

Building an International Audience at GRM

Interview with François J. Bonnet

By Arie Altena



Re—
Imagine
Europe

In November 2020 Arie Altena interviewed François J. Bonnet, composer, musician and director of INA GRM in Paris. They discussed the ways in which GRM interacts with and builds its international audience. GRM, short for Groupe des Recherches Musicales, was founded by composer Pierre Schaeffer in 1958. It was the successor to the GRMC – arguably the world’s first electronic music studio, and the place where *musique concrète* was developed – which he founded in 1948. Since 1975 GRM has been part of the French national audiovisual institute INA, and is concerned with the creation, research and conservation of electroacoustic music and recorded sound. It develops innovative tools, presents concerts, and organises workshops and residencies.

Cover photo
Acousmonium, Paris, 2020



Acousmonium at Elevate Festival, Graz, 2020

Arie Altena: *This interview is intended for a publication on audience development, so I'd like to ask you about the audience-building strategies you use at GRM...*

François J. Bonnet: I'm always cautious when discussing audience development, because of the marketing language that is often used. Sometimes I feel the methodology of audience development may lead you to lose the scope of what you are trying to accomplish as a cultural organisation. There's a danger of subconsciously sublimating your goals to commerce, to the idea that you need to grow just because you need to grow. Having said that, I think that we can reach a wider audience with what we offer at GRM, with the music we defend. We can reach curious people who don't know about us yet. We don't feel the need to target a mainstream audience, but we can touch more people than we do. Worldwide, we can reach many more people, especially young people, and we can change more lives a little bit. Because this is ultimately what it is about: reaching more people whose lives can be changed by what they see and listen to. We need to find strategies to grow in that respect. It's not growing merely because you need to grow, but because you believe in what you're trying to do and that this experience can be shared.

Arie Altena: Maybe it's not so much about growing as building and strengthening a network? Connecting people with certain interests, people who don't belong to the same sociologically or culturally defined groups. The amateur musician with 16 years of classical piano training, the computer nerd, and the 20-year-old outsider: all three of them might be blown away by a new Okkyung Lee piece. You could develop an audience through producing new work, and making sure it gets out there. The work, the music is then a focus point. Because indeed, I agree with you that there are plenty of curious people, and you need to create opportunities for them to make discoveries.

François J. Bonnet: Exactly. We don't go to concerts to mingle, we go to concerts to discover. Creating a welcoming space is very important, because it makes discovery possible. But this is not an issue of opening a café next to your concert hall or museum. For example, with our festival *Présences électronique*, we don't try to attract people with the 'socialising' aspect of the concert. The concerts are seated, they are presented in the radio building, where there's a strict protocol. The strategy we use is that we programme artists from different fields; we mixed up the artists. So we work on the content, we share with the audience artists we all value, and who may come from different cultural worlds. That makes discovery possible. And it worked, because little by little the audience took shape around the festival itself. Now we manage to have sold-out concerts without big headliners. Of course this is only possible in a city like Paris, where you can have an audience of 800 for experimental music – if you have the trust of the audience.



☰ / Teum (The Silvery Slit) by Okkyung Lee, Sonic Acts Festival, Amsterdam, 2019

Arie Altena: One of the things you've initiated recently is the Spectres books that you publish bilingually in collaboration with Shelter Press, and are distributed internationally. How did that come about, is it a way of reaching out to a new audience?

François J. Bonnet: We have a tradition of book publishing at GRM, and GRM has worked with publishers throughout its existence. GRM itself was built around the theory of *musique concrète*. The second life of GRM started in 1966 with the publication of Pierre Schaeffer's *Traité des objets musicaux* (Treatise on Musical Objects). In the 1970s and 1980s, we had a series of books, the Cahiers recherche/musique, which were more like series of articles. After that we published a series of monographs of composers, the Portraits polychromes. That was a nice initiative. When I took over as head of GRM, I thought it might be a good moment to start something new with publishing. I wanted to do it a bit differently though, and learn from the successful and the less successful aspects of the earlier series. I liked the format of the Portrait polychromes, but the less successful aspect was that we were printing and distributing the books ourselves. We were in fact doing everything ourselves, but lacked the necessary know-how in book distribution, for example. I felt this was like academics who write a book, and when the book is done, assume that the job is done, forgetting that part of the job is also to bring it to the people. Another bad academic habit is churning out massive books and writing long, overly complex articles that are aimed only at specialists in a university network. And the authors, although academics, aren't necessarily the best theoreticians in a given field. Complexity isn't always necessary. And sometimes a text seems complicated just because it's poorly written. A text on music or sound doesn't need to be complex to be relevant. I looked at such academic publications and thought: what's the opposite of that? The opposite is a well-conceived, well-curated, and well-distributed book, published by a well-equipped, professional publisher that has a network, and can reach the right audience. We're currently collaborating with Shelter Press, a nice, efficient publisher. The people at Shelter Press are very good friends, and we can really work well together. We publish short texts to address an audience that maybe had given up on musical theory because articles on the subject were too long and over-complex, or didn't always seem relevant to the contemporary context.

Arie Altena: Who selects the authors for the Spectres books?

François J. Bonnet: We find and select the people ourselves. We don't send out a call for contributions. We work on a theme, and find writers for essays, as well as musicians to interview. We give specific instructions to our authors, we ask them to write on a certain topic, but, in the end, they are quite free to write whatever they like. We don't supervise or censor them; we only channel the content. For example, I invited Drew Daniel of the experimental group Matmos, because I know he's a specialist in English and French literature, and knows a lot about Georges Bataille. I thought that Drew could write something great on *musique concrète* and heterology (a concept developed by Bataille). We solicit renowned artists and writers like philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy or sound-recording legend Chris Watson, but also other interesting people who the audience might not know about. An example is Espen Sommer Eide, a bright mind and a great composer, but who is not so well known worldwide. He has written a beautiful text on Jakob von Uexküll and field recording.

Arie Altena: Why did you choose to make the Spectres books bilingual? The French and English texts are printed back to back in the books.

François J. Bonnet: The idea was to make the book a desirable object, to put great care into its manufacture. We decided to make it bilingual, so we can reach more people. English is the easiest way to reach the maximum amount of people, as it's the *lingua franca*. But, of course, it's also raises questions about possible cultural imperialism. We do the book in French, because we're French. We want to reach the largest possible audience with the technical and material means that we have.



Recollection GRM series by Editions Mego and Spectres publications

Arie Altena: How was the first Spectres book received?

François J. Bonnet: The first book was quite a success; we sold around 2500 copies, which for this kind of publication is very good. It was well distributed, and you could find it in very different places, for instance, also in synthesizer shops. The readers were very excited. I think it's because the format of a series of short but intense texts that you can really dig into, works well. It's also a very nice mix of texts, there is a range of tones, from philosophy to interviews and more diary-like texts. I think that works well. We try to bring interesting people together; we curate the content with care. The idea is to bring people to the theory without compromising by simplifying things. And it's a pretty dry book in the sense that it's only text, no illustrations.

Arie Altena: *That so many copies were sold confirms for me that there is an audience for this kind of music theory, an audience that includes modular synth makers, young people interested in electronic music, as well as people involved with electronic music, composition, serious music and contemporary art. I sometimes have the impression, but I might be mistaken, that the approach that you've been pursuing at GRM has historically been quite a French affair. It was something that people knew about, but they could only really access the theory and cultural context if they could read French. In that sense these books also share a form of electronic music, and a French approach to composition and sound with a more international public. GRM's legacy has certainly become much more visible to an international audience over the past few years.*

François J. Bonnet: Indeed. We started to receive a lot of feedback from people from all over the world. They were looking for information about INA GRM, what we were doing, about the software we were developing, our history. My predecessors at GRM realised that our organisation was known worldwide. And I'm not sure that this was very consciously acknowledged at GRM before the late 1990s or early 2000s. GRM certainly had an international reputation before this, but that was more within an academic network. Only later did a younger, non-academic, let's say freer audience, find its way to GRM. The need to address everyone was on the table from then on. We're probably the world's oldest research centre for electronic music that still exists, so we understood that we had a role to play. A lot of people claim to be influenced by Pierre Schaeffer, Pierre Henry and all the others who are associated with GRM. Using English is a practical way to address this vast community. Having a common language is extremely handy. And now we are maybe more famous outside France than in France.

Arie Altena: *What do you see as the function of the weekly radio programmes that you make for France Musique?*

François J. Bonnet: We have a long history of making radio programmes at GRM. Of course GRM was born at the radio. It was part of national radio and television for a long time, before being attached to INA. I think it's still very important to broadcast experimental music on national 'hertzian' radio. Pioneers of *musique concrète* like François Bayle or Eliane Radigue will tell you that they discovered this music through listening to radio.

Arie Altena: *Couldn't it just be a podcast?*

François J. Bonnet: Hertzian radio still allows you to hit on something by chance, which could change your life. Suppose you're listening to a radio station on a Sunday night, and you hear something you don't know, because it is not part of your cultural milieu, and you're hit by it, that is still 'gold'. Hertzian radio can reach people who didn't know they were interested in this particular type of music, who discover it by accident, are attracted to it and inspired by it. Hertzian radio allows for random discovery. It has become harder to stumble across something on the Internet, because people don't really explore the Internet anymore, instead, they are fed by recommendations through social networks. Secondly, radio is still a support for artists. National hertzian radio generates real money for artists. Spotify doesn't and neither do podcasts.

Arie Altena: Could you tell me something about your choice of artists who developed work within the *Re-Imagine Europe* project? You had Kali Malone, Okkyung Lee, and Lucy Railton, among others.

François J. Bonnet: There was no set format. The project was a way to move the boundaries a bit for the artists as well as for us at GRM. We wanted to do long-term projects with three-week residences, and work with people who might not be regarded as acousmatic electroacoustic composers, but whose work is interesting in this context.

The idea was to create an intersection between their work and the sort of music we defend at GRM, and instigate a sort of shift. That Okkyung and Lucy are both cellists is a coincidence, both were very interested in expanding the territory of their playing. I knew that they are very open-minded, and they both have a strong personal approach to playing and composition.

It would be worthwhile for them, I thought, to have time to develop a new project. Kali is more used to working acoustically, and she was really into our multichannel system. Composer Marja Ahti also had a residency with us, among others.. *Re-Imagine Europe* gave us the opportunity to invite European artists to come to Paris and discover GRM. This is always difficult because Paris is so expensive. We extended our network with people who were already familiar with our approach and with whom we wanted to work. It was a good opportunity.



Rehearsal Michèle Bokanowski on Acousmonium, Paris, 2020

Arie Altena: *Was the collaboration with Editions Mego, which led to the Recollection GRM series, a way of exposing a new audience to GRM's music?*

François J. Bonnet: Yes, but actually it was an initiative of Peter Rehberg from Editions MEGO. Editions MEGO was starting to set up a collection of sublabels. The trigger point was at the Kontraste Festival in Krems, Austria, which was curated by Sonic Acts. Our loudspeaker orchestra, the Acousmonium, was featured there in 2011. Peter Rehberg and Stephen O'Malley performed on our system. You'll remember that, as you announced the concert. Peter and Stephen had done a residency at GRM shortly before, so we had really got to know each other. Peter came up with the idea of doing vinyl releases with us. This was just before the resurgence of vinyl. I wasn't in charge of GRM at the time; Daniel Teruggi and Christian Zanési were. They didn't know Peter Rehberg and wondered what he wanted from us. I said, it's going to be good and interesting. They said, let's try just one. We released Pierre Schaeffer's *Le tièdre fertile* on vinyl. It's a later piece by Schaeffer, who never really supported his own work. I think it's a great piece, and it wasn't available for a long time. It was an opportunity to connect GRM's productions to a worldwide distribution system. When we sold the first 1000 records of *Le tièdre fertile*, the others at GRM were really pleasantly surprised. And when I started the Spectres books, years later, I used the lessons learned from the collaboration with Editions MEGO: find a good partner that you trust, that has the expertise and knowledge that you don't have in distribution, and that has a network with connections in the right places. MEGO was the perfect partner because the label was attracting a lot of people from the radical computer music scene, the hacker scene, the scene of young people interested in experimental music. This was an audience that was rediscovering gorgeous things from the past mostly through the Internet. And suddenly, through the *Recollection GRM* series, they had access to things they didn't know about, but which definitely had a major influence on the music they were listening to. I completely understand the success of the *Recollection GRM* series: it's well crafted and curated with great care. Stephen O'Malley made a superb layout for the sleeves. We're very careful not to flood the market. We do two to four re-issues a year. We're very proud of it, and I can say this because it was not my initiative, but Peter Rehberg's. Also, it was one of the earlier re-issue series on the market. Now there's almost too many of them.

Arie Altena: *And GRM is still releasing CDs...*

François J. Bonnet: It's a tradition at GRM to do the big box sets of CDs as well. I upheld that tradition. I did the Eliane Radigue CD box set, because it's important to compile an overview of the work of a groundbreaking composer. You don't attract a new audience with it. You make it for the people who already know it, and who are quite happy to pay 60 euros to have it all. To attract new people you need something else.

Arie Altena: *You also started a series of vinyl releases with new pieces...*

François J. Bonnet: We started a series of new pieces by both famous musicians like Jim O'Rourke, and lesser-known ones like Max Eilbacher. We wanted to go back to the idea of pieces, not albums. That is why we do split records. The Jim O'Rourke piece is 35 minutes, so that is one LP. But if a piece is around 20 minutes long, it takes up one side of a split LP.

I like to compare it to the Philips *Prospective 21 siècle* series from the late 1960s that also featured *musique concrète*, and the Wergo series of contemporary music, where you had works by several composers on one LP. It's a chance for people who buy an LP for a Lucy Railton composition to discover Max Eilbacher, and the other way around. If we commission a work, and during the concert, we think, wow, this is amazing, then we might release it on vinyl too. It's not that we release everything we commission. The vinyl release is really the cherry on top.

Arie Altena: *Would you agree that it is important to open up of the history of electronic music and look beyond the canonisation of certain figures? I have the impression that this is certainly happening with GRM's history. Besides the 'bigger' names of Pierre Schaeffer, Pierre Henry, Bernard Parmegiani, François Bayle, and maybe Luc Ferrari (who himself was some sort of an outsider at GRM), there is now much more attention for composers who worked at GRM throughout its existence. This includes composers who've worked at GRM who have an aesthetic or approach to music that was somehow different from let's say the 'classical acousmatic composition'.*

François J. Bonnet: At some point in GRM's history there was maybe the danger that 'GRM' was becoming synonymous with a specific type of academic electronic music. I think that was a generational thing. This can happen when you have a homogeneous group of people of roughly the same age, who've worked together for a long time and have too many shared values. Then, at one point, you might lose your connection with the rest of the world. I think quite a few electronic music laboratories disappeared like that.

Arie Altena: *How important is it for GRM to push the boundaries of what you're doing?*

François J. Bonnet: I think it's fundamental. In the past, people sometimes had the idea that GRM was a bit like an ivory tower. But GRM has always been moving on in technology as well as in its approach to music and sound. It has never been purely a centre for acousmatic music. Acousmatic music is our specialty, and it's something we really claim and defend, but at GRM it has always been combined with many other approaches to sound. Of course we want to defend the idea of acousmatic music, and that music can be focused on the experience of listening, as well as on the qualities of sounds themselves. Attracting artists to this vortex nourishes us because it obliges us to just keep thinking about what we do. We don't have a recipe for doing music. We're constantly reinventing our approach to music and sound. It enables us to attract new artists and present their music to an audience in the wider world.

BIOGRAPHIES

Arie Altena (NL) is an editor, writer and researcher who works in the field of art and technology. As part of the Sonic Acts team he co-curated numerous festival editions and projects such as Kontraste and Dark Ecology. He also edited several Sonic Acts publications. He works for V2_ in Rotterdam, and is the author of *Wat is community art?* (2017).

François J. Bonnet (FR) is a Franco-Swiss composer, writer and theoretician based in Paris. He's been a member of INA GRM since 2007 and became its director in 2018. He has published several books: *The Order of Sounds*, *The Infra-World*, *After Death* (all published by Urbanomic) and *The Music To Come* (Shelter Press). He's the co-editor of the *SPECTRES* book series (Shelter Press) and the *Recollection GRM* and *Portraits GRM* record series (Editions Mego). He also produces a radio show for national radio France Musique. His music, often presented as Kassel Jaeger, has been played at renowned venues and festivals all over the world.

CONTEXT

This article is part of the *Re-Imagine Europe* publication. The publication collects articles, essays, interviews and reports about audience engagement for interdisciplinary arts organisations. It aims to share knowledge gained throughout the *Re-Imagine Europe* project with professionals in the cultural sector who would like to gain a deeper insight in audience development and capacity building.

Re-Imagine Europe (2017-2021) is a four-year project of ten cultural organizations from across Europe, responding to the current social and political challenges. With a programme of residencies, commissions, symposia and workshops, the project partners stimulate both artistic production and audience development. They experiment with new ways of reaching out to their audiences, motivated by the ambition to develop a broader and more engaging approach to audience development and capacity building.

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