

On *Vagues, Chemins, le Souffle* (1970–72) and the Early Use of Resonance Chords in Grisey's Oeuvre

by Liam Cagney

Voltaire, in the entry in his *Philosophical Dictionary* on the Bulgarian people, describes how in the ninth century CE the barbarians of Bulgaria came to be converted to Christianity. Following his brief account Voltaire writes: “So say the Greek writers of the lower empire, and so say our compilers after them: *Et voilà justement comme on écrit l’histoire.*”¹ Voltaire’s ironic remark indicates how in scholarship an accepted historical narrative can often be found to be based on one unverified source.

This is pertinent with regard to one of the key questions in Grisey scholarship: that of how Grisey first came to compose using frequency spectra as large-scale harmonic models.² To date it has been generally agreed that Grisey’s first significant mature work, and first idiomatically “spectral” work, is *D’eau et de pierre* (1972) for two instrumental groups.³ Grisey composed *D’eau et de pierre* as a commission for the inaugural edition of the Festival de Metz (whose artistic director was Claude Samuel); the work was premiered in November 1972 before receiving a repeat performance at the Domaine musical the following February. While composing *D’eau et de pierre* Grisey attended the Darmstadt Summer Courses in June 1972, alongside his colleague in Messiaen’s composition class, Michaël Levinas, and a couple of new Quebecois acquaintances, Walter Boudreau and Claude Vivier. There they heard a performance of *Stimmung* given by the Collegium Vocale Köln, and they attended Stockhausen’s seminar on the same work:

1 Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. William F. Fleming, s.v. “Bulgarians”, <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/v/voltaire/dictionary/chapter97.html> (accessed 1 October 2014).

2 Jérôme Baillet, in his study of Grisey’s oeuvre, states that Grisey’s first use of the spectral chord appears in *Initiation* (1970) for baritone voice, double bass and trombone; although use of the chord therein is negligible, given the Berio-esque idiom and reduced forces. Jérôme Baillet, *Gérard Grisey: Fondements d’une écriture* (Paris: L’Harmattan/L’Itinéraire, 2000), p. 83.

3 For example, see *ibid.*, pp. 9, and 247; François-Xavier Féron, “The Emergence of Spectra in Gérard Grisey’s Compositional Process: From *Dérives* (1973–74) to *Les espaces acoustiques* (1974–85),” *(De)composing Sound*, ed. Nicolas Donin, *Contemporary Music Review*, 30 (2011), no. 5, pp. 343–75, esp. p. 348.

such was the impression made by *Stimmung* on the young compositional cadre that they were almost ejected from the trams in that German town for continually parodying *Stimmung*'s singing.⁴ In recent years Michaël Levinas has said on a few occasions that it was at Darmstadt in 1972 that *musique spectrale* was born;⁵ and following Levinas's claim, this account of the birth of spectral music has been reiterated by others.⁶ *Et voilà comme on écrit l'histoire.*

Two aspects of this account of the "birth" of spectral thought might make us provisionally cautious. First, the sole source for this is Levinas, and it is not mentioned by Grisey himself. Second is the performance history of *Stimmung*. *Stimmung* was performed in Paris on four occasions between 1968 and 1972, beginning with its world premiere performances at the Maison de Radio France on 9 and 10 December 1968.⁷ Given *Stimmung*'s performance history in Paris and Grisey's well-known enthusiasm for Stockhausen's music, it seems likely that Grisey had already heard *Stimmung* by mid-1972.⁸

In any case, study of relevant materials in the Gérard Grisey Collection presents to us a different and more concrete account of how Grisey began to use spectral models. Grisey does so via chords modeled on resonant percussion strikes in an early work, *Vagues, Chemins, le Souffle* (1970–72) for two orchestras and amplified solo clarinet, a work Baillet does not discuss (he simply classifies it as an *œuvre d'apprentissage*). Although admittedly it is for the most part idiomatically uncharacteristic of Grisey's subsequent music, *Vagues, Chemins, le Souffle* contains some important antecedents of his mature style.

Vagues, Chemins, le Souffle was the last work Grisey completed as a student in Messiaen's composition class, and was composed with the aim of being premiered at the Royan Festival. As is shown by a letter written from teacher to student and preserved in the Grisey Collection, Grisey enlisted Messiaen's help in this aim; and the premiere of *Vagues, Chemins, le Souffle*

4 See Bob Gilmore, "On Claude Vivier's 'Lonely Child'," *Tempo*, 61, no. 239 (January 2007), pp. 2–17, esp. p. 3.

5 See, for example, Michaël Levinas, "Rupture et système," *Le temps de l'écoute: Gérard Grisey, ou la beauté des ombres sonores*, ed. Danielle Cohen-Levinas (Paris: L'Harmattan/L'Itinéraire, 2004), pp. 31–36.

6 See Féron, "The Emergence of Spectra" (note 3), p. 348.

7 Tristan Murail says that although he did not attend the *Stimmung* premiere, some of his colleagues did. (Tristan Murail in discussion with the author, January 2014.) The premiere was reviewed by Maurice Fleuret in *Le Nouvel Observateur* (23 December 1968) and by Jacques Lonchampt in *Le Monde* (11 December 1968). Stockhausen once said that the best performance of *Stimmung* he had heard (he refers to it as "perfect") took place in Paris on 2 June 1969 at the Théâtre National Populaire in the Palais Chaillot.

8 Deutsche Grammophon also released an LP of *Stimmung* in 1970 (DG 2543 003). Given that Messiaen usually played such newly recorded releases by significant composers to his composition students in class, this may have been another occasion for Grisey to have heard *Stimmung*.

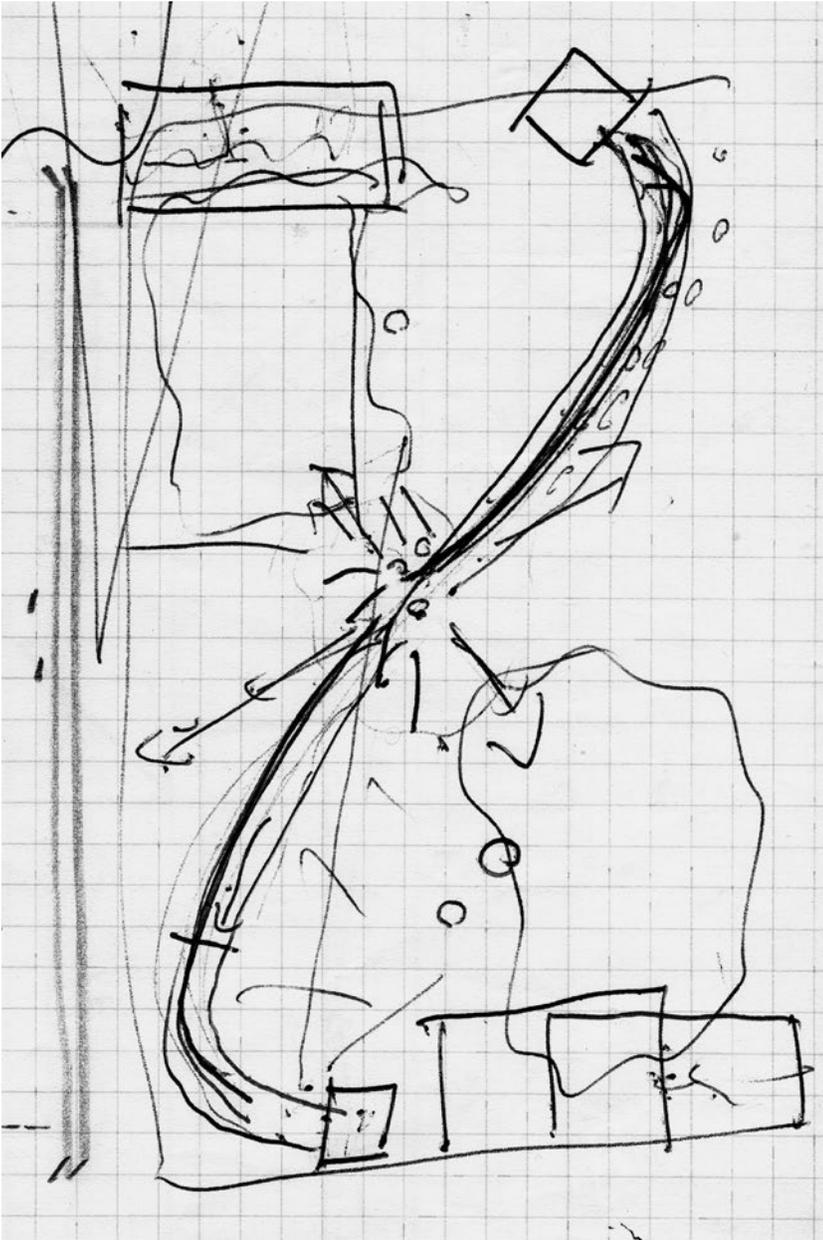


Plate 1: Gérard Grisey, pen sketch of the orchestra's distribution in *Vagues, Chemins, le Souffle* (Gérard Grisey Collection). The arrows indicate trajectories for the spatial movement of sound.

was duly set in the prominent position of the closing concert of Royan 1972, to be performed by the Orchestra of the ORTF. Inspired by the venue, the Royan Sportshalle where two of Xenakis's spatial works had been premiered (*Terretektorh* in 1966, *Nomos Gamma* in 1968), Grisey composed a piece in which the orchestra is distributed throughout the hall amidst the audience.

After considering different possible layouts for the orchestra, Grisey decided upon an "S" shape (*Plate 1*). The orchestra is divided in two and thus requires two conductors. The solo clarinet stands in the center, with the string sections taking up the main part of each curve, and winds, brass, and percussion distributed at either end of the S. The movement of sound in different directions around the hall, at a constant speed, accelerating or decelerating, comprises much of the musical interest, and is the first instance of Grisey's composing process music. In a review of *Vagues, Chemins, le Souffle*'s premiere (which, in the end, did not take place until 1975), Jonathan Harvey notes that Grisey's spatial shifting of sound creates "a sensation of musical dizziness with string glissandos turning round a false axis as if in a distorting mirror."⁹ This pseudo-hypnotic effect prompted Grisey's first

Example 1: Resonance chord at the opening of "Le Souffle" (© 1974 Gérard Billaudot Éditeur SA, Paris. Reproduced with kind permission of the editor).

9 Jonathan Harvey, "The ISCM Festival," *The Musical Times*, 117, no. 1595 (January 1976), p. 33.

choice of title, *Transe*, which he subsequently jettisoned for the eventual tripartite title (changing from a Stockhausenean to a Boulezian tone).

So much for the context; but what of the harmonic spectrum? During the middle section, “Chemins,” there appears a series of resonance chords (rehearsal mark 50), and the final section “Le Souffle,” too, opens with a series of resonance chords (rehearsal marks 70–71). *Example 1* shows the third of the four chords which open “Le Souffle.” The chords comprise sustained homophonic pitches in the strings, all having the same dynamic, be-

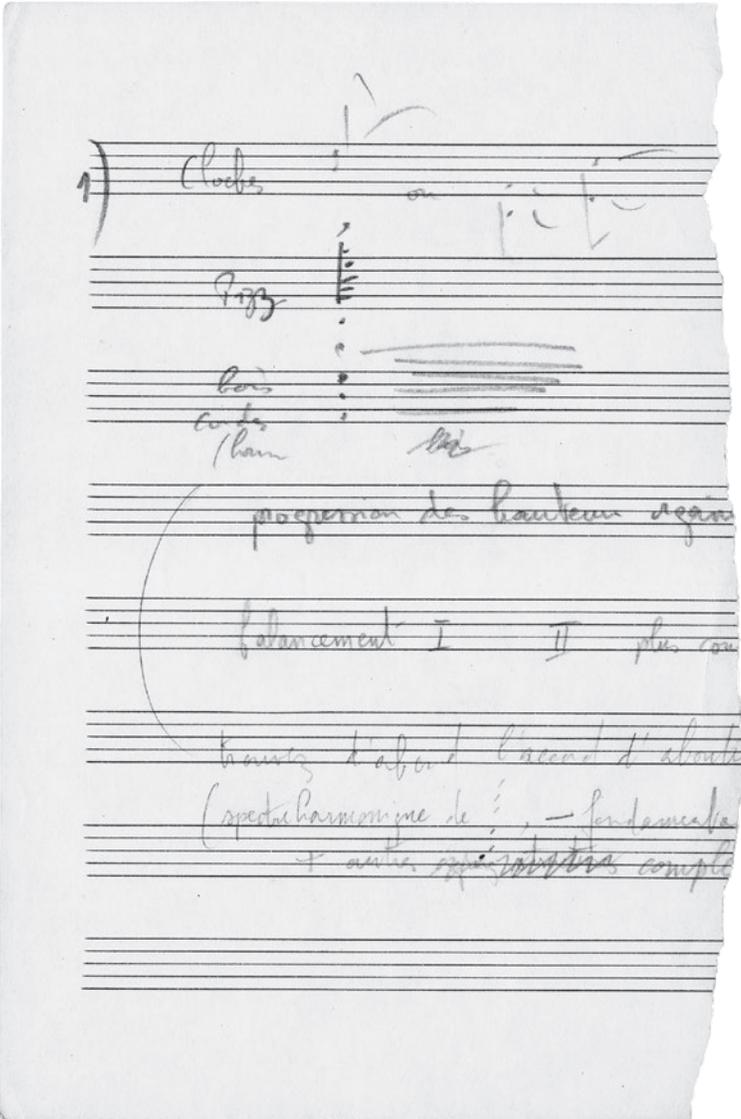


Plate 2: Sketch showing Grisey’s intention that the chords in “Le Souffle” be modeled on resonance and the harmonic spectrum (G rard Grisey Collection).

ginning with *mf* and gradually diminishing in volume to fade out, with a strike on a resonant percussion instrument (here tubular bell) marking the initial “attack” or onset of the chord. Some of the strings play harmonics. The resemblance of this chord both to the chord at the beginning of *Dérives* (1973–74), and to the string harmonics of the spectral chord at the beginning of *D’eau et de pierre*, is marked.

Sketches on a small scrap of manuscript paper held in the *Vague, Chemins, le Souffle* dossier evince Grisey’s thinking when he was conceiving this section (*Plate 2*). When making his initial sketch for these chords Grisey wrote beside it: “spectre harmonique.” Thus, although Grisey did not use a sonogram to calculate the chord’s content, or microtones to accurately simulate its partials, the harmonic spectrum is still the declared auditory reference point. These therefore appear to be the first quasi-spectral chords in Grisey’s oeuvre.

Notwithstanding contemporary works by Jolivet, Dutilleux and Risset also utilizing the model of natural resonance, interestingly it appears that Grisey’s direct influence here was a composer who is rarely considered to have influenced him: Pierre Boulez. During the composition of *Vagues, Chemins, le Souffle*, Grisey bought a score of Boulez’s *Don* (1960–62, revised 1989) for soprano and orchestra, the first movement of *Pli selon pli*. This score, which is preserved in the Grisey Collection, bears witness to Grisey’s study and analysis of Boulez’s work, an analysis which focuses not on serial processes but on surface resonant sonorities. At different passages on pages 10, 18, and 19 of the score Grisey writes: “Klangfarbenmelodie issue de la résonance d’une mélodie.” On page 2, where Boulez has divided the ensemble into three groups, Grisey notes some of the characteristics of how these three groups interact. “Les groupes aigu et grave,” he writes, “imitent le principe instrumental du groupe central (attaques + résonnances).” In other words, a subensemble of players produces a collective sonority – a harmony-timbre – in imitation of, and in reaction to, a strike on one of the resonant instruments of the central group. It is this mimetic idea that Grisey uses in turn in *Vagues, Chemins, le Souffle*, and which he will develop thereafter in *D’eau et de pierre* and beyond. When the connection between Grisey and Boulez is established, the filiation is obvious between the opening chord of *Don* and that of *Dérives*.

Reviewing the premiere of *Vagues, Chemins, le Souffle* in *Le Figaro*, Pierre Petit wrote: “C’est triste, interminable, monotone, lugubre.”¹⁰ Yet while the work may indeed not be a masterpiece, it is a key one from a musicological point of view, study of its sketches furnishing a more accurate picture of the emergence of the *courant spectral*.

10 Pierre Petit, “Hululements au Théâtre de la Ville,” *Le Figaro* (1 November 1975).