



Entrevista con Tristan Murail: Diálogo y Reflexión en Torno a la Música Espectral

INTERVIEW WITH TRISTAN MURAIL: DIALOGUE AND THOUGHTS ON SPECTRAL MUSIC

ENTREVISTA COM TRISTAN MURAIL: DIÁLOGO E REFLEXÃO EM TORNO À MÚSICA ESPECTRAL

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Abstract

This interview was given by French composer Tristan Murail during the International Laboratory of Contemporary Music, which took place in Bogotá, Colombia between October and November of 2004. Conducted by Ricardo A. Velasco, the interview creates a dialogue with who is widely considered to be the main exponent of Spectral Music, addressing fundamental issues for the understanding of one of the most complex currents in both contemporary musical practice and acoustic research.

Resumen

Esta entrevista fue concedida por el compositor francés Tristan Murail en el marco del Laboratorio Internacional de Música Contemporánea que tuvo lugar entre Octubre y Noviembre de 2004 en Bogotá, Colombia. Dirigida por Ricardo A. Velasco, la entrevista constituye un diálogo con quien ha sido ampliamente considerado como el principal exponente de la Música Espectral, abordando cuestiones fundamentales para el entendimiento de una de las más complejas corrientes tanto en la práctica musical como en la investigación acústica contemporáneas.

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Resumo

Esta entrevista foi concedida pelo compositor Francês Tristan Murail no marco do Laboratório Internacional de Música Contemporânea que teve lugar entre Outubro e Novembro do ano 2004 em Bogotá, Colombia. Dirigida por Ricardo A. Velasco, a entrevista constitui um diálogo com quem há sido amplamente considerado como o principal expoente da Música Espectral, abordando questões fundamentais para o entendimento de uma das mais complexas correntes tanto na prática musical como na investigação acústica contemporâneas.

SOBRE TRISTAN MURAIL.

Nació en Le Havre, Francia en 1947. Después de realizar estudios en ciencias económicas y políticas, ingresó en 1967 al Conservatorio Nacional de París, estudiando composición bajo la dirección de Olivier Messiaen. Su obra temprana fue enfocada al desarrollo de volúmenes de masas sonoras y densas texturas que surgen a partir de diferentes técnicas de creación electrónica. En 1973 fundó, junto a Michael Lévinas y Roger Tessier, el colectivo musical "L'itineraire", el cual se constituyó en un medio de experimentación y una extensión de su trabajo de investigación para la conjunción de instrumentación acústica con el uso de recursos electrónicos y la composición asistida por computador. A partir de 1980, su carrera toma un giro definitivo al vincularse como investigador y compositor en el instituto francés IRCAM, uno de los más prominentes centros para la investigación en acústica y tecnologías musicales. Su obra musical se ve enriquecida y se desarrolla en torno al uso de tecnologías de sistemas para el análisis del fenómeno acústico y para la asistencia en nuevos métodos de creación musical. A partir de este estrecho vínculo entre tecnología, investigación y práctica musical surge la música espectral, de la cual Murail es su más destacado compositor, junto al también francés Gerard Grisey. En la actualidad Murail es Profesor Titular en la cátedra Francis Goelet de composición en la Universidad de Columbia en Nueva York.

Durante su visita a Colombia, en el marco del Laboratorio Internacional de Música Contemporânea que tuvo lugar entre el 25 de Octubre y el 6 de Noviembre de 2004 en Bogotá, el compositor Tristan Murail concedió una extensa entrevista al compositor y productor musical de la Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Ricardo A. Velasco. A partir de una investigación sobre el contexto cultural e histórico en que surgen el conjunto de técnicas y métodos de investigación y composición musical que ha llegado a conocerse como Música Espectral, el autor busca dar voz a quien se considera su creador y más distinguido compositor, llevando a cabo una revisión y un diálogo en torno a diversas problemáticas que surgen en el seno de esta compleja práctica musical.

Singularmente, la entrevista busca entender la articulación entre la práctica y la teoría de la música espectral dentro del particular contexto en que se gestan estos campos, cuya relativa autonomía ha estado desde sus orígenes directamente relacionada con la desarrollada institucionalización de las artes musicales y la cultura en Francia y en la actualidad se articula dentro del marco de apoyo a la investigación de prestigiosas

instituciones universitarias, como la Universidad de Columbia en Nueva York. De igual forma, el diálogo con Tristan Murail explora la compleja relación entre las preocupaciones estéticas del compositor y los determinantes tecnológicos que enmarcan los problemas centrales sobre investigación acústica y creación artística dentro del “campo de producción cultural restringida” (Bourdieu, 1993) que constituye hoy la música contemporánea. En el curso de la entrevista se tocan cuestiones esenciales para entender algunos de los cambios más radicales en el pensamiento estético contemporáneo, como el giro crucial en los Estudios Musicales que con la incorporación de diversos procesos electrónicos a la composición, ha terminado por desplazar el interés y énfasis analítico de la representación musical al objeto sonoro como tal. Así, el diálogo desarrollado durante la entrevista invita a una revisión crítica que enmarca la relativa autonomía del fenómeno estético dentro de un conjunto de prácticas musicales institucionalizadas y estructuradas por determinantes tecnológicos en constante evolución.

Ricardo Velasco:

In the 18th century, when Jean-Phillipe Rameau tried to formalize a theory of tonal harmony based on acoustical principles, tonal music had been in practice for more than a century and it was still in the process of development. Do you consider that the theory of spectral music could generate a musical practice as well established as the practice of tonal music was?

Tristan Murail:

No. I don't think so, I think this is a completely different issue. Spectral music is not a system, anyway. It is more a method than a system of any kind, it is a way of approaching sound and mostly harmony, so it is not going to be anything like tonal music, I am afraid.

R.V.: Is there a theory of harmony that you are trying to develop, or certain coherent aesthetic principles?

T.M.: Perhaps I should try to make a comparison, a metaphor. At this moment in the history of music everything was possible. So you need something to guide you in your search, you know. So imagine you are in a desert or perhaps the rain forest. You know there is something, some treasure lying here but you don't know how to go to it. So you just take, arbitrary, some direction. This is what I call the methods I am proposing with spectral music, for instance. It does not mean there are laws to be discovered or anything of the sort. I think tonal music is a kind of an accident in the history of music. It is the music of a little region of the world for a little period of time and for lots of people it looks like something universal and like the absolute truth, or something you have to destroy because you want to do something else and then replace with something equally powerful. But I think all these things are wrong ideas, and what we have now is something completely open and you have to, as I said, find your way in this jungle in some way. And in doing so, you may uncover some

beautiful things, perhaps wonderful sounds but it does not mean it is a new system bound to replace an old one.

R.V.: How has the relationship between theory and practice developed during the evolution of spectral music?

T.M.: Well, I think theory and practice nurture each other. Obviously, music is mostly a practice. Theory usually comes after. So when we think of tonal music, as you mention before, tonal music was there before there was a theory of tonal music. But if you think, if you try to construct the laws to understand why something is working, then you build the theory which can give you the possibility to go further, to enrich your practice. So the theory can help you develop your practice, then you find your things and you have to theorize them again. It is like going back and forth between theory and practice and I think it is a little bit what I have been doing in all these years.

R.V.: What socio-cultural events do you consider were relevant in the development of spectral music?

T.M.: I am not sure how much socio-cultural events really do influence music, specially the kind of music that we do. I suppose that it is more important for commercial or popular music. For our music, really, I am not sure. I am teaching at Columbia University – as you know – and sometimes I teach a course called “Music after 1945” and in so doing I read books explaining that there was a relationship between the war and what happened after the war. I am not convinced [of this argument] and I feel that total serialism or aleatory music would have happened anyway. I think if something made possible the music I am doing it is not really socio-cultural but rather technical. For instance, the development of electronic and computer techniques, that does have something to do, of course, with spectral music, because we need these techniques, these methods to create what we are doing. So how much you can call that socio-cultural, I don't know.

R.V.: Is there a spectral school?

T.M.: I don't think you can call it a school. School means that you have, like what we said before about tonal music, a body of rules or at least practices that everybody would agree upon, which is not the case. This is why I always say that there is not such thing as spectral music per se. There are spectral methods or spectral techniques and then you can do whatever you want with them. And the music, which is written by people who are interested in spectral techniques, can be extremely different from each other.

R.V.: According to Julian Anderson's article “A Provisional History of Spectral Music” (Anderson, 2000), there are two approaches to spectral music, represented by the group *L'itinéraire* and the Feedback Studios in Cologne. What differences and similarities do you find, between the approaches to spectral music developed by both schools? Was there any kind of feedback between the two groups?

T.M.: Julian Anderson is referring to the beginnings of these spectral techniques. I suppose there were more than two groups. *L'itinaire*, first, was not a group around spectral music. It was an ensemble, a group of performers and composers, and a lot of people in this group did not do this kind of music at all. With respect to the Feedback Studios, I cannot really speak for them. You have to ask Mesías Maiguashca [who was present and to be interviewed later on]. We did know each other, we had some contact, but I don't think we exchanged very much about methods or ideas but simply were aware of the existence of each other. There were other approaches to these spectral techniques at the same time. In Denmark and in Rumania, for instance, there were groups of composers who used spectral techniques. So, I guess the idea was in the air. It had been prepared by very famous composers such as Stockhausen in one side and Ligeti in the other side. I think the main difference, perhaps, between people around *L'itinaire* and the people in Cologne, was that Stockhausen directly influenced the later, while in Paris there was the influence of different composers, especially Ligeti. The approach was perhaps very different in this respect.

R.V.: What aesthetic elements in the music of composers such as György Ligeti or Iannis Xenakis were crucial as an influence in your early musical thought?

T.M.: Well, I think the crucial element was the liberation from traditional rhetoric. So, in the music of these two composers at that time, in the seventies, you found the use of masses of sound and notions like architecture or sculpture of sound. So they were not longer using things like counterpoint, for instance, and they directly try to carve the music or carve the sound. So I suppose this was what I was mostly interested in and there was also a kind of freedom towards pitch. Xenakis set very different ways of using pitch: he calculated things, he used mathematic formulas and computers. Ligeti, on the other hand, had a very intuitive way of dealing with pitch and, as a result, his harmonies sounded very refreshing and he dared introducing things like octaves and clear harmonies in his music. In a time when most music was written in dodecaphonic style with lots of harsh harmonies, the approaches of these composers were like a blow of fresh air.

R.V.: Do you consider yourself to be a "sculptor of sound"?

T.M.: Well, sometimes yes, I do. At that time I probably did. Then, in the late eighties and early nineties, I started introducing lines into my music, in fact. With lines, I mean melodies. Before that, I was quite afraid of falling back into all clichés, into rhetoric all stuff. So I did not use melodic structures. Afterwards, I started introducing melodies and clear harmony progressions - functional harmony. So I don't know if these are sculptures or not. They are certainly different from older pieces where masses of sound and processes were more important.

R.V.: Do you find any similarities between the approach of spectral composers to acoustical theorization with other attempts in the same path which came up during the ear-

ly 20th century, as for instance Paul Hindemith's combination tones theory or Henry Cowell's rhythmic structures based on numeric relations of the harmony spectrum? Have these theories influenced your own music in any way?

T.M.: Well, certainly they tried to deal with the same things, but their approach was very naïve. You can criticize lots of thing in their approach. Hindemith, as you mentioned, spoke of tones and harmony series, but he omitted the seventh harmony because, you know, it was not tempered. So that did not do any good, in the end, to his search. Cowell was also extremely naïve in his approach in linking rhythms and harmonic series. Stockhausen did in fact exactly the same thing in the fifties and he wrote about it. I don't agree at all with his approach.

R.V.: What concepts of contemporary philosophy and science have influenced your musical thought? For example, have you found any links between theories of the spectrum of light and you own theoretical approaches to sound spectra?

T.M.: Well, there are some similarities. And that is why we speak of sound spectrum. But I think the similarities are limited to conceptual comparison, because light and sound are very different phenomena. The main issue in both cases is that you are in front of an object that you perceived as one, as an entity. But then, when you start analyzing it, you find that it is composed of many things inside: all the spectral arrays for light, all the partials for sound. This in fact could be compared to the approach of the science of chaos. Let's take an example. You are looking at something, let's say a tree. For you, a tree is a tree, is an object. You can recognize a tree, you can kind of memorize it, remember it. Now, if you start analyzing a tree, it is incredibly complex. In my music, sometimes, I am trying to build trees. I want to create objects which are quite simple for the perception, but which at the same time, are very rich and complex. And in doing so, I have to do very complex procedures, create complex algorithms and develop complex methods in order to do something simple for the perception. Simple, but rich.

R.V.: How do you assimilate this theoretical conceptions from the science of chaos? For instance, do you apply Mandelbrot equations or fractal division models?

T.M.: I have tried to see what teachings we could use from these theories associated with the idea of chaos, which all revolved around the same principles: simplicity and complexity. I have tried to apply fractal division especially for form and rhythm but I am very careful with that too, because you cannot easily transfer something which is from the visual domain into the sound domain, because space and time are not the same thing for the perception. Most of the times, when you look at a painting, you can embrace its visual field almost in one look, but you have to live a moment of your life in order to read or listen to a piece of music. Time is not space, it is not something you can just measure in a mathematical way. That is the limit where mathematical processes applied to music have to stop. You have to deal with perception, perception of time, psychology, cognition and –perhaps this is answering other aspect of your former question– the phenomenology of perception.

R.V.: What other contemporary music tendencies do you think have sympathetic elements to spectral music?

T.M.: Well, there are so many forms of trance music now... [laughter], it is so hard to answer a question like this. But there is something I could mention perhaps. When you deal with computers, when you want to create sounds with computers, you have to use some kind of spectral methods, unless you just process already existing sounds with conventional software. But if you want to synthesize sounds and you want to understand what you are doing with sound, you have to use these sorts of methods too. Although that does not mean that you are writing spectral music.

In other context, some critics have compared aspects of early spectral music with some features of minimalism such as the emphasis in lengthy, gradual processes, but I think this is a misunderstanding. It is true that in the beginnings of, let's call it spectral music for simplicity, in some of the early pieces by Gerard Grisey and some of my pieces there was slow motion in time, because we wanted to build processes, we wanted people to understand what was going on. Therefore, at that time, it is true that there was a kind of similarity between spectral music and the use of processes in minimalism. But that was the only similarity, because at that time I did not – and I still don't – agree with the idea that in order to make a process or development you have to nullify all the other dimensions of music. By that I mean the use of extremely simple harmonies, for instance, why does minimal music have to be modal? There is no reason why. The music that Grisey wrote in his late years and the music I have been writing for almost twenty years now is very different. Sometimes you find slow motion, sometimes very fast motion and it is really going further and further away from minimal music.

R.V.: Composers such as Philip Glass and Steve Reich have created their own ensembles for the performance and recording of their music, which in turn has had an important influence in their actual musical language. In your own case, have you created relationships with particular ensembles, musicians or conductors in order to record or perform your music?

T.M.: We created *L'itinéraire* in the seventies. It was not exclusively for doing this kind of music, but at that time we did work with instrumentalists, and sometimes we found things together. For instance, we found new techniques when we tried to understand what was going on while using extended techniques. And now, there are ensembles that kind of dedicate themselves to this kind of music. This does not mean that they play just that, but they are especially good at it. I could mention for instance two of them. There is an ensemble in France, which is called *Court Circuit*, created by composer Philip Hurel who is part of the spectral trend. There is one conductor, Pierre-André Valade. They are extremely good at playing this kind of music. And recently, a student of mine at Columbia University also created an ensemble called *Argento*. They have played my music and we are now recording a disc of my music, in fact. These two ensembles have been spending lots of time studying the techniques and the tuning needed for this sort of music, and they have become very good at it.

R.V.: Do you supervise the recordings of your music?

T.M.: Of course I do. In fact, I think this is the most important thing. For me, the score is not very important, what is important is the music when it reaches the ears of the listeners. So I think recordings, compact discs or whatever it will be in the future are more important than scores or concerts because they deliver the real thing, show what this music is really about, so I am very, very careful with supervising this processes.

R.V.: How do you exploit the possibilities of the modern recording studio? How do you direct the recording processes of your more complex orchestral works?

T.M.: Well, orchestral works cannot be recorded in studios. It would be too expensive. So most of the times, we use concert performances or rehearsals and then try to piece them together using the best takes. And sometimes, I do have to process them, for instance, get through the wrong notes [laughter] and this sort of things. With modern techniques you can really do amazing things. But with small ensembles, I prefer to do the studio process. In fact, we have recently recorded a piece for 19 players with the Argento. We did a multi-track recording in order to be able to rebalance or remix, add some reverb if needed, etc. Yes, I take full advantage of all the studio techniques in order to recreate the ideal performance of the piece. I am not going to cheat; I just want to recreate the ideal performance of the piece.

R.V.: Spectral music is linked to technological development. How has this fact affected the creative process of music composition in spectral music?

T.M.: In a way, I would say that computers liberated spectral music. When I started using these techniques it was very hard to do it, because you had to do everything by hand, do calculations with pocket calculators and this sort of things. In the eighties, I could use computers at places like IRCAM, but computers science was still developing in early stages at that time. You had to go to those places in order to work with computers. But a studio is not an ideal place for composing. Soon after I completed my first work at IRCAM in 1983, I bought a small home computer, and I started programming in order to help me making my calculations, researching spectral rhythms, etc. Since then, I can practically do everything at home. Sometimes I just need technical advice. Therefore I work with computer scientists, assistants from places like IRCAM in order to go further in the research and analysis of sound. Most of my colleagues do the same. So I think this is crucial for the creative process, to be free from the constraints of the studio.

Right now, I am in the process of writing a new piece for large ensemble and electronic sounds and I want to go a bit further with electronics, beyond the techniques I already know. I would like to discover more, especially about the analysis and re-synthesis of complex sounds, sounds that are hard to analyze, like different types of noises. I have to develop new approaches, new methods in order to do it. For that reason, I am working with five different people. One of them is a student of mine at Columbia University who has recently devised a piece of amazing software for the

analysis of complex sounds. So, I want to make a bridge between the potentialities for analysis offered by this new technology and my own systems for processing analysis data. I also will be working with a computer scientist in France, where the piece will be produced eventually, in order to improve my sound re-synthesis methods. All this can give you an idea of the many changes in the creative process as a result of technology developments, which go beyond conventional notions of composition.

R.V. Finally, what is your opinion about the composition level in Colombia, from your experience of being part of the jury during a national composition contest in our country?

T.M.: In fact, I have been very surprised by the composition skills and the level of people here. I must tell you that I am favorably impressed. There is lots of talent here. I am also very impressed by the questions people ask, the level of thinking about composition and music. Even in the context of our interaction today, the questions you have asked me are not the questions people usually ask. I was also surprised by that. So, there is a great deal of potential here. It seems that the main problem you have here is information. If I compare this visit with many other visits I did to other countries during the last few years, for instance in East Europe, I think what I saw here was better than what I saw in places like Slovakia or Poland. So I am quite optimistic about composition in Colombia, about what Colombian composers will be able to achieve in the years to come.

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