

The Acousmonium: Another
Utopia, Devoted to Pure
Listening

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ACOUSMONIUM

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Acousmonium
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The Sonic Acts festival opening event is dedicated to acousmatic compositions featuring commissioned works by Okkyung Lee and BJ Nilsen, new work by Thomas Ankersmit, legendary sound pieces by Dick Raaijmakers, Eliane Radigue, and Régis Larivière, and acousmatic live performances by Beatriz Ferreyra, Anthea Caddy & Judith Hamann, François Bonnet, and Keith Fullerton Whitman.

Sonic Acts has a long history of exploring and presenting expanded audiovisual experiences and sound experiments. As part of Hereafter, the 2019 edition, the festival revisits the legendary Acousmonium, an 80-speaker orchestra from the National Audiovisual Institute's Musical Research Group in Paris (Groupe de recherches musicales, Institut national de l'audiovisuel, or Ina GRM) with legendary pieces by Eliane Radigue, Beatriz Ferreyra, and others, and with commissioned new works by authors such as BJ Nilsen and Okkyung Lee. This event, celebrating 25 years of Sonic Acts, was a perfect opportunity to search through the festival archives and figure out the connections between Ina GRM, the pioneering centre for electro-acoustic research, and the festival, which since its beginning in 1994 has served as a platform for experiments in the audiovisual field. This essay looks back on their shared history, and features archival documentation of performances as well as excerpts from interviews with authors Gilles Aubry and Hilary Jeffery about their experiences composing works for the Acousmonium.

Founded by Pierre Schaeffer in 1958, Musical Research Group (GRM) was one of several theoretical and experimental groups operating under the umbrella of the Research Service at the French Public Broadcasting Office (ORTF, 1960–74). Some of the other groups founded at the time were Image Research Group (Groupe de recherches image, GRI), which focused on audiovisual questions, and Technology Research Group (Groupe de recherches technologiques, GRT), which focused on the development of new electronic instruments.

In its long history, composers such as Daniel Teruggi, François Bayle, and more recently current director François Bonnet, who will perform or 'diffuse' two pieces at Sonic Acts 2019, have managed GRM. GRM was focused on researching sonology and electroacoustic music. It was founded on the idea of *études* (studies or exercises) rather than compositions, with the aim of exploring how the eye and ear work and how seeing or listening is perceived.

Devoted to production and creation, the GRM remained based on practice, and could be summed up by the catchphrase 'do and listen'. Exploring Schaeffer's ideas of *musique concrète*, acousmatic music, as well as other audible phenomena and music in general (including non-Western music), the GRM remains active today as a leading laboratory of sound experimentation that successfully connects to a younger generation of contemporary artists. The group has counted musicians such as Luc Ferrari, Iannis Xenakis, and the recently deceased Bernard Parmegiani among its members.¹

1 *Groupe de recherches musicales*, text published at the Club Transmediale website (2014), www.ctm-festival.de/archive/festival-editions/ctm-2014-dis-continuity/specials/groupe-des-recherches-musicales.









Ina GRM and Sonic Acts share a sixteen-year long relationship, starting in 2003 at the De Balie, Amsterdam. For its ninth edition, Sonic Light, Sonic Acts in collaboration with GRI organised a film programme dedicated to Pierre Schaeffer. The films in the programme came from Schaeffer's personal collection.

Pierre Schaeffer is famous for being the founder of the *musique concrète* movement and is now regarded by many to be one of the precursors in thinking about the concept of 'sampling'. Besides being a composer and theorist, he was also the head of the *Groupe de recherche images* of the French broadcasting corporation, a department doing research into future forms of television and where about 1000 experimental films were made. Most of these films were never shown on television and are now locked away in a state archive (as if dangerous to mankind). The programme comprises two beautiful cinematic essays on the relationship between image and sound, two very different works produced by the GRI, and finally, *La trièdre fertile*, a film version, based on oscilloscope images, of the sounds in Schaeffer's tape composition with the same name.²

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The Acousmonium is a sound diffusion system, or the loudspeaker orchestra, designed in 1974 by François Bayle for the GRM at the Maison de Radio France. It contains 80 speakers of different sizes, placed across a stage at varying heights and distances, and provides a very complete and complex system for sound projecting acousmatic and electroacoustic music or instrumental music transformed by computers. Acousmatic music diverges from the standards of instrumental music, composed in a studio and projected live through a constellation of speakers.

Arie Altena recounted aspects of spatial sound that the Acousmonium embraced for the 2011 Kontraste Festival – curated and organised by Sonic Acts in Krems, Austria – in his introduction to the 2011 festival publication, *The Aelectrosonic*.

Many of the composers who started working with electronic sounds in the 1950s experimented with the spatialisation of sound. Stockhausen famously used rotating loudspeakers to achieve a space effect. Schaeffer and Pierre Henry distributed speakers throughout a space. Their engineer, Jacques Poullin, built a

potentiomètre, a system using induction coils to spatially control the sound. On stage, the potentiomètre allowed a performer to position a sound either to the left or right, above or behind the audience, by moving a small transmitter towards or away from four somewhat larger receiver coils arranged around the performer. The effect is that a sense of space is created for the listener.

François Bayle, who took over the direction of the GRM in 1966, further explored this approach and in 1974 commissioned the design of a massive loudspeaker orchestra. The Acousmonium is an orchestra of up to 100 speakers of different sizes placed across a stage at varying heights and distances. Their placement is based on their range, power, quality, and their directional characteristics. When built, Bayle stated: 'It puts you inside the sound. It's like the interior of a sound universe.' The Acousmonium was conceived as 'another utopia, devoted to pure listening [...] as a projection area, arranged for the immersion in sound, and a spatialised polyphony.'³ Such a spatial sound landscape is just one step away from a sound or audiovisual installation that can be explored interactively by an audience.⁴

The Acousmonium was presented for the first time in the Netherlands in 2008, at Paradiso in Amsterdam, as part of Sonic Acts XII, titled The Cinematic Experience. The evening programme was curated in collaboration with GRM and featured *La roue ferris* by Bernard Parmegiani, *Sambas pour un jour de pluie* by Michel Chion, *Turpituda* by Ivo Malec, *Symphonie pour un homme seul* by Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry, Eliane Radigue's *Elemental II* performed by Kasper T. Toeplitz, *Cronicas del tiempo* by Diego Losa, *Cercles* by François Bayle, *Spaces of Mind* by Daniel Teruggi, *GRM: Experience' Echoes* by Christian Zanési, and live performances by Christian Fennesz and Hans-Joachim Roedelius.

Daniel Teruggi returned for Sonic Acts XIII, The Poetics of Space, to discuss how positioning sound sources in space permitted the creation of new perspectives on and conceptions of the effects space could exert on music during the *Architecture of Sound* panel at the festival conference. Teruggi gave an account of how, at GRM, musique concrète evolved alongside the sound systems and instruments that were used to compose the music, spending some time tracing the history of the Acousmonium, from its first concert in 1974 to its cyclical set up as Cycle Acousmatique in the 1980s and to its 2010 iteration.

3 François Bayle, *Musique acousmatique, propositions... positions* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1993).

4 Arie Altena, 'Imaginary Landscapes of Electrical Nature or, a Journey Along Some of the Inspirations', in *The Aelectrosonic* (Amsterdam: Sonic Acts Press, 2011).





Sonic Acts continued exploring the Acousmonium in 2011 at the Imaginary Landscapes edition of the Kontraste festival. Over two evenings, 14 and 15 October 2015, at Minoritenkirche in Krems, Sonic Acts presented sessions on pioneers of electronic music, such as Iannis Xenakis, Luc Ferrari, Gottfried Michael Koenig, Ivo Malec, and Eliane Radigue; Dutch electronic compositions featuring Jan Boerman, Dick Raaijmakers, and Kees Tazelaar; contemporary GRM with Daniel Teruggi, Christian Zanési, and Benjamin Thigpen; and a series of new commissioned works and live performances by Jim O'Rourke, Gilles Aubry, Keith Fullerton Whitman, Thomas Lehn & Marcus Schmickler, Hilary Jeffery, and KTL. Keith Fullerton Whitman's *Rythmes Naturels*, which was commissioned for that occasion, will be presented for the first time in the Netherlands at the opening of the Hereafter edition of Sonic Acts in 2019.

Before the premiere of his new composition, *L'amplification des âmes* (amplification of souls) – commissioned by Kontraste and Sonic Acts – Gilles Aubry spoke with Arie Altena about his new piece. He worked with various recordings of religious services and urban environments in Kinshasa, Congo, which he later combined, overlaid, and spatialised for playback on a multichannel sound installation – in this case, the Acousmonium. Arie Altena's interview with Gilles Aubry is featured in the 2012 Sonic Acts publication, *Travelling Time*; a shorter, Dutch version was also published in *Gonzo Circus*. Altena inquires on the use of Acousmonium in Aubry's piece, in which the 'amplification of souls' refers quite literally to amplification through technology. Aubry expands on the title's relation to French acousmatic music, especially that created by the generation of François Bayle:

The Acousmonium is all about immersion in sound, which has now been adopted by commercial cinema. I thought it would be interesting to use space and the spatialisation of sound as a way to conceptually organise the different sound sources in *L'amplification des âmes*. With the Acousmonium, I can create an immersive décor, which conveys the feeling of being in the city. This illusion is shattered when you hear the video recordings made just in front of a television. The spatialisation of the sound works well and is quite efficient because you can present one idea in one place and another one somewhere else in the space. Sometimes in the piece, you hear a sound on one side and something that contradicts it on the other. This creates tensions. But of course, it's sound; it doesn't stay in one place as images do. The sounds merge into each other. I tried to structure the piece not only according to musical aspects

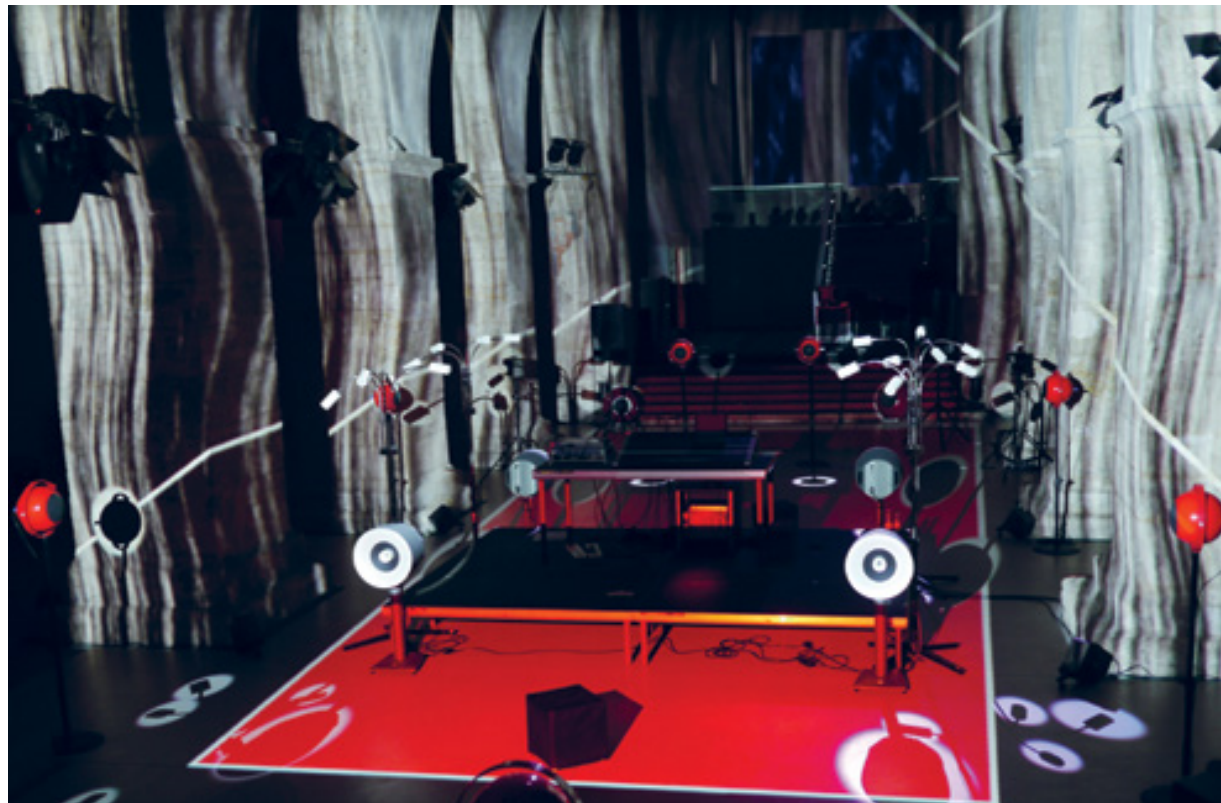


Photo © Ayako Nishibori.

but also in terms of discursive ideas. The piece consists of five parts. In the beginning, I introduce elements of the city soundscape, including the amplified voices of street preachers. Then it moves into the church, where you hear several extracts from a soul deliverance service. From here it goes into the cinema and then back into the church. In the fourth part, you hear recordings from the prophet's archive and the most intense moments of the ceremony. You don't hear any religious sounds in the last part; instead, you hear sounds from daily life. I recorded the working environments of the women who attend the Libambu church. You hear hairdressers, women selling stuff on the market. You hear them talking and, as you probably don't know their language, it will sound exotic. But it's really down to earth at the beginning and at the end. There are very characteristic moments in the piece, such as the sound check in the church. You hear 'one, one, check, Jesus, Jesus'. At the end, the singer has a bit of spare time, and lets go. He sings like a baby and about a woman, and there is a weird, Hawaiian guitar player. That's where these stereotypes start to change.⁵

As a trombonist Hillary Jeffery plays in many different ensembles, ranging from Catherine Christer Hennix's *The Chora(s)an Time-Court Mirage*, Zeitkratzer, to *Mouse on Mars*. He works in and in-between the fields of improvised, electronic, and contemporary composed music. The

5 Arie Altena, 'The Amplification of the Soul through Technology', in *Travelling Time* (Amsterdam, Sonic Acts Press, 2011).



following excerpt, published in the *Travelling Time* publication, is from Arie Altena's interview with Hilary Jeffery at Kontraste in Krems after the premiere of his electronic composition, *Mesmeric Forest*.

Mesmeric Forest is a soundscape of an imaginary electronic forest. [...] I call it a forest because the material suggests possible sounds and atmospheres of a forest. The piece uses synthetic sounds, which makes it an imaginary electrical forest. I call it 'mesmeric' because I intend to induce something like a light form of hypnosis.

The idea for making this type of soundscape originates from my research and work into making scores. I'm trying to find alternatives to approaching, perceiving, and reading music in a linear way. When music is read through notation in the Western tradition, it is typically done so in a linear fashion. I've been trying to get around this in my work. I came up with the idea of making scores which function in a similar way to maps. One can explore a territory with a map in an intuitive, interactive, and non-linear way, and I have been trying to apply this to explorations of specific musical territories. I have tried this idea on several occasions with different musicians. I made a map of an imaginary city for instance, as well as a forest, and I used these scores for ensemble playing. I see *Mesmeric Forest* as part of a larger project that includes using maps as scores.



The next stage in this work will have the same soundscape plus a new map describing possible representations of this abstract forest. The map could then be used by listeners to find their way in the composition and orient themselves in the space created by the sounds, as well as functioning as a score for musicians who perform live with the soundscape.⁶

This Sonic Acts festival edition in 2019 delves back into this legendary sound system, further surveying the possibilities of ‘another utopia, devoted to pure “listening”’.⁷ The dedicated exploration of the Acousmonium is simultaneously a study in the practices of expanded audiovisual performances and an observation of the artistic and cultural relationships with technology. For years before the spread of multi-channel sound systems, the Acousmonium offered a larger audience the unique chance to enjoy the acoustic properties of diffused spatial sound in a way that was previously only possible for ‘a single listener situated at the perfect location’.⁸ Perhaps the loudspeaker orchestra can now be considered as a practical framework for diffusing artistic and theoretical practices in the entangled realities that Sonic Acts explores.

⁶ Arie Altena, ‘Opening up New Spaces, Exploring Time’, in *Travelling Time* (Amsterdam, Sonic Acts Press, 2011).

⁷ François Bayle on the note of the CD sleeve in 1993: ‘Another utopia, devoted to pure “listening”’: the Acousmonium, designed in the early ‘70s (20 years already!) as a penetrable “projection area”, arranged with a view to immersion in sound, to spatialised polyphony, which is articulated and directed.’ Source: <http://www.iac.lu.se/projects/acousmatic-lab>.

⁸ Nick Collins, *The Cambridge Companion to Electronic Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).