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## Translating Pierre Schaeffer: Symbolism, Literature and Music

I gave this presentation in Beijing and was referred to as the author in the conference programme. However, I should like to emphasize that Christine North's contribution to the paper was invaluable and, like the collaborative translation projects we are currently undertaking, it would not have been possible without her assistance. Christine North must, therefore, be regarded as the co-author of this text.

### Introduction

As a preamble to this paper I feel I should give a brief history of the two projects my colleague Christine North and I are currently undertaking. The first is an English translation of Michel Chion's 'Guide des Objets Sonores'<sup>1</sup>. The second is a translation of Pierre Schaeffer's 'A la Recherche d'une Musique Concrète'<sup>2</sup>. Locating Schaeffer in the history of ideas and identifying his philosophical and literary references are two of the subjects we are researching. Whilst writing this paper I realised that perhaps more urgency should be placed on terminological matters – hence our decision to concentrate on our work on Chion's text and issues of translating certain terms rather than, as the title suggests, Symbolism and Literature. Naturally, as Chion's book is an exegesis of Schaeffer's theories, Schaefferian ideas will still be prominent in this discussion.

This introduction is largely anecdotal but the problems we have encountered are relevant to the paper as a whole and are best introduced as part of a personal narrative. In the early 1980s, I started my PhD in musicology at Middlesex Polytechnic (now Middlesex University) with Dr Denis Smalley as my Director of Studies (Dr Smalley kindly agreed to be the DoS even though he was working at the University of East Anglia, he is now Professor at City University, London). He recommended that I read Michel Chion's 'Guide des Objets Sonores' as a supplement to Schaeffer's 'Traité des Objets

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<sup>1</sup> Chion, M. (1983) *Guide des Objets Sonores* Paris: Editions Buchet/Chastel

<sup>2</sup> Schaeffer, P. (1952) *A la Recherche d'une Musique Concrète* Paris: Editions du Seuil

Musicaux’<sup>3</sup>, ‘Machines à Communiquer’<sup>4</sup> and other texts. Chion’s book had just been published and I read the work deciding to translate the principal sections as I progressed through the text for my own use. This translation (if such it can be called) was hand-written as at the time I had no access to even the most basic word processor. I realized immediately that as I moved from one section to another I had to modify earlier choices in my text and my written translation rapidly came to resemble one of Marcel Proust’s manuscripts with alternative lines scribbled both above and below the English text, with amendments added to the edges of the page and alternative versions stuck on top (these flaps partially obscured the text underneath which I was not sufficiently confident to erase). Nevertheless, in the absence of anything better, this was all I had. Moreover, as I was more than willing to send my efforts to others (always with the disclaimer that I was no translator and the recipient of my text was advised to check the original thoroughly) this was all several researchers in the UK had if they could not access the source text: like me they had only my handwritten ‘translation’. To claim that this was better than nothing was, to put it mildly, hardly a ringing endorsement of my efforts, nor was it much of a compliment to Chion’s book. The ‘Guide des Objets Sonores’ deserved better then, and certainly with the increasing numbers of composers and researchers in the English-speaking world who are interested in the theories of Pierre Schaeffer, it deserves much better now.

Subsequently, after many years working in schools as a peripatetic guitar teacher, in 1998 I was offered the position of Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at Middlesex University (I am now Senior Research Fellow). As part of my research duties I decided to see if my ‘translation’ could be made more widely available. Cutting this already excessively long story short I paid to have the text typed by a student and asked my colleague Christine North (a retired Senior Lecturer in French Language and Literature at Middlesex University) if she would be willing to help me revise it and complete the translation by adding the sections I’d omitted. As Christine had helped me in the past in translating various texts by Pierre Schaeffer she had become interested in him and his theories. She has a background in post-Romantic French philosophy and literature and was fascinated by his cultural references. As such she has proved the ideal collaborator. Indeed, without her help as a translator and expert on post-Romantic French thought I would never have embarked on these projects. Moreover, with the invaluable help and encouragement of the EARS ‘team’ based at De Montfort University in the UK I believe we are finally about to achieve the kind of text about which I no longer need to be so defensive.

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<sup>3</sup> Schaeffer, P. (1966) *Traité des Objets Musicaux* Paris: Editions du Seuil

<sup>4</sup> Schaeffer, P. (1970) *Machines à Communiquer* Paris: Editions du Seuil

## Translation and Terminology

It is during the processes of revision and constant re-revision that many issues have arisen which I wish to discuss in this paper. Two main problem areas have been identified. The first is the terminology itself. Schaeffer invented many neologisms which were necessary in the development of his new music theory. Thus, we have *acoulogie* and even the term *interdisciplines* (the subtitle of the ‘Traité des Objets Musicaux’ is *Essai Interdisciplines*). In addition, he used standard words in non-standard ways. *Allure*, *facture*, *context*, *contexture* are all examples of this. Do we leave these in French after ensuring they have been defined accurately or try to find the closest English equivalent? The second problem is Schaeffer’s way of conceptualising his research. This, I think, can be summarised as investigating the lowest stage of the materials (the sound objects), which are understood via a system which had yet to be developed for *musique concrète* (this system was his *solfège* or music theory), to the higher stage of works which have ‘meaning’. Note the hierarchical scheme I have adopted. This is entirely characteristic of Schaeffer’s thinking. Indeed, if we read Chion’s definition of *acoulogie* from the ‘Guide des Objets Sonores’ this process is made explicit (the translation is ours, of course):

*Acoulogy*, therefore, tries to forge a way between the “lower” level of the material and the higher organization, of meaning, knowing that in traditional music there is between these two levels an intermediate level, of structures of reference and codes appropriate to each tradition which permits communication. (Chion, 1983: 94)

And, in Schaeffer’s own words from the ‘Solfège de l’Objet Sonore’<sup>5</sup>: ‘it’s not acoustics, but it’s not quite music’ (7th theme, 8th point) – a good example of the ‘in between’ nature of disciplines to which he was referring with the word ‘interdisciplines’<sup>6</sup>. I think his writing style is unquestionably highly sensitive to words and their literary/philosophical meanings – he did after all describe himself as an ‘écrivain’. There is also the additional risk when translating an intellectual French writer that many words are too abstract, too Latinate for standard English readers.

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<sup>5</sup> Schaeffer, P. & Reibel, G. (1967) *Solfège de l’Objet Sonore* Paris: Editions du Seuil (reissued as three CDs - Schaeffer, P. & Reibel, G. (1998) *Solfège de l’Objet Sonore* Paris : INA/GRM). The booklet was translated by Livia Bellagamba but as the quotation appears in Chion’s ‘Guide’ on page 95 we have slightly changed the English for our translation.

<sup>6</sup> We are grateful to Prof. Simon Emmerson for alerting us to the fact that ‘interdisciplines’ is not equivalent to ‘interdisciplinaires’. The latter is a standard French term; as far as we can determine the former is another of Schaeffer’s neologisms.

In attempting to solve these problems we must, of course, acknowledge different ‘philosophies’ of translation. One suggests that the translator keeps as close to the original as possible regardless of any solecisms and clumsy constructions. Another approach aims to translate the text but tries to render it into comprehensible English such that the text reads as if it had been written in English whilst still retaining the correct language register. Various hybrid situations exist. Complex poetry with many levels of meaning will often benefit from the former approach (though the English version might be a very ‘different’ poem !). But, broadly speaking, Christine and I favour the latter approach for Chion’s ‘Guide des Objets Sonores’. Only once did Christine decide to deliberately adopt archaic language formations. This was on page 12 of the ‘Guide’ where Chion writes an obvious biblical pastiche complete with various references which could be rendered into standard English but in doing so would lose the sense of strangeness and distance that comes with an explicitly religious language. I would have no idea how to retain this in English but Christine’s education was steeped in traditional ‘classical’ studies and the King James Bible (and fortunately her son just happens to be an Anglican priest!).

To put the situation in context I would like to offer the following as an example of one of the very few translations of Schaeffer I encountered during the early days of my research with Denis Smalley. It appeared in a standard work (though not, I should emphasize, on the works of Schaeffer) and thus, I can only assume with some surprise, it was subjected to some kind of editorial process. Here is the French original :

Devant toute musique électrique j’ai la réaction de mon père violoniste, de ma mère chanteuse. Nous sommes des artisans. Mon violon, ma voix, je les retrouve dans tout ce bazar en bois et en fer blanc, et dans mes trompes à vélos. Je cherche le contact direct avec la matière sonore, sans électrons interposés. (Schaeffer, 1952: 15)

And here are two translated versions:

1) Before all electric music I recoil, mindful of the fact that my father was a violinist and my mother a chanteuse. We are craftsmen. My violin, my voice. I recapture in all this hardware of wood and metal, and in the sound of my “revolving clarions”. I want to achieve direct contact with the matter of sound, without electrons getting in the way.

2) When I come up against electric music I have the reaction of my father who was a violinist, my mother, who was a singer. We are craftsmen. I rediscover my violin and my voice in all this wooden and tin junk, and in my bicycle horns. I am seeking direct contact with sound material without electrons getting in the way.

In the first version, had we no recourse to the original (a necessary task for any researcher), we would be forgiven for thinking that Schaeffer is pompous and stylistically unsophisticated – which is very far

from the truth. It would appear that Schaeffer cannot even use a transitive verb correctly (I am of the generation that was required to learn such grammatical niceties). ‘I recapture in all this hardware (...) and in the sounds of my ‘revolving clarions’’. Recapture - *what* exactly? The text of ‘A la Recherche d’une Musique Concrète’ (a text, as I noted above, we have worked on and which we will shortly resume translating once the Chion text is complete) is witty, indeed in places it is very witty, and clearly the work of an ‘écrivain’. This, I believe, could not be ascertained by the first translation. While the second translation (which is ours) might not be a model of prose style it is, I believe, accurate and does use the correct language register. In version 1 for example: should *bazar* really be translated by ‘hardware’? Is *fer blanc* best rendered by ‘metal’? Note also, the inverted commas around ‘trompes à vélos’. They are not there in Schaeffer’s text so I assume the translator in inserting them in the English version hoped this eccentric solution should be read with a certain amount of caution. In fact, a great deal of caution is needed as it’s simply incorrect. ‘Trompes à vélos’ should, of course, be: *bicycle horns* which makes much more sense than ‘revolving clarions’ – whatever ‘revolving clarions’ are. This example demonstrates clearly the inadequate standard of translation of Schaeffer’s texts. When we read the French original we can see that Schaeffer does indeed know how to use a transitive verb ; the clumsy constructions are the translator’s, not Schaeffer’s. I noted with a certain relief that when a second revised edition of this work appeared some years later this translation was omitted. It is not my intention to criticize too harshly anyone’s attempts to render a foreign text into English. However, so many errors in such a short passage is worrying.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, what are some of the specific issues we have encountered and how do we try and solve them? As I mentioned before, a persistent problem occurs when Schaeffer uses a word with a common meaning but intends the less common secondary meaning. This is, of course compounded when translated into English where we have precisely the same difficulty. We are aiming for consistency in our translation. If a word is used in one sense it should be consistent throughout the text. It is our aim to suggest a translation which can be used by other academics, composers and researchers. We are, naturally, asking for advice from other academics and musicians but ultimately the choice must be made by someone and we have to accept responsibility; translation by committee is probably the worst solution.

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<sup>7</sup> The first translation comes from: Maconie, R. (1976) *The Works of Karlheinz Stockhausen* Oxford University Press: London. It appeared on page 40, though who did the translation is not at all obvious. Maconie indicates that it comes from Schaeffer’s *A la Recherche d’une Musique Concrète* but he took it from another source: Claude Samuel’s *Panorama de l’Art Musical Contemporain* published by Gallimard in 1958.

## Facture

One word that has troubled us is *facture*. This is an important concept in Schaeffer's theory and can clarify many aspect of the 'virtual' and the 'actual'. Thus it needs scrupulous attention. *Facture* and *mass* are the two aspects of sounds which underpin the whole stage of typology. Sound objects which have *facture* are 'balanced', those that have no *facture* are broadly speaking sounds which are too short, too long or they develop in an unpredictable manner. The 'Solfège des Objets Sonores' has 'execution' as its choice of translation (see: 8th theme, 4th point). This choice retains the notion of 'to perform or carry into effect' and while the sense of agency is retained we felt this was unhelpful in other contexts. Naturally, the standard French definitions are of little assistance if we take the common usage of 'invoice' but we sense the meaning of Schaeffer's term when we see that it also means 'well-made'. In order to try and find the nearest and most suitable English equivalent my strategy is to go to the British Library in London and consult as many dictionaries as possible in order to clarify the etymological roots and determine possible alternatives. Luckily, as the main research resource in Great Britain, the British Library has many volumes of dictionaries both modern and historical. In searching for definitions of *facture* this is a sample of my findings (they are, of course, edited in length but they are precisely what was written in the French language dictionaries):

### 1) Le Grand Robert de la langue Française, Paris, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2001

#### **Facture**

1) n.f. XVIe 'fabrication' XIIIe puis 'travail, œuvre, créature';  
anc. franç. faiture; lat. Factura, 'fabrication', du supin de facere 'faire'

- 1 didact. Manière dont est faite (une œuvre d'art), dont est réalisée la mise en œuvre des moyens matériels et techniques. 'La facture d'une sonate'.

Absolt. Morceau de facture, qui offre des difficultés d'exécution – la facture d'un sonnet, d'une strophe.

> Manière, style, technique. 'Des vers d'une bonne facture' –

Couplet de facture où l'auteur a utilisé des rimes rares, redoublées etc

- 2 (Mil XIXe) Techn, Fabrication des instruments de musique. > Facteur. La facture d'un piano, d'une harpe etc.

'Antoine travaillait à son troisième violon (...) Cette facture promettait un volume sonore plus ample, tout en conservant le timbre doux et feutré qui faisait la célébrité des violons de Crémone' Herbert LE PORRIER, *Le Luthier de Crémone*, p.61

Dimensions qualités des tuyaux d'orgue. Jeux de la petite, de la grosse facture: jeux dont les tuyaux sont étroits, larges.

2) Le Robert Dictionnaire Historique de la Langue Française Paris: 1993

FACTURE n.f. est un emprunt (XIIIe s.) au latin classique *factura* “fabrication”, en latin medieval “créature”, “bâtisse” et aussi “magie”. *Factura*, dérivé du supin de *facere* avait abouti à l’ancien français *faiture* “trait, visage” (1080, d’où l’anglais *feature*), “production” et “sortilege” (XIVe s.)

*Facture* a eu le sens de “trait de visage” (XIIIe s.) comme *faiture*. Lié à l’idée de fabrication, le mot désigne (XIVe s.) la manière dont est faite une œuvre d’art; cet emploi didactique est resté vivant.

Comme terme technique lié à *facteur*, il s’emploie (1548) à propos de la fabrication de certains instruments de musique.

3) Dictionnaire de l’ancienne Langue Française du IXe au XVe Siècle, Paris: 1884

FACTURE voir FAITURE

FAITURE        fayture, feiture, feture, feteure, fature, faicture, facture, fauture, faucture, feiture.

s.f. action de faire, de produire, de créer, et le résultat de cette action, production, creature, personne.

4) Dictionnaire de la Langue Française du Seizième Siècle, Paris: 1946

Facture    Action de faire, création.

Forme, apparence d’une chose ou d’une personne.

Thus, we see that the notion of ‘making’ or ‘fabrication’ does exist as one of the definitions. Moreover, it is important to note that the word *facture* can be used in English even though it is usually part of cognate words such as ‘*manufacture*’:

Oxford English Dictionary        1933, 1961

Adopted from French *facture*

Etymologically from Latin *factura* formed on *facere* - to make

1. The action or process of making (a thing). Cf. *manufacture*.

b The result of the action or process; the thing made; creation

2. The manner or style of making (a thing); construction, make; workmanship

3. Comm. = invoice. A Fr. sense: perh never used in Eng

This is the kind of information that I collected and together with Christine we decided not to translate *facture* as ‘*execution*’ but as... ‘*facture*’! Through gritted teeth I might add with weary resignation: ‘So, all those hours in the British Library was time well spent’. But, of course, it *was* time well spent. This is

the basic task that needs to be done as part of any responsible act of translation. While our choice is still open to discussion the fact that the word existed in English at all persuaded us to follow Schaeffer's lead and resurrect a less common, even archaic, use of the word. In this case I believe that once it has been defined we can refer to the *facture* of a sound object without needing to render the word into more 'modern' perhaps even demotic English. We are engaged in a scholarly enterprise and we should not be timid in advocating this kind of linguistic complexity and, dare I say it, level of sophistication.

## Allure

Another word which troubled us is Schaeffer's 'generalised' vibrato: the word he used was *allure*. Once again, my tactic is to consult the resources of the British Library. These are examples from one of the many French dictionaries I consulted:

Le Grand Robert de la langue Française, Paris, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2001

ALLURE n.f. - 1170, *aleure*: *allure*, 1174; *de aller*.

1 – a) Vitesse de déplacement, de progression (au course d'une action, d'un mouvement, d'une activité, d'un déplacement...) > Cadence, Allure lente ou rapide. Accélérer, forcer, précipiter, ralentir, maintenir son allure. L'allure d'un ouvrier au travail. – (Avec à...) Rouler à faible allure, à vive allure, à toute allure (> Vitesse). À cette allure, la réunion ne sera pas finie avant demain matin.

b) Manière d'aller, de se déplacer > Démarche, marche, pas. Allure légère, lourde, pesant. L'aisance de son allure.

(XIIe) Spécilat. Les allures du cheval. Allures naturelles (pas, trot, gallop), défectueuses (amble, aubin, traquenard), acquises (par le dressage: pas d'école, passage etc.)

c) Fam. Manière dont les choses évoluent. Loc. À l'allure où vont les choses: de la façon dont elles changent (rapidement).

2 (1532) Manière de se tenir, de se comporter; caractère général de l'apparence d'une personne (jugée d'après des critères culturels).

3 Fam. Apparence générale (d'une chose) . Elle a une drôle d'allure, cette maison.

We can see immediately that Schaeffer's choice is an extremely intelligent solution. Like *facture*, it encapsulates exactly the characteristic of the sound object he wishes to communicate. We should notice its derivation from *aller* as it captures the identifiable manner of someone's way of walking. In the 'Solfège de l'Objet Sonore' it is translated as 'motion' (see: 7th theme, 6th point). In our opinion this is too neutral. It fails to capture the concept of a characteristic movement that results from natural agency



(or the lack of it) and the interaction with specific materials (real or virtual). Of course, the word also exists in English – which is slightly problematic as in English *allure* has acquired a more distant meaning that now dominates. ‘Allure’ in English usually means a form of attraction – often of a sexual, seductive kind. Thus, we thought there was more urgency to find a new translation for this particular word. Indeed, at a conference in Dublin two years ago I presented a paper – a short sketch of an analysis – on Schaeffer’s *Etude aux allures*. It was quite obvious by the expressions on the faces of many conference delegates who were unacquainted with Schaefferian theory that they felt slightly cheated (to put it mildly) when I played examples of sounds with *allure*. They expected, even if they didn’t admit to themselves, sounds that were *alluring* in the English rather than the Schaefferian sense. After the presentation one delegate came up to me and said ‘You really have to use another word. *Allure* is simply too misleading’. So, what are the alternatives? ‘Gait’ was one we considered and one that Rolf Inge Godøy and Lasse Thoresen have suggested (both are Norwegian musicologists). This is a good old English term and one I like a lot. But... *Etude aux allures* becomes in English: *Study on gates/gaits* – this could be problematic. Not only would there be confusion with garden gates (with all kinds of possible references to Pierre Henry’s *Variations pour une porte et un soupir*), there are electronic ‘gates’. The different spellings are more obvious if the title is read in a text, of course, but homophones can cause problems when spoken. ‘Mien’ perhaps? ‘Wobble’ was regarded as too low in register, so what about ‘Movement’? ‘Vibrato’? Christine (who comes from northern England) wanted to introduce a word familiar to her region: ‘wimmer’. But while we liked the sound of the word we felt it didn’t travel well beyond Yorkshire. The solution (and we’re open to suggestions) is... *allure*! Despite the entirely sensible misgivings of the delegate in Dublin every alternative we have discovered has been considered and eventually rejected.

## Conclusion

If these specific solutions (and I repeat these are not final solutions) seem lacking in courage I can only appeal to the numerous cases where foreign words have been accepted into the English language. English absorbs words all the time. No-one can legislate against this – nor should they. Personally, I never use the term *concrete music* which has an ‘official’ status appearing as it does in the most recent on-line version of the Oxford English Dictionary. I feel that *musique concrète* has become a term that is used so frequently that its musical significance cannot be contested. Moreover, despite Schaeffer’s claim that it had served its use and that *musique expérimentale* should be used instead, *musique concrète* remains closer to the philosophical meaning of ‘concrete’ which is so central to the Schaefferian method. If we were to use the term *concrete music* in English the first definition that most people

would identify would not be the philosophical term but the building material<sup>8</sup>. The French do not fall into this trap: their word for ‘concrete’ as used by the construction industry is *béton*.

In conclusion, Christine and I have many decisions to make. The translation should appear shortly and I hope that it will promote a debate on the issues I have discussed. I would like to think that those interested in the electroacoustic medium will contact us with their suggestions and, if we are persuaded, an electronic text can be altered without undue difficulty. The most important thing is to get the text published and to initiate the debate. Chion deserves it and, most important of all, so does Schaeffer.

John Dack & Christine North, London, October 2006 (rev. January 2007)

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<sup>8</sup> To illustrate this point we can read the following passage from: Griffiths, P. (1995) *Modern Music and After – Directions since 1945* Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.18. ‘...(hence the term ‘musique concrète’ to denote this music created from ‘concrete’ sound sources, though behind the choice of word there may also have been the hope that new materials would revolutionize the art in the way that reinforced concrete had revolutionized architecture—an optimistic analogy cherished by many composers in the decade or so after the war).’ I admire Griffiths’ writings on contemporary music enormously. However, the play on words suggested by ‘reinforced concrete’ does not work in French. ‘Reinforced concrete’ in French is *béton armé*. Schaeffer, was, I am certain, referring to the philosophical meaning of the term.