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The conference Spectralisms 2019, presented 12–14 June at the Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM) in Paris, shows the extent to which scholarly interest in spectral music has flourished in the past decade. This is the second conference in the Spectralisms series; the first, organized by Jonathan Cross, was held at Oxford University in 2017.<sup>1</sup> While twenty-five years ago spectral music was largely the domain of composers and a few specialized researchers based mainly in France, each of these recent conferences welcomed a broad variety of music scholars from Europe, North America, and as far afield as Japan, South Korea, and Australia. With thirty-six talks at the Oxford conference and forty-nine at IRCAM, the conversation around spectral music has broadened to include a wide range of composers and aesthetics as well as different analytical and musicological approaches.

The term “spectralism”, like many other “-isms”, has drawn complaints from the very composers it purports to describe. Gérard

Grisey found the label reductive – “just a sticker that we got at a certain period” – and misleading, drawing too much attention to a handful of harmonic techniques (such as “instrumental synthesis”) and not enough to more thoroughgoing innovations in timbre, texture, and temporality.<sup>2</sup> Yet the term remains useful to describe certain developments in contemporary music starting in the 1970s and building on the work of timbre-focused precursors such as György Ligeti, Giacinto Scelsi, and Olivier Messiaen.

In its narrowest definition, spectralism is associated with the Paris ensemble and composers’ collective *L’itinéraire*, founded in 1973 by Hugues Dufourt, Gérard Grisey, Michaël Lévinas, Tristan Murail, and Roger Tessier. The adjective “spectral” was first proposed by Dufourt in a 1979 article, making reference primarily to the use of the acoustical spectrum of sounds (their unique constituent overtones) as a model and the privileging of a “dynamic continuity” in place of the discrete structures of serialism.<sup>3</sup> Characteristics of spectral music as

<sup>1</sup> Programs are still available online for the conferences at both Oxford ([music.ox.ac.uk/spectralisms](http://music.ox.ac.uk/spectralisms)) and IRCAM ([spectralisms2019.ircam.fr](http://spectralisms2019.ircam.fr)). The IRCAM event was filmed, and videos of all the talks are now available in IRCAM’s online repository: [medias.ircam.fr/search/?q=spectralisms](http://medias.ircam.fr/search/?q=spectralisms).

<sup>2</sup> Gérard Grisey, “Entretien avec David Bundler”, in *Écrits, ou l’invention de la musique spectrale*, ed. Guy Lelong (Paris: Éditions MF, 2008), 265.

<sup>3</sup> Hugues Dufourt, “Musique spectrale”, in *Musique, pouvoir, écriture*, ed. Jean-Michel Bardez (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1991), 335–340.

practised by L'itinéraire composers include the use of acoustics and psychoacoustics as compositional reference points, a concern for the “sound itself” over symbol or syntax, the gradual parametric development of complex sound masses, and playing on the ambiguity of timbre and harmony through chord-timbres and timbre-chords.

The use of the plural “Spectralisms” in the title of these two conferences indicates the organizers’ desire to recognize the diversity of spectral practice, including developments parallel to (or even preceding) those of the L'itinéraire group by composers in Romania (Horațiu Rădulescu, Iancu Dumitrescu, and Ana-Maria Avram), the United States (James Tenney and Alvin Lucier), Austria (Georg Friedrich Haas), the United Kingdom (Jonathan Harvey and Julian Anderson), and Japan (Toshiro Mayuzumi). Even more than the Oxford conference, the IRCAM edition of Spectralisms featured talks on composers from the margins of the spectral tradition, such as Rozalie Hirs (Netherlands), Riccardo Nova and Fausto Romitelli (Italy), and Keith Hamel (Canada). Finland’s Kaija Saariaho was the subject of a number of presentations, even rivalling the long-canonized Grisey as the most discussed composer of the conference.

This shift towards a broader range of spectral practices reflects the dissemination and adaptation of spectral ideas over several “generations”. Joshua Fineberg has traced the emergence of the “second spectral generation” (Saariaho, Philippe Hurel) and even a third (François Paris, Jean-Luc Hervé, and Fineberg himself):

today we might extend this still further to include works by younger composers such as Steve Lehman and Anthony Cheung.<sup>4</sup> In the course of this diffusion of spectral sounds and ideas, the approach of the L'itinéraire composers has been enriched by encounters with diverse influences, ranging from Norwegian folk music (as discussed by Lasse Thoresen in a paper on his own compositions), soundtracks of television dramas (Robert Sholl on “Spectral Music in Nordic Noir”), and experimental electronica by Pan Sonic and Ryoji Ikeda (Riccardo Wanke on a cross-genre “ecstatic-materialist perspective”). The music of Rozalie Hirs, presented by composer Bert van Herck, combines a spectral perspective on harmony with a more diatonic sound language based largely on perfect fifths – the crisp sonorities of works such as *Book of Mirrors* (2001) and *Platonic ID* (2006) have echoes of Louis Andriessen’s post-minimalism, a far cry from the dense microtonal complexes of the L'itinéraire composers.

While the first wave of writings on spectralism were largely by composers associated with the movement, the IRCAM conference offered many research presentations adopting the tools of historical musicology, including archival work on composers’ sketchbooks and other documents. Work by Ingrid Pustijanac, Julie Delisle, and François-Xavier Féron drew on Grisey’s sketches (now at the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel), and Landon Morrison and Wataru Miyakawa discussed Saariaho’s

<sup>4</sup> Joshua Fineberg, *Classical music, why bother?* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 134–135.

compositional processes. Since spectral music has always had a close relationship with electroacoustic music and ideas from sound synthesis, many of Saariaho's "sketches" cited by Morrison are in fact computer scripts, printouts of code in the programming environment CHANT used for the synthesis of vocal and quasi-vocal sounds in *Vers le blanc*.

With some historical distance from the original formulations and polemics of spectral thought, musicologists are beginning to reframe some of our central assumptions about spectralism: for example, in his paper "Et le nuage est spectre, et le spectre est nuage": Murail, Poetics, Symbolism" Liam Cagney argues that the late works of Murail might be considered as exemplifying a neo-Symbolist aesthetic. Some of the philosophical implications of spectral thought (and in particular theories of temporality) were explored in Dylan Principi's "Grisey's Time and its Conceptual Implications", linking Grisey's phenomenological approach to musical time with precursors in the writing of Bergson and Deleuze. Presentations on spectral music from the perspective of specific instrumental performance traditions included Tobias Tschiedl's analysis of Hugues Dufourt's writing for electric guitar and Jack Adler-McKean's "The Spectral Tuba".

Given spectral composers' fascination with the physical nature of sound, performance practice has always been a central concern. The hosts of Spectralisms 2019, IRCAM musicologists Nicolas Donin and François-Xavier Féron, included four performance workshops in the conference

schedule, bringing performers together with musicologists to talk about spectral compositions from an interpreter's perspective. These workshops included Grisey's *Anubis-Nout* with saxophonists Antonin Pommel and Claude Delangle; Pascale Criton's *Wander Steps* with accordionists Jean-Étienne Sotty and Fanny Vicens of the Duo XAMP; Giacinto Scelsi's *Trilogia* with cellist Frances-Marie Uitti; and Horațiu Rădulescu's *Das Andere* with violist Garth Knox.

Of these four featured composers, only Grisey comes from the L'itinéraire group. François-Xavier Féron's discussion with Delangle, the dedicatee of *Anubis-Nout*, revisited the development of the work through sketch study and reminiscences of the late composer. Scelsi can be seen as an important precursor of spectral music, with his microtones, sustained sounds, and slowly shifting textures; both Grisey and Murail cite his music as a major influence. Uitti's presentation on Scelsi's *Trilogia* (in dialogue with musicologist Sharon Kanach) focused on the cellist's one-on-one collaboration with Scelsi to develop extended playing techniques, including the co-creation of customized resonators that lend the strings a complex buzzing tone.

The third workshop, by composer and musicologist Martin Suckling, delved into Rădulescu's unique strain of experimental and mystical spectral thought, part of a lesser-known Romanian spectral movement that developed in parallel to the Parisian school. Pascale Criton's music for microtonal accordion duo was the most recent work featured in these workshops: her 2018