

# Why Did I Decide to Erase all Production Tapes of my Musique Concrète Except for the Final Compositions?

## A Clarification

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*Michel Chion*

This text aims to explain why it is difficult for me to consider the musical elements of my concrete music production for magnetic tape (composed between 1970 and 2000 – thereafter I increasingly used digital media) as archives or documents to be preserved for history and why, while preciously preserving the original of the finished works, I erased the preparatory elements for the mix, thus making their medium, the magnetic tape, which I donated to other people, available for reuse.

I have always enjoyed working with tape recorders, and at the same time the tape has never been an idol for me; this is due to my personal history.

In 1958, when I was 11 years old, my father, an engineer, returned from a business trip, bringing with him to the small Alpine valley of Vallorcine where we were spending our holidays a heavy machine from Germany. It was an amateur Grundig tape recorder running at a speed of 9.5 cm per second. At the time, this device was very rare outside professional circles. This is how two little boys named Jacques and Michel Chion had the opportunity to play with a device which, compared to photography and cinema, offered miraculous possibilities: One could hear the result of the recording immediately (unlike photography and amateur cinema, for which one had to wait, firstly, for the roll of film to be finished, then for its development and finally for the images to be printed on paper or projected). Moreover, one could erase the medium and use it over and over.

I never again heard those imitations of radio shows my brother and I recorded for fun as children. I guess my father later reused the tape to record music. For a child of my generation, I was introduced to sound recording at a very early age and to the fact that its medium is reusable and not sacred. In this sense it is quite different from a piece of paper on which someone has written something.

Allow me to relate a personal example: When my father died, his second wife proceeded to destroy all our family letters and documents, but not the family photos. My father, before acquiring the tape recorder, had had another hobby in the 1950s: photography. Not only did he take the photos, but he developed the film himself and made his own paper prints. As children, my brother and I had seen what it meant to take a picture and the time and care needed to develop it; we knew that this process was irreversible.

When my father's second wife died, I cleaned up the house they had lived in, and I discovered a treasure that had escaped destruction because it was in a box of photographs: about ten handwritten letters to my father from his mother – our paternal grandmother, who had died when I was still a child. These letters gave me back a part of my history: Not only their content, which alluded to a family episode forgotten by my brother and myself, but also the medium of the text itself, namely our grandmother's handwriting, which revealed a lively, determined, ebullient woman, whereas the photos we had kept of her depicted a seemingly inconspicuous and reserved person. On different levels, I had found a historical document.

It has nothing to do with a tape recording intended for the composition of music on a support – what I call 'musique concrète', while others in France call it 'acousmatic music' (cf. Chion 2009): It has no more meaning than the discovery of a single part of a work for orchestra. Let us imagine that a symphony by Gustav Mahler or Camille Saint-Saëns has disappeared and that as the only trace we find the separate flute or harp part for one of the movements, including the silent bars: I wonder what could be done with it? To hear single parts of 'orchestral material' is the distressing feeling I had when listening to an 'archive disc' released by the GRM (Groupe de recherches musicales) in 2017 (Parmegiani 2017).

That year, in fact, the GRM (of which I was a member a long time ago) published a posthumous double album by Bernard Parmegiani (1927–2013), a composer I knew well, especially in the 1970s, and with whom I worked together on two occasions (in 1975 for a show entitled *Trio*, in which I played the role of a composer, and in 1977 for the satirical work *Des mots et des sons*, for which he recorded my voice). The first of the two CDs on this album brought together rare works not included in the 12-CD box set *Bernard Parmegiani – L'œuvre musicale* already published in 2008 by INA-GRM (Parmegiani 2008). The second CD, entitled *Matières premières*, did not feature works, but only short sequences of 'working material' found and selected from the very many reels of magnetic tape left by Parmegiani after his death. I played the disc and heard a series of insignificant things, unworthy of the composer. It seemed as though the CD was meant to be 'sampled' by the buyer. This feeling was all the stronger

as the publication was not accompanied by any explanatory note or historical clarification.

While listening to these *Matières premières* I made the definitive decision not to leave any trace of this kind. In 2020 and 2021, I therefore erased or discarded the music elements of all my works composed until 2000, except for those for *La tentation de Saint-Antoine* (1984), for which I plan to compile a historical documentation of the production process, including texts and musical extracts. As my tapes did not contain too many 'tape splices' and thus were reusable, I kept them to give to the three musician friends who agreed to be my executors; they will be able to reuse them, or give them to other musicians; in fact, the manufacture of tapes has ceased, and they are sold on the Internet for a considerable price.

When I made my music in the studios of the GRM, I could use professional tapes without having to pay for them; these studios were located in the Maison de la radio et de la musique – Radio France, the headquarters of the French public radio stations. A GRM technician, Jacques Darnis, had noticed that the dustbins of the radio studios next to those of the GRM often contained large reels of magnetic tape in almost new condition, which had only been used once for the final copy of a radio show. He recovered them and gave them to me. I used them extensively.

I was scandalised when listening to *Matières premières* because Parmegiani was a demanding composer for whom a work is not just a succession of pretty sounds, but also a form, a journey. This led him, like me, to rework his compositions several times, including *De natura sonorum* (two versions) and *L'enfer de la divine comédie* (three versions). I am not criticising Bernard's widow for authorising this publication, as Claude-Anne Parmegiani did her best to promote her husband's work; rather, I am criticising the members of the GRM who took the initiative to reduce this composer to a 'creator of sounds'.

Already, after his death in November 2013, a GRM radio show hosted by Christian Zanési, David Jisse and Christophe Bourseiller chose not to feature the composer's important works, but the three-second jingle known as the 'Roissy call sign', intended to precede spoken flight announcements, a jingle that Parmegiani had made for France's largest airport Charles de Gaulle, located north of Paris. As if it were a title of glory to have been heard in this way, on airport loudspeakers, by tens or hundreds of thousands of travellers! Yet, having met Parmegiani many, many times, I have never heard him refer to this work and take pride in it.

At the same time, it is striking that the detailed collective work devoted during Parmegiani's lifetime to the genesis of his masterpiece *De natura sonorum* (1975) is still out-of-print: *Lenvers d'une œuvre* (Mion, Nattiez and Thomas

1982) by Philippe Mion, Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Jean-Christophe Thomas and the composer himself, who was interviewed at length for this publication. It is still unavailable, even though it is of considerable historical interest – especially, but not only, in terms of the techniques used by the author – and should have been republished and even translated a long time ago.

Even if these techniques have since changed completely, and not only for the new generations: Parmegiani himself, who was 20 years older than me, converted to computer music quite quickly, as François Bayle (born in 1932) and Francis Dhomont (born in 1926, he is the oldest of all of us!) had done before him. When I used the GRM studios in the 1990s and then again between 2006 and 2012, I was the last one using the tape recorders. However, I suspected that this device would become fashionable again, so I published several articles in the magazine *Revue & Corrigée* about my tape recorder techniques.

In addition, Rodrigo Maia Sacic filmed me in 2012 (in the GRM studio 116C) and Régis Lacaze in 2017 (in my small private studio) for a video explaining the technical aspects of my studio work. I'm going to use this footage for a self-portrait film I'm producing, so we'll be able to see the concrete aspect of these things. But playing a fragment of a tape without commentary and presenting it as a document: That is deceiving people.

As a document, and contrary to the abovementioned 'found letters' of my grandmother, a few metres of magnetic tape without context mean nothing: We don't know if this fragment constitutes a part that has already been mixed or an element of the mix, at what speed it should be played (in my music, certain elements have been played at 19 cm per second or 38 cm per second) and even in what direction... Each fragment of tape is a possible source of very different sounds, through variations of speed, manual interventions during the playback of the sound, etc. Only the composer can tell, if he remembers at all.

The album *Matières premières* was in fact a rather cynical exploitation of the interest of many young musicians in the synthesizers of the 1970s, and in particular in the large set of oscillators called the 'Coupigny synthesizer', which I had used myself. However, this interest in 'old synths' often seems to me to be reductive and fetishistic. With more recent equipment you can get sounds that are just as interesting, you just have to look for them. And the most important thing for me is the composition, or rather the relationship between the composition and the life of the sounds.

Of course, I have not tried to encourage other composers to do what I do, and I am only describing my personal position. However, I would like to remind you that I have as a composer of concrete music written many historical, didactic, critical and theoretical books and articles on 'musique concrète' (also called 'electroacoustic' or 'acousmatic music'), made radio broadcasts, and carried out

research useful to the public, composers, musicologists and researchers. I even believe that, after Pierre Schaeffer, I am the one who has written the most in France on the genre. Far from wanting to deprive historians of sources and archives, I am therefore extremely attached to the transmission of information. But at the same time, we must not forget what is important which is, in my opinion, the works and their composition. These works – at least mine, and I believe all those that count – are not mere collections of sound moments. I also consider my role as a transmitter important, and through my texts and my practice of erasing my tapes and giving them to other musicians younger than myself I aim to keep carrying out this role, thus playing a part in ensuring that new works continue to be produced, while at the same time defending the integrity of my own works.

*Translation from French: Reinhold Friedl*

## **Bibliography**

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