



**The
Amplification
of the Soul
through
Technology**
Interview with
Gilles Aubry
Arie Altena

This interview with Gilles Aubry took place at Kontraste Krems, the afternoon before the premi re of his new composition *L'amplification des âmes* which was commissioned by Kontraste / Sonic Acts. For this piece he worked with various recordings of religious services and urban environments in Kinshasa, Congo, which he combined, overlaid and spatialised for playback on a multichannel sound installation, in this case the Acousmonium of the Groupe de Recherches Musicales (GRM). For the past few years Gilles Aubry has mainly worked on sound installations and live performances, often using field recordings. His work is informed by a cultural, critical and ethnographic interest, but also by formal experiment. Before starting the interview we discussed the connections between semiotics, Lévi-Strauss and the writings of Pierre Schaeffer, founder of the GRM and 'inventor' of *musique concrète* with Pierre Henry.

Arie Alterna What are the sound sources you have used for *L'amplification des âmes*?

Gilles Aubry There are basically five categories of sound. First the general soundscape of the city, with acoustic signs of religious presences, like preachers in the market. These sounds are always present in the background of the composition. The second source is the documentation of actual religious services, which contain ritualistic elements. The Libambu Ministry in Kinshasa, where I spent most of my time, is a neo-Pentecostal church specialising in soul deliverance. The third source is recordings from Prophet Libambu's office space in downtown Kinshasa. This is where he stores and edits his personal audiovisual archive of hundreds of VHS tapes of services, campaigns and journeys. There are moments in the composition where you hear the distinctive VHS sound of the videos playing, plus his voice commenting on it. The sounds recorded from the television allow a critical distancing: it's clear you hear a document of a document, not a document of reality. Also, it helps to avoid the impression that you are listening to just some kind of crazy exotic thing.

The fourth source consists of sounds recorded inside or outside the informal cinemas that are often located in traditional markets. These small makeshift cinemas are dark, extremely loud, and are mostly visited by young men. They project a lot of Western erotic, horror and action movies. You hear the sounds of the movies and of the surroundings. Such situations are examples of Western cultural influence in contemporary Kinshasa. They also emphasise the presence of fictional images in everyday life situations, which is so pervasive that, according to anthropologist Filip de Boeck, the boundary between reality and the phantasmatic collective imaginary sometimes seems to have collapsed.

I was in one of those cinemas when they screened a violent cannibal film about a group of researchers from America who end up being eaten by cannibals. Cannibalism is extremely relevant in this respect, because one of the major activities the church engages in is identifying kids who have been accused of being witches or sorcerers, or of having eaten people. Most times the community bans these kids. For example, your neighbour could say, 'I dreamt that your kid is a sorcerer, and you'll have to kick him out, otherwise we're going to set him on fire'. These kids end up on the streets. The church tries to do something about it, but in a very ambiguous way. At the same time they confirm the witchcraft and proclaim, 'Now they're saved'. What exactly happens with these kids afterwards is not clear. Sometimes they remain rejected by their families and live on the street. So the idea of eating people is connected to some very concrete problems.

A fifth sound category comprises recordings of the daily life of people who go to the Libambu church, and the preparations for an evangelical campaign, including meetings, rehearsals, voices announcing the upcoming service on the street, building up the stage and dealing with the authorities. By mixing all the sources together in the piece, my intention was to portray a reality such as this as a highly fictional construction relying on an economy of signs and images.

AA How did you use the Acousmonium, the 'orchestra' of eighty speakers, designed by François Bayle at the GRM in the 1970s?

GA The Acousmonium is all about immersion in sound, which has now been adopted by commercial cinema. I thought it would be interesting to use space and the spatialisation of sound as a way to conceptually organise the different sound sources in *L'amplification des âmes*. With the Acousmonium I can create an immersive décor, which conveys the feeling of being in the city. This illusion is shattered when you hear the video recordings made in front of a television. The spatialisation of the sound works well and is quite efficient, because you can present one idea in one place and another one somewhere else in the space. Sometimes in the piece you hear a sound on one side, and something that contradicts it on the other. This creates tensions. But of course, it's sound; it doesn't stay in one place as images do. The sounds merge into each other. I tried to structure the piece not only according to musical aspects but also in terms of discursive ideas. The piece consists of five parts. In the beginning I introduce elements of the city soundscape, including the amplified voices of street preachers. Then it moves into the church, where you hear several extracts from a soul deliverance service. From here it goes into the cinema, and then back into the church. In the fourth part you hear recordings from the prophet's archive, and the most intense moments of the ceremony. You don't hear any religious sounds in the last part; instead you hear sounds from daily life. I recorded the working environments of the women who attend the Libambu church. You hear hairdressers, women selling stuff on the market. You hear them talking and, as you probably don't know their language, it will sound exotic. But it's really down to earth at the beginning and at the end. Very characteristic moments in the piece are, for instance, the sound check in the church. You hear 'one, one, *check*, Jesus, Jesus'. At the end, the singer has a bit of spare time, and lets go. He sings like a baby and about a woman, and there is a weird, Hawaiian guitar player. That's where these stereotypes start to change.

AA Can you explain the title, *L'amplification des âmes*, the *Amplification of Souls*?

GA The title is an indication of what was going on, but it should be taken as a bit of a joke too. If you take it literally, there is amplification through technology, and it relates to the spiritual aspect of amplifying the soul. The title is French, referring to French acousmatic music, especially that created by the generation of François Bayle, who, as a director of the GRM in Paris, came up with the idea of the Acousmonium. His generation had some really weird ideas, often tending towards esotericism and cosmic music, but mixed with modern rationalism. Take Bayles' idea of the Erosphère, this very sensual and very scientific 'sphere', which is evoked in his music. It is completely cut off from reality, in the tradition of the elite avant-garde. There is no reference to a world of praxis, everything is up there in space. It's very psychedelic, but also monumental, thus reproducing the power structure of Western modernity. I jokingly wanted to allude to this grandiosity.

AA Bayle regarded the Acousmonium as a utopia of pure listening, and perhaps he thought that through pure listening you gain access to a different perspective.

GA The concept of transcendence is a key element here. Bayle frequently uses the word transcendence in interviews, specifically with regard to the Acousmonium. He sees it as a performance tool, but he also says this tool needs to be transcended by the acousmatic composer – music has to transcend materiality. For Bayle the composer is 'god' who is able to make that transcendence happen. Of course transcendence is also a key concept in religious practises in Kinshasa. I asked Pastor Libambu several times how he views the role of technology. Of course he said that it's important to have this power to spread the gospel. But, he said, it is not divine in itself; God and the revelation are divine. So he makes quite a clear distinction between the apparatus and the revelation of God, a distinction that is much less clear for the avant-garde composers of acousmatic music, who adored the technology and the music.

^{AA} Wasn't the possibility of transcendence through technology on of Bayle's main preoccupations?

^{GA} Perhaps. Going towards pure listening, pure experience, pure sensuality, pure music. Composers like Bayle believed that sounds have an intrinsic meaning inscribed in their morphology, therefore they empty the sounds of human and cultural connotations. That is what *musique concrète* is about, and it goes back to Pierre Schaeffer's writings on sound. But then they talk about the human and cultural aspects all the time, much like the traditional-modern ideologies of African churches, which while rejecting traditional religion, spirits and witchcraft, talk about it continuously.

^{AA} Your piece is also a reflection on the media and technologies used in the ceremonies, and on how meaning is produced. Instead of trying to arrive at pure sound you focus on the socio-political aspects of the use of sounds. Is your piece an investigation into how this works?

^{GA} It is research, yes. In fact I experimented with what you could regard as a new form of sound ethnography, because I'm using sound recordings made with a portable microphone, and sounds sourced straight from the mixing desk that they use in the church. I really wanted to get the sounds from the individual inputs on the mixing desk because they have a specific quality and provide a separation of the voices. I call it the mixing-desk perspective of the ritual. No one in the actual ceremony hears it that way, so it's not exactly realistic. It's interesting to hear the differences between the sound recordings; it facilitates a finer analysis of the structure of the ritual.

Through it I am also trying to position myself in relation to the robust tradition of pure music. The idea of pure music is still resilient in institutional avant-garde music, not only in France. I think it is important to reflect on the various aspects of music production, to deconstruct them a bit. I don't like the myth of the divinely inspired composer who produces music without supposedly really knowing how he did it. The audience comes to hear what he has made, but the process of generating

the composition remains hidden. In my musical practice I use a reflection on the aspects of music production as a way to invent new forms that allow the audience to get a feeling for such a reflection. If you emphasise that you're using different types of sound sources, it becomes clear the piece of music is a construction, and does not come – divinely inspired – out of the blue. I try to make that construction process audible. It's very common practice in the visual arts, but less so in the sound arts. I want it to be playful though, and I strive to arrive at something that is, in the first place, aesthetically interesting. I use the research to create a new artistic format. I'm an artist, not a scientist. My work is not the presentation of a study; it is a work of art, with all the freedom of interpretation a work of art allows for.

^{AA} The use of sound recording technology was a major shift for ethnography. What does multi-track recording add to ethnography? Does it mainly provide poetic material for a composition?

^{GA} In this respect I think a multi-track recording is important because it allows a 'view' behind the scenes of the religious spectacle. These ceremonies are highly structured and ritualised in time, and the roles in the ceremony are precisely assigned. You cannot crack that ritualised structure by just being there with a camera and microphone, with which you merely reproduce the staging of things. One strategy I used to get a deeper understanding was to also record other moments associated with the service: before, after, and the beginning and the end, when people go home, the sound check for their next session. Another strategy was to record the entire ceremony through the mixing desk. It was a very basic set-up. But with this I could hear how the ceremony progressed; I could hear the distorted sound from the mixer and captured the artificiality of the situation and the presence of technology. Technology does play an important role in the ceremony. The sound in the church has a bad, distorted quality, but is it because they're using cheap equipment or is meant to be that way? This kind of documentation makes it obvious that they

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are using the noisy aesthetic. I think some people would even say that the noisy way of expression is a way to establish continuity with a traditional musical aesthetic of African noise. When they do use the noisiness in these ceremonies, it is to their taste and relevant to the practice.

^{AA} In your composition you use the idea of simultaneity or contemporaneity, the same moment in time is represented with different recordings of it, positioned at different places in the spatial set-up of the sound system. How did you deal with time in this piece?

^{GA} There are moments when the multi-track mixing-desk recordings and my microphone recording are synchronised, creating a kind of co-presence. I had to limit myself to a composition of 30 minutes, whereas I had hours and hours of recordings to consider. In the composition time is kept in the moment. A sense of time is created through the sequence of fragments. There are key events in the compositions, each of which I allow just enough time to play to establish the idea for the listener, then I cut it, and go to the next one. Some of these might deserve a longer duration, so the listener can go beyond the moment of surprise and exoticism, and be immersed in the temporality of the recordings. The logic of the time construction is derived from the actual ceremony. The piece opens with a sound check, followed by the preaching and the soul deliverance, and then there is a kind of climax, and finally there's the time after.

^{AA} Is the piece informed by your experience as an improvising musician?

^{GA} The influence from improvisation is certainly present in my taste for noise and abstract music, and in how I combine sounds. But my compositions are more reflective and controlled than my improvising. I really felt something special and powerful in Kinshasa. The only thing that seems truly relevant to me is the concept of the piece and the idea of sharing these documents and this experience. It would feel wrong to use all these sounds as just pure sound material in an acousmatic way

and then not acknowledge their original content in the composition. Therefore, I decided I didn't want to improvise with this sound material. Why should I improvise like crazy, twist knobs, manipulate the sounds, when in fact the basic recordings provide an amazing listening experience. As a composer I create conditions for listening experiences, which is also an ethnographic tradition, but I do add some twists on top. The piece is a reflection on the sounds and the technologies. I'm not a sound ethnographer, I'm not into the idea of purity of sound, and I'm definitely not a proponent of the idea that a recording can reproduce reality. The only possible position I can take is that of an external observer who is also participating. It needs to be made clear that a distortion, a selection, and an interpretation have occurred: the original context and the reception are not the same. What is being documented is not only the situation but also my own position. That's why I'm always documenting the production of documentary work too; that's why there are all the reflective moments, the sounds of technology, the noise, my own voice, manipulations on the microphones. These things focus the attention on the material and on the cultural aspect of producing such a work.

^{AA} How does this new piece relate to your earlier work?

^{GA} The method and approach is quite characteristic of all my work since *Berlin Backyards* (Crónica, 2008). That piece was much more poetically naïve, and I think I've developed since then. It started with an interest in the pleasant acoustical qualities of the gardens. I thought it would be a good idea to record them and do something musical with them. During the process I became more aware of the social aspects; in a sense *Berlin Backyards* revealed these social aspects by avoiding them. There is hardly a human sound in the recording. After *Berlin Backyards* it became important for me to not aestheticise spaces and real-life situations, but rather to try and construct an artistic discourse that includes the social aspects.

^{AA} One of the themes underlying the concept for the 2012 Sonic Acts Festival is that a work of art is a container of time...

^{GA} I made a transparent sound screen on the border between Switzerland and France, *Reversible Sound Wall* (2011). Amongst others it reflects on the idea of sound pollution. I would like to exhibit this screen later, not as a sound screen but as a dust collector. The screen would remain in the forest for one year, and afterwards it would bear traces of nature, rain, insects and pollen. In its form it refers to Marcel Duchamps' *Large Glass of The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915–23), which in addition to many other interpretations is sometimes seen as a container of dust, time, or frequencies. My *Reversible Sound Wall* also stores time in a way. I find it interesting to display parts of this noise screen as traces of time. It's a physical trace of time and, in a way, makes time tangible.

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