

Futura 2000

Festival International D'Arts Acousmatique, Crest, France, 23-26 August, 2000

Reviewed by Lawrence Fritts
University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, USA

From its beginnings in 1993 as a two-day festival of French acousmatic music, the Futura Festival International D'Arts Acousmatique has grown into a four-day series of events featuring 124 works by composers from 18 countries. Organized by Denis Dufour, Futura 2000 took place August 23-26 in Crest, France, a small, medieval town 60 miles south of Lyon. Guest composers included Michel Chion, Georges Gabriele, Laurent Ho, and Alexandre Yterce.

The events were held in La Tour de Crest, a 13th-century castle which proved an ideal setting for the festival's presentations. Concerts of acousmatic works for tape alone—there were none for instruments or video—took place in four main rooms. Installations incorporating sculpture, painting, and interactive computer were situated throughout the castle, providing considerable visual context and creating an effective atmosphere for the festival. The concerts were presented in four formats: Acousma Radiophonica, a room in which longer radiophonic works were presented on a two-channel system; Acousma Domestica, a small listening room where short tape pieces ran continuously, according to a posted schedule, on a four-channel system; Acousma Da Camera, a medium-sized hall where works were presented on a 16-channel system; and Acousma D'Orchestra, where longer works were diffused on a 24-channel system on the top floor of the castle.

Both the Acousma Radiophonica and Acousma Domestica concerts eschewed sound projectionists, creating an intimate environment which encouraged listeners to develop a one-on-one relationship with each work. Most effective were the radiophonic works based on voice narratives, such as Robert Cohen's *Solal's Les Shadoks*, a highly entertaining work adapted from a 1968 science fiction animation film. Jacki Apple's *The Culture of Disappearance* is a more somber work, recounting a list of atrocities committed against human and animal cultures. Set against a backdrop of alternating overdubbed choral laments and sounds of industrial encroachment, the narrator enumerates various instances of extinction in North America during the 19th and 20th centuries. In contrast, Roland Cahen's *La Culture Concrete* is a playful and inventive interplay between the voice of a young boy and expertly manipulated close-miked objects. The dialogue between the voice and the physical world in which it resides evolves into an evocative and structurally sophisticated work. Other radiophonic works included Dieter Kaufmann's *Dialogue Avec Wittgenstein*, Luc Ferrari's *L'Escalier des Aveugles*, and Beatriz Ferreyra's *Le Petit Poucet Magazine*.

The Acousma Da Camera and Acousma D'Orchestra concerts were presented by a well-rehearsed team of projectionists. The Acousma Da Camera sound system was asymmetrically arranged with speakers placed around and within the audience's listening space. This arrangement was used to excellent effect, especially in such sonically demanding works as Elsa Justel's intensely rhythmic *Mats*. Focused frequency bands from the composer's carefully crafted sounds were presented in three-dimensional space by projectionist David Behar in a way which musically articulated the larger structures of the work. The rhythmic suppleness and vitality of the work seems to grow out of the smallest materials, primarily samples of small hand drums, and extend into ever-expanding phrases to create a work of powerful unity and drama. Ms. Justel's morphological compositional aesthetic was shared by Ricardo Nillni's *On Swings and Folds*, which features finely wrought sounds constructed out of small, iterative fragments. A resonance filter, along with other processes, helps unify sonic material which the composer has shaped into wonderful long arcs. Other works, such as Regine Cabanes's *Carapaces 2*, required a more motion-oriented approach to spatialization. In this piece, time-expanded sibilants from a childlike voice grow into colorful washes of sustained, swirling harmonies, projected at this concert into the listening space as subtly moving sound images by Jonathan Prager. Another notable work using the voice was Georgia Spiropoulos's *Paralogismes*. In a festival dominated by works of extreme sonic clarity, this piece was a model of transparency, meticulously projected by Mr. Prager in crystalline detail. Like these and other works for voice, Berangere Maximin's *Salem Pepsy Joke* also had a humorous quality, punctuated here by a variety of coarse, broadband sounds.

A number of works on the festival were derived from recognizable instrumental sounds in ways that seemed to comment upon, rather than obscure, the source material. For example, Jean Mahtab's *Hors Antennes* explores the aesthetic implications of extending the concept of audio distortion of an instrumental source into other musical domains. As the source sound, a cello, becomes increasingly distorted over the course of the work, so do its melodic, rhythmic, and gestural figures. By the end, the transformation from the smooth, linear contours of the cello into irregular, angular, hard-edged sounds is complete. A different approach to incorporating the cello as source material was represented by David Berezan's *Unheard Voices, Ancient Spaces*. Here, microtonal pitch-shifts of arco and pizzicato sounds extend the cello's voice to create a compositional space of great depth and resonance. The electric guitar made an appearance in several other works, including Robert

Mackay's *Postcards from the Summer*. This is an exuberant work, rhythmically propelled, with the aid of Frédéric Kahn's projection, from one sound world to the next. After climaxing in an energetic display of rock guitar pyrotechnics, the piece concludes with a contemplative setting of overlaid organ-like chords. Alexandre Navarro's *Kio* also features the sounds of a guitar, here in the form of a reversed recording of tonic-supertonic chord patterns intercut with "concrète" material. The work develops nicely out of the tension arising between closely- and distantly-related sounds. A more straightforward, but effective, use of pre-recorded musical material was heard in *Lubna Loop*, by Geoffroy Dadier, in which complex layers of transformations gradually fade out to reveal a simple, unaffected song loop.

While pitched sounds figured prominently in many works of the festival, they tended to be used in atmospheric, rather than structural, ways. One of the most evocative was Eleonore Bak's *Les Gardiens du Son*. Here, isolated high-pitched sounds are presented in a spare, almost uninterpreted time-space. As the piece progresses, reverberation and multiple-tap delays act to sustain high-frequency regions of the sound, evolving into a slow meditation on the pitches C-B. Agnes Poisson's sensitive placement in the concert of these frequencies in vertical and horizontal space helped evoke the poignancy of the work. A more complex and integrated handling of pitch could be found in Erik M's *Frame*. Throughout this strongly imaginative and compelling work, the composer displays an absolutely confident handling of a wide variety of sonic and formal materials. The composer's sensitivity to the pitched aspects of sounds contributes to the work's overall harmonic interest, which seems to derive from overlaid tertian structures. These harmonies shift in blocks and layers within a richly-textured formal design, clearly articulated by Ms. Poisson's projection. Hans Tutschku's *Resorption-Coupure* presented a similarly multi-layered approach. This is an intriguing work whose interest derives from a sophisticated and lively interplay of short, scattered sounds and longer, layered phrases.

The Acousma D'Orchestra concerts were held in the evening on the top floor of the castle, a wide space which provided discrete separation of the 24-channel sound system's loudspeakers. The symmetrical arrangement (including speakers suspended from the ceiling) over such a wide area helped ensure that sounds retained their spatial intentions. Works with such deep stereo imaging as Francis Dhomont's *Frankenstein Symphony* took excellent advantage of this environment, especially with the aid of Philippe Fauchart's projection. Virtually stitched together out of fragments of pieces by 22 composers, this hour-long 4-movement hybrid is a stunning work of acousmatic virtuosity in which anything seems possible. A wonderful moment of musical sorcery occurs in the *Scherzo (Giocoso)* movement, in which the sounds of a traffic jam are transformed into a gaggle of honking geese. Another large-scale work that drew on forms from the past was guest composer Michel Chion's *24 Preludes à la Vie*. Modeled after the preludes of Bach and Chopin, Mr. Chion's 42-minute work is "transposed" from one timbral area to another, each with its own characteristic register, density, means of transformation, and source material. This is a demanding work in which material is presented in a stark, almost roughly-hewn manner, requiring that the listener make connections between such divergent sources as drum machines, guitars, oscillators, and a range of non-specific, but evocative, sound worlds. The festival concluded with *Nuit Blanche*, an all-night concert featuring works by Robert Normandeau, Ivo Malec, Ragnar Grippe, Aphex Twin, Trevor Wishart, and others.

Denis Dufour and his staff did an admirable job of selecting, organizing, and presenting a wide variety of electroacoustic compositions. The sound quality of the performances was uniformly excellent and it was a genuine pleasure to hear acousmatic music projected with such care. In the span of a few years, the Futura Festival has clearly evolved into an important international venue for presenting works from both new and established composers of acousmatic music.



BACK TO TOP