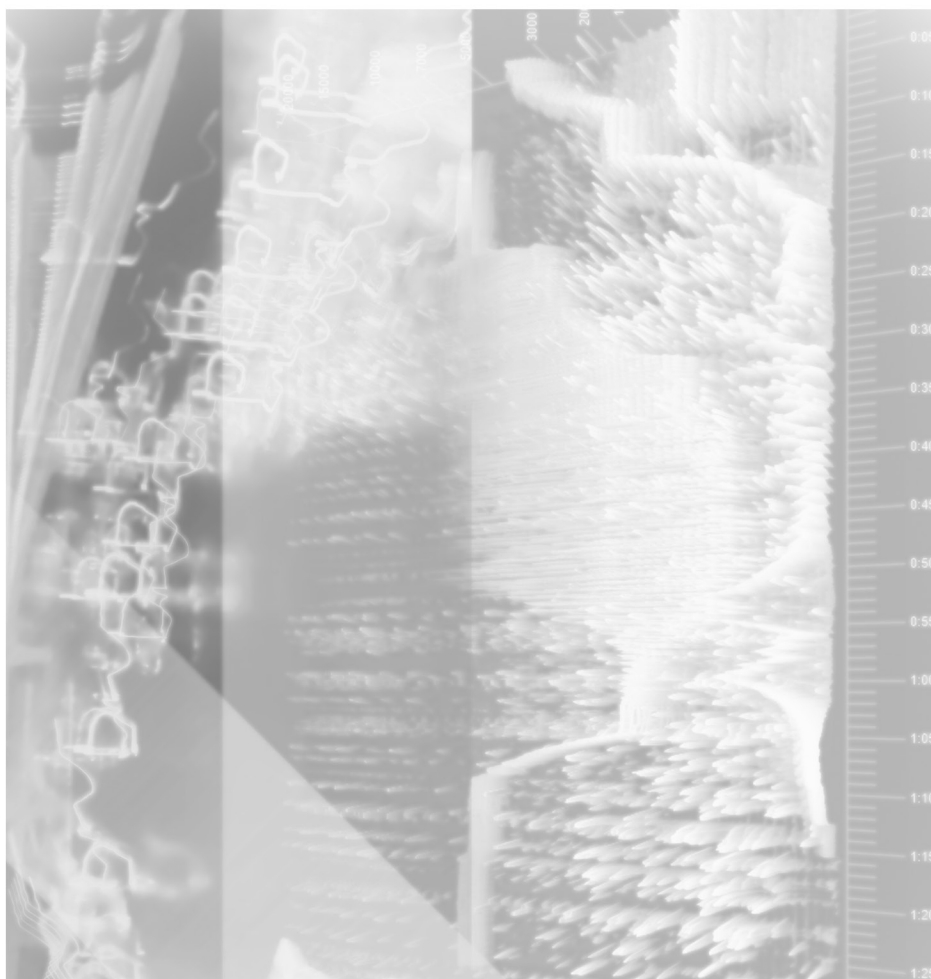


I N S Δ M

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC, ART AND TECHNOLOGY



Book review: Évelyne Gayou, *A Revolution in Music: The History of the Groupe de Recherches Musicales*, translated by David Vaughn. Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 2025.

Patrick Valiquet

INSAM Journal of Contemporary Music, Art and Technology

No. 15, December 2025, pp. 187–190.

PATRICK VALIQUET
Birmingham, United Kingdom

ÉVELYNE GAYOU

***A REVOLUTION IN MUSIC: THE
HISTORY OF THE GROUPE DE
RECHERCHES MUSICALES***

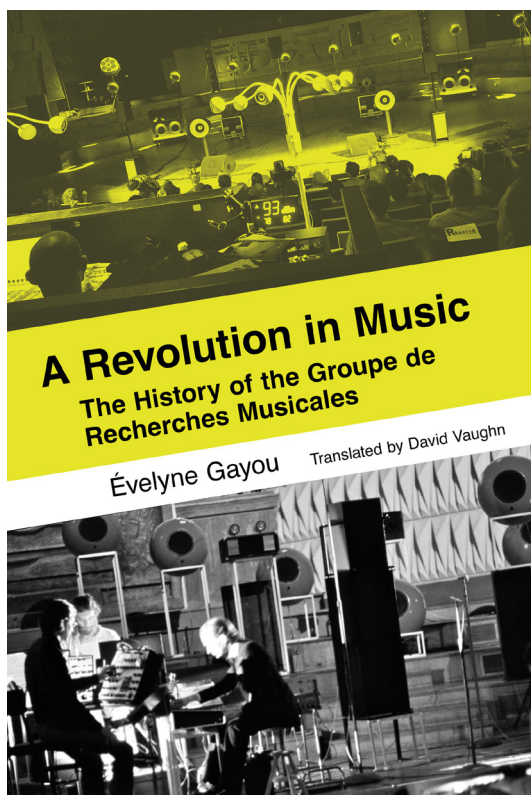
**Translated by David Vaughn.
University of California Press, 2025.
ISBN 9780520409774 (Paperback),
9780520409781 (Ebook)**

BOOK REVIEW

Received: September 12, 2025

Accepted: October 1, 2025

Almost twenty years have passed since the appearance of the original French publication of which this book is a translation. Several informative changes have been made, changes which we might want to read as hints to the editors' expectations about the needs of anglophone readers in the 2020s. First, consider the original title: *GRM: Groupe de Recherches Musicales: Cinquante ans d'histoire*. The phrase "fifty years of history" refers to the continuous operation of the GRM since the anniversary of Pierre Schaeffer's first *musique concrète* experiments in April 1948. Typical of its time, Gayou was anxious not only to recount the "birth" of an "electroacoustic community" to conserve the "specificity of the electroacoustic genre" against an oncoming wave of "forgetful" experimentation by young artists working outside the national studio system that fostered the early Cold War avant garde (5). Instead of reaffirming this anxious accumulation of institutional heritage in anticipation of a slightly more modest seventieth anniversary, translator David Vaughn and his editors at University of California Press have chosen to banish all other views: instead of a specific amount "of" history, we now have before us "the history," and specifically the history of a "revolution in music," hyperbole dispelling all doubts as to its importance. The intention seems to be to underscore Gayou's stated focus



on acknowledging the work of “major twentieth-century composers who have profoundly marked the history of music” and whose research showed how “music could be done better and ... achieve more” with new recording and broadcasting technologies (1). Indeed, the editors seem to want readers to take this hagiography just as seriously as they have taken Schaeffer’s own rather hyperbolic theoretical writing: even the cover design echoes those of the recent translations of his *Treatise on Musical Objects* (2017) and *In Search of a Concrete Music* (2012). Interestingly, however, while both of those books carried endorsements by former GRM artistic director Daniel Teruggi, an analogous comment from Teruggi’s successor François Bonnet is absent here. It is not clear what support the GRM has provided for

the present translation, if any. Bonnet’s own English translations are published by the decidedly edgier British press Urbanomic, but that should not have stopped him from contributing a short preface of some kind.

Another change has been made to the sequence of the original book’s chapters. The short introduction has been altered slightly, both to agree with the new chapter sequence and, apparently, to puff up the seriousness of Schaeffer’s thought. To wit, the sentence on page 6, “Pierre Schaeffer as a fine physicist, in his quasi-mystical quest to understand musical reality through the systematic exploration of sound matter, profoundly disturbed the so-called learned musicians of his time, provoking rejection from most.” The grammatically questionable clause, “as a fine physicist,” does not appear in the original. The closing paragraph designating the first chapter as “prehistory” is also new: originally, this first chapter was subtitled, more poetically, “une mesure pour rien” (one bar for nothing), which is colloquial French for the “pickup” bar that is often counted before beginning to play with an ensemble (“a one and a two and a three and a ...”). In the English version, however, all of the ensuing chapters of Part one have been moved to Part two, while all of the chapters originally in Part two have been moved to Part one, following the prehistory. Instead of belonging to a chronology, then, this version seems to suggest that we treat the GRM’s “origins” as one of many “themes” emerging from a rigorous musicological “forgetting” of the archival “facts”: an enticing thought from a philosophical perspective, perhaps, but not necessarily what the

author or translator had in mind. Meanwhile, the new version appears to give greater importance to the remaining themes, especially those of Chapters 3, 4 and 5 (9, 10 and 11 in the original), which highlight technological, social and conceptual novelty (i.e. the titular “revolution”). The new subtitles that have been assigned to Chapters 7 through 10 (3 through 6 in the original) also seem to point in this direction, signalling “Birth,” “Innovation,” etc., where the original offered only a range of dates.

The reorganised first part is still useful to the extent that it explains and illustrates many of the key concerns of post-*concrète* music research in a way that is more deeply informed by observations of studio and concert practice than the quite abstract technical descriptions to be found in previously available works like Schaeffer’s *Treatise* or Michel Chion’s *Guide*. Gayou places insightful emphasis on Schaeffer’s idiosyncratic mystical ambitions and on the pedagogical experiments he conducted on his followers in the course of their research to discover the universal perceptual structures behind music’s emotional and intellectual powers. Her “prehistory” helpfully situates these experiments in relation to the history of modernist radio and cinema. Although it does not deal in sufficient detail with Schaeffer’s own ideas about the moral and aesthetic impacts of broadcasting technology, it does show how much the GRM borrowed techniques and styles from other sources, to the point of lightly problematising (but again, not really engaging critically with) the notion that anyone in particular “invented” the practice of making music from recorded non-musical sounds.

However, the same pervasive idea that technological progress engenders new aesthetic possibilities that the ambitious music researcher has only to track and test (e.g. a prescient speculation about the future “playability” of the GRM’s in-house database, dubbed *Acousmaline*) also leads Gayou to some unfortunate historiographical choices, the acceptability of which could certainly have been questioned had the book written in 2024. Gayou’s decision to resolve the power imbalance between electroacoustic music and techno by endorsing a simplified narrative in which Schaeffer and Henry figure as “grandfathers” of the latter rings particularly false, and has already received more criticism than it deserves, not least by feminists like Tara Rodgers. (And yet, is this claim to “paternity” not the very same marketing narrative sustained by the GRM’s ongoing reissue series with august post-rave imprint Éditions MEGO?)

Part two (originally part one) deserves some praise nevertheless as a reference guide to the expansive literature and repertoire that has come out of the GRM. Students and teachers of traditional electroacoustic music will find this material particularly rewarding, and far more thorough than anything currently available in English. The standardised chapter structure highlights various “milestones” of achievement or competition, and features concise annotated lists of works and composers for each historical period. Again, however, the predominant concern here is canonisation. Conceptual and cultural references are included as decorations on a secondary study syllabus, not linked together interpretively or cross-referenced with existing histories.

Although this translation is being sold by University of California Press as a work of “sound studies,” it was written at a time when the emergence of that discipline was still

contested in English and had not yet been articulated in French (e.g. the journal *Sound Studies* launched only in 2015, the same year in which Jonathan Sterne's *Audible Past* first appeared in French translation). Francophones interested in Schaeffer's concept of sound already have access to much more meticulous work in Carlos Palombini and Sophie Brunet's 2010 critical edition of Schaeffer's *Essai sur la radio et le cinéma* or in Martin Kaltenecker and Karine Le Bail's 2012 anthology of studies from Schaeffer's personal archive, *Les constructions impatientes*. In contrast, Gayou's book doesn't really contribute to a critical understanding of twentieth-century sonic or auditory culture at all, and certainly not to advances in media theory. The anachronisms also extend into Vaughn's attempts to modernise the translation with more contemporary terminology. *Arts-relais* becomes "bridge-arts," fudging the more specific technological meaning of the term "relay," in spite of its currency in the English translations of proximal thinkers like Paul Valéry and Gilbert Simondon. *Électro* becomes "Electro" when "electronica" is clearly a much closer equivalent, a commercial term indicating a wide range of electronic genres.

The most alarming exclusion here is that of Schaeffer's extensive work for the French overseas ministry from 1946 onwards, work which he frequently identified as one of the most important influences on his music research. There is only cursory mention of the abortive Studio École which Schaeffer established to train colonial radio staff in the Parisian suburbs from 1954 to 1957. Also among the details which Gayou has apparently "forgotten" is the illustrious list of West African, Caribbean and Vietnamese radio engineers and composers who studied with Schaeffer from 1954 onwards. There is no mention of the dubious racial theories that Schaeffer adopted from his guru Gurdjieff and took pains to apply in his teaching and writing as explanations for the unequal development of musical cultures around the world. There is no attempt to relate GRM operations to the terrifying impacts of France's colonial wars in Vietnam and Algeria, nor, although Gayou is eager to draw a positive comparison between the "universality" of GRM practice and that of contemporaneous "atomic research," of its irresponsible nuclear testing in the South Pacific or the Sahara.

Ultimately, then, this is a book that sees no problem with limiting our understanding of electroacoustic music's historical roots to the safest and most conservative possible terms. It is an echo from the time when electroacoustic music's "elite" cultural status was first being threatened, and it should be interpreted accordingly.