

## Making sense of Schaeffer's 'philosophy'

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### Abstract:

Schaeffer, in the *Traité des objets musicaux*, misunderstands Husserl's philosophy. Phenomenology aims to a description of world divested of empirical particularities, which are precisely the raw material required to a new solfege of sonic objects.

Pierre Schaeffer, in the book IV of *Traité des objets musicaux* pretends to approach to sonic object philosophically. Husserl's phenomenology is called on, among others theoretical frames of reference. The author intends "have done phenomenology unknowingly, which is after all better than speaking of phenomenology without practising it". (Schaeffer 1966: 262) However, his own claims are contradicted along his so called philosophical explanations.

The project of a pure theory of essences, one of sound explicitly affirmed (*Ideas*, §2), was a point shared by the different versions of Husserl's phenomenology. Pureness implies research into a sort of common denominator to every sound – or sonic object, according to Schaeffer's terminology. The name of this inquiry into the suppression of sonic objects' diversity is reduction.

The morphology of sonic object proposed by Schaeffer and phenomenological reduction are irreconcilable. Husserl's project, having taken a look at empirical experience's objects, turned its back on particular to reach universal. On the other hand, Schaeffer settled down in empiry and there remained. The former ascends to the transcendental realm of ideas, the latter comes down on the side of the unutterable sonic world's variety. The ineffability of empirical differences renders a new solfege a project as heroic as the effort to contemplate the world divested of its empirical décor.

Thus, musicology, even though it commits philosophical faux pas, has its individual dignity as a branch of knowledge. However, one should ask for the illusion that arose Schaeffer's mistakes about the affinities between his research and Husserl's one. The heart of the matter lies on misunderstandings about 'natural attitude towards knowledge'. While Husserl makes use of the concept 'natural attitude' to undermine commonsensical *thoughts* about the world, Schaeffer aims at a new approach to aural *perceptions*.

The opposition understanding vs. sensibility (in Kantian sense of 'Anschauung') is decisive. It concerns not merely the opposition of distinct branches of knowledge, but, more critically, it points out the practical consequences Schaeffer's theory could have and Husserl's not. Phenomenology belongs to a philosophical tradition that runs from Descartes and Hume to Kant. Any effort to change the world is beyond its scope. The ultimate goal of acousmatic listening, unlike its theoretical 'inspiration', could be described as a practise which actually transforms the way one perceives reality.

Acousmatics is not merely an exercise of understanding. Cum grano salis, it may be approached as a microscopical revolution. Music is liberated from the old relationship with quantitative parameters as pitch and duration – in one word, mathematics. It acts as a explosive, calling in question the originary ground of thought in Western music, as established by the Pythagoreans. The 'mathematical' ones, of course. The "very old neologism" of Schaeffer is not a fortuitous joke.

## Bibliography

Schaeffer, Pierre. *Traité des objets musicaux*. Paris: Seuil, 1966.