

*Acousmatique &
Soundscape Composition*

musique concrète



acousmatique

Acousmatic music is the modern evolution of musique concrète. When Schaeffer began composing with sound in the 1940s, it slowly became apparent that the traditional models of acoustic composition did not apply well. Apart from the fact that composers were no longer dealing with collections of notes (either scales or chords), the entire conception of musique concrète was different. Schaeffer began with the sound (the concrete), and after applying various studio techniques (editing, filtering, reversal, etc.), he began to apply musical techniques to their combinations (repetition, transposition, reordering, etc.) to create musical structures (the abstract). This is exactly the opposite of the acoustic tradition, in which a composer begins with the abstract (the notes) and only creates sound when the composition is performed. Listeners could not apply their conditioned responses to the new music, and thus they required a new mode of interpreting the sounds they heard.

elektronische musik



musique concrete



electroacoustic music

Since elektronische musik and musique concrète merged and came together with live electronic performance and later computer music, the term electroacoustic music has been used to refer to any music created using electricity in some meaningful way. The designation now refers less to a specific style or aesthetic conception than to a general method of creation. A concert of electroacoustic music today may be as varied as a concert of acoustic music.

“Cinema for the ears”

By the mid-1970s, a number of composers who descended from the original musique concrète tradition felt a need to designate their conception clearly in terms of their methodology, syntax, and tools. In order to separate their music from performance-oriented electroacoustic music, which included new instruments, live electronics, and even instrumentalist and tape combinations, François Bayle suggested adopting the term acousmatique. Musique concrète may have been a preferable term, since it was well entrenched, but it already referred to a historical period. Therefore, it could be confused not only with the period but also with the aesthetic of the time—exclusion of electronic sources—which was not part of the acousmatic ideal.

This new music was to be considered the “art of projected sounds which is shot and developed in the studio, projected in a hall, like cinema” (Bayle). The allusion to film is obvious, as is the apparent contradiction in its strict lack of visual component.



acousmate

Bayle borrowed the term from the French writer Jerome Peignot, who used it in a radio talk in 1955 to describe *musique concrète*, suggesting that there was a separation of a sound from its origins. The term *acousmate* comes from the Greek *akousma*: what is heard. Students of Pythagoras (sixth century BC) listened to his teachings from behind a screen, unable to see him. He believed that the lack of visual cues would force his students to focus all their attention on his message. After his death, his followers split into *Acousmatics* (practitioners of the mystic doctrine) and *Mathematics* (remarkable scientists). It was this shrouding of the source that Peignot referenced in his 1955 talk, and Bayle appropriated the term. The loudspeaker was the modern equivalent of the screen partition. As Francis Dhomont suggests, the lack of identity of the cause of the sounds can generate a flow of images in the psyche of the listener. Thus, it can be considered the imaginary sound, or that “of which the cause is not seen.”



Of course, today's society presents us daily with sound removed from its source—for example, listening to a CD in our living rooms, listening to the radio, or even conversing on the telephone. But, as was suggested in the first unit, listening to a Beethoven symphony at home does not make Beethoven an acousmatic composer. Beethoven, and most composers of music recorded on CDs, created with the intention that live performance be the final result of their compositional efforts. Acousmatic composition is conceived of as having an acousmatic listening environment, designed for the ears alone, as its final product. This environment may be created in the home, on radio or on CD/tape, or in concert through the use of equipment (digital or analogue) that allows the projection of sound in three-dimensional space.

- *Heard over **loudspeakers***
- *Displays an **acousmatic intent***
- *Composed on and exists on “**fixed**”
medium*
- ***Physical** source (if any) of the sound is **not present** at the time of listening*
- ***Source**, nature or cause of sound may be **unknowable** or **unknown***
- *Compositional criteria extends **beyond** what is normally considered **musical***

Heard over loudspeakers. The reproduction of the recorded music over loudspeakers is not a by-product but the intent of the composer. In concert, this reproduction may occur over a multi-speaker diffusion system.

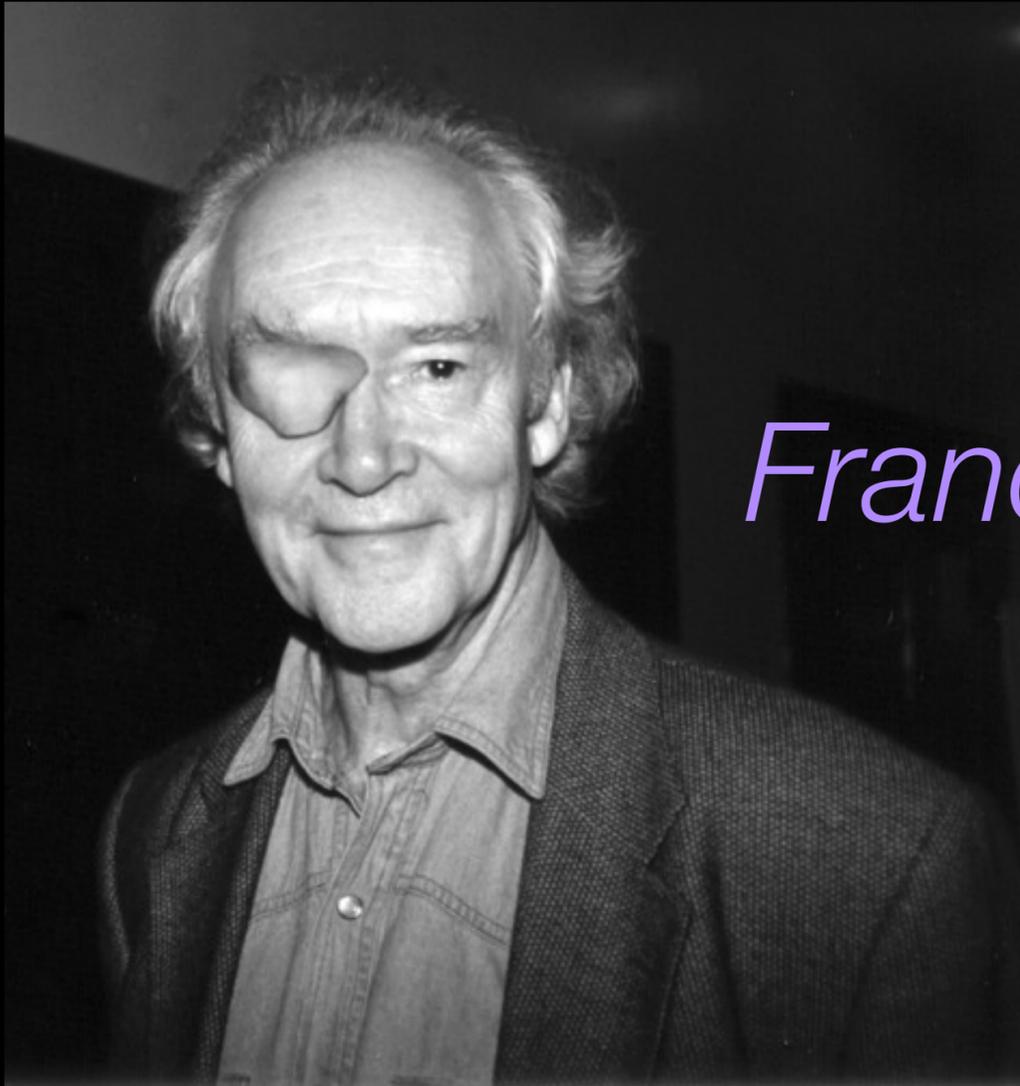
Displays an acousmatic intent. Again, the performance over loudspeakers is not merely a substitute for another listening mode, such as live performance, but is the composer's intention.

Composed on and exists on a fixed medium. The medium can be digital or analogue, but it cannot involve any live component.

The physical source (if any) of the sounds is not actually present at the time of listening. Again, there can be no live component—neither instrumentalist interacting with tape nor live performance on an electroacoustic instrument (such as a synthesizer).

The source, nature, or cause of the sound may be unknown or unknowable. This characteristic sets acousmatic music apart from the original musique concrète, in which the original sound was usually explicit. Acousmatic theorists believe that the audience should not exert any effort in attempting to identify the sound sources and should instead listen to their interactions.

The compositional criteria extend beyond what is normally considered musical. Unlike a good deal of electroacoustic music, which furthers the traditions of acoustic composition (the composer manipulating inert sound material) and extends instrumental technique, acousmatic composition employs the studio as a completely new means of interacting with sound and fundamentally rethinking music.



Francis Dhomont

Francis Dhomont is a French-Canadian composer and theorist of acousmatic music. An ardent proponent of acousmatics, his work since 1963 is comprised exclusively of works for tape. These pieces display his continued interest in the morphological interplay and ambiguities between sound and the images sound may create.

Born in France in 1926, he relocated to Montreal in 1979 to teach at the Université de Montréal. There, he influenced several generations of Canadian electroacoustic composers. Many of these composers have achieved distinction around the world, and they have established what is now recognized as the Montreal School.

Dhomont's compositions, as he explains in the liner notes to one of his CDs, "present an enigmatic discourse involving shifts of sense, space, place and atmosphere, as well as powerful archetypes of tension and relaxation, and processes of recall possessing a rare expressive quality."

Dhomont suggests that his composition "Espace/Escape" is an attempted encounter of heterogeneous elements related by two criteria: one is sonic and denotative (the place of sound in space), the other symbolic and connotative (referring to the theme of wandering), both alluding to movement. These criteria determine the form and are its cement. The multiplicity of materials embody the ideas of "space" and "mobility." This work integrates into its structure active elements of spatialization which have a semantic value.

escape/escape 1989

Francis Dhomont, "Espace/Escape" (excerpt), (1989)

For Dhomont, and for every acousmatic composer, sound has meaning. When you listen to this work, Dhomont's masterful manipulation of his material and his incredible gestural sense should be apparent. But is the meaning of the work or any meaning at all (as suggested by his program notes) apparent?



Michel Chion

Michel Chion is a French composer who began to work at ORTF (French Radio and Television Organization) in 1970 as an assistant to Pierre Schaeffer. Chion is also a theoretician in the systematic study of audio-visual relationships. He teaches at the Université de Paris as well as a number of French film schools, and he has written extensively on the subject of film sound. He is also a leading theorist in acousmatic music and has written several major books on the subject. For example, his *Guide des objets sonores* is an analysis of the ideas of Schaeffer and *musique concrète*, while his *Musique, médias, technologies* is a theory of sound based on language.

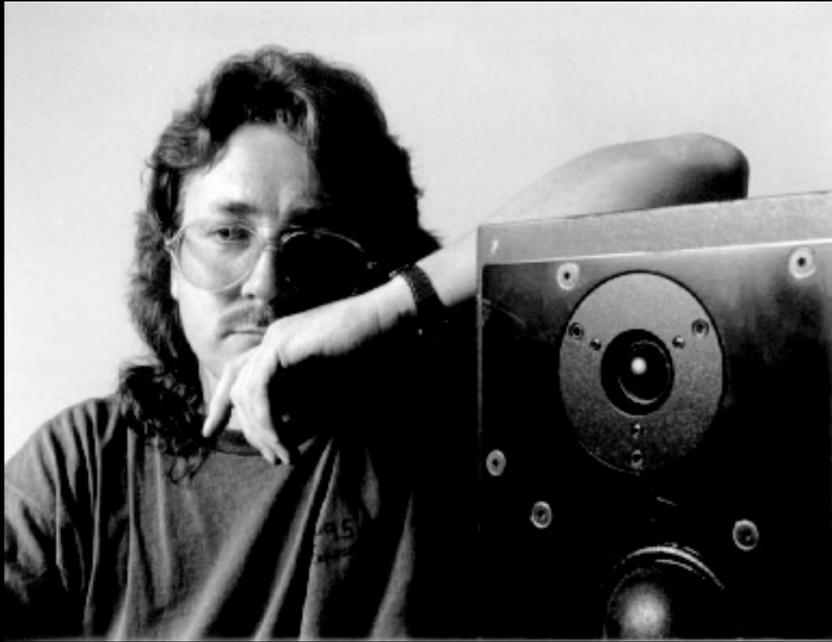
Much of his music is dramatic in nature; in fact, he created the *concrète melodrama*. In *Requiem*, he suggests that the listener takes an “uneven dramatic course” in following the work, which he says concerns the “troubled minority of the living, rather than the silent majority of the dead.”

Requiem is a ten-movement work, and “*Dies Irae*” is the fourth movement. There is much repetition of movements within the work (e.g., this movement is a repetition of the first) as well as of internal sounds (e.g., the three repetitions of the recording of the requiem).

Requiem: Dies Irae (1973)

Michel Chion, "Requiem: Dies Irae" (excerpt), (1973)

The opening and closing gestures in this movement have direct reference to the title: they are manipulations of a recording of a Requiem mass. What do these manipulations suggest? How are they related to the implied subject matter of the entire work (a mass for the dead)? How does the long central gesture fit into the whole?



Jonty Harrison

Jonty Harrison is one of the major forces of electroacoustic music in Great Britain—a composer of important works, an educator at the University of Birmingham, and a presenter of electroacoustic music via BEAST (Birmingham ElectroAcoustic Sound Theatre). Harrison strongly believes in the uniqueness of acousmatic composition as distinct from traditional acoustic creation. He feels that acoustic music is frequently created based on the relationships of symbols (notes) rather than any relationships between their sounds. Harrison also points out the difference between the ideal of *musique concrète* as stated by Schaeffer and compositional practice. Schaeffer's original definition of the sound object was a sound removed from its source, divorced from any association with its physical origins, but many composers have played with the contextualization of sound. This disparity should not be ignored, and it is one Harrison pursues in his own music. He has called this opposition a crossroads between Rue Schaeffer (*musique concrète*) and Schafer Street (soundscape composition). The known becomes strange and the unknown familiar in a continuum of reality, unreality and surreality, where boundaries shift and continually renewed definitions are the only constant. . . .

... et ainsi de suite... (1992)

“... et ainsi de suite ...” is an eleven-movement work that Harrison states was created “in the manner of the musique concrète tradition.” All sounds originate from a set of rough-textured wine glasses. Each movement takes its sounds from the same source material and explores different techniques and processes. In his program notes, Harrison states that the work is “not a vehicle for ... dramatic musical argument” and that he is more concerned with creating a “network of connections within a sound-world.”

Harrison is the founder of BEAST, the thirty-two-channel diffusion system. This system places thirty-two speakers around the concert hall: on stage, above the stage, and all around the audience, including directly overhead. He creates his music with this unique diffusion in mind. Typical of Harrison’s concern with spatialization, “... et ainsi de suite ...” places sounds in three-dimensional space. Imagine, if you can, hearing the work in a concert hall where you are surrounded by thirty-two speakers and the sounds swirl around you. In such a dramatic listening environment, would you feel the need to identify the sound, or would you be content to allow it to remain unknown?



Robert Normandeau

Robert Normandeau, born in 1955, is a Canadian composer who has received international recognition for his acousmatic works. A student of Francis Dhomont, his works focus on acousmatic music that creates a cinema for the ear. In these works, both meaning and sound are elements for elaboration.

Normandeau has written a series of cycles that focus upon different aspects of composition. One of these is the “cinema for the ear” cycle, another is the Onomatopoeia cycle, of which “Le renard et la rose” is a part. This latter cycle is based exclusively on sounds produced by the human voice. In using the voice, Normandeau concentrates on “gestures or feelings as sounds” rather than on abstract representations of words.

Le Renard et la rose (1995)

Normandeau is one of the rare electroacoustic composers who include corporeal rhythm in their music. However, in contrast with much popular electronica, these beats appear and dissolve quickly, playing with the listener's expectations. How does Normandeau's use of repeated rhythms, coupled with the voice samples in this work, affect your interpretation of the music?



Robert Normandeau, "Spleen" (excerpt),(1995)

This is an excerpt of a longer (15 minute) work. The program notes for the work are as follows:

Spleen is comprised solely of the voices of four adolescents, aged 16 years. The title refers to one of the most significant moods of the adolescent: this kind of sudden melancholy which surfaces for no apparent reason. This work is a sequel to a previous piece, *Éclats de voix*, which utilized dozens of sounds from the *Dictionnaire des bruits* by Jean-Claude Trait and Yvon Dulude as a sonorous base. Onomatopoeic, the material is extremely rich because it represents those instances when the sounds of human language correspond directly to the designated object or to the expression of a sentiment.

The piece is divided into five sections which represent typical situations for the adolescent, and a corresponding sonorous parameter. These sections are presented successively in concert, or separately when broadcast on radio.



Christian Calon

Christian Calon is another Québécois composer of acousmatic music who has garnered worldwide recognition. His music focuses on the “architectural dimension of sound.” He has created a number of sound installations, sound sculptures set up in galleries that allow listeners/viewers to move through and interact with the creation.

Portrait d’un visiteur is an acousmatic work that uses digital synthesis extensively. What makes it acousmatic rather than computer music is the conception behind the work. Apart from meeting all the criteria of acousmatic music, Calon has created sound objects via synthesis, yet he treats them as if they were concrète.

Portrait d'un visiteur (1985)

Christian Calon, "Portrait d'un visiteur" (excerpt), (1985)

Does the fact that this work uses synthesis make it seem different from the other acousmatic works presented here? How is it different and how is it similar, both objectively (within the sounds themselves) and subjectively (your reaction to it)?



Louis Dufort

Zénith (1999)

Louis Dufort -- Another Québécois composer, Louis Dufort, states that his university studies have not altered his “iconoclasm and originality.” His interests in cinema, painting, and contemporary dance (he is a regular composer for the Compagnie Marie Chouinard contemporary dance company) lead him to include in his compositions elements from outside of music. -- “Zénith” (excerpt),(1999)

This is a very dense work, with long gestures contributing to its grandness. The use of granular synthesis on the voice to break it apart and the introduction of instrumental sounds in the second half are unique techniques. With such source material, meaning within the work becomes much more abstract, since the listener has a harder time relating to the sounds. What is your reaction to this work?



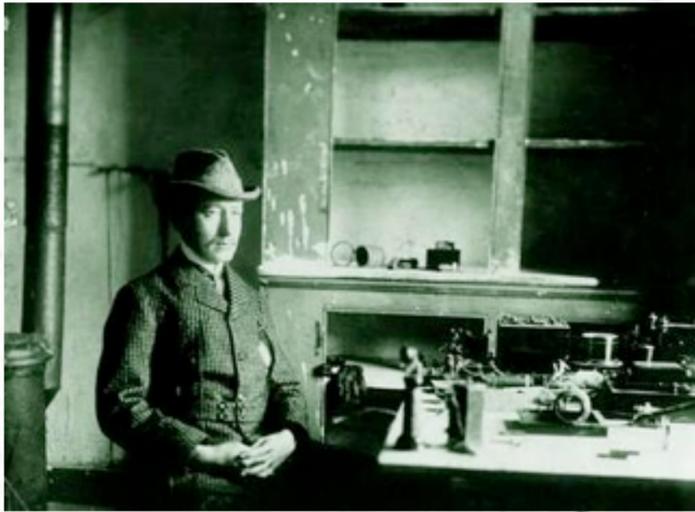
Ned Bouhalassa

Jets

Ned Bouhalassa

Yet another Québécois composer of acousmatic music, Ned Bouhalassa is, like Dufort, affected by cinema and claims contemporary visual art and science fiction as influences. He has composed music for a variety of media (cinema, television, the Internet) and in a variety of techno-derived styles. He says this about his composition, “Jets”:

“Jets” was originally conceived for the sound projection system of San Francisco’s Sound Traffic Control (STC). I wanted to write a piece that could demonstrate the potential of automated sound projection. In order to make a dynamic and energetic piece, I chose to use jet-shaped materials. Water, air and dust jets that leave a trace as they move through space would serve as models for the creation of my sonic materials. There are objects in this piece which move freely, in an almost intuitive manner; others flee quickly, like hunted animals; finally, there are those that hurl themselves against the edges of the stereo field, as if they were in a cage. There is also a kind of nostalgia that is found in the more “musical” passages that serves as a setting, as ambience.



The Mystery of His Will





balloon