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Luc Ferrari

Interview by Dan Warburton, July 22, 1998

I've always had a soft spot for the music of Luc Ferrari, ever since I came across a copy of "Music Promenade" (which, along with Cage's "Variations IV", Berio's "Sinfonia" and Stockhausen's "Hymnen" and "Telemusik" perfectly encapsulates the polystylistic cultural turmoil of the Sixties) in a record library at a time when most of my schoolfriends were checking out the Sex Pistols. Here at last was electronic music (oops, sorry-musique concrète) with a human face and a healthy sense of humour! "Presque Rien No. 1" from 1970, one year after "Music Promenade", confirmed Ferrari as one of the best pairs of ears in the business (I heartily agree with Daniel Caux's conferral of masterpiece status here, though I doubt Ferrari would go along with that himself), and I set out to track down whatever I could of his. No mean task, since most of the old vinyls were long-deleted and totally unobtainable. Now, some years on, others are taking an interest: John Zorn has given one of his Tzadik album slots to Ferrari, and David Grubbs is preparing to re-release two major instrumental works of that period, "Interrupteur" (1967) and "Tautologos 3"(1970). It was a great pleasure to meet Luc Ferrari—the human face and a healthy sense of humour are just as evident in the man as in his music—and talk in the shade of the plum trees in his garden in Montreuil, trees heavily laden with not only fruit but also compact discs ("they're things I don't listen to very much, so I hang them on the trees..."), glittering in the sunlight of a July afternoon.

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There's a great Luc Ferrari tradition of falsifying autobiographies...

In any case, when people lie, they don't necessarily realise it! I was born in Paris, and I haven't moved, except until now—I live in the suburbs and I hate it. (Laughs)

Do you come from a musical family?

No, not at all. My parents came here from a little village in Corsica after the First World War; they became nice, provincial petits-bourgeois. I was in a place—the fifth arrondissement—where, by chance, there were artists and musicians. My sisters were going out with artists and poets, and eventually it was the creative world which attracted me. I wanted to play piano, and that slid quickly into writing—it wasn't enough to play other people's notes: I had to write notes too.

What were your earliest musical memories?

I suppose that would be the radio, because radio was something completely new. I was a kid during the Second World War and even before that my parents had one of the first radio sets, and there was Radio London. I can still remember those four timpani strokes, and then that mishmash of voices scrambled by electronic devices, through which you could hear those surrealistic messages, like *cadavres exquis*! Wonderful sound memories. You turned on the radio and heard all kinds of things. One day it was "Pacific 231" by Honegger, which really had an effect on me: it was absolutely astounding, noise-music. After the War they started talking about contemporary musicians—I was 15 years old and followed the programmes passionately—the first things I heard by Webern and Schoenberg were about that time, just after the War.

Whom did you study with?

(Laughs) Oh, you want the big picture, is that it? Well, first I studied piano. I wasn't very satisfied because I thought my teachers were dumb... and repressive. I had these ideas of interpretation that went way beyond the standard Conservatoire limits. So I was at war with my piano teachers. What's more, I was already writing things, so I obviously thought I was someone special! (Laughs) I was writing atonal music, noisy music, like Honegger—who I met too. I worked with him a bit and found him really depressive. (Laughs) And pessimistic, saying it wasn't worth it. When you're young it really bugs you to have some guy say: "Oh, music's useless... be a dentist instead..." I thought that was old. I needed something new.

Afterwards I went to Messiaen, in 1953, or something like that. I went just after Boulez and Stockhausen. Messiaen was inspiring when discussing other people's music, and he was unbearable when he talked about his own! (Laughs) He kept going on about the birds, and I couldn't care less about birds, and then it was colours, these chords which were mixtures of colours, and it all seemed so incredibly naïve to me. And the Lord God, Jesus and Mary and all that came up again and again in what he said, and I was completely atheist. Bugged the hell out of me. I didn't think his music was any good. He had no sense of movement. It was music written in sections which didn't establish itself over time, or continue an idea. Music made up of little ideas stuck one on top of the other, in the same way as he stuck in the birdsong—there would be a gap

somewhere and hey presto! he'd stick in a birdsong from somewhere or other. The concept was to put into music everything he heard and liked. It seemed a little thin to me. But he was an inspiring guy...

Then I was at Darmstadt from 1954 onwards, and it was great. My first pieces were played straightaway. It was there that I met everybody who made up that generation that redefined post-War music. Messiaen was there, of course, but the meeting which was the most enlightening for me, in terms of philosophy and aesthetics, was with John Cage. Not Boulez. Stockhausen was a great guy, very rich in terms of musical imagination, all the different aspects of sound creation rolled into one extraordinary intuition. With a strict intention to be serial, but serial in an explosive way.

Was Darmstadt as rigorous as legend has it in terms of ideology?

They were ideological times. It was a time when we wanted something strong, a strong structure. We were coming out of a total mess, emerging from violence... Darmstadt was in ruins. It really disturbed me to see a country like that, demolished to such a degree. Terrifying. But there were some smashing girls! You had to choose between serialism and girls. (Pause) I chose girls. (Laughs) No, the great musical encounter was with Cage, who exploded all those ideas which were already starting to get a bit institutionalised.

What was your music like at the time?

It was based on a series, quite serial, but not too systematic. Mistakes were accepted. (Smiles) This was also the time when I was attracted by noise, and therefore by the beginning of musique concrète more so than electronic music. Even so I got on quite well with the people who took care of music in Cologne, Musik der Zeit, who played my stuff too.

Had you already discovered musique concrète before going to Darmstadt?

I probably went to musique concrète concerts-though not the very first ones-at the beginning of the 50s. I met Pierre Schaeffer about that time. Schaeffer always hated contemporary music (Laughs) but he liked me for some reason. He probably thought I was some kind of deviant in the serial world. That's probably why he invited me to the studio, but I didn't go until 1958, because I wanted to continue doing instrumental music. I did lots of things about that time, instrumental and orchestral experiments, scores which people don't know.

Do you look at your old pieces today?

It depends, sometimes. When we move house! (Laughs)

Which other pieces impressed you at that time? "Le Marteau sans Maître" "Gruppen"?

Oh yes, "Gruppen." Of course. All the Klavierstücke of Stockhausen. I was at all the premieres.

And Boulez...?

Boulez seemed to me to be a guy who wrote laws. Like a company lawyer. (Smiles) I

didn't like that very much, because I felt more at home with freedom, working on intuition. What do I want, what do I really want? Seeing if that corresponded to a norm or not didn't strike me as an interesting problem. So I quickly moved away from that, and since I was more on Schaeffer's side than on the electronic music side, people didn't hang out with me all that much! When the Domaine Musical started up, I wasn't part of it. They were the major players in contemporary music at that time, broadcasting old and new composers' work. And I wasn't one of them.

Was there really such a great difference between musique concrète and electronic music at that time?

Oh yes, absolutely. Electronic music used pure sounds, completely calibrated. You had to think digitally, as it were, in a way that allowed you to extend serial ideas into other parameters through technology. Whereas Schaeffer and Henry were working like samplers, their idea was to capture those sounds which couldn't be serially calibrated because they were too complex in character. I was very interested in that. My first attempt with musique concrète was in 1958, with a few "Etudes"... Schaeffer had done studies with noise, I did studies with sounds in motion, repetitive sounds...

What did you record as basic starting material?

All kinds of things. The piano, of course, as reference instrument—but not using it as a keyboard, more as a complex-sound-generator... Corrugated iron, percussion instruments, anything we could as a sound source. We went to fleamarkets, workshops and factories looking for bits of metal, springs... All the founder members of the Groupe de Recherches Musicales were there, François-Bernard Mâche, François Bayle, Parmegiani and many others... We were a real group.

Did the group have its own ideology too?

Schaeffer did: it was to create a generalised solfège. I didn't think that solfège was enough—it was an instrument which allowed you to recognise sounds, play with them, listen to them in a particular way. I really learned to listen a lot. First you record the metal, springs or whatever, but as soon as you can't see them anymore you're listening to tapes and what they have to say. You're not listening to images or causality anymore. So the ideology was that: use sounds as instruments, as sounds on tape, without the causality. It was no longer a clarinet or a spring or a piano, but a sound with a form, a development, a life of its own.

How did your tape work influence your instrumental writing?

I managed to do my electro work and carry on as an orchestral and instrumental writer, but obviously what I'd discovered with sounds made me want to try out some different things with instruments, less to do with serial information than before. My music at that time was atonal, though... sometimes there were harmonic things. This was also the collage period... and there was Cage's influence.

Let's come back to that—why was it such an important encounter for you?

To start with, it had nothing to do with what we were listening to at the time, which was serial music. It was a way of approaching the instrument from a different direction... you had a piano but you didn't use it as a piano—that was already quite close to the

concrète way of thinking. Above all, it was music designed to provoke something else... what was going on theatrically when he was moving round the piano, or blowing whistles in pans of water, or when the two of them (with David Tudor) reacted according to some kind of hidden agenda...? In the end, it was the discovery of that definition and that concept which were completely mysterious... Cage was totally provocative. We laughed our heads off, and he loved it! I have to say that even Boulez laughed, a little bit. But not for real... hollow laughter... (Laughs)

With Messiaen you said you didn't like the "baggage"-birds, colours, religion... but Cage also had his obsessions: Zen, mushrooms, whatever... That didn't bother you?

It was totally exotic, much more interesting than birds. In fact, Cage didn't go on so much about that at that time; he spoke about everyday life—we all know those speeches of his, which relate the little details of life, minimalist observations on society, human feelings, things we've seen, things we've experienced... Things we've experienced have so much to teach us—that's what was so extraordinary.

What were you doing in the early 60s, after the ferment of Darmstadt?

I was a member of the Groupe de Recherches Musicales which had just started up, and my job was to research instruments and their construction. I did improvisation sessions too (which wasn't done all that much at the time) with the Ensemble Instrumental de Musique Contemporaine de Paris, conducted by Konstantin Simonovic. We worked a lot together, we did semi-notated improvisations, experiments with different ways of writing. Some parameters were indicated in the score, others weren't. You could see what was written and what was improvised.

Were you aware of the free jazz that was coming in from America at the time? The piano writing in "Société II" always reminds me of Cecil Taylor.

I think I came across Cecil Taylor a bit later, in 65 or 66. That really impressed me—Cecil Taylor is an amazing character... Both his music and the way he approaches the instrument are astonishing.

What else were you listening to at the time?

The Beatles, all the pop stuff. Obviously everything in new music. Classical too—I've never stopped listening to it—Bach, Beethoven. Brahms and Schubert have never interested me, on the other hand.

"Société II" also bears the title "and if the piano were a woman's body..." Could you explain that?

"Société II" was an instrumental piece in which there was already a bit of music-theatre. Back then it was avant garde, including an element of theatre in a concert. I was good friends with Kagel, and we were working more or less along the same lines (we see less of each other nowadays, as we're both quite busy—sometimes we meet up by chance and it's very pleasant). "Société II" is basically a number of musicians who, bit by bit, gather together around a piano and make it suffer... (Laughs) Violent male action on a woman's body... So it's also describing a period in which macho behaviour was being called into question... we were getting ready for 1968, the

important social and political realisations, the place of women in society, et cetera.

Just before the end of the piece there's that amazing moment when the music takes off and becomes a kind of crazy vaudeville... What did you mean by that?

Breaking up styles. There's noisy music in there, music-theatre, tonal and atonal music, all mixed up in a joyful patchwork. Even back then I wanted to mix different styles.

Maybe that's what caught the attention of John Zorn?

Oh, I doubt he knows that.

I wouldn't under-estimate him! He's a great collector, and a big Kagel fan.

Oh yes? That's nice.

What were you doing in May 1968? Taking part?

I was recording a bit...! (Laughs) I went to meetings. I didn't take part because I don't like violence. People throwing rocks on one side at others throwing tear-gas grenades, it's not my scene. I was a little bit on the outside. I took part from a distance.

Did you believe that it would change the way new music would be received?

Musically, did it change anything...? (Pause) I think our generation preceded that movement. It didn't come from nowhere, it came from a socio-politico-philosophical way of thinking that we started. That fantastic longing for freedom, that idea of breaking up institutions, going beyond aesthetic limits and things that "were like that and not any other way"... all that was already expressed in our scores. Breaking the rules. I think 1968 benefitted from our action.

"Music Promenade", with its bits of political speeches and protests, has always seemed to me to be a sort of commentary on that time... Did you intend it as such?

It's a panorama of society. The idea for the piece came from the fact that, early on in musique concrète, I was one of the first to take the tape recorder outside the studio, and use sounds recorded outside, sounds from real life. I had a Nagra, one of the first portable machines. I started collecting sounds without any preconceived notions other than a desire to insert into musical discourse a sound that basically didn't belong there.

As I said earlier, musique concrète was a kind of abstractisation [sic] of sound-we didn't want to know its origin, its causality... Whereas here I wanted you to recognise causality-it was traffic noise it wasn't just to make music with but to say: this is traffic noise! (Laughs) Cage's influence, perhaps. At the time I was part of team which made films for television, as a pseudo-sound-engineer (I didn't have any formal training, but I had a feel for it, and some experience of recording). I was employed as musician and recording engineer, and this team travelled all over Europe making films, so I recorded for them and also for myself. I recorded anything that took my fancy, things which probably weren't much use to anyone... I stockpiled an enormous number of

sounds I later started to compose with for "Music Promenade." Originally it was an installation, not at all something which had to be twenty minutes long. It was for four tape recorders playing non-stop, four times twenty minutes' worth of sounds which get out of sync as the machines finish and rewind, creating a kind of permanent environment. But it was difficult to realise-installations weren't in at that time!-it was hard finding four tape recorders, eight loudspeakers, mixing desk and what have you... So the record label Wergo asked me to mix it down.

"Tautologos 3" from 1970 is going to be reissued by David Grubbs. Is he going to re-record the piece or use Simonovic's original performance?

They're going to reissue the original. Which isn't bad, actually... it's fun. "Tautologos 3" is another story, one which inevitably puts me in line with the American minimalists. I think I already knew their music-around 1970 I went to the States and met Steve Reich, Terry Riley, Robert Ashley, Gordon Mumma... I like these guys a lot. Maybe the idea was already there. When was "In C"? 1964? I couldn't say I was a minimalist at the time, but I was always interested in repetition: I just didn't know how to tackle it. I was tied up in serialism in the 60s, but even so I was experimenting with loops which repeated in cycles which never met up-that was also the idea of the "Music Promenade" installation we talked about: Musical events where you perceive the idea of repetition without them being necessarily repetitive themselves.

What interested me was looping the events in such a way that each time they reappeared, they created new musical objects. The idea of tautology. The first "Tautologos 3" was a written score, a text-score (like many others at that time), where I explained the rules of the tautology; it was a score which gave individual players the freedom to choose their action. We did this version a lot, in instrumental and theatrical contexts. Well, what with mixing up other people's instrumental and theatrical actions, after a while I wanted to do my version of the piece! (Laughs) So I wrote an instrumental score which respected the demands of the text-score. From time to time I taught workshops where I did "Tautologos 3" very often, with the students having to follow the score quite closely-so when I showed them my own version they said: "You're cheating! You're not following the rules!" And I said: "I am free, you know..."

The other piece on the CD is "Interrupteur". What were you trying to do with in that work?

I wanted to write the most static music possible. I suppose it didn't work out, as it's quite a busy score! (Laughs) The idea was to have instrumental continuities which went from beginning to end. One instrument goes up for ten minutes and comes down for ten minutes, while another goes up for three minutes and comes down over the next seventeen, and so on. Each instrument had its plan and there were lines which crossed, and each time that happened there was a special event. That was the basic idea. What interested me was to decide on a duration and to see what each instrument was going to do, in a conceptual way. I'm starting to work with durations again, trying to organise them in a completely aleatoric way in terms of the composition; it's all written out, but the compositional information is all generated by chance. I take the duration and use it as a painter would, like a canvas...

"Presque Rien N° 1 ou le lever du jour au bord de la mer" is still your most famous piece...

That's true. I wonder why that is.

For David Grubbs at least, it represents a new genre in contemporary music of that time, which he calls "Sound Art" as opposed to "Music Composition"... Was it a different compositional approach for you?

I wanted to be a radical as possible, and take it to the limit in terms of using natural sound, by not including any artificial, sophisticated sound at all. Once I'd done "Presque Rien N° 1" I didn't need to be that radical anymore. There's one landscape, a given time, and the radical thing is precisely that it's just one place at one specific time, daybreak.

What's nice about the "Presque Riens" is that you really notice the things you hear, and eventually there's a moment where sounds stand out more than they normally would. I went everywhere with my tape recorder and microphone, and I was in this Dalmatian fishing village, and our bedroom window looked out on a tiny harbour of fishing boats, in an inlet in the hills, almost surrounded by hills-which gave it an extraordinary acoustic. It was very quiet. At night the silence woke me up-that silence we forget when we live in a city. I heard this silence which, little by little, began to be embellished... It was amazing. I started recording at night, always at the same time when I woke up, about 3 or 4am, and I recorded until about 6am. I had a lot of tapes!

And then I hit upon an idea-I recorded those sounds which repeated every day: the first fisherman passing by same time every day with his bicycle, the first hen, the first donkey, and then the lorry which left at 6am to the port to pick up people arriving on the boat. Events determined by society. And then the composer plays! (Smiles) I'm free, I play with freedom... I think it's good to have a really strong concept-and then to forget it. If not, things can pass you by... You have to listen to your intuition.

How was the work received?

Very strangely! It was badly received by my GRM colleagues, who said it wasn't music! (Laughs) I remember the session where I played it to them in the studio, and their faces turned to stone... I was quite happy, because I thought it wasn't bad at all. It was recorded by Deutsche Grammophon for their famous "Avant Garde" series. It had some success in the States, probably because it came out at a time when people were into plans-séquences... They probably recognised it as being along those lines. Warhol's films, for example. Minimalism.

You waited seven years before doing "Presque Rien N° 2".

"Presque Rien N° 2 was a derailment of "Presque Rien N° 1". There were two places, and it's more or less nighttime, dusk instead of dawn. That meant I could sleep in in the morning! (Laughs) I was struck by the night in a tiny village in Corbières called Tuchan, where I went walking at night with [my wife] Brunhild, recording. The night had an extraordinary sound quality-distant traffic, birds, crickets more or less nearby, bells, dogs...

And another element: your voice included, as a kind of commentary.

There was also the idea of the walker/observer, who realises what he's recording and adds his ideas. In fact there's true and false involved-there are some things which

were added for dramaturgical reasons, some commentaries which are completely bogus! (Laughs) In any case, playing with truth and lies is what makes up the concept, which came later when I realised that a "Presque Rien" was being born... Instrumental sounds are added too: putting the walker inside the recording process and recognising him as a person, led me to think: "There are these natural sounds, and I'm going to make sounds too, incorporate a symbolic transcription of what comes into my head and then intervene as composer." So I became a kind of director.

How did your instrumental music evolve during the 70s? I get the impression it became less serial, more minimal...

That's true. But there wasn't one style, there were many... realising that you could work in ways that were atonal and tonal-that means taking and playing with harmonic possibilities rather than with tonality, 19th century style. Tonality is like serialism as such-neither interests me. What I'm interested in is using harmonic potential to present a state of awareness, playing with that.

Do you work at the piano?

Yes, a lot. It's important to have the gesture. If somebody asked me for a piece for six flutes, I'd be panic-stricken! (Laughs) With the piano I'm completely in control of the gestural situation-not that I'm going to play the piece myself, but I know what's difficult, what's impossible.

What about computers?

I have problems with machines which aren't gestural. But now we're returning to the gestural, even with digital machines-I'm quite fascinated by techno, the way those guys work with records, the ease and directness of the gesture... Samplers are very interesting, a way of doing real-time montage.

What are you working on at the moment?

I work all the time. Hörspiels, things for experimental radio-especially in Germany and Holland: there I get real commissions-and then I do electro or instrumental things, or a mixture of both. At the moment I'm preparing two things: a "travel diary" in the American South West which I'm doing for Radio Hilversum in Holland. We're going to see everything you can see in the tour guides! The piece can be as long as I want... I'm the recording engineer who tells the story-in sounds or words-of everything that can happen on an adventure holiday... I imagine there's more to see than to listen to over there, but that's my problem! (Laughs) The second project is to do a piece for next year for instruments and tape, a commission from GRM. Twenty minutes. Which is quite short for me.

How did you meet David Grubbs?

I was in Chicago not so long ago, in April. I was doing the university circuit-I do conferences on my work and if all goes well they give me a concert or two in the university. In Chicago I did a tape concert: "Presque Rien avec Filles", "Music Promenade" and "L'Escalier des Aveugles". David was in several places where I was giving conferences and we got on well together. When he came to Paris, he came to see me and said he'd like to reissue some things which were unobtainable, like

"Interrupteur" and "Tautologos 3". Meeting a student/teacher from the other side of the world talking about this music not many people have ever heard of, it was quite funny. It's quite common in the States, apparently. There are guys who know a bit of everything. I don't know how they do it. I get the impression that in the States you can find all the old vinyls. I don't know if they bought up all the existing stocks or something... I know that I ask Deutsche Grammophon they won't even remember who I am! (Laughs) Let alone that record with "Presque Rien N° 1" and "Société II". There were also things on EMI and on Philips, that famous silver series. Probably things you can find in department stores over there.

How were you contacted by Tzadik?

We did a concert at Mills College in California in 1997, during a tour with Brunhild of the universities over there (who got in touch with each other-"Luc Ferrari's coming to California!"-and I got invited to quite a few places). At Mills College they wanted to do an instrumental concert, so I sent them the score of "Cellule 75". I hadn't heard it in years and decided to do a revival. From time to time there are things which interest me once again. They played it so well that we said it'd be silly not to make a record. Chris Brown and William Winant suggested we do it with Zorn... Winant knows Zorn, I think...

Yes, he plays on "Kristallnacht"...

A-ha, so he's actually seen him! (Laughs) The record was done very quickly-they recorded and mixed it without telling me. They sent me the first mix, I made my criticisms, they corrected it, and it was good. I didn't deal with Mr. Zorn. It was his assistant with the Japanese name. Since the record came out I haven't heard a word from them; I don't know if they've advertised it at all... This version of "Cellule 75" is quite different from the one recorded for La Muse en Circuit, because there's a degree of freedom in the partially-improvised bits. The other piece, "Place des Abbesses", had never been issued before. I had it in my archives, listened to it and thought it would do to fill up the record. I thought it was still... audible.

Did you live near the Place des Abbesses in Paris?

No, but I had many friends who did. It's a square I like a lot, halfway between the bottom and the top, stuck there like that... I didn't record anything there-it's purely virtual. A description in my head, not at all realistic. The "Presque Rien"s are a lot more realistic. "Place des Abbesses" is impressionistic in the French tradition... (Smiles) When I get my new studio set up in two or three months I'll start looking through some other boxes of tapes.

If I were to lock you in your studio for the rest of your life with just ten records to listen to, what would you choose?

Quelle horreur! What a wretched question. I'm far too sociable to imagine I could ever be locked up anywhere-unless they send me to prison, which is perhaps possible... (Laughs) But, anyway... Opus 106 by Beethoven, that interests me. "The Well-Tempered Clavier", Bach. The Debussy "Préludes". (Pause) "She Was A Visitor" by Robert Ashley. "In C" by Terry Riley. Definitely a late Cage piece, perhaps the symphony for large orchestra, I can't remember what it's called... I can listen to that for hours and there's always something different... (Pause) Some Monteverdi madrigals,

though I can't give you titles. Something by Vivaldi. (Pause) A Cecil Taylor from the 60s. (Pause) Staying with jazz, something by the Modern Jazz Quartet. Songs don't interest me a lot. I trust the spoken voice, but not the singing voice. What I prefer is spontaneity. Meeting people. Like this interview...



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