

Music; A Music Attuned To the Structure Of Primal Sound

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IT is sound, not mathematics; sound, not theater; sound, not sculpture, quantum mechanics, astrology or acupuncture," declared the French composer Gerard Grisey some 20 years ago, in the midst of composing his monumental "Espaces Acoustiques."

When Grisey died suddenly at 52 in November 1998, the new-music world in France was stunned. But his death was little noted in New York, where his music has seldom been performed. Tomorrow evening, at Merkin Concert Hall near Lincoln Center, a group of performers assembled by the music department of Columbia University afford an opportunity to hear the first three parts of "Les Espaces Acoustiques," a series of six pieces for successively larger ensembles (solo viola to symphony orchestra) written from 1974 to 1985. The second and third pieces are generally considered the earliest examples of "spectral music."

The musical achievement of "Les Espaces Acoustiques" ultimately towers above its historical significance. It is hard to encapsulate in words what makes the piece so radically different from most of what had appeared before or has appeared since. (A riveting recording of the complete work by the Ensemble Court-Circuit

and the Frankfurt Museum Orchestra is available on two CD's from Accord.) Alongside the power emanating from the sheer unconventionality of the concept come persistent sensuality, rawness, masterly pacing and sometimes breathtaking orchestration (with moments that would make Ravel proud).

In fierce reaction to serialism, with its postulates derived in no small measure from modes of thinking and organization that transcend music itself, spectral music was conceived in accordance with the behavior of pure sound, revealed generally by principles of acoustics and specifically by the characteristics of instruments throughout their ranges of register and timbre. In one sense, "Les Espaces Acoustiques" anticipates and inverts an objective of electronically realized sound, which has often sought to complement and extend the world of voices and instruments: in this work, instruments replicate electronic effects.

This procedure seems counterintuitive, yet it is remarkably effective, because certain early electronic processes ("ring modulation," for example) demonstrate that music is not merely a language revealed by sound but also an expression of the nature of sound. Ordinarily representative and reflective of reality, music here becomes a conduit to a more primitive sense of apprehension. The effect on a listener is revelation in a literal sense: one begins to hear straight through the texture and the moment-to-moment progress of the music.

It is this primal state of music that gives the work its consistent sensuality, yet the intellectual realm is not at all diminished. Just when the mind begins to ask the ear whether this or that moment threatens to escalate beyond control, the composer has already initiated a transformation. But transition and object itself are never quite distinct from each other, for it is in the nature of sound to be forever in motion: we cannot hear except through time.

Music that, in Grisey's words, "treats time as a constituent element of sound itself" is a profound departure from much of contemporary music, in which interactions of tones are commonly conceived independently of the time in which they occur. The spectral composers challenged the article of faith that composers should consider as distinct sets of decisions what the notes are and when they are heard. More than

20 years ago, computer analysis began to reveal the complexity of instrumental sound that enables us to recognize timbre, and suggested to composers that the depiction of "dilated time" could serve as a basis for musical expression.

Grisey was strongly influenced by his studies with Olivier Messiaen and Karlheinz Stockhausen, both of whom, in highly personal ways, sought to link the logic of musical composition to phenomena of nature and acoustics. The work of America's early Minimalists also informed his thinking, especially insofar as process -- moment-to-moment musical evolution -- might take precedence over subject. (Grisey, in fact, taught at the University of California, Berkeley, from 1982 to 1986.)

Much of "Les Espaces Acoustiques" derives from an orchestration of the overtones inherent in a trombone's fundamental E. Of course, assigning instruments to reproduce these harmonics creates many more overtones. Precisely the point: while the formal logic of the harmony is preserved, "the depth and density of the sound," in the composer's words, are extended. This timbral "theme and variations" embraces harmony and timbre into a single entity.

The concert tomorrow night also includes recent works by Philippe Hurel and Ronald Bruce Smith, members of the "second wave" of spectral composers. The program, "New Music for a New Century," represents the first strike of an intent to fill the gap between the small chamber ensemble and the orchestra with a symphonic ensemble modeled after the London Sinfonietta or the Ensemble Intercontemporain.

As the composer Tristan Murail, the co-founder of the spectral approach and an artistic director of this venture, points out, there has simply been too much valuable music composed for such forces to ignore. And there remains a need for a large-scale ensemble to serve the more experimental requirements of the newest generation of composers. Sometimes these experiments go awry. But occasionally they succeed brilliantly and illuminate our perception of just what is music.

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