in the music of the twentieth century.

We have also demonstrated that we have a formidable instrument for projecting sound – the Acousmonium – which allows sound in all its nuances to be presented in public. The majority of electronic music concerts are given with rock sound systems, full face, very powerful but far from the quality that we have developed with this tool. These sorts of music also need, themselves, to be heard with their exact nuances. The enthusiastic response of the public and guest musicians bear witness to this.

How would one best define this tool?

It is a whole culture: the Acousmonium is a tool that has crossed several decades, always improving over time. The choice of loudspeakers has often set us back, but finally while adhering to the basic idea, it has survived the changes in listening attitudes. We do not listen now in the same way as we did in 1950 or in 1970. One day, I asked Pierre Henry what music was like at the beginning of musique concrète. I had imagined it as having a good deal of rattle and shake, and rather aggressive, but he told me that it was very soft, or rather at median dynamic, and without aggressiveness. And indeed, if you have a chance to listen to 78s from the 1950s on the turntables of that period, you will hear a refined sound, light and delicate. Over time, our ear has developed, and we now need more sharpness in the clarity. More contrast and better definition. Experience in the cinema, and listening at home with a hi-fi system, as well as noise pollution, have been part of this evolution. In its way, the signal needs to be more precise in order to make its way through the jungle of noise. The ear requires this, and thus transforms itself.

What is the basic idea of the Acousmonium?

When at the end of the 1960s François Bayle and his colleagues at the GRM thought up a system of sound

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projection for concerts, it was proposed to give electro-acoustic music presentation a spectacular dimension. They began with rather a simplistic idea; they conceived a sort of orchestra made up of loudspeakers of different calibres following the pattern of orchestral instruments, each with its own register. In fact a very good loudspeaker is quite able to make audible the double bass or the timpani as well as the piccolo. On the other hand, the fact of using different speakers and placing them in different positions allows a particularly musical flow of sound. The speakers react more or less well to the sound according to their own characteristics, but always organically – I would like to say that the frequencies produced come in some way from 'inside' the sound, and are thus naturally calibrated with the flux of the music. Of course one adds to that human intervention, the control that the ear exerts in reaction for the regulation of volume, to company the frequencies, and finally to reveal the shape and the complexities of the work. Some people qualify this type of work as a performance.

In 2008 we are celebrating fifty years of the GRM. What are the reasons for its long life?

I think that the GRM is just the right size, neither too large nor too small, and it has always been housed within a greater institution (since 1975, INA, the National Audiovisual Institute), guaranteeing it financial stability. Also, over the decades, the GRM has been able to hold on to and develop is technological tools to accompany exactly (and often to anticipate) the perpetual changes in listening.

Quite sincerely I do not believe that we have been tied to dogmatism or an ideology. When one runs through the list of more than a thousand works produced over the fifty years, what is obvious is the diversity of approaches and the great freedom of the musicians. Naturally enough, each era, each decade has its more or less dominant colour, but at the centre of the organisation there is, can one say, a philosophy of work that runs right through the history of the GRM: from the start, the studios and the tools have been constructed in a fashion that enables the musician to be autonomous very quickly and to work alone. Certain defining actions done on sound – those that frequently give rise to a style – cannot be delegated to others, and if you construct too complicated a tool, requiring a highly specialised technician to be constantly in attendance, you lose interaction and the involvement of the body which are fundamental to the working out of sound. This explains, for example, the worldwide success of GRM Tools, invented for composers, but today used by sound engineers in very many studios. The DNA of these tools results in this trope of creativity.

What is the social function of the GRM?

The expression of this that seems to me to be the most obvious is that the GRM is – and ought to be – a house of composers. That makes it a place both physical and symbolic to which musicians are happy to come to work and exchange ideas. This seems simple, but to understand it one has to go back in time. In the 1950s and up to the 1970s the thinking was that the justification for this type of institution was the scarcity of resources of production. They were so expensive that only a few enterprises could afford to acquire them, and these for the majority were in the public sector, such as the broadcasting bodies. To put it another way, the company generously put at the service of motivated artistes the best technology available as well as the space necessary for reflection for the invention of types and of daring ideas, and this in itself signifies a handsome responsibility. The institutional prototype put in place by Pierre Schaeffer has been copied in a number of countries.

When, however, in the 1980s, home studios became a reality, the question of the usefulness of 'great studios' was posed, logically enough. Machines for the recording and processing of sound, synthesisers using the MIDI standard, then personal computers with their host of software accessible to the greatest number of people have multiplied the stations of production to the limit – a studio for everyone! – that there has been a strong fall in interest for the pioneer institution. Very obviously, this is the tree that obscures the forest. The defining character is not only made by the tools, but also consists in the meeting place, and in the widest possible sense of the term, the place of communication.

When composers come to work at the GRM, they find the means to construct their music, certainly, but they also find there other musicians and researchers with whom to talk, and technicians to help them, and also a public concert hall in very good shape and radio and media response. All that works up even to the issue of publishing a CD. It is thus the process of production in its entirety that is available.

But above all, and this is perhaps the most important, the guest composer enters into some sort of communion with his or her predecessors. Given this, a studio is not neutral. It is not just four walls containing machines. There is a *spirit*: the invisible traces of those who have worked there before. That creates a feeling that one is part of a history, and that one has the possibility of adding a stone to the edifice. At the GRM, the inherited dynamic is a work itself. This is very clear for example with the musicians whom we have invited for our festival PRÉSENCES *électronique*: artists such as Ryoji Ikeda, Yoshihiro Hanno, Martin Schmidt and Drew Daniel (Matmos) or eRikm have asked to work on our old machines (such as the Coupigny synthesiser, constructed in the 1960s) or on recycled concrète sounds. And this heritage process is also completed since, I will recall the fact, the GRM was made part of INA, whose principal task is to preserve audiovisual archives, and thus the music of our imagined composer will be able to be kept and communicated under the best conditions to future generations. And that, I fancy, can only be guaranteed by a public institution.

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