FROM NOISE TO MUSIC:
THE WORLD OF PIERRE SCHAEFFER

by Alberto Popolla

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Shake Edizioni continues its commendable work of dissemination and in-depth exploration of the musical avant-gardes of the postwar period through the *Classici della Nuova Musica* series, edited by composer Massimiliano Viel. After the volumes devoted to Karlheinz Stockhausen and John Cage, it is now the turn of Pierre Schaeffer's diaries, *Alla ricerca di una musica concreta*, in Giancarlo Carlotti's excellent translation. The book recounts the problems, doubts, conflicts and reflections of the French composer as he worked toward new musical languages. It can readily be placed alongside the Stockhausen volume, precisely because both investigate - philosophically as well as in more strictly musical terms - the search for new paths and the difficulties involved in pursuing them, the clashes between different visions and, above all, the revolutionary impulse that so powerfully permeated postwar culture.

Concrete Music

> *“Because of the way it is constructed, I call this approach to composition using materials drawn from experimental sound data Musique Concrète, in order to emphasize that we no longer depend on preconceived sonic abstractions, but on fragments of sound that exist concretely and are regarded as defined and complete sound objects, especially when they escape the elementary definitions of solfège.”*

Pierre Schaeffer, born in Nancy on 14 August 1910 and deceased in Aix-en-Provence on 19 August 1995, occupies a central position in the history of twentieth-century music as the founder of musique concrète, a compositional practice that radically transformed the relationship between sound, technology and perception. A telecommunications engineer and technician at Radiodiffusion Française, founder of the Groupe de Recherche de Musique Concrète (GRMC), composer, musicologist and writer, Schaeffer was able to combine technical rigor with an innovative artistic sensibility, creating a new sonic aesthetic based on the use of phonographic recordings and, later, magnetic tape. The revolutionary element of musique concrète lies in replacing traditional notation with the direct manipulation of recorded sound. Composition is no longer founded on notes and instruments, but on “sound objects”: recorded sounds from everyday reality - for example, the noise of a train, the sound of a bell or a spoken voice - appropriately manipulated and transformed.

His reflections, carefully recorded in these diaries between 1948 and 1952, belong fully to the postwar debate - and not only among musicians - about the renewal of compositional practice and the use of new sonorities. They also address the desire to change musical forms, escaping the radicalism of twelve-tone and serial techniques, which in a certain sense constrained the composer, and beginning instead to place noise elements on the same level as musical ones. This was certainly part of the broader cultural need to break with the past and produce new, revolutionary forms of art, a movement that affected not only music but also painting, sculpture and literature. These diaries by the French composer are a valuable testimony to the intense debate that swept through the European and American avant-gardes, because they alternate practical descriptions of experiments - uncertainties and failures as well as successes - with philosophical considerations intertwined with other art forms. Central to all this is the desire to treat sound objects as genuine musical sources, reinventing musical language and focusing on the listener's perception in the construction of a new expressiveness free from rigidity, mathematical calculations and increasingly restrictive musical formulas. Schaeffer writes:

> *“To the extent that only the commitment to twelve-tone music seemed to open a new expressive path for certain contemporary musicians, we have seen that, without realizing it, they were engaged in experimentation rather than in a work of expression. No doubt some will disagree, but I am*

compelled to insist on this statement and, if I have not been clear enough, I will repeat that if there is no longer, on the part of composer and listener, a compatibility of language or an accessible practice that allows the inspired creator to construct an expressive object and the recipient to perceive the expression of that object, then there is no longer expression. The former, by applying a priori structures, limits his choices to such an extent that he becomes little more than a craftsman serving a kind of aesthetic automatism; the latter, by attributing his impressions only to false relationships derived from the past or to relationships that cannot be perceived directly by musical sensibility but only by analytical intelligence, is no longer a listener, but the commentator on a written text or a working plan."

Schaeffer's criticisms of the twelve-tone and serial universe certainly place him in sympathy with John Cage - to whom he was introduced by Pierre Boulez when Cage first went to Paris - while, in the development of electronic techniques, he clearly belongs in the company of Stockhausen, with whom he maintained fruitful relations. Yet, unlike those working in the field of electronic experimentation, Schaeffer did not want his expressiveness to be founded and constructed exclusively by the machine, but rather by the surrounding world, eliminating the abstract and artificial aspect of composition and using, in a conscious order, the noises of external chaos. Thus, in his *Cinq études de bruits*, composed in 1948 and the first works of musique concrète, Schaeffer used, alongside prepared-piano and percussion sounds, the noises of locomotives, barges and pots, modifying them and, one might say, ordering them into musical form. But it is in his masterpiece *Symphonie pour un homme seul*, composed in 1949-50 together with his invaluable historic collaborator Pierre Henry, that the brilliant experimental fusion of Schaeffer's musique concrète displays its creations at their best: a symphony of noises and sounds that recounts a man's day through footsteps, yawns, breaths, shouts, heartbeats and laughter.

Abstract Music

"Restricting music to sounds that can be transcribed and performed, and that we mistakenly call natural - although they are in fact the result of highly refined instrument-making - has the consequence that every musical work is constructed from the structures, or archetypes, that until now have seemed to be the only ones capable of being made musical. It is just as if mathematicians, not yet having discovered irrational numbers, had used only algebraic numbers because they were unable to solve the quadrature of the circle."

As with Stockhausen, the desire to escape notation and the classical construction of forms led Schaeffer to build a new aesthetic that could be genuinely disruptive and trace new expressive and formal lines, bringing the French composer to "play" the external world by ordering it into musical elements, into sound objects. This research runs in parallel with, and is intertwined with, revolutions in painting, from Futurism to Dadaism and Cubism, in representations of reality and the inner world no longer tied to figuration but broadly abstract and free from formal constraints. For Schaeffer, musique concrète is a kind of abstract music because it is no longer bound to musical instruments or scores, but is free to elaborate music from elements that are at once new and ancient, such as the sound of the surrounding world. These concepts and theories would be systematized more fully in his 1966 treatise *Traité des objets musicaux*, establishing him as one of the protagonists of experimental music, particularly electronic music and sound design, as well as of the development of film music and a certain minimalism. The distinctive feature of these diaries - and their great merit, as well as their value as a source for experimentation even today - is that they allow us to experience with great intensity the birth and development of a new language, to encounter it within the climate of its own era while finding it, in many respects, still relevant and, without hesitation, revolutionary. Or, to let Schaeffer himself say it:

"A revolution, a renewal, always takes place against something, or at the very least from and toward the overcoming of a certain state of affairs. But what happens is something else: it is the overcoming of the old universe not through the harmonious crowning of the previous universe but, for better or worse, through a new contribution that completes nothing, that is added or substituted, or that simply and purely imposes another kind of existence."

LISTENING

- Pierre Schaeffer, *Cinq études de bruits* (1948), in *L'Œuvre Musicale*, INA-GRM, 2010.
- Pierre Schaeffer, *Symphonie pour un homme seul* (1950), in *L'Œuvre Musicale*, INA-GRM, 2010.
- Pierre Schaeffer, *Orphée 53* (1953), in *L'Œuvre Musicale*, INA-GRM, 2010.

English translation of Alberto Popolla's article published in *Quaderni d'Altri Tempi*.