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# **LUC FERRARI: A PIONEER OF SOUNDSCAPE COMPOSITION**

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Luc Ferrari was a French composer and sound artist who, throughout the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, developed his practice from mostly traditional music to experimental field recordings and electroacoustic compositions. Growing up in Paris, Ferrari started his musical career studying piano. However, he quickly became uninterested with the standardised piano teachings, finding his teachers repressive and pessimistic<sup>1</sup>. He instead was more excited by noise music<sup>2</sup> and the avant-garde movements of the 1940s and 1950s<sup>3</sup>. In the mid 1950s he became involved with the *musique concrète* movement, and went on to establish his own individual technique of experimental composition. In this essay I'll be exploring these beginnings, Ferrari's *Presque rein* series and the influence he has had on sound artists since.

The practice of *musique concrète* employs acousmatic listening to remove a sound from its origin or source, reducing it to a sound object that can be manipulated and arranged to form a new sound composition. Most of these compositions revolved around advances in technology such as tape recorders. The figurehead of the *musique concrète* movement was Pierre Schaeffer and is considered the first to magnetic tape use for musical composition<sup>4</sup>. In 1951, Schaeffer founded the *Group de Recherche de Musique Concrète*, a collective of composers that studied the practice. During this time Luc Ferrari was composing orchestral pieces while keeping an interest in Schaeffer's innovations. A few years later, Schaeffer was also taking an interest in Ferrari's work and after attending one of his concerts, he was invited to join Schaeffer in what had now been renamed the *Group de Musique Concrète*<sup>5</sup>. In an interview with Brigitte Robindore, Ferrari considers what Schaeffer saw in his contemporary piano playing; "I think that what may have interested him was the contrast it offered to most pieces of that time that were so completely and systematically serial. In my scores, one could hear the serial elements but also that I was already deviating from this system."<sup>6</sup> This unpredictable form of composition is in Ferrari's musical nature and was more in keeping with the experimental sound artists of the time than the traditional

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<sup>1</sup> D. Warburton, created summer 1998, accessed 25 April 2017, <http://www.paristransatlantic.com/magazine/interviews/ferrari.html>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> B. Robindoré, and L. Ferrari. 'Luc Ferrari: Interview with an Intimate Iconoclast', *Computer Music Journal*, vol. 22/no. 3, (1998), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> S. Dallet, S. Brunet, and Centre d'études et de recherche Pierre Schaeffer. , *Pierre Schaeffer: Itinéraires d'Un Chercheur : Bibliographie commentée De l'Œuvre éditée De Pierre Schaeffer = A Career in Research : A Commented Bibliography of Published Works*, Anonymous Translator(Bilingual edn, Montreuil, Centre d'études et de recherche Pierre Schaeffer, 1997), p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> Robindoré, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8,

composers: “Instead of being on Boulez's side, I was already on the side of John Cage and of Edgard Varese.”<sup>7</sup>

Luc Ferrari didn't join the *Group de Musique Concrète* until 1958, as he wanted to continue exploring orchestral music for a few years.<sup>8</sup> In this time, he became heavily influenced by the electronic experiments of Edgard Varese and even travelled to America to meet him. Ferrari commented that “...the sounds composed in his scores found just the right way to place themselves in time and space...”<sup>9</sup> Around this time Ferrari also met John Cage in Darmstadt and was inspired by his “...purist and intransigent”<sup>10</sup> attitude. These two encounters were very significant in shaping Ferrari's attitude towards composition and were the two main inspirations behind his initial tape recordings in the 1950s.

Ferrari has described his early work with the *Group de Musique Concrète* as atonal and only occasionally harmonic.<sup>11</sup> He would find sound sources in objects such as corrugated iron, scraps of metal and springs and then treat their resultant sounds independently from their sources.<sup>12</sup> This was pretty common practice for GMC students, and Ferrari would soon move away from the usual approach of *musique concrète* composition and the guidelines that Schaeffer had set out. Ferrari got to a point during his time at GMC in which “...the influence of the New Realist artists such as Armand and Yves Klein was much stronger on me than the influence of *musique concrète*.”<sup>13</sup> These influences, along with his established admiration of John Cage's approach, lean more towards conceptual art, and Ferrari comments that he was “...concerned with the idea of the *objet trouvé* - the sound found by chance.”<sup>14</sup> ‘Objet trouvé’ translates to ‘found object’, and Ferrari's search for a sonic representation of the found object would mark a vital new direction in his work.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Luc Ferrari started recording with a Nagra tape recorder while travelling. His approach was to record everything and anything that interested him. This included environmental sounds and conversations between strangers; recorded with the condition that it wasn't organised by himself. The only control he allowed himself was

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Warburton, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Robindoré, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Warburton, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Robindoré, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 11.

how he positioned the recording equipment<sup>15</sup>. The main differences between his approach and Schaeffer's, for example, was the way he took his recording equipment outside and the way he recorded sound as it exists as opposed to reducing and manipulating it. In an article for *Organised Sound*, John Levack Drever wrote of how Ferrari "...flew in the face of the GRM's Schaefferian phenomenological precepts of attention to the intrinsic qualities of recorded sound..." and instead "...focussed on the 'anecdotal' qualities of recorded sound."<sup>16</sup> By removing himself from the conception of the sounds he recorded, he created a totally unique approach to composition and sound arrangement.

Ferrari's most recognised accomplishment is his *Presque rein* series. The first in this series is *Music promenade*, recorded between 1964 and 1969, and he continued the series for *Presque rein No. 1 – le lever du jour au bord de la mer* (1967–70), *Presque rien No.2 – ainsi continue la nuit dans ma tête multiple* (1977), *Presque rien avec filles* (1989) and *Ina-grm 245172* (1995). All of these pieces share a stylistic similarity and of these, *Presque rein No. 1* is arguably the most celebrated.

The piece is twenty minutes long, and features field recordings of a Croatian (Yugoslavian, at the time) village in the summer of 1968. All sounds are acoustic recordings little or no manipulation<sup>17</sup> and no electronic synthesis. It's mostly extremely quiet but has very few moments of complete silence. It is a stereo piece that uses some subtle panning. Throughout the piece, we hear a number of human voices in conversation and singing, the sounds of bicycles and cars driving past, bells ringing and running water. The piece also features the sounds of donkeys, chickens, sheep and what sounds like crickets chirping. There are other sounds and that are harder to clearly distinguish and rely more on listener interpretation. For example, at one point there is a knocking sound that sounds to me like someone chopping wood. The recordings were made from Ferrari's window in the early hours before dawn over a number of days. Ferrari then collected all of the recordings he had made and organised them over the next few years, aiming to produce "...a sonic representation of a typical morning in Vela Luka..."<sup>18</sup> All of Ferrari's compositional techniques come from the way that he organised the recordings through duration, timbre and volume. For example, the cricket sounds fade in slowly after about eight minutes and

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> T. Rennie, 'Socio-Sonic: An Ethnographic Methodology for Electroacoustic Composition', *Organised Sound*, vol. 19/no. 2, (2014), p. 121.

<sup>17</sup> E. Drott, 'The Politics of Presque Rein', in *Sound Commitments: Avant-Garde Music and the Sixties*, Robert Adlington (eds.) Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009. p. 146.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 153

gradually increase in volume until they are the focal point of the piece by the end. Most of the other sounds come and go in waves, sometimes overlapping each other and sometimes appearing again at different points throughout the piece.

*Presque rein No. 1* was recorded in the midst of the student uprising of 1968. In 'Sound Commitments: Avant-garde Music and the Sixties', Eric Drott writes that "There is little doubt that the student uprising and general strike of May-June 1968 impressed itself upon Ferrari."<sup>19</sup> Ferrari was involved with the movement both as a protestor himself and as a sound artist, as he would "...take his microphone and portable tape recorder along with him into the streets to capture the protests"<sup>20</sup> The political intention of *Presque Rein* isn't apparent in listening to the piece, but the protests inspired a cultural change in the way Ferrari considered his role as a composer. Drott writes that "...Ferrari's comments from the time reflect a widely held belief in the necessity of changing the audience's relationship to art, of rendering it more active."<sup>21</sup> Ferrari attempted this in his *Presque rein* series by attempting to make an art form that could be created and listened to by anyone. His use of affordable and portable tape recorders reflected the attitude of the 1960s, with the rise of pop art, "...there was a growing consensus that access to and participation in culture was a right to which all were entitled..."<sup>22</sup> This attitude did not reflect the approach of *musique concrète*, which was another reason why it was such a stylistic shift for Ferrari. The *Presque rein* series did not require avant-garde knowledge or experience to be enjoyed: "The only culture required is that which each person possesses: the capacity to recall his own memories."<sup>23</sup>

*Presque rein* translates to "almost nothing", and this minimalist aesthetic is a theme in the series. The reason Ferrari was compelled to record the small village of Vela Luka was due to "...the stillness that fell over the village at night"<sup>24</sup> and so his attempt at a sonic representation was purposefully minimal. The piece therefore feels very relaxed, calming and zen-like. Despite all the sounds appearing naturally, there is very little dissonance in the piece, which may not have been the case had it been recorded in a busy city. The sounds blend into each other so naturally it could easily be mistaken for a simple twenty-minute

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 154.

recording, but the careful placing of the sounds ensure that it is always interesting; there is always something happening.

This use of field recording for purely musical listening had not been approached in this manner before, certainly not in the practices of *musique concrète*. Ferrari's new direction would go on to influence a number of composers, such as Barry Traux and Hildegard Westerkamp, to work with environmental sounds. One of the most important impacts of Ferrari's work was its undeniable influence in R. Murray Schafer's explorations of acoustic ecology and his coining of the term 'soundscape' in the late 1970s. When Schafer speaks of the soundscape, he is describing the immersive environment of sounds that is audible to the human ear. Ferrari says of *Presque rein* that "It is a soundscape work, only I never gave it this name, nor did I need to create a theory about my approach"<sup>25</sup> and despite Schafer never acknowledging Ferrari as an influence, it is clear that he is theorising what Ferrari practiced earlier in the decade.

In "The Music of the Environment", R. Murray Schafer's explores "...music as a search for the harmonizing influence of sounds in the world about us."<sup>26</sup> In this search he looks at the rural soundscapes of a time when the world soundscape was untouched by the industrial revolution, and speaks about the importance of "...quiet periods for mental and spiritual recomposure."<sup>27</sup> His theory for overcoming the noise pollution affecting our world soundscape is to "...let nature sing for itself"<sup>28</sup> and encourage the use of sound objects that harmonise with nature such as wind chimes and Aeolian harps. These theories have been put into practice by sound artists such as Max Eastley and Andres Bosshard, whose works rely on nature and environmental harmony. The influence of Luc Ferrari and his early use of the soundscape is inescapable in these works. Artists such as Chris Watson use the same template for composition as Ferrari and is considered one of the leading artists in field recording today. His influence has also spread to experimental music, such as Brian Eno's development of ambient music in the 1970s and 1980s and more recently, the work of Wolfgang Voigt as Gas, which uses environmental sounds as much as it uses electronic sounds. The compositional techniques and the output of both of these artists reflect the minimalist approach of the *Presque rein* series.

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<sup>25</sup> Robindoré, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> R. M. Schafer, 'The Music of the Environment', in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, C. Cox and D. Warner (eds.), New York/ London, Continuum, 2004, p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 36.

The influence of Luc Ferrari can be heard everywhere today, and it is evident from his early rejection of traditional musical values as well as his rejection of the *musique concrète* style, that he was bound to create his own unique vision of composition that would go on to be one of the most innovative and underappreciated movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in both music and sound art.



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**Sound works / Installations**

Andres Bosshard- *Klanggarten* (2001)

Max Eastley- *Handmade Aeolian Harp* (1977)

Brian Eno- *Discreet Music* (1978)

Luc Ferrari- *Music Promenade* (1964-1969)

Luc Ferrari- *Presque rien No. 1 'Le Lever du jour au bord de la mer* (1967-1970)

Luc Ferrari- *Presque rien No.2 – ainsi continue la nuit dans ma tête multiple* (1977)

Luc Ferrari- *Presque rien avec filles* (1989)

Luc Ferrari- *Ina-grm 245172* (1995)

Gas- *Pop* (2000) Chris Watson- *In St. Cuthbert's Time* (2013)