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From Wire to Computer: Francis Dhomont at 80

Francis Dhomont (Figure 1), a pioneer in electroacoustic music, is renowned internationally for his compositions—attested by numerous awards and prizes including the Magisterium Prize at Bourges (1988) and the Prix Ars Electronica (1992). Mr. Dhomont (b. 1926, Paris) recently retired to Avignon, in his native France, after a long sojourn in Montreal, Canada, where his work and teaching had a profound influence on the development of the local world of electroacoustic music. In particular, his scrutiny of Pierre Schaeffer's work and his own experiments in the earliest days of *musique concrète* resulted in a favored place for the development of acousmatic music in Montreal.

This interview was conducted initially during the Electroacoustic Music Studies 2005 conference (EMS-05) in Montreal, where Mr. Dhomont was the keynote speaker. It was subsequently completed through electronic mail correspondence, and then translated from French by the interviewer.

[Editor's note: Audio examples of Francis Dhomont's music will appear on the disc accompanying the next issue of *Computer Music Journal* (Vol. 30, No. 4). A list of electroacoustic compositions by Mr. Dhomont is shown in Table 1, and a discography and more information are available at the composer's Web site, www.electrocd.com/bio.f/dhomont_fr.html.]

Rosemary Mountain: I remember that the first time I actually met you, at the Canadian Electroacoustic Community (CEC) conference in Banff in 1989, I said that although it seemed that everyone was moving toward synthesizers and computers, I still preferred *musique concrète,* and you said "Me too!" I was very reassured! But it's interesting that we are doing this interview for *Computer Music Journal,* because in the old days, *musique concrète* was considered quite distinct from computer music.

Francis Dhomont: One can produce *musique concrète* with any medium; despite the fact that it's made with computers, it's still *musique concrète.* It used to be tape recorders—it was always done with a support medium. Pierre Schaeffer used the flexible disks with needles . . . that was the first thing. I started around the same time as him—without knowing him—but I worked with a Webster sound recorder (an American brand) with a magnetic wire. It was a wire made of very thin steel. I had a roll of it. It sat over at the side, I would pull some out, and then I would record on it. It had been invented a long time prior by Valdemar Poulsen, and it was meant for businesspeople—an early kind of Dictaphone. I found it in the years just after the war; the Americans came over not only with guns but also with recorders! The uncle of one of my friends had one; he worked with an American firm. I experimented a bit with it and thought it quite fantastic. So I started working with one, making *musique concrète,* without knowing that *musique concrète* already existed.

Mountain: When would this have been?

Dhomont: Let's see, it would have been between 1946 and 1948. I would have been 20–22 years old. At the time, I was an instrumental composer.

Mountain: What was your instrument?

Dhomont: I didn't really have an instrument. Well, of course I played a bit of piano, but I started too late. I began the piano at a very early age, then I stopped, and I began again when I was 15, but without any intention of becoming a performer; I was interested in composition. Of course, I would play a bit with my friends—some jazz—I played some trumpet, some trombone, but I wasn't a competent instrumentalist.

Mountain: Did you know any electroacoustic or electronic composers at the time you discovered this invention?

Dhomont: No.

Mountain: So it was the technology—its potential for recording things—that attracted you.

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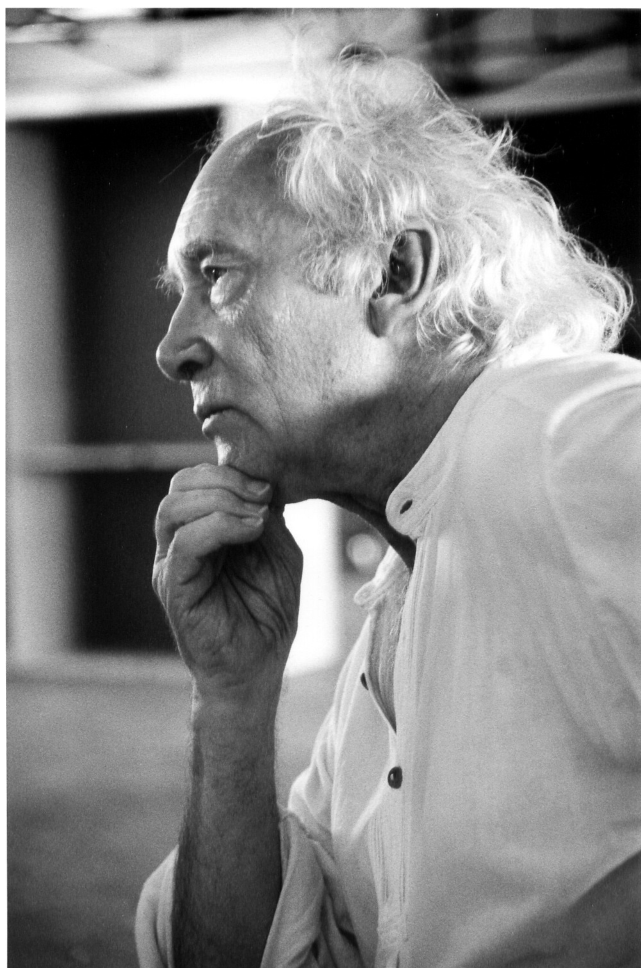
Figure 1. Francis Dhomont in Paris, 2001. (Photo: Florence Gonot.)



Dhomont: Exactly. The possibility of recording was fantastic! It was quite a discovery—although it was not easy; there were a few studios around, but still . . . Now, with a little machine, one could do everything. One could hear right away what one had just done. So, with a friend, I started making *musique concrète,* without knowing what it was. We made sounds with bottles, all types of things. We made noises, we recorded our voices.

Mountain: Did you use acoustic instruments to produce sounds?

Dhomont: No, not really—mainly noises. You know, you could say it was an idea in the air at the time, in a way.

Mountain: Where were you at the time?

Dhomont: In Paris. But you know, I did this mostly as something to amuse myself, but I was really quite interested in it. And then, one night, I heard the famous *Musique Concrète* show by Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry on the radio—I think it was called Radio Paris at the time—and right away I recognized it as being the same thing as I had been doing. I said, "There! That's what I'm doing!" And frankly, I'd had about enough of instrumental music at the time—my own as well!

I had the opportunity to work again with the recorder a bit later, but by then tape was being used. This was around 1950–1951, when I had moved to the South of France and was working in a youth hostel. I was asked, since I was a composer, if I would be interested in preparing a workshop of contemporary music for teachers, professors, etc., who came to Provence to visit. I said, "Yes, certainly, I'd be very interested." I made a collage of a very long program of contemporary works, and also a whole bunch of text, all recorded using cheap little microphones. I could slow down the sound by pressing my finger on the capstan and create superpositions by putting a piece of cardboard in front of the erase head, and so on—all quite amateur, you know, but it really interested me, and gave me a taste for it all. I was still doing instrumental music, but I thought, I really need to get some money to buy some equipment to work.

Mountain: And were you alone there? Or did you have friends to help you make these experiments?

Dhomont: No, there were no other composers, no other musician buddies—I was the only musician in the area. Now, at the time, I was married, we had three boys, and I needed to do lots of other things to make a bit of money. For a while, I didn't do any more music, because I had to work hard to support the family. I did a lot of different things, but mostly I worked as a wood craftsman. I made objects in wood—olive wood—and I lived for years like that.

Mountain: That's fascinating!

Dhomont: Yes, it's different, but then, I'm rather good with my hands. Anyway, it really seemed that

something was missing in my life, so finally, things seemed stabilized a bit, and I managed to find the funds to buy some recorders and set up a little studio for myself in the middle of the countryside. The first recorders were really not very good, they didn't work properly, and they gave me a lot of trouble, but then I was able to buy some Revoxes. Now, they were old Revoxes—what we call the G36—not very well known—big, old gray things with tubes in them. Have you seen that kind? They worked very well.

Mountain: Yes! And how many did you have—two?

Dhomont: Yes, two.

Mountain: One can do a lot with two already.

Dhomont: Yes, sure—though I did manage to resuscitate one of the old cheap ones I had for a third, to allow me to do mixing and so on.

Mountain: Were these two-track?

Dhomont: Well, you know, that was the most dramatic problem, because the first ones were one-quarter track. I didn't know much about them, and the salesman had told me they were excellent, and so on, but it wasn't at all what I needed. So I converted the one-quarter-track machine into half-track, which was an awful lot of very complicated work. I had to buy new heads, and it never worked well. But in the process of taking these old ones apart—you know, I was in the middle of the country all by myself doing this—I managed to create a variable-speed recorder.

You see, I replaced—there was a metal disc, like this—it had three speeds—1, 2, 3, like this [he describes with his hands three discs of decreasing diameter, with the smallest on the top]—and I took it out. And since I was used to working with wood, I was able to turn a little cone, and the rubber slid along it.

Mountain: That's great!

Dhomont: Well, you know, when you have nothing, you need to have imagination! So, that was the beginning of my electroacoustic career. You know, I listened a lot to the radio—the Groupe de Recherches Musicales (GRM) editions—and I also started buying records. I bought the *Traité des Objets Musicaux,* which I read very carefully and seriously.

Mountain: How did you know about the existence of the *Traité*? Was that through the GRM radio shows?

Dhomont: I don't really remember, but I was listening to those shows all the time, and reading—well, really looking hard for anything that would relate to this field—and I bought the *Traité* in 1966, just as it arrived on the shelves. *Solfège des Objets Sonores,* with the three records, came out a year later. So that was how I taught myself. And in fact I began writing my own book about it.

Mountain: Really? And do you have any trace of that?

Dhomont: Oh, well, I don't know, I might have some notes somewhere, or maybe at the Université de Montréal.

Mountain: But that would be really interesting to read, because if you were questioning the same issues independently at the same time, you might have different perspectives, different solutions.

Dhomont: Well, yes, I did have some different solutions, but those that worked, I remembered and used in my own work subsequently—I think! The *Traité* was very important for me. I didn't know Schaeffer at the time, but I bought all the records that came out from GRM, including the first ones of Schaeffer, that came out on the Philips label, called *Prospective of the 21st Century,* and at the same time, I was reading. So that was really my schooling.

Mountain: Did these GRM radio shows occur weekly?

Dhomont: I think they must have.

Mountain: You know, in Canada right now, we don't have much on the radio.

Dhomont: Yes, that's true; it seems to be the same everywhere. In France, it's really diminished through the years. Even I made some GRM shows at one point with Christian Zanési, but now, there is hardly anything. And it's the same everywhere: only a few shows in the middle of the night, when no one

is listening. It's awful. But they were really solid shows, one hour long, with explanations of how the music worked, who was doing it, the manipulations and so on. I kept the cassettes of the shows.

Mountain: What type of speakers did you have for listening to these shows? Were you able to hear details of the timbres and so on?

Dhomont: Well, I can tell you a story about that! I had bought some better equipment, but I didn't have a console. So I made one out of modules. I had made some radio sets when I was young, so I knew how to solder, how to read diagrams, and so on. Well, it worked, but there was a bit of hiss. Anyway, although I had bought the best speakers I could afford, they weren't great, since I didn't have much money. And one day, I went to the house of a friend who was a technician and had some really good speakers, and we put on the tape of my new piece. And all we could hear was a lot of heavy bass thumping. You see, I couldn't hear the bass very well on my speakers, so I put tons of it in! And I was really taken aback when I heard it on these good speakers—really alarmed—because I had to do everything again. But that's how it goes.

I discovered the technical stuff like that, a bit at a time. Because I was alone, I had to figure out how to make things myself. In the middle of the countryside like that, there were no people who could repair my equipment. And I was having crises because I had to work all day in the woodworking shop to make money, and then I would work all night in the studio, and the equipment wouldn't work properly. Even when I went to Marseilles, no one there really knew what I needed. They could tell if a machine worked or didn't work, but they had no awareness of the subtleties in between. I would say, "But there's a little noise here," and they would shrug their shoulders. It was difficult.

Mountain: So, apart from your friend with the good speakers, did you have any other people around you who listened to your music? Or did you have the impression that you were stuck being a perpetual student?

Dhomont: By the way, my friend with the good speakers worked at FNAC, the record store, and through him I was able to get good prices on records, which helped me a lot. But no, there wasn't anyone to listen, because I wasn't in Paris, so it was difficult until the day I decided to put on my own concert. In 1975, a few of us artists in the region (Provence) founded a little festival of contemporary music. It wasn't mainly electroacoustic music—it was instrumental music mainly, classical, jazz, rock, etc.—but Xenakis came, and Ligeti. Then I became president of the society and continued for five years. Van Gogh is buried there. Saint-Rémy-de-Provence is a tiny little village, but there were always lots of painters and sculptors, so it was exceptionally active for its size.

So I organized these concerts. There was a young man, Bruno d'Auzon, who came to work with me in the woodcraft business, to make some money, and after a while—since he was interested in music—I suggested that he could help out with the concerts. (He is now an electroacoustic composer and a teacher in Nîmes.) That was around the time that I went to find François Bayle to invite him to participate in the concert. So he came with a big truck full of equipment. That's when I really started to have contact with the electroacoustic music world.

Mountain: How did you find the funds for this?

Dhomont: Well, we didn't have much! But we were full of goodwill. When the society was originally founded, the local municipality gave us a bit of money to help out, but it wasn't much. Then, when I became president, I went after SACEM (the French performing rights organization) in Paris for a bit of support, and so on. But everything was volunteer-based: we only paid for the visiting musicians, and we didn't have to pay for labor. Everyone was just happy to help get it going. Of course, it doesn't continue forever, that kind of thing. But nevertheless, we had a great two-week-long festival!

Mountain: And I suppose that people enjoyed coming down to the south of France and drinking the wine. Did it have a name, this festival?

Dhomont: Yes, initially it simply bore the name of the artist society that founded it: Prisme. But when I took over the presidency of the society, I chose the name Musiques Multiples, because we played all

kinds of music, as long as it was contemporary. Much of it was instrumental. But we had Bernard Parmegiani, and François Bayle, and Daniel Charles who spoke about John Cage, etc.

Mountain: And did these people not find it a bit odd to find you making *musique concrète* in the middle of nowhere, all by yourself?

Dhomont: Yes, certainly! But anyway, we soon entered into conversations, and they seemed to enjoy it. At first, they wondered, "Who is this guy?" But they quickly realized that I was quite serious, and frankly there were many who relied on me. And I did still know a few people in Paris. For example, when Ligeti and Xenakis came, it was through Claude Samuel who was organizer of the important series called (and still is) Centre Acanthes. And every year they had a program in Aix-en-Provence called Compositeur Celebre where young composers could go for workshops. I had known Claude Samuel for a long time, and so we came to an agreement where he moved the whole program—not only the invited composer but also all the performer—to our festival for one day. He got a bit of publicity for his program out of the deal, and I benefited from excellent performers who played the work of Xenakis and Ligeti, so it worked well. And then I moved to Canada.

Mountain: What prompted that?

Dhomont: Ah, well, that's a personal story, but I can tell it. You see, at one of the festivals, there was a composer in Marseilles called Marcel Frémiot—who is still there, in fact!—and he wanted Canadian singer to perform a piece of his. And I said, "But I don't have the funds to pay a singer to come from Canada!" He said, "No, it's okay, she's currently in Paris because she's working on her doctorate, so we only need to bring her from Paris," so of course I agreed.

So she came and sang Mr. Frémiot's work, and we got along very well. This was Marthe Forget—perhaps you know her? She was professor at the Université de Montréal for many years. And things were not going so well for me there, and she suggested that I come to Montreal for a bit, and I thought it a good idea. So in 1978, I arrived in Montreal, and stayed a few months, and then I went back to Provence to organize the festival for the next year. But I was really exhausted that time. So then afterwards, I returned to Montreal, and we married, Marthe and I. And I must say that at the Faculty of Music at the Université de Montréal, they really opened their doors to me. They had a studio there—not very sophisticated, but not bad, run by Louise Gariépy then. I met her and we got along well, and she said, "You know, no one is really using the studio much, so if you want, you can work there sometimes." And so I worked there most nights. And I made a long piece there, *Sous le regard d'un soleil noir.*

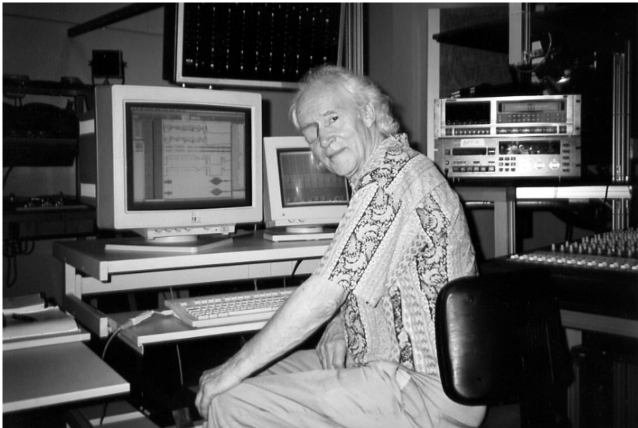
We gave our first concert there, with the premiere of the first version of that work. (The hall wasn't where it is now, but rather on Côte-Ste-Catherine—the Pavillion Marguerite d'Youville, where there is a hospital now. On the second floor was a space we called Le 10–20, where we gave the concerts.) And Jean-Jacques Nattiez was there, and even the dean, who wanted to make a record of the piece, to which I of course said yes. Then the dean pulled back a bit, but Jean-Jacques Nattiez urged me to talk to François Bayle at GRM, whom I knew of course a bit from the St-Rémy festival days. He was quite enthusiastic, and we made the recording with them.

I was then invited to go to GRM and work for a short time to produce some supplementary material, so I ended up creating an additional movement for the work. And from that point, I started working more closely with GRM, working in their studio, giving talks there, and so on. At that point, I had completely abandoned composing for acoustic instruments.

Mountain: And when you arrived in Montreal, did you feel that it was really a different culture?

Dhomont: Well, yes, but the most notable difference for me was that between the anglophone and francophone cultures. You see, when I first arrived in Montreal, I met composers like Yves Daoust, Philippe Ménard, Marcelle Deschênes, who had all worked in France already, at GRM or at Bourges.

Figure 2. Mr. Dhomont in Bourges, 1998. (Photo: Institut International de Musique Electroacoustique de Bourges.)



Mountain: That's what I thought, so there were links; you knew some of the same people, had the same influences.

Dhomont: Yes, that's it—it was the same culture.

Mountain: So if you had gone to Toronto, for example, it would have been completely different.

Dhomont: Completely. We all knew France, *musique concrète,* Schaefferian ideas, etc. So we got along well. It was only after that that I got to know the English works, after I had lived in Montreal for a while. Because when I first arrived, my associations were with people who shared similar ideas, like Micheline Coulombe Saint-Marcoux, who had also been at GRM.

Mountain: Did you know her already?

Dhomont: I knew her work—we had had some of it at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. We had played and recorded *Ishuma.* We presented a recording of her work at the festival—Marthe spoke to me about her—because it was she who had premiered the work.

So, I didn't find a great difference, but I believe I was able to offer something additional, because I knew something of the Paris/Bourges culture: for example, concerts that used multiple speakers. I began speaking about "acousmatique"—a word unknown here at the time. Then they asked me to give some courses. Louise Gariépi asked me to give some courses in technique, and then Marcelle Deschênes was appointed professor, and she asked me to teach some of the courses: electroacoustic composition techniques, auditory perception, composition.

Mountain: Was the idea of having a course in electroacoustic composition techniques particular to the Université de Montréal, or was it taught like that in Paris and elsewhere also?

Dhomont: I don't really know, because in Paris I spent a year at GRM and at the Conservatory, but it wasn't defined like that.

Mountain: And the course in Auditory Perception?

Dhomont: Acoustic Perception was taught in my own way. Before me, it had been taught by Marcelle Deschênes, who had founded the course, and subsequently Francois Guérin, but as he didn't want to give the course any more, Marcelle asked if I wanted to give the course, and I said yes, but that I would want to redesign it. So she gave me carte blanche, and it was there that I designed it so that the Schaefferian idea of listening was a central element.

I thought that it was important, the only place in North America where this kind of thing was studied, so I thought it would be a good idea to introduce it. And in the end, a whole generation of students became familiar with these ideas—not only the way of listening, but also the thinking that accompanied it—so I believe that it was good, and it seems to have produced some good results. And people began talking about "the Montreal school" because we had a special way of doing things.

Mountain: Auditory Perception is of particular interest to me. You know the work of Al Bregman, *Auditory Scene Analysis*?

Dhomont: Yes, though not so well.

Mountain: Montreal has become quite a center for this, in fact; from the psychology aspect à la Bregman, and from the electroacoustic-music angle, although oddly enough for years they did not mix or cross paths much.

Dhomont: Yes, and it's great, because they're quite complementary. And clearly I was quite partial to

it—I was very happy to develop these courses, because it was an area that I knew well, and on the other hand, it was not at all known here in North America.

Sometimes I had arguments, for instance with Jean Piché, because he came from a different background, but I said, "Listen, I know I'm not teaching all aspects, but I am teaching something that is different, so maybe I should keep going." But it was of course important to have diverse points of view.

Mountain: What about computer music? Did you have any links with Vladimir Ussachevsky, people like that?

Dhomont: No, not at all. No—my training is in that of *musique concrète.* I never used a computer at all until tape recorders became a thing of the past. Of course, I knew something about it; I was very aware of the difference between the German electronic school and the Paris *musique concrète* one . . . but I was clearly of the latter. There was one guy, very well known in France, who right from the beginning was working with computers; his name was Pierre Barbaud. He really worked a lot in the field. I didn't know him; I knew his music a little bit, but I wasn't very enthusiastic about the musicality of it. What was good about it was that there was finally a little bit of real music that started being produced—like the *ILIAC Suite*—the first steps towards actually using the computer to produce music. It showed that it could in fact be done. But it wasn't my specialty at all; I didn't feel connected to it. It's true that it seemed to be a tendency that was more explored in Western Canada and in the States.

Mountain: Yes, it's true—the Université de Montréal didn't have so many students working with computers—perhaps even now?

Dhomont: Well, now it's changed quite a bit. For example, there's Jean Piché, who is quite open to computers—and now of course everyone uses them, but at the time, I seem to recall, back then, we did make a couple of attempts, but I can't remember much about it. Anyway, it's not my field!

Mountain: Now you use the computer, though. What software do you use?

Dhomont: Well, I'm always thrifty! When I worked with tape recorders, I didn't have the most expensive ones, and I work on the basis that to make good music, it can be done relatively simply, as long as the technical quality is good.

As far as software goes, as you know, I work with Pro Tools, and also GRM Tools and a few plug-ins. What else . . . oh yes, I have also kept some of the old digital audio machines for reverberation and effects, such as the Lexicon PCM 70 and 60—a very good machine, it was—and I still use it.

Mountain: And to create the sounds, did you always record them?

Dhomont: Not always. Way back in the early days, I actually bought a synthesizer—a little AKS, just when it first came out—and I still have it and use it from time to time. And then I also used lots of electronic sounds, which I went off to different studios to create—at Marseilles, at GRM, at Bourges, etc.—as they had machines—synthesizers—that I didn't have. So I recorded many sounds there.

Mountain: So you would go there, record sounds, and then take them back home where you would manipulate them?

Dhomont: Exactly. I always work that way, except for once at Bourges, when I created a whole piece in their studios because I had to. Actually, twice I worked like that. But mainly, during all the time that was allotted to me, I would just collect sounds. I would get to know the machine well. For example, I worked on the first Synclavier at Marseilles. You see, I knew Jon Appleton very well, so I went to visit him at Dartmouth College, and learned a bit about the Synclavier from him, and then I was invited to spend a month at Marseilles, where they had one too, and recorded lots of sounds with it. Similarly, at Bourges, they had some extremely high-quality analog oscillators, so I was able to create many sounds there too. Also, at GRM, I worked with the SYTER system. So I would record all these sounds onto tape, in the early days, then later onto DAT cassettes, so that I would have a huge collection of sonic material—and then I would take it home, because I always preferred to work at home.

Ever since the beginning, I had been collecting sounds, and I would begin developing them, little by little. I would get to know my material very well and assemble it. And I would know my machines well, too. I don't like working with new machines, because one just ends up producing banal things. But when one knows a machine very well, one can get more deeply into it. So, I would take my sounds, work with them, apply treatments from different tools, organize them, mix them, and eventually produce a work on tape—or later on, put it into Pro Tools.

Mountain: Do you still have sounds you've never used?

Dhomont: Yes, a few—mostly sounds that haven't been subject to much treatment. The sounds I took from the SYTER system, unfortunately, I think have all been used already. I was very fond of them! But I had many acoustic sounds that I had recorded—and I still record interesting sounds—and many of them I have not yet used. All my sonic objects—I know where to find them!

Mountain: Well, it's all fascinating! Tell me: it's rare that a composition lasts more than 20 minutes, even in the world of instrumental music. It is even rarer that a piece over 60 minutes long will not lose the audience to impatience or boredom. But you do that regularly, with success.

Dhomont: Yes, clearly one of the difficulties of long pieces (30, 45, 60 minutes and more) is not wearying listeners, of holding their attention. When I compose works of any substantial dimension, I am very conscious of this problem. It's why I organize them into a succession of relatively short movements (of from two to twelve minutes). That's what happens in *Sous le regard d'un soleil noir* (eight sections), *. . . mourir un peu* (nine sections of durations that increase and then decrease in size), *Forêt profonde* (13 sections associated with the 13 *Kinderszenen* of Schumann), *Cycle du son* (four movements; the second movement is itself divided into six interlinked parts), and so on.

Each section or movement has a particular character that often contrasts with the preceding one. Thus, the interest of listeners is renewed, and if their attention starts to lag during one section, the change in the musical discourse will wake them up by breaking the perceived monotony. In other words, I learned very early on—as we were taught at GRM—to avoid long static textures, so easy to create on synthesizers but so often boring, or to use them but with significant bits and echos, which give life to and articulate the sonic continuum. This style of writing is fairly representative of a so-called "French" style, which is sometimes considered by some circles within the electroacoustic milieu to be too information-rich, and therefore difficult to follow. But, as I tend to think of electroacoustic music as more than mere entertainment, I feel that it is quite acceptable to expect a bit of effort from the listener, since I have already made the effort to shape each detail of the work with care.

Mountain: Do you think about a total duration before you begin a work? Do you choose your durations according to specific measures, or just "by ear"?

Dhomont: I generally have an idea of that at the beginning. I even go so far as to predict the number of sections with their respective durations. These choices are rarely arbitrary, but rather depend on the general form I have chosen for the specific piece in question. In the same way, I almost always find a title for the work before beginning, because the title sums up, for me, the general concept that I have chosen. But I don't feel obliged to subject myself to rigid rules, and if my intuition tells me, "That's not working," then I don't hesitate to make some changes. Because even if I do go for a certain rigor for the form and construction of my works, whenever there is a doubt, it's my intuition that is always given the final word. However, it is rare that these types of changes will radically transform the generative idea and the overall organization; they simply take into account the discoveries that I am making during the compositional process.

Moreover, I often go back to work on a piece that has already been finished and presented in concert. Frequently I endeavor to "aerate" it; I remove the elements that I find too long, useless, redundant—precisely because I think that they will tire the listener's hearing.

Mountain: It seems to me that the majority of your works are based on "narrative" forms, giving the idea of a voyage or story, more than an exploration of sounds or textures for themselves. Do you think of it this way?

Dhomont: I have long thought that my body of work was made up of two main categories: on the one hand, the rather abstract works (that is, where the music is there just for its own sake—developments, variations, permutations of musical parameters or morphologies, etc.), and on the other hand, more figurative works that include extra-musical ideas (poetic, romantic, philosophical, psychoanalytical, social, etc.) But, as time goes on, I have noticed that the majority of my works belong to the second category and that many of them do obey narrative forms or rise from extra-musical arguments. Some do this in an obvious way, by using texts borrowed from works of writers, poets, philosophers, psychologists, spoken by various voices; others are inspired by specific situations, events, or ideas that I try to express through the music.

I chose to abandon instrumental writing around the mid 1960s to focus on my study of electroacoustic composition, because I was convinced that this new and very open domain, practically free of rules—where the poetic image could be freely associated with a musical vocabulary—was capable of drawing on very diverse creative fields. The idea stayed with me when I noticed that I was often positioning myself just at the edge of narrative, and that I was in search of a kind of musical dramaturgy, close to opera, but an opera free of singers, traditional instruments and all the conventions of lyric art. It's therefore not surprising that, 45 years later, I realize that I remained faithful to my intentions first and that behind my music there is often something else. I could almost say that music is for me the language that I use to speak of aspects of being. However, not all my works belong to the narrative domain, and some could be considered "pure music."

I should add that, for me, all musical organization—even that which illustrates something—needs to follow musical criteria. This means that the logic of a narrative alone does not ensure the coherence of a musical discourse. The work must function at two levels: that of the concept and that of the musical syntax used, in the same way that a verbal narrative must transmit ideas through an understood language.

Mountain: Do you normally start at the beginning of a work, adding fragments in a more or less chronological way?

Dhomont: I take a long time to construct my narrative works—months or years. I gather documents, ideas, readings, notes, sketched-out diagrams, lists of sounds to find. I also reflect on the form and listen to previous works, simulations, etc. The duration of this preliminary phase varies, but is often proportional to the work itself. Afterwards, I can then begin to organize the chosen materials, with the inevitable hesitations and regrettable bits corrected through an attentive listening. It is extremely rare that I build a work in a chronological way. In fact, that has happened only once, for *Signé Dionysos,* which was a sort of linear narrative. In general, I need to know from the beginning how the work will end, and where the principal points of articulation for the musical discourse are. However, as these long works have separate sections, I may well work on those that are related to each other but don't follow one another in the final piece.

I work a bit like a filmmaker, because I use a "story board" to figure out how the piece should evolve. Also, like a filmmaker, I can improvise during the shooting. Lots of details can be modified, adapted, or abandoned during the production, depending on the problems encountered and solutions discovered. But the overall form and the generative idea don't change.

Mountain: Can you give some examples of names of composers who have influenced you the most—if there are any?

Dhomont: It's clear that *musique concrète* had a crucial influence on my work. Of course I am thinking of Pierre Schaeffer, but also Pierre Henry, François Bayle, Bernard Parmegiani, Luc Ferrari, Michel Chion, and, in general, the composers of GRM in Paris. But naturally, composers like Stock-

hausen, Xenakis, Varèse, Berio—who are above all instrumental composers—also counted for a lot. Among the composers of "pure" instrumental music, I would mention Machaut, Monteverdi, Bach, Beethoven, Schumann, Debussy, Ravel, Berg, Stravinsky, Messiaen, Ligeti, Scelsi, Boulez, Kagel (but these are just the ones I can think of at the moment—there are lots more)—and contemporary music in general, and jazz.

Mountain: Do you still listen to other electroacoustic music?

Dhomont: Yes, not only because of my personal interest but also because I participate in numerous juries.

Mountain: You incorporate a lot of spoken words into your works. I noticed that when you talked of your first experiments with the magnetic wire recorder, making noises and sounds with the bottles and so on, that you also mentioned using fragments of conversations with your friend. Is there a direct link with these early experiments, or does it come from somewhere else?

Dhomont: My attraction to words comes partially from an appreciation of the sound of voices themselves—their particular "grain"—but above all from my lifelong interest in literature, poetry, and text in general. My parents read a lot. My father and one of my uncles were writers, and I was attracted to books from a very young age. I was also a fairly gifted student in the humanities.

Mountain: How do you choose the text for a work?

Dhomont: They are always ones that moved me or fascinated me when I read them, whether Kafka, Freud, Laing, fairy tales by Lautréamont, and many others that I have not yet used.

Mountain: When you create a section of a work, do you think in terms of atmosphere—melancholy, happy, strong, weak?

Dhomont: Yes, certainly. I try to translate the feeling or idea that the words suggest to me through the evocative power of the sound. Of course, I strive to avoid making redundant illustrations of the text, a pleonasm. In *Sous le regard d'un soleil noir,* for example, there is a section of the work where a female voice describes what madness is. At this moment, it's obviously necessary to avoid emphasis, sonic delirium, loud cries. I therefore used an agitated but understated rhythmic vibration throughout the whole section, at a low dynamic level with simply a few bursts of sound from time to time, like an inner tremor.

Mountain: Now, as a retiree, how do you find post-university life?

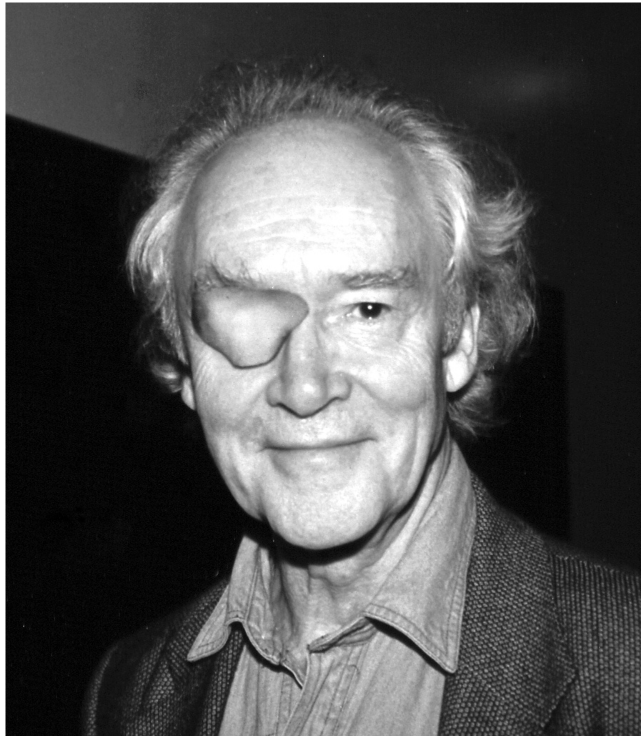
Dhomont: At the time that I left the university in 1996, I had not been teaching such a heavy load. I had managed to have my classes all grouped into one or two days at most, which wasn't very tiring. But when I really didn't need to go to the university any more, and I could spend all my time as I wished, without having to make arrangements if I was going to travel, for example, or if I wanted to work all night and sleep during the day, I experienced a fantastic feeling of total freedom.

What I did miss was not meeting with the students any more. I always really enjoyed teaching and having discussions with them. I tried to give them the taste for electroacoustic music and art in general. In return, they gave me their enthusiasm and all sorts of useful information on life in Montreal and the latest technological gadgets. I have very fond memories of all those years of study and friendship.

Mountain: It is obvious that many of them have very fond memories of you as well! What do you wish for in your future?

Dhomont: As far as that goes—since it's not reasonable to think about the long term!—I will stay active for as long as possible. I wish for passion and wisdom. For the moment, my health still allows me to compose, to write, to travel, to participate in the music world—and I won't deprive myself of it! In 2005, I made a dozen trips in Europe and Canada for concerts and conferences. I am in the middle of working on two new compositions: one a long work on Kafka, which I have been thinking about for ten years and for which I have already completed a part

Figure 3. Mr. Dhomont in Paris, 1999. (Photo: Michel Lioret, Institut National de l'Audiovisuel.)



dedicated to "The Letter to Father" (*Brief an den Vater*). I have had two commissions for concerts that will happen in November for my eightieth birthday. I am also working in France with the Radios Libres and I have several trips planned. And we are invited, my wife Inés Wickmann and me, to the Studio Delta P in La Rochelle for a residency which will end with a multimedia show; she is going to link some videos to my works with a setting on the theme of "Anamorphoses" (deformations, reflections, shadows of visual or acoustic images, etc.). We have stretched the concept to the metaphor, playing on all sorts of alterations and distortions—natural or not—of illusions and tricks, through reverberation, duplication, echo, and sparkle, confusing time and space, audio and visual.

Mountain: What do you want to tell us about Inés, your wife? I know that she adores your music, and it's clear that it inspires her. For example, I really enjoyed her video *Microcosmo* set to your piece that we watched during the EMS-05 conference.

Dhomont: Inés Wickmann is an artist, sculptor, and video artist from Colombia. She is passionate about music, particularly contemporary music. She has even produced numerous shows on the subject for the Bogotá radio. When we met in that Colombian city, during a festival of acousmatic music, she already knew many of my works, and I could say that it's not I who seduced her, but my music! She really feels it. I have great confidence in her judgment and I always ask her advice when I work on a new piece.

Mountain: So we owe her some thanks too!

Dhomont: Since our respective artistic paths are very close to each other, we have an excellent rapport when we collaborate. It seems to me that this rapport is evident in our works and that the results are convincing testimony.

Mountain: I fully agree! Thanks so much for your time, Francis. It's always such a pleasure to chat with you. And we look forward to your next piece!

Table 1. Electroacoustic Music Compositions by Francis Dhomont

Title	*Year*	*Duration*
Cité du dedans	1972	20'49"
Assemblages	1972	18'30"
Syntagmes	1975	10'03"
Puzzle	1975	2'08"
Asie	1975	13'33"
La Liberté ou la mort	1976	25'46"
Espaces sonores pour des textes de Jean Tortel	1976	34'30"
Métonymie ou Le corps impossible	1976	17'42"
Cathédrale d'images	1977	43'00"
À cordes perdues	1977	15'47"
Zones et rhizomes	1978	16'25"
Mais laisserons-nous mourir Arianna?	1979	16'00"
Sous le regard d'un soleil noir	1981	51'35"
Points de fuite	1982	12'21"
Transits élémentaires	1983	16'35"
. . . mourir un peu	1984	44'52"
Drôles d'oiseaux	1985	18'22"
Signé Dionysos	1986	28'22"
Les Traces du rêve	1986	17'13"
Chiaroscuro	1987	17'30"
Poe-Debussy, autour de la Maison Usher	1988	41'00"
Chroniques de la lumière	1989	31'16"
Novars	1989	19'07"
Espace/Escape	1989	19'24"
Qui est là?	1990	3'02"
L'Électro	1990	1'06"
Simulacres: un autoportrait	1991	28'36"
Figures de la nuit	1991	27'15"
Studio de nuit	1992	3'00"
Forêt profonde	(1994–1996)	58'32"
Convulsive!	1995	2'54"
Lettre de Sarajevo	(1995–1996)	14'30"
Nocturne à Combray	(1995–1996)	13'55"
Objets retrouvés	1996	5'19"
CPH Pendler Music	1997	12'30"
Frankenstein Symphony	1997	63'45"
Air du large (L')	(1997–1998)	5'44"
En cuerdas	1998	11'27"
Ricercare	1998	8'25"
AvatArsSon	1998	18'06"
Phonurgie	1998	12'30"
Cycle du son	1998	54'10"
Les Moirures du temps	1999	15'26"
Vol d'arondes	(1999–2001)	11'25"
Un autre Printemps	2000	6'08"
Glank-50	2002	1'01"
Corps et âme	2003	7'43"
Here and There	2003	10'10"
Je te salue, vieil Océan!	2004	14'50"
Voyage-miroir	2004	14'50"
Brief an den Vater	2005	17'25"