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How Electroacoustic Pioneer Luc Ferrari Captured the Social Life of Sound



BY NATHAN GEYER

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Looking back at the intimate musical language of Luc Ferrari (1929-2005), who employed cinematic methods in the service of quotidian storytelling



Summer, 1967. It is a typical morning in a fishing village in Korčula, a small Dalmatian island surrounded by the Adriatic Sea. As dawn breaks, the ambience of daily life quietly filters through an open window – the braying of a donkey, footsteps on cobbled streets, the hushed chatter of villagers and the rattle of a tired engine as a truck rumbles past. As the sun rises, adult voices shout out to playing children before the day's work begins; once quiet returns, a solitary voice sings the refrains of a folk tune, accompanied by the incessant rattle of cicadas.

In an interview 30 years later, the composer Luc Ferrari recalled the stillness of Korčula: '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...'. Waking up at 3 or 4am, Ferrari recorded all that could be heard from his window every morning, keenly observing the daily repetition of certain sounds. These recordings would form the foundation of Ferrari's best-known composition, entitled *Presque rien N°1, le lever du jour au bord de la mer* (Almost Nothing N°1, Daybreak at the Seashore) (1967-70). Ferrari assembled fragments of his daily recordings into a complete whole, a sonic tapestry woven from the recurring rhythms of daily life.



Luc Ferrari with Mauricio Kagel, Amiens, 1968. Courtesy: Brunhild Ferrari

Ferrari described the piece as 'a sort of anti-music', a quietly radical work that was undoubtedly inspired by John Cage, whom he met in 1956 at Darmstadt, one of the experimental frontiers of classical music. Spearheaded by the domineering presence of Pierre Boulez, most of the composers in residence at Darmstadt were pursuing serialism, a strict form of atonal music bound by rules and conventions. While Ferrari found Boulez's attitude 'purist and intransigent', his encounter with Cage was formative. In 1952, Cage's seminal 4'33" was premiered in New York – as Cage's collaborator David Tudor sat at the piano without playing a single note for the required 4 minutes and 33 seconds, it was hoped that the audience would discover the world of incidental sound in the concert hall, breaking down the threshold that set 'music' apart from

'noise'. Though *Presque rien N°1* was more composed than the 'nothing' of 4'33", Ferrari's playful attitude to composition shared more with Cage than the earnestness of many of his European contemporaries.

Between 1958-1966, Ferrari was part of the Groupe de Recherches Musicales (GRM), a pioneering studio devoted to the research and composition of *musique concrète*. Ferrari recounted time spent scouring flea markets and factories for miscellaneous bits of metal, searching for 'concrete' sound sources that would be recorded and manipulated in the studio. While Karlheinz Stockhausen developed a scientific approach to synthesised electronic music at the West German Radio studio in Cologne, *musique concrète* was like an anarchic collage of found objects. Pierre Schaeffer, the founder of GRM, was committed to what he defined as *acousmatic* experience, composing works that would ostensibly enable the listener to appreciate the complex form of sound in itself, its source mangled beyond recognition. When Ferrari presented *Presque rien N°1* to his peers at GRM, he was met with stony faces – they said, 'it wasn't music'.



Luc Ferrari, 2002. Courtesy:
Brunhild Ferrari

Even before he left GRM, Ferrari had begun to move beyond Schaeffer's approach. Armed with a portable tape recorder, Ferrari started collecting what he described as 'anecdotal' sound, recording everything from conversations in the street to farmyard animals. In *Hétérozygote* (1963-4), the frantic tones and percussive clamour familiar from *musique concrète* were juxtaposed with the anecdotal, coming together in a surreal fabric of abstracted sonic textures, environmental recordings and speech. Ferrari compared anecdotal sound to images, likening himself to a film director; while *Presque rien N°1* is in many respects like a long-take slowly unfolding over time, *Hétérozygote* has all the frantic chops and changes of montage, juxtaposing images across time and space.

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Ferrari's cinematic method continued to develop in his later works, which showed an unusual commitment to quotidian storytelling. In *Presque rien N°2: Ainsi Continue la Nuit dans ma Tête Multiple* (Almost Nothing N°2: And so the Night Continues in my Multiple Head) (1977), we accompany Ferrari with his partner and fellow composer Brunhild on a walk through a village in the south of France – a soundscape of magical realism combining natural and artificially manipulated sounds, accompanied by Ferrari's whispered commentary. Speech became a central part of Ferrari's practice throughout the 80s and 90s, in numerous works that combined the sonic experimentation of *musique concrète* with the narrative sensibility of a radio play or travel diary.



Cecil Taylor and Luc Ferrari. Courtesy: Getty Images, INA; photograph: Laszlo Ruzska

Music has often been described as the most 'abstract' of the arts, its mathematical principles of harmony and rhythm estranged from the world of lived experience. Yet, even in his writing for acoustic instruments, Ferrari's interest in storytelling was enduring. From the anecdotal narrative to the play of collaboration, Ferrari's music effuses the personal and poetic gestures of social life.

In celebration of Luc Ferrari's 90th birthday and the launch of the English translation of his Complete Works by Ecstatic Peace Library, a series of performances of Ferrari's compositions, in

addition to talks, films, readings and installations will be hosted at Cafe Oto and Close-Up Cinema in London. **Stereo Spasms Festival runs from 7 to 14 February 2019.**

<https://www.cafeoto.co.uk/events/stereo-spasms-festival/>

Main image: Luc Ferrari during a Groupe de Recherches Musicales concert. Courtesy: Getty Images, INA; photograph: Laszlo Ruzska

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