Surround Sound

On the occasion of a major retrospective in London, *Paul Schütze* talked to pioneering composer **Eliane Radigue** about her 50-year career, which spans electronic music, Tibetan Buddhism, *musique concrète* and 'anti-acoustics'

Born in Paris in 1932, Eliane Radigue occupies a unique place in the 20th-century musical avant-garde. Trained first in classical piano, she became a student of *musique concrète* pioneer Pierre Schaeffer and an assistant to composer Pierre Henry. Drawn to the American minimalists, Radigue availed herself of the newly developed synthesizer technology at New York University in the early 1970s. While many of her European contemporaries were slicing, splicing and shattering sound into recombined shapes and montages, she teased and caressed it into forms so large and tremulous their edges were seldom even glimpsed. Radigue has developed a sound world of infinitesimal delicacy, languorous duration and psychoacoustic daring. In the late '70s she encountered Tibetan Buddhism and, soon after, the influence was expressed through a cycle of works based upon the *Book of the Dead*. This summer, Sound & Music presented an extensive retrospective of concerts in London, premiering Radigue's first works for acoustic instruments and transmitting a language, honed over decades working alone in electronics, to a new generation of collaborating performers.

PAUL SCHÜTZE I am very interested in the two churches – Christ Church Spitalfields and St Stephen Walbrook – that were chosen for your London concerts. Because of the way your music occupies space, location must be an important element in listening to your work.

ELIANE RADIGUE That's the main thing with this music. All of these spaces are like conch shells in which the audience is placed – as if they are inside the body of an instrument. When I was young I used to sit under the piano whenever someone was playing so as to hear the full resonance of the music. What we're trying to do is to surround the audience with a sound, so that when you turn your head you hear something different. The sound is everywhere. There is no stereo; the stereo is everywhere.

PS You've talked about your idea of 'anti-acoustics' and mentioned that you have used cross-like formations of speakers, despite technicians telling you this was 'wrong'.

ER Absolutely! I don't like to tell anyone that they should sit in the middle of the room, as this is where you listen the best. I always say, go wherever you want – you can even walk around slowly. We're talking, of course, about electronic sounds, which are so alive; there is so much possibility for them to resonate with the room, with the walls, with everything. In March, the Groupe de Recherches Musicales [a pioneering electro-acoustic research centre founded by Pierre Schaeffer in 1958] organized a concert at Le Centquatre in Paris – a beautiful setting. I was a little worried about using the Acousmonium [a sound-diffusion system developed by François Bayle in 1974, it comprises 80 loudspeakers and is designed for tape playback], but I had a nice surprise: the space was beautiful and included several loudspeakers, of different colourations [differing sonic, textural qualities; colouration in acoustics often implies a deviation from flat, 'true' reproduction]. I could play with it and use the 'colour', which was very interesting.

PS The duration of your work, and the overtones and harmonies that you use, demand that you listen with your body. It's a very physical music – it isn't just for the ears. This seems to connect with your interest in Tibetan Buddhism, in that Tibetan ritual music is also very physical.

ER It's difficult to say, since I was already doing this kind of music before I came to Tibetan Buddhism, but perhaps I encountered it through this kind of music. It comes from something very natural. The first electronic sound I worked with was the feedback effect, which happens when you are between a microphone and a loudspeaker. If you put a tape-recorder between the two you have to be very careful to get the right distance: if you come too near it's going to hurt, if you go too far away it disappears. You have to be very much in control. And *slow* – you can't do it quickly.

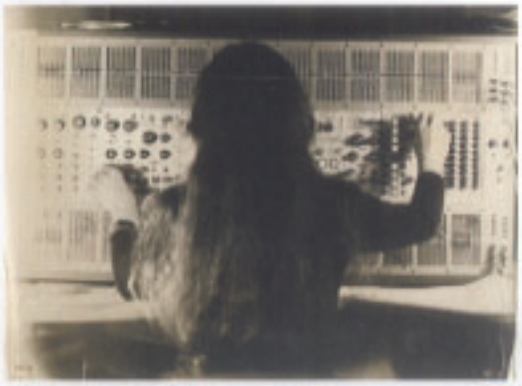
PS So duration is a function?

ER It's included in the fact of creating these kinds of sounds, which I was fascinated by early on; I loved these sounds. I want to catch or to deal with them so I have to be very careful and respectful with them. In between two

Opposite page and above:
Eliane Radigue in the New York Cultural Center
1971

Right:
In her studio in Paris
1971

Left:
In Nice with Yves Klein
1955



tape-recorders, if you touch the microphone or the potentiometer [a level control dial or fader] even slightly there is change. If you do it too quickly or powerfully everything collapses. I have always been very fond of the second movement in classical music, which is quite slow, quite suspended. This is what I'm looking for.

PS Studying Buddhism has obviously informed the narrative of your works, such as the *Trilogie de la Morte* [Trilogy of Death, 1988–93] and the *Milarepa* works [1984]. My understanding of the music connected to Tibetan Buddhist rituals is that it was designed to mirror the metabolism, the blood moving through veins, the pumping of the heart. With a lot of your work it feels as though it's mirroring the nervous system, an even more microscopic internal world. It seems to turn inwards as much as outwards.

ER I like this image of a mirror. From the very beginning I've known that the work is first of all a mirror of our mind: depending on our mood, our perception of the work is altered. That's incredible. There was one point when I was completely rejecting everything and at the beginning I got angry, and I started to destroy things, which was silly. Because when I looked for some kind of shape it was there. Now, I'd rather go for a walk and let the work exist. And I know that it's exactly the same for the listener, depending on their mood.

PS You've recently started working with acoustic instruments.

ER It's a great discovery of my life!

PS Well it's such a change!

ER Oh no, not that much – the only change for me is the tremendous enjoyment of sharing the experience with someone, because I've been working alone for so much of my life. My only assistant has been my cat. I would always know something was wrong when she made a face, but when she was very quiet I'd just carry on. But she was a very poor assistant, not that efficient! Working with great musicians is such a wonderful experience; I'm so lucky. They're the greatest musicians of their generation, you know?

The recent concert at Christ Church Spitalfields was wonderful: the first piece I did was with Kasper T. Toeplitz on electronic bass. He's played this piece about 30 times and now it's just flying; it improves every time. So we'll make another recording, to track how the piece evolves. The premiere of the new work for Rhodri Davies and his harp was also absolutely incredible. Rhodri asked if we should make a recording and I said wait a while; because it was the first time he had played in a room that wasn't his or my room in Paris. It's like with painting: in an artist's studio you see it one way, but in the gallery it's something different. So I said, let it grow.

PS With composition you obviously don't have so much control over how people 'use' the music. They buy the CD and can listen to it on headphones or while they do the ironing. Whereas with a painting it's controlled: you see it in the museum, you see it in the gallery. And it seems that most of your work really requires proper 'auditing' in the right space so you can give your full attention; you can spend the time with it, you can move your body. So in a way it is very performative, even though the process is not always.

ER That's right, because what I've been looking for are mainly spatial harmonics and so on, which are somehow artificial, because all electronic sounds are artificial. This is why electronic music is somehow the same as what I'm doing now, though now I'm doing it acoustically.

PS Some of your pieces took a long time to make, I think?

ER Yes, up to a year and a half. I can hardly listen to my electronic pieces now: I always think 'this could be a little too long' or 'that should be changed'. It's a nightmare! All of them were a compromise between what I really wanted to do and what I could achieve at the time. Because I was doing and re-doing – it could have been endless. But when it was there on tape there was nothing else I could do, because at the time – 30 or 40 years ago – when I was mixing a very long piece, of around 80 minutes, there were obviously no computers, so I had to do it from beginning to end, in just one movement. So if something went wrong at 75 minutes, it had to be re-done from the beginning. I couldn't do that anymore!

PS Because you can't make a 'hard cut' into your work.

ER Yes, it's just impossible to cut it like that.

PS But interestingly, at the time you were working, that's what most of your contemporaries did.

ER When I was working as an assistant to Pierre Henry in the early '60s he gave me a pile of tape, and asked me to make a montage using only the attacks of the sounds [i.e. the sharp beginning of certain sounds, the equivalent of an opening consonant in speech]. So you had a 'ta-ta-ta-ta' sound. Believe me, making three minutes of that, I know what it is to cut! But I preferred what was left after the attack – if you cut the sound of a bell just after the attack, you have this beautiful game of the harmonic, and the ear is not 'attacked' by it.

PS Also the attack is the anchor when you're listening, which enables you to come back to the sound, whereas if you don't have the attack it becomes much more subjective – sort of democratic in a way, in that you can choose which harmonic you listen to.

ER Yes. I realized that the last piece I did with electronics, using a sound programme – like Digidesign – I had the feeling that they were not as sensitive as when I was doing it by hand, because with these programmes you see and you draw the line and that's it. But when I was doing that with a potentiometer I could pause, slow or accelerate the fades.

PS You're drawing with your ear, rather than with your eye?

ER Absolutely. As I mentioned, at first electronic sound fascinated me, although I'm from a classical music background which is really my first great love. Classical music is so perfect – what could you achieve after that? Twelve-tone music is another story: very interesting intellectually, but not so much emotionally. Occasionally it is, but you're never really completely fascinated by the full joy of such pieces.

In the 1950s people like Pierre Schaeffer and John Cage were saying: 'But there are all these sounds in the world, and if you listen to them carefully enough you will hear the music that they speak.' This immediately opened up a new world; it's enriching once you've educated your ear to that, because when you're annoyed by the sound of the street you can make music out of it. You can make music out of almost everything! So the discovery of the wild electronic sounds was important, namely the ones like feedback, which are accidents, garbage sounds, but they contain a lot. One thing that really interests me is the way they act – a sustained tone, or beats (more or less speedy) and pulse. These are the three main words in the electronic vocabulary, but they are also the three main words for life, so it matches our own internal rhythm. I'm coming back to what you said before: there is a kind of harmony. The music is a mirror of the mind but also, somehow, of the body. I've always imagined these sounds to have their own personality; after listening to them, at a point it becomes a dialogue with the sounds. All the rest develops naturally when you enter into a process.

PS How does using acoustic instruments change the way you think about new work?

ER Oh, it's definitely a tremendous enrichment. First of all, it throws me back to my first love, acoustic instruments, which are so wonderful. I'm much more into string instruments – I don't know wind or brass so well, though I've come to know them better through musicians. I've discovered much more about it, which goes perfectly with my commitment to classical music. When I work with musicians now I don't worry about any system of tuning. For each instrument, the first thing to find is the best threshold of resonance. Each instrument has its own – for my collaborator Charles Curtis this is the so-called wolf tone. I don't know exactly what this is, but I think of it as a huge sound that is particular to each instrument. It changes every day, so first of all he finds out what is the 'wolf tone' of the day, depending on the weather. All these instruments have their own lives – this is the first thing to respect.

PS Does the venue also affect this tuning?

ER It could do, but it's a matter of proportion.

PS Your work is quite unique in its use of harmonics and partials, which float above the 'fundamentals', providing the characteristic illusions of pitch and spatial change.

ER Yes, this is why this music is always very quiet, because the fundamentals should be played very softly. If you play too loudly, it's there but it almost disappears.

PS And the degree of collaboration between you and the musicians is very important?

ER It's very, very close. Because every composition is not for an instrument, it's for the instrumentalist. And, I would never give the same piece to another instrumentalist. They are allowed, if they wish to, to transmit it. So if someone on the other side of the world wants to play this piece, he will have to come and work with me for a while and I will create a piece for him or for her.

PS So in 50 years time these pieces can't be performed any more?

ER Maybe not. Except if there was a transmission from one player to another. But it can only be an oral transmission – it can't be written down. We would take notes from memory – it can't be notated. I have rough scores but they're more like glimpses.

PS Do you have notes for each piece?

ER Yes, I have a book in which I keep them.

PS So a Radigue archive, say in 100 years, would include recordings, the instructions, the notes for each piece, and possibly also the notes from the performers?

ER There will be other musicians, but musicians are a growing population! So many young people are really interesting. This will be another story. ●

Paul Schütze is an artist/composer based in London.

Eliane Radigue is a composer based in Paris, France. In June 2011, Sound & Music presented a London-wide series of concerts, the first major UK retrospective of her work.

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Opposite page:
Eliane Radigue in her studio in Paris
1971

Far left:
A performance of ***Elemental II*** by Kasper T. Toeplitz at Christ Church Spitalfields, London, as part of the 'Triptych' concert series
2011

Left:
Eliane Radigue in St Stephen Walbrook church, London
2011