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[See table of contents](#)

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ACTUALITÉS

De-Composing Tristan Murail: The Collected Writings, 1980-2000

Sean Ferguson

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Along with the late Gérard Grisey, Tristan Murail is one of the founders of what is commonly referred to as the French spectral school of composition. While only the use of the term “composition” in the preceding label is not subject to debate, there is general agreement that a new approach to instrumental music began to develop in France in the early 1970s. This approach brought together concepts derived from electroacoustics and auditory perception with a heightened sensitivity to the relationship between timbre and harmony¹. Although spectral music is traditionally associated with artistic activities in Paris, particularly those carried out at Ircam, interest in North America and in the English-speaking world in general has increased substantially in recent years. There are many reasons for this, but one of the most important has been the appearance within the last decade of a number of significant texts in English dealing with this topic. Of these, the most well-known are undoubtedly those published in 2000 by the *Contemporary Music Review*, which devoted two complete numbers to an in-depth examination of the history, aesthetics and techniques of spectral music.²

1. For a detailed description of the techniques of spectral composition, see Fineberg, Joshua (2000), “Guide to the Basic Concepts and Techniques of Spectral Music,” *Contemporary Music Review*, Vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 81-113.

2. *Contemporary Music Review* (2000), Vol. 19, nos. 2 & 3.

3. Murail, Tristan (2004), *Tristan Murail: modèles et artifices*, (Pierre Michel, ed.) Strasbourg, Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg.

Tristan Murail's stature as a major figure in contemporary art music during the last quarter of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first is reflected by the appearance within the last two years of two editions of his complete writings: one in French³ and an English translation in the *Contemporary Music Review*, which is the subject of the present article. With the exception of a short editors' note by Joshua Fineberg (the US editor of the *Contemporary Music Review*) and Pierre Michel (editor of the original French publication), the English version contains the same articles as the French one, consisting of written texts and transcriptions of lectures by Tristan Murail from 1980 to 2000. While most of these texts had been available for years in different journals, brought together in a single volume they are a glimpse into the thoughts of one of France's greatest living composers and an essential primary resource for those interested in the historical evolution of spectral music.

The two earliest texts in this collection are derived from lectures Tristan Murail gave at the Darmstadt Ferienkurse in 1980 and 1982. In the first of these, "The Revolution of Complex Sounds," Murail situates his musical style and that of his colleagues Gérard Grisey, Hugues Dufourt and Michaël Lévinas within the context of the contemporary music scene of the day. In doing so, he identifies a number of key issues that we recognize today as being fundamental to our conception of spectral music. On the one hand, the music he is pursuing avoids the application of independent processes to separate musical parameters; he contrasts his approach to the use of "antiquated grids of parameters" by "traditional compositional techniques" including "serialism, aleatoric composition, stochastic composition, etc." He prefers to think of sound as consisting of "a field of forces, each force pursuing its own particular evolution." For Murail, "the musical 'atom' is not the notehead written on staff paper. The musical atom is the perceptual atom... It is possible as well that there is no perceptual atom, that music is indivisible, that we perceive only flux." On the other hand, he also distinguishes his music from that of a group of composers who are "performing a kind of turning backwards...to techniques dating to the period between the wars." From a contemporary North American perspective, we immediately recognize the evolutionary descendants of his opponents within our own musical circle. It is not difficult to bring to mind composers, arts administrators and civil servants (including conductors) for whom "this path is often disguised as a virtue, under noble pretexts: the return to 'expression', to 'simplicity'..." We might also agree with Murail when he says that "like all examples of 'retro' styles, it is fundamentally sterile."

In the second of these early lectures, "Spectra and Sprites," Murail begins again by setting the context for his text, a world populated by "...budding

Boulezes, miniature Stockhausens, Xenakis copies, neo-impressionists, Donatoni cloning himself..." Following a series of humorous characterizations of the practitioners of various contemporary compositional styles, Murail poses a question that lies at the core of the spectral approach: "But why do we always have to speak of music in terms of *notes*?" In this text, more so than in the previous one, he appeals to the same kind of break with the past that characterized so much of early post-1945 musical thinking: "Our conception of music is held prisoner by tradition and by our education." This article deals primarily with Murail's *Désintégrations* for ensemble and computer-generated tape, with most of it taken up by a discussion of techniques for transforming spectra using various types of mappings, including splitting, filtering, stretching, distorting, etc. Another important aspect of this article is Murail's visionary anticipation of the expanded role of computer technologies in the compositional process. As he describes his musical goals and the tools he dreams of using to realize them, we can vividly see the extent to which subsequent technical developments at Ircam were based on the artistic needs of creative musicians. In modern North American society, on the other hand, the requirements of composers carry no weight whatsoever; the development of technology is driven by industrial and commercial demands.

The next article, chronologically speaking, is a transcription of a talk given at Royaumont in 1988, entitled "Scelsi and L'Itinéraire: The Exploration of Sound." It deals with the early influence of the Italian composer Giacinto Scelsi on those composers who were associated with the Ensemble l'Itinéraire: Murail, Grisey and Lévinas. These composers met Scelsi in Rome during their residencies at the Villa Medici. The text is particularly interesting for its description of the early experiences of the spectral composers. For example, Murail describes his studies with Messiaen, who "insisted that we work serially and forbade the use of octaves."⁴ Small wonder, then, that French composers of this generation felt a need to search out new, less oppressive approaches. As examples of Scelsi's influence, Murail mentions the use of extended instrumental techniques, the fusion of form and timbre, an approach to "smooth" time (*temps lisse*: an avoidance of rhythmic discontinuities in favour of slowly evolving timbral processes), the use of microtones, and finally an interest in the transformation of instrumental sound using both acoustic and electronic means.

A second article dealing with Scelsi is also included in this volume. "Scelsi, De-Composer" was written for a collection of essays about Scelsi published in Italian in 1992. In it, we see Murail at his most pugnacious. In the great tradition of those introducing what they feel are radically new ideas (whether it be in

4. This reminds me of the story told by the late Swedish-Canadian composer Bengt Hambraeus (1928-2000), who, in order to gain access to the Cologne electronic music studios, was forced to sign a contract stipulating that he would only use them for the composition of serial music.

music, philosophy or religion), Murail feels compelled first to dismiss all other existing approaches. Terry Riley and LaMonte Young are “naive,” *musique concrète* is “too simple,” electronic music is “too artificial,” minimalist and electronic composers “generally lack classical training,” the harmonies of Reich, Adams and Glass are “chord progressions from the harmony textbooks of the Belle Époque,” and Schoenberg “changed nothing: his compositional technique is nothing more than a negative image of the academic tradition.” For Murail, “the real revolutionaries are those who have fundamentally changed our relationship to sound.” In Murail’s view, Scelsi has done exactly that. In Scelsi’s music, “minute sonic fluctuations (vibrato, glissandi, spectral changes, tremolos) become not mere ornaments to a text, but the text itself.” The common element between Scelsi and the spectral composers is therefore an “attitude towards the phenomenon of sound” that treats the sonic world in a global manner, as the raw material from which music is sculpted, rather than as something that is built up of smaller units (intervals, rhythms, harmony). In essence, Murail is proposing a rejection of music as a carrier of symbolic information.

In the light of the preceding article, it is difficult to give credence to Murail’s claim in “Target Practice” that “our approach carries no proscription. In other words, it’s not defined negatively against some other system of composition.” Regardless, this article, originally published in the journal *Entretemps* in 1989, is probably the key text in the collection. It is his most personal text, dealing explicitly with his poetic goals and technical means, and is also his clearest attempt to define the spectral approach. He lists a number of what he calls “essential precepts” to “find a place in the ‘spectral’ universe.” It is interesting to compare this list with one made by Gérard Grisey in “Did You Say Spectral?,” published in the *Contemporary Music Review* in 2000. Grisey’s list is first of all much longer, but also seems to represent a more flexible approach to what it means to be ‘spectral.’ For example, while Murail says that a spectral attitude involves “thinking in terms of continuous, rather than discrete, categories,” Grisey writes of the “potential for interplay between fusion and continuity, on one side, and diffraction and discontinuity, on the other.” One important point that Murail wishes to make is that practice should precede theory; he notes that “a composer’s actual practice is often more pragmatic than his discourse or theory might suggest.” Nevertheless, what Murail details in this article is a sort of ‘theory of practice’ of spectral music. In the process, he takes us deep into his compositional method; we feel that we are being given a privileged tour of the master’s workshop:

I admit that I often tamper with the results of my semi-automatic procedures by eliminating a part here or there. With processes of interpolation or growth of a param-

eter, I calculate more data than I need so that I can eliminate certain steps that might conflict with my basic idea.

If I were to be asked by a particularly harried person with the time to read only one of these articles which it should be, this is the one I would recommend. Murail describes his approach in a clear, well-written and logical way, without getting mired in trivial details. We finish the article with a better idea of not just what he does, but why he does it.

The last text that I would like to deal with, “After-thoughts,” was originally written in English by Murail for the previously-mentioned special edition on spectral music of the *Contemporary Music Review*. Published twenty years after “The Revolution of Complex Sounds,” this article finds Murail defending music not from the serialists or neo-classicists of the 1970s, but the postmodernists of the turn of the century. He describes the “ambiguous notion” of postmodernism as “not much more than disguised academicism.” He appeals for the expression of “new thoughts” using “new material” and argues for the resurgence of an avant-garde attitude. As he observes himself, “this position may seem ironic, since at a certain point the ‘spectral movement’ was seen as a reaction against the ‘avant-garde.’” We are also given a brief impression of Murail the teacher in this article. Describing what he perceives as a current lack of interest in harmony, he says: “This attitude is reflected in many of my students; their most common deficiency is the lack of harmonic awareness. They write music that may have strong gestures, but that ultimately does not function over time because the harmony fails to support the form.” It is hard for anyone to speak as a professor without sounding stodgy, but given his stature as a teacher, first at the Paris Conservatoire and Ircam and now at Columbia University, it would have been fascinating to learn further how Murail has avoided falling into “academicism” in his own teaching.

The recent North American interest in the techniques and poetics of the French spectral school has only been rivaled in the last one hundred years by the insatiable appetite for serial methods that followed the Second World War. During the 1950s and 1960s composers from around the world made pilgrimages to the Darmstadt Ferienkurse to be anointed by dodecaphonic oils. Today, Ircam and its cursus exert a similar pull on a new generation of composers. But North American students do not have to voyage overseas to gain first-hand knowledge of spectral techniques. Just as major American music faculties used to feel compelled to have at least one representative of the serial tradition among their composition staff, there appears to be a developing trend at those same schools of hiring composers with what might be termed “spectral credentials.” This includes, for instance, North Americans who have studied at

Ircam—such as Edmund J. Campion at UC Berkeley and Joshua Fineberg at Harvard—as well as important historical figures of the movement, including Philippe Manoury at UCSD as well as Murail himself at Columbia. As the fundamental techniques of spectral music become more familiar to the English speaking world, more and more young composers will likely be drawn to use them. I have already had several students ask to be taught “how to compose spectral music.” I try to explain to them that thirty years have passed since the beginnings of this movement. By the time integral serialism came to prominence in American universities, German composers had already moved on to other things. It might have been better if we had too.

If I could say one thing to young composers reading this collection of Murail’s writings, it would be to remember that these are historical documents. Tristan Murail still has much sublime music left to compose. These texts provide us with insights into the thoughts of an artist who, as a young man, participated in the creation of a new approach to composition that grew out of the historical and cultural context of his time. That is the ‘take-home message’: cultured, educated and historically-aware composers can find within themselves new approaches to art that are unique to them and to their generation. It would be a shame if this publication were taken as a cookbook for spectral techniques, turning the *Contemporary Music Review* into a modern-day spectral *Die Reihe*.