

Notes on image and sound



Musique concrète

six pieces-installations

by Cecilia Arditto



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English translation Mercedes Escardó



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Preface

Musique concrète is a series of 6 pieces-installations written for two percussionists and low-tech paraphernalia whose score deals not only with the sound but also with the visual aspect and the architectural space. These texts have accompanied the creative process of this series as a side note, both the reflection and the creation being part of the composition.

This is music made with simple elements, like threads, record-players, tins, cassettes. It is my intention, maybe my fantasy, to work with everyday objects that lay bare the composition processes and the relationship between things. I prefer to refer to the objects as everyday objects, rather than "simple", as everyone who works with them knows that they are far from being simple: in general simple materials demand arduous processes and the more concrete "things" are, the more abstract the connections turn out to be.

Musique concrète tries to build a small personal world made of objects first found, then made our own and finally organized in a score which, just like a detailed instruction manual, will not only include the annotation of sounds but also of light and space. It is an attempt at reflecting on the relationship between the disciplines that, when organized in a unique temporal line, turn the whole experience into a performance situation resembling the ways of chamber music.

Musical analysis has always struck me as a narrative act of a fantasy nature with a life of its own which goes beyond the work that it comments on. That is why I have decided to abandon myself from the start to the fiction of these words, which might have a partial correspondence with the piece and maybe a life of their own.

Here are the texts and, in case they spark your curiosity, you will be able to complement them with the scores and audio of **Musique concrète** available online¹.

I have come a long way to get to this preface. I say goodbye with great pleasure and a little nostalgia for the inevitable ending. Good night.

Cecilia Arditto
Dusseldorf, October, 2015

¹ Scores and audio available for download at <http://www.ceciliaarditto.com> "projects" link "musique concrete" link.

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I. Le son concrète, l'image concrète

The sounds come from the recording and find their sound sources in real objects. Concrete music then becomes "doubly concrete".

This project is called **Musique concrète** because it is inspired by the work of Pierre Schaeffer, French composer who since the 40s has devoted himself to composing music by recording sound objects and then processing their sound in the studio. Schaeffer broadens the repertoire of sounds which had been used until then in academic music by incorporating recordings of everyday objects to the orchestral palette. Beyond the timbre revolution, Schaeffer's music would change the way we think about music by extending the limits of what is and is not music.

The nature of the recorded sound as opposed to the live one is a topic which fascinated the pioneers of concrete music, who discovered the technical and aesthetic possibilities of mechanical replay. Recording is a powerful tool that brings the sounds closer "through a microscope" revealing their peculiarities to the extent that the recordings become independent of their sources, so the sounds acquire new timbre possibilities when they are affected by their mechanical support as opposed to the qualities of the live sound.

In our present scene, 80 years later, the sounds come out of the recordings and find their sources in the real objects. We will listen as the recording of virtual scissors becomes a counterpoint to the sound of scissors live and we will see how a couple of fans flood the space of shadows with the movement of their carcasses. Concrete music then becomes "doubly concrete".

However, not only does this relationship between the original and the recording pose interesting timbre questions, it also opens up stage possibilities. In our small theatre, acoustic exploration is also affected by a search of a theatrical nature. The original sound object which gave birth to the recording is on stage as a counterpoint of its recorded "alter ego" presenting the fascinating topic of the original and its copy.

... and we stop in the midst of things in the very instant in which they have been thrown into the world, but they haven't yet touched it completely, placing ourselves at the point of initial hope.



Simple objects

In **Musique concrète** the everyday objects come from the kitchen, the attic, wardrobes and –forgetting their practical nature– jump on stage building a new fiction of a poetic type.

Fans, radios, tins, lamps, record-players, sewing machines and a pair of scissors will be our orchestra of found objects; threads, paper, cardboard, cloth and flashlights will build the visual space. The stage will also recreate an everyday space made up of the parts of a house: a door, a window, a staircase and a column will be the set.

The simplicity of the materials and the processes used in this project create a sense of familiarity with the scene which blurs the conceptual border between fiction and reality. Reality breaks into the scene and, ideally, in an act of reciprocity, art bursts into our daily lives.

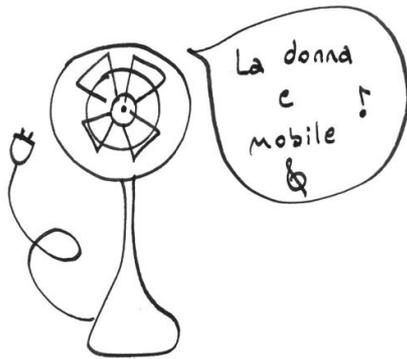
Two interpreters –one in charge of a set of slide projectors and the other playing various sound objects– are responsible for building this mixed audiovisual world. The sound and visual materials are manipulated live in counterpoint with the recordings done beforehand. As a performance cinema, music and images interact following the guidelines which define audiovisual scenes live and direct. The realization processes of the piece are visible explicitly since the interpreters, just like puppeteers, show the “backstage” of the project: the black box of the audiovisual product becomes totally transparent.

When reality comes on stage, it is always fiction. I developed MFT, Minimal Fiction Threshold, which is a unit of fiction, like kilos, liters... How many MFTs are there in this room now?

Vivi Tellas

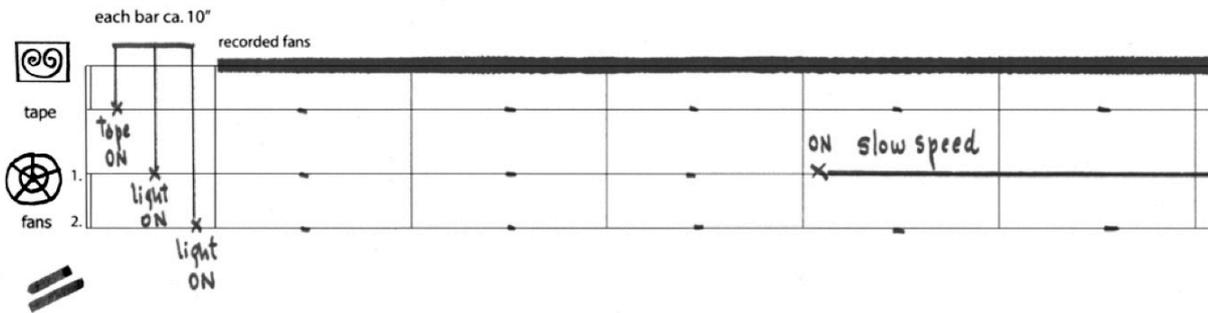


If we fine-tune our listening skills, we will see that every record-player, radio, sewing machine, every slide projector, and magic lantern has its own unique, one-of-a-kind characteristics. Our "objects trouvés" will be, to a greater or lesser extent, different in each version of these pieces. Their personal characteristics, buzzes, statics, clicks and residual sounds will make up an enveloping phantom which constitutes the heart of this project.



This underworld of subtle sounds meets the recorded music, which magnifies and elaborates them but also will be found in their live doubles in a more spontaneous way: the stage objects will be the source of new sounds and acoustic surprises.

In everyday life, objects are accessories and serve practical purposes: because they are familiar, they are invisible; because they are omnipresent, they are absent; because they are everywhere, they are nowhere. In the theatrical world, these objects become protagonists and serve, besides their practical function, a poetic one.



"Le ventilador" (detail of the score). Two old fans, with rotating carcasses and different speeds, produce different sounds as a counterpoint to a pre-recorded set of fans. It is interesting to see how even identical appliances, of the same brand, produce different sounds.

2. The score as a storyboard: the cinema in real time

Musique concrète is an instruction manual for the recreation of a film which exists only in the virtual form of the score.

□

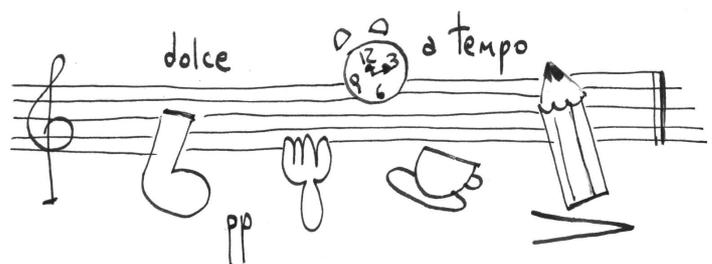
In **Musique concrète**, sound, image and the use of space follow the guidelines in the score which synchronizes the different events in a unique timeline. The score, as a storyboard, includes precise indications for the execution of the sound and light objects as musical instruments. There are also instructions for the composition of the scene and the synchronization of these parameters –sound, light and space– in real time.

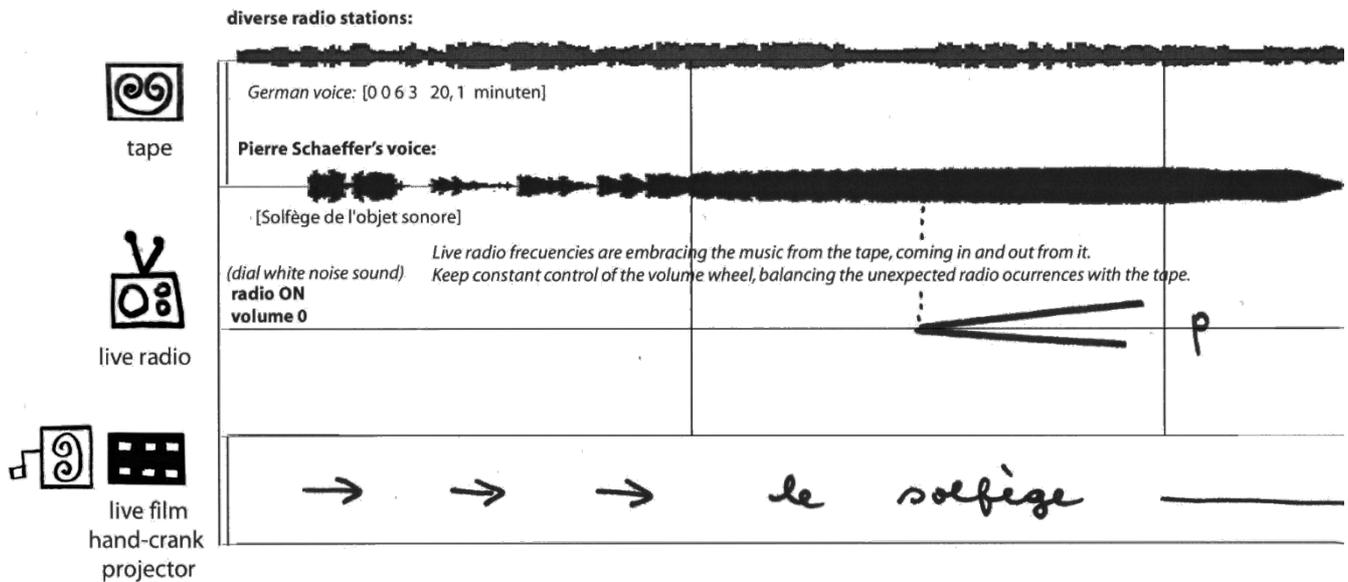
At the cinema, once finished, the films are able to be reproduced in a mechanical way once and again identically. **Musique concrète** is an instruction manual for the recreation of the film that exists only in the virtual form of the score.

The concept of version, so akin to classical music, is applied here as well –both to the visual world and the space design. The creation of different scenes and the production of visual material is made from scratch following the instructions of precise annotations. Not only will “the notes” be read as a trigger of the sound world, but also the lines and graphics will be read in time and in due form (a truer word was never said!) to be able to produce a version of the visual world.

The instructions for the slides and films not only cover the reproduction on stage, but also involve their manufacture: the slides and films will be made out of simple materials such as thread, transparent tape, markers, type-writers, scissors, etc. The process is simple but arduous and puts interpreters necessarily in the making of the piece as they have to manufacture their own audiovisual objects.

Time spins 360°, like the volume of the things in a room; it is an extensive time, full of things, of gestures and of space. The before and the after, the above and the below float in this ball of minutes and place.





La radio" (detail of the score). In the line at the bottom, there are the indications of a homemade film drawn on a piece of paper. The film will be reproduced manually in synch with the recorded tape and a live radio. To manufacture the film, it is not necessary to trace the film or reproduce the fond suggested, interpreting the drawing in a personal way following the general idea in time and in due form is enough.

This project, inspired in the cinema but with music at its heart, will have as many versions as interpretations of the score there are. The drawings will always be original, the machines will be different, the space of representation will always be changeable, but ideally the heart of the piece will remain intact.

The decoding of the score allows for interpretations of the same idea in different ways. "Different versions" is not the same as "many copies" of the same thing since the versions will always be similar to one another –but different– and the copies will be identical.

May this project be a way of reflecting upon what prevails and what changes in the performing arts.



Les moments trouvés

In our daily lives the simple things produce complex and poetical effects constantly. **Musique concrète** captures that fleeting instant where the shadow of the fan draws an outline in an angle of the ceiling, that plastic mini-moment worthy of an art gallery.

These spontaneous moments are freed from their brevity and are organized in a score: the ephemeral is perpetuated thanks to the notation and are destined to repetition "ad eternum". Then the "objets trouvés" turn into "moments trouvés" since our scene not only has a visual entity but also a temporal one: a fan or a simple flashlight are capable of providing us with complete representations, defining scenes with audio and sound just like a film.



A tempo

?

Something stays, something is lost, and something new is incorporated in the ephemeral dynamics of the reconstruction of music notated on a piece of paper., and the consequent effort of building the piece again from scratch.. every time. The sounds as soon as they are born, die which shows why music is essentially an art of the present, an ephemeral museum of the now. The score prevails.

Hence we go... perceiving those moments that connect us with an extremely brief instant of a poetic nature, those miniature fractures of our attention that happen in general when we are busy with another thing. It happens to us all the time and at the same time never because of the brevity of the events and their capricious nature.

3. Different layouts of *Musique concrète*

1. Succession

If the space of representation is fixed, with an audience also fixed like in the case of a traditional stage, the successive segments will be presented in succession, one after the other just like a concert. Each section of this project calls upon a different architectural space-element so we will be seeing the different parts in an unfolding manner: first the column, then the corner, later the ceiling; building the space progressively before our eyes, section by section. It will not be the audience the one to move around the house, but the house the one to "walk" in front of the audience fixed in their chairs.

The familiar place, just like a holistic restoration, will be re-drawn by light and sound. The steps of the listener, which go from one place to the next, will continue to trace the timeline, which cannot be seen but can be heard.

2. Fragmentation

If the place of representation is a big space with different rooms, the sections of *Musique concrète* will be presented in different areas. The public and the interpreters will move around the rooms building an itinerary. The pieces will be represented in different spaces successively. If more interpreters are available, the sections can be played simultaneously in different rooms, juxtaposing one another, while the interpreters are fixed in their places.

3. Repetition

One piece alone is repeated constantly, in a loop, like an installation. Space and time are frozen thanks to repetition. The public comes in and out of the room, going in and out of the piece.

back in 5"
The column

4. Synesthesia-confusions

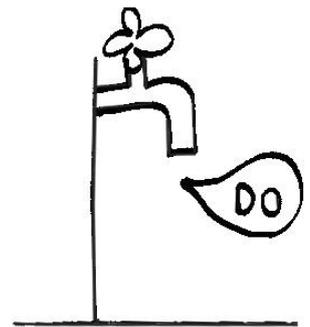
The conversation between dimensions that brush against one another is no more than a dialogue which is implicitly understood and translated instantaneously, an exchange of cross-perspectives and happy confusions between different categories.

Musique concrète, like any interdisciplinary project, suggests different kinds of relationships between things; there connections between recorded objects and their originals, between image and sound, between projected objects and corporeal objects.

Ideally, different disciplines have different logics and talk about various issues without explaining themselves. This conversation between dimensions that brush against one another is no more than a dialogue which is implicitly understood and translated instantaneously, an exchange of cross-perspectives and happy confusions between different categories.

This project is a reflection on the connections between different interdisciplinary dimensions but music is at its heart. Sometimes the relationships between things are more obvious, like in the case of "The Radio", where the film is watched in synch with its soundtrack, translating image and sound in mimesis. Other times, the connections are more indirect, which is when one thing leads to another... and that thing to another... and so on and so forth... while the relationship between the first thing and the last remains blurry.

I like to call these deferred and more distant relationships with the name of "synesthesia", which is when an element takes the quality of another that belongs to a different order of things.

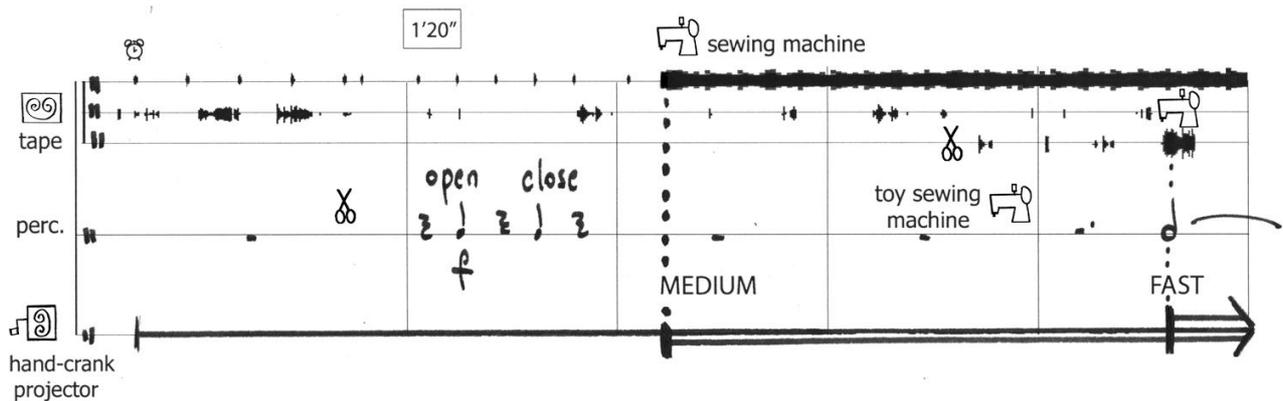


The worlds expand one another: the book connects to the lamp which lights it up and the lamp connects to electricity... beyond are the aerials, the storm and the rivers.

Discontinuous catalogue of the relationship between things

Acoustic Mirrors

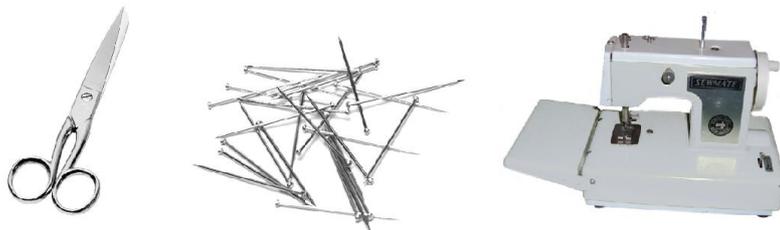
The recording finds its sound source in reality. The pre-recorded sound plays in counterpoint with the live sound in a game of double acoustics. Which is the copy and which the original?



Recorded sewing machine in counterpoint with the live sewing machine. "La machine à coudre", detail of the score.

Visual Mirrors

The visual arts have learnt well how to own concrete objects in the shape of "ready-made" found objects which, in the context of an exhibition, become a "piece of art". In **Musique concrète**, in a hyper-realistic gesture, the objects reveal themselves from the core of the recording and become corporeal on stage. All our "ready-made" are plastic objects but, above all, they are musical instruments.



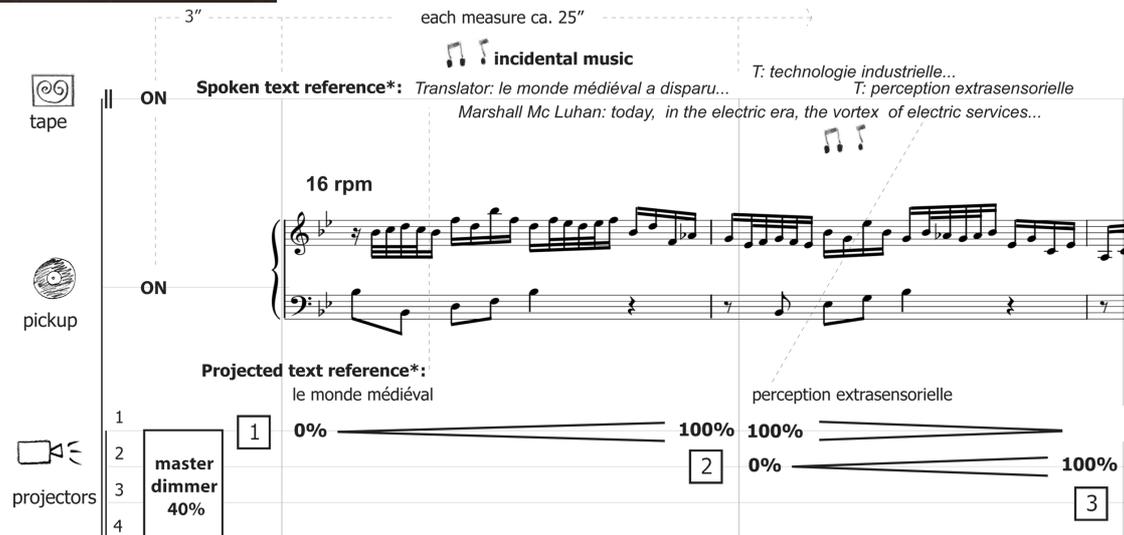
Home-made electronics. "La machine à coudre" for sewing machine, scissors, pins and recorded tape.

Brief Synchrony

The recorded text and the projected text share brief moments of synchrony. Sound and image flow in simultaneous lines, of a floating nature, totally independently. Images and sound sporadically touch each other in an instant of very brief but absolute correspondence. These ephemeral coincidences build a structure over time, minimal but solid, which as scaffolding, hold the fizzy nature of the piece.



Partial synchronies between the projected text and the recorded text in "La table tournante". Photograph of one of the slides used in the projections. The texts meet briefly with the recording throughout the whole piece.

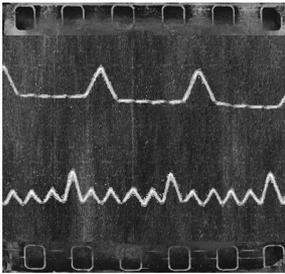


*Synchro between spoken text and visual text is approximated.

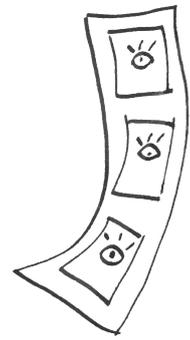
The recorded text (Translator in the score) and the projected text (projectors in the score) share brief moments of synchrony. They are connected in the score with a dotted line (see for example the text "le monde medieval" in both lines at the very beginning of the piece). "La table tournante", detail of the score.

Concrete Double

In "La machine a coudre", we can see a film which is simply made up of white spots on a black background and is played rudimentarily using a projector with a handle. The 35 mm film is 20 meters long and, as time goes by, it progressively takes up the space around the projector. "The film itself" is not only the medium for the projected imagen but also becomes a plastic object in itself.



A film made up of holes has been punched with the same sewing machine which gives us the concert. "La machine a coudre", detail of the film.

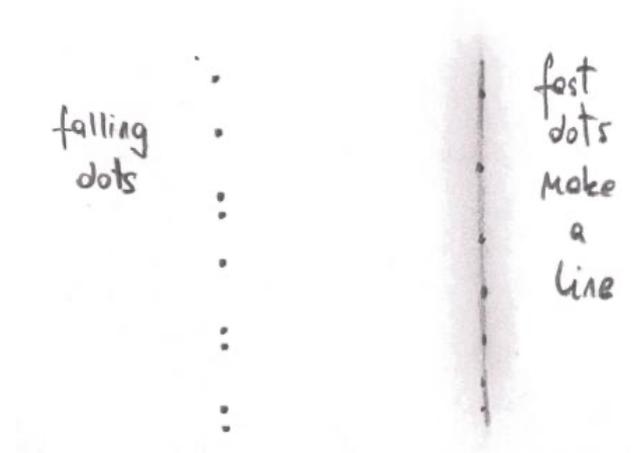


The film look at us

Music to Watch.

In "La machine a coudre", a home-made film is played in a manual projector at different speeds. The variations between fast and slow produce different rhythms of a visual nature executed in counterpoint with the recorded music.

Sometimes the points of light disappear into the pitch-black room representing the silence of the image in an analogy with the silence of music.



In "La machine a coudre", small dots of light projected on the wall at different speeds produce simple and fascinating optical phenomena. When the dots are reproduced at great speed, they turn into a continuous line of light on the screen. Detail of the score.

Synesthesias

"Of gold is the silence. The afternoon is of crystals."
Juan Ramón Jiménez, Immense Hour

Synesthesia is a rhetorical figure which consists of the attribution of a sensation to a sense to which it does not belong to: silence is gold, afternoon of crystals, immense hour...

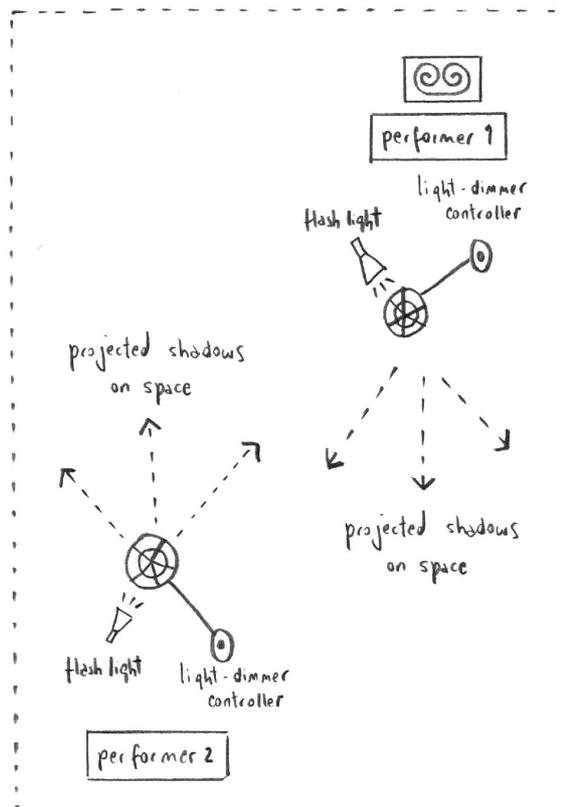
Inspired in poetry, in our little theatre the synesthesia becomes "concrete" and the metaphors become instructions in a score.

In "La machine a coudre" explained in previous examples, the sewing machine "sews the sound with its needle" and the projector "sews the fabric with its light."

Tactile Music

In "Le ventilateur", two fans in counterpoint with a recorded tape play with its different speeds cooling off the room with thier staved swinging.

The theory says that the perception of sound originates in the difference in the pressure of air registered by our ears. In this piece, our body –as if it was a big eardrum– is the one to receive the moving air: concrete music is literally made of air.

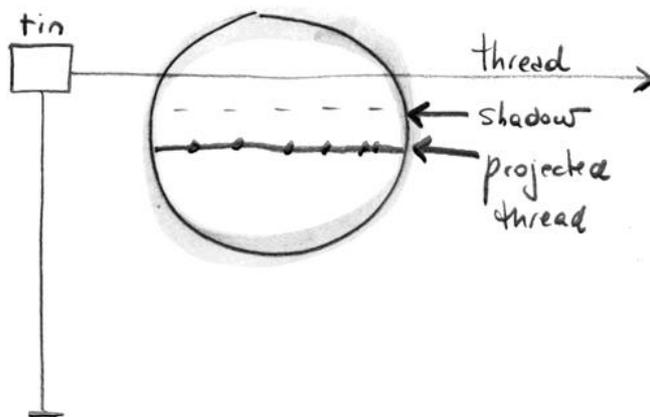


"Le ventilateur", layout of the space. Detail of the score.

Adjacent Worlds: the association of the association of the association

"Électricité" is the story of a wire projected in a circle of light. Three instances of this wire are simultaneously reflected on a screen: a projected wire, a real one which crosses the space and the shadow of the real wire. There are three kinds of visual representation for the phenomenon of electricity which is paradoxically audible but invisible.

Music is made up of buzzes, pure frequencies and the noise of switches.



In "Électricité", the wires play different roles: transmitter of electricity, cord telephone and at the same time a drawing of the frequencies they transmit. A small tribute to electricity in its multiple sound and visual facets.

Consequence-cause

A vinyl is pre-recorded with sounds from the same record-player which reproduce it: noise from the stylus, scratches, buzzes, crackling and engine noises will delight our ears. The live record-player will inevitably add sounds similar to those recorded in the moment of the replay, creating a certain confusion of the cause-consequence kind.



In "Vinyle", a record-player with built-in loudspeakers and a system of valves works not only as a vintage player but also as a musical tool in itself, source of different sounds.

Recursive Logic

In "La machine a écrire", the percussionist sitting on a staircase types a fragment of the text "Solfège de l'objet sonore" by P. Schaeffer. The same text which he/she is typing is projected simultaneously on itself: white letters light the interpreter and the staircase where he/she is sitting.

The staircase pretends to be the huge folded piece of paper in a type-writer, illusorily the same piece of paper the interpreter is writing on. The interpreter is contained inside the same piece of paper which, in theory, he/she is using in his/her portable type-writer creating a problem of scale. This scene follows the logic of recursive actions, which is when an element includes a smaller version of itself.

A musical score detail for "Solfège De L'objet Sonore". It features a treble clef and a tempo marking of $\text{♩} = 126$. The score includes the instruction "spoken text in balance with xylophone (no wishpering)" and a dynamic marking of *mf*. The title "Solfège De L'objet Sonore" is written in a typewriter font. A specific instruction "keep your hand up, frozen" is placed above a note on the staff. The score is handwritten in black ink.

Projected text, text played, spoken text in "La machine a écrire". Detail of the score.

Displacements

In dreams, we can speak naturally with a loved one who, instead of his/her face, has the face of an animal or a vegetable, but we clearly know who this person is in spite of his/her changed appearance. This phenomenon is called displacement. In "La machine a écrire", the percussionist types a text in a portable xylophone with a set of thimbles which amplify the sound, imitating a type-writer. We all imagine a type-writer and would never think it is a concert for xylophone. I like to think that verisimilitude in art is similar to the verisimilitude of dreams.



"La machine à écrire". Detail of the score.

5. Et vive la liberté!

In **Musique concrète**, although there are fixed parameters based on a detailed score, there are other open parameters which will have to be dealt with by the interpreters and the conditions of the production.

The notation of the parameters is the basic tool to create the universe of this project, its limitations/limits, its entity and its operation. The interesting thing about musical notation is that it always demands an interpretation of the instructions, a decoding that suggests a delicate balance between fixed and changing factors. This phenomenon is not new and has allowed academic music to remain alive and present for over a thousand years already.

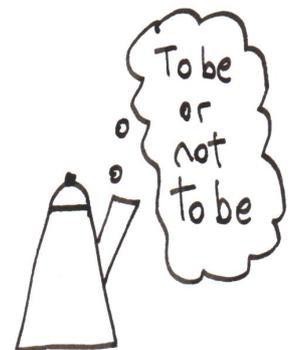
In this project, since the variables spread to the visual world and the specific place, the relationship between the definite and the indefinite becomes exponential. The instructions reach not only the instruments and the musical objects but also the visual world, ruling not only its execution but also its construction from scratch.

The objects are simple and, because of their simplicity, their concrete nature becomes conceptual. It does not make much of a difference whether you use one kind of thread or another to project on the wall, or whether the shape of the fans is round or square. There will always be an aesthetic decision and a commitment on the part of the interpreter in each decision, solving –and enjoying– the unexpected both in the “found objects” and the “moments found” in relation with the space available and the possibilities of production.

It is my wish that the dynamic of the interpretation of the parameters allows for this project to be taken to situations outside the academic circle and also to different social situations.

Musique concrète tries to create not only a finished artistic product, but also a platform for different pieces-options with multiple applications, a mini-world of ideas and objects, flexible and adaptable to different types of settings, both theatrical and social. **Musique concrète** is a conglomerate of things: columns, staircases, ceilings, floors, fans, record-players, radios, projectors, pieces of paper, threads, all of them as unrepeatably as the stories they entail and as unique as the interpreters who animate them and as each member of the audience who receives them.

We look at and listen to objects which in turn look at us from their modest and particular stories in an exchange of emotions where the mundane becomes special.



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