

Article received on 25th May 2011  
Article accepted on 12th April 2012  
UDC: 78(714.1)  
78.07 Мекрир П.

*Sophie Stévançe\**  
Université Laval, Québec  
Faculty of Music

## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC AT THE FRINGE: THE EXAMPLE OF “MUSIQUE ACTUELLE” IN CANADA

**Abstract:** The International Week of Today’s Music (SIMA), organised in 1961 by Pierre Mercure within the framework of the Montreal Festivals, is a master event: beside the works of Serge Garant, Karlheinz Stockhausen or Iannis Xenakis, this event permitted to the experimental music of today to be heard as provocative and heterogeneous as it may be, in particular with Cage *Atlas Eclipticalis*’ creation or Richard Maxfield’s *Piano Concert for David Tudor*. Mercure challenged an American experimental aesthetic’s different from Europeans experimentations. The hypothesis of this paper is that what has been called “musique actuelle” since 1979 in Quebec, refers to Mercure’s artistic perspectives. How affiliated is musique actuelle to the SIMA? This paper seeks to answer this question by looking at the different uses of the expression of musique actuelle so as to bring to light the historical reasons, roots and fundamentals of the expression since its first uses. The actualist movement has in common with Mercure’s project more than a name: it carries and maybe focuses for the Mercure’s aesthetic and social policy by refusing certain zone system within cultural poles with creation methods such as free and collective improvisation. But beyond this project, it’s definitely of Mercure event’s tradition that actualists arose and built their identity field.

---

\* Author contact information: [sophie.stevance.1@ulaval.ca](mailto:sophie.stevance.1@ulaval.ca)

**Keywords:** Musique actuelle, actualism, Pierre Mercure, Productions SuperMusique, musical identity, The International Week of Today's Music

**Апстракт:** Међународна недеља савремене музике (СИМА), коју је, у оквиру Монреалских фестивала, 1961. покренуо Пјер Меркир (Pierre Mercure), врхунски је догађај: поред дела Сержа Гарана (Serge Garant), Карлхајнца Штокхаузена (Karlheinz Stockhausen) или Јаниса Ксенакиса (Iannis Xenakis), на том фестивалу може се чути и музика данашњице у свој својој провокативности и разнородности, посебно у таквим случајевима као што су Кејдов (John Cage) *Atlas Eclipticalis* или *Клавирски концерт за Дејвида Тјудора* Ричарда Максфилда (Richard Maxfield). Меркир је заступао тезу да је америчка експериментална естетика другачија од европских експеримената. Хипотеза је ове студије да се оно што се од 1979. у Квебеку назива „актуелна музика“ („musique actuelle“) заправо односи на Меркирове уметничке погледе. Како је актуелна музика повезана с фестивалом СИМА? У овом раду одговор на то питање тражи се проучавањем различитих експресивних намена актуелне музике како би се разјаснили историјски разлози, корени и темељи израза од његових првих појава. Заједничке црте актуелистичког покрета и Меркировог пројекта не завршавају се само на имену: тај покрет шири, а можда и фокусира Меркирову естетику и друштвену политику тиме што одбацује извештај систем зона између културних полова, ослањајући се на креативне поступке као што су слободна и колективна импровизација. Али изван тог пројекта, актуелисти су неоспорно изникли на традицији Меркировог фестивала и од ње изградили свој идентитет.

**Кључне речи:** musique actuelle, актуелизам, Пјер Меркир, Productions SuperMusique, музички идентитет, Међународна недеља музике данашњице (International Week of Today's Music)

The International Week of Today's Music, organized in 1961 by Pierre Mercure within the framework of the Montreal Festivals, in an important event: alongside the works of Stockhausen, Ligeti, Schaeffer, Xenakis and Varèse, this event allowed *experimental music* of the day to be heard, however provocative and heterogeneous it may have been, including premieres of Cage's *Atlas Eclipticalis* and Richard Maxfield's *Piano Concert for David Tudor* as well as pieces by Mauricio Kagel, Christian Wolff and Earle Brown. Pierre Mercure's wish was truly to champion an *American* experimental aesthetic that was different from European experimentations. To better understand what is meant by *experimental music*, and in light of the importance of the New York School in Pierre Mercure's project, we can refer to John Cage's interpretation as explained in his book *Experimental music: Doctrine*:

Where, on the other hand, attention moves towards the observation and audition of many things at once, including those that are environmental – becomes, that is, inclusive rather than exclusive – no question of making, in the sense of forming understandable structures, can arise [...], and here the word experimental is apt, providing

it is understood not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success and failure, but simply as of an act the outcome of which is unknown.<sup>1</sup>

My working hypothesis is that what has been called “*musique actuelle*” in Quebec since 1979 (and is a full-fledged musical current), emerges from Mercure’s aesthetic directions. The expression *Musique actuelle* may even refer to the “new art” produced by this festival of controversies and aesthetics. My reference to the expression “new art” as used by Clément Pépin, a composer known for his conservatism, is not only anecdotal: it is used – first – to highlight the controversial reactions triggered by the musical programming of the Festival, “oriented towards the new world”, and second, because the meaning of this expression sits at the heart of a force field between conservatism (or continuation of classical tradition) and the desire to turn away from the European tradition. This is attested to in the interviews I did with some observers who were active on the scene during this period: the musicologist Marie-Thérèse Lefebvre and the composer Jean Piché. They confirm my working hypothesis: *musique actuelle*, identified in 1979 by Productions Super-Mémé, then Productions SuperMusique, is affiliated with Mercure’s event (SIMA – The International Week of Today’s Music [Semaine Internationale de Musique Actuelle]). But in what ways? I will seek to answer this question by examining the origins of the expression “*musique actuelle*” in order to bring to light the historical elements that allow for its evolving definition.

I will show that the Actualist Movement has more than just a name in common with Mercure’s event (through which the composer wished to renew the act of creation by non-conventional programming that stood in opposition to the “*vieille garde*” (or: *old guard*): the Actualist Movement carries – and maybe provides a focus for – Pierre Mercure’s aesthetic and social views by refusing certain components within cultural axes through the use of methods of creation such as free and collective improvisation.

## **I A Global Project**

Since the 1980s, and specifically in Québec, the expression *musique actuelle* designates an avant-garde musical movement in which musicians, in reaction against institutions, deconstructed their values by opposing them with what they had themselves rejected: pell mell *bruitism*, electronic sounds, free improvisation, jazz, rock and folk.

The Actualists way of creating is a spontaneous gesture where new relationships emerge between the musicians on stage and the public. These relationships

---

<sup>1</sup> CAGE, John, *Silence, Lectures and Writings by John Cage*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961, 13–17.

are even more significant due to the non-observance of hierarchies between composers and musicians, as well as the participation of composers as performers of their own music. Managing their own production, Actualists create relying neither on established modes of transmission nor on conventions. Moreover, they want to bring to light women's participation in music research. Thus, the movement constitutes a very well-organized structure that we can grasp by observing the aesthetic strategies put in place by Pierre Mercure.

Indeed, wasn't Pierre Mercure the first to wish to deconstruct (according to Jacques Derrida's use of this term) the musical conventions of that time by opposing them with the very things they had up to then rejected? During the roundtable organized after the Festival by Jean-Marie Beudet with Maryvonne Kendergi, Pierre Mercure, Eric McLean and Jean Vallerand, Pierre Mercure proposed a definition of what he meant by the expression "musique actuelle" at that time:

By 'musique actuelle', I mean this new way of approaching music, sound research [...], sound being more important than form, melody, and connections with formal structures of the previous centuries. The music of Bali, for example, can be heard without knowing if it is one form or another, without knowing if it is a dance or not; Hindu music can be listened to with great interest, even if we don't know the raga on which it is based. In these traditions, the sound is powerfully persuasive. In (Pierre Schaeffer's) *musique concrete*, the sound should convince us, but it cannot because we are enclosed in a grouping, a social fact that brings us repeatedly to the same type of music, the same kind of concert.

In his *Pocket Book dictionary for Today's Music Lovers* (the original title), Mercure once again described his conception of *Musique actuelle* as "that which is currently being written"<sup>2</sup>. Besides this temporal dimension, an international aspect is notable. In the program of *La société des Festivals de Montréal* (the Montreal Festivals Society) dated on June 25 1961, he wrote:

In order to secure the most essential characteristics of this first International Week of Today's Music<sup>3</sup>, this program can be changed up to the last minute to make room for music that is more representative of the topical and/or international nature of music today.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Rédaction d'un petit lexique pour l'amateur de musique actuelle par Pierre Mercure présenté en annexe de ses réflexions sur la musique contemporaine. (Texte bilingue). Document sur les activités 06-M, P90/2-2.3, non daté.

<sup>3</sup> This is the official translation of the festival's title, but I would propose "International Week of *Musique Actuelle*".

<sup>4</sup> „Note importante“, Fonds Pierre Mercure des Archives nationales du Québec, Programme 06-M, P90/1-16.3, 61/08/03 au 08, Original dactylographié, 6 pages.

Moreover, guided by these principles – being topical and international –, Mercure also wanted to offer “to the audience better communication with today’s musical art.”<sup>5</sup> It was about creating new listening conditions in light of those already in place in the other arts and thus “demonstrating that today’s music is undergoing an evolution similar to the one already taking place in contemporary painting, sculpture, and cinema.”<sup>6</sup> This means that Mercure also factored reception in to his whole project.

## II What is at stake in the use of a term

According to Mercure, “Musique actuelle” was embodied by European and mainly American avant-garde composers: the Actualist trend stems from a force field whose structure emerges from between two cultural axes; use of the term *musique actuelle* meant a reaction in opposition to “contemporary music” from European classical tradition. Marie-Thérèse Lefebvre explains:

These words define an activity in time. One is *contemporary* or one is *current* (*In French, “actuel”*). Very quickly, these words became aesthetic positions with all that this implies for the repertoire.

There are certain issues at stake with the use of these terms. An important one lies in the strength of the Actualists’ identity, as is evidenced by their inclusion in Quebec’s musical chronology and even more in the line of descent of the SIMA.

The Actualist Danielle Palardy Roger attests to the influence of Mercure and the SIMA in the constitution of “*musique actuelle*”, even if the line of descent is indirect, considering the evolution of the term and its uses through the decades. Between 1961 (the date of the SIMA) and 1979 (the date the Actualists joined forces), there was a very long process of gaining recognition; Danielle Palardy Roger recalls the following:

In 1990, we took a new look at ourselves, at the new directions we wanted to give to our group. We realized that what we already called our “*musique actuelle*” traced its roots back to Pierre Mercure’s event. There was no doubt about it. It was a revelation. It was as if we had finally found a lost parent, an ancestor...<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Mercure, Première rencontre du comité de préparation de la SIMA. Document sur les activités (06-M, P90/2-5.2). 61/05/11, Montréal. Original dactylographié, 5 pages. Fonds Pierre Mercure des Archives nationales du Québec.

<sup>6</sup> Document sur les activités 2-5.5. Montréal, 62/08/09, de Pierre Mercure, pour Robert Letendre, Président. Seconde version du projet pour la Société des Festivals de Montréal. Deuxième semaine internationale de musique actuelle, saison d’été 1962. Original dactylographié, 7 pages.

<sup>7</sup> Marie-Thérèse Lefebvre, Entretien avec Sophie Stévanche, 5 novembre 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Danielle Palardy Roger, Entretien avec Sophie Stévanche, 8 novembre 2011.

In order to grasp this musical identity, it is necessary to draw historical connections starting from the SIMA and the different meanings of “musique actuelle” since 1961, to the Actualist movement as we have understood it since the 1980s.

The following chart describes the different uses of the expression: “Musique actuelle”.

### Chronology of “musique actuelle”

#### Chronology of “musique actuelle”

Dates	Events	Important figures
1961	International Week of Today’s Music (SIMA)	Pierre Mercure – John Cage <sup>9</sup>
1968	Fonudation of <i>L’Infonie</i> : multimedia events combining poetry, improvisation, visual arts and choreography, occasionally close to the performance art, exploring new timbres and audience participation in the creation	Walter Boudreau and Raoul Duguay <sup>10</sup>
	Concerts of <i>Quatuor de jazz libre</i>	Jean Préfontaine – Yves Charbonneau – Maurice Richard – Guy Thouin
1975	International Womens’ Year	
1975	<i>Parachute</i> , contemporary art review	Chantal Pontbriand
1977	Foundation of the Feminist Improvising Group (FIG) in London	Maggie Nicols – Lindsay Cooper
1978	Foundation of the Association of the Today’s Music in Québec	Gisèle Ricard
	Foundation of the group <i>Arcanson</i>	Danielle Palardy Roger – Diane Labrosse
1978	Foundation of the Ensemble for improvised music in Montréal	Jean Derome – Robert Leriche – Pierre St-Jacques – Claude Simard – René Lussier
1979	Foundation of the group <i>SuperMémé</i>	Danielle Palardy Roger – Joane Héту – Diane Labrosse

<sup>9</sup> See Marie-Thérèse Lefebvre, “L’influence de John Cage au Québec: résistances et convergences”, *Les Cahiers de L’ARMUq*, n°14, mai 1992, 87–107. See also Johanne Rivest, La représentation des avant-gardes à la Semaine Internationale de Musique Actuelle (Montréal, 1961), *RMUC*, 19/1, 1998, 50–68; “*Atlas Eclipticalis*, commande montréalaise”, *Circuit*, “Québecage”, Vol.8, n°2, 61–69.

<sup>10</sup> See Raymond Gervais in “Montréal, Musiques actuelles, 1960. 1990”, Programme officiel du Festival Montréal Musiques Actuelles / New Music America 1990, 9.

*Stévanche, S.: Contemporary Music at the Fringe: the Example of Musique Actuelle... (51–63)*

1980	1st concert of the Wondeur Brass in Salle Polonaise for the 5th anniversary of the Womens' Library [Librairie des femmes] in Montréal	Danielle Palardy Roger – Joane Héту – Diane Labrosse – Gin Bergeron – Claude Hamel – Geneviève Letarte – Dyane Raymond – Danielle Broué – Martine Leclercq
1980	Organization of the conference <i>Performanc: postmodernisme et multidisciplinarité</i>	Chantal Pontbriand
1983	1st edition of FIMAV	Michel Levasseur
	Foundation of the group <i>Les Granules</i> Creation of label <i>Ambiances Magnétique</i>	Jean Derome – René Lussier Jean Derome, André Duchesne, René Lussier et Robert M. Lepage
	First airing of the radio program <i>Musique Actuelle</i> , Radio-Canada (replaces Music of our century [ <i>Musique de notre siècle</i> ] founded in 1967 and led by Serge Garant)	Hélène Prévost
1984	1st concert of <i>Wondeur Brass</i> , 4th International Congress <i>Femmes et musiques</i> in Paris  Meeting of <i>Wondeur Brass</i> with the group <i>Les Diaboliques</i> consisting of Joelle Leandre, Annick and Irene Schweizer  Meeting of <i>Wondeur Brass</i> with André Duchesnes and Chris Cutler (Duchesnes introduced them to <i>Ambiances Magnétiques</i> and Chris Cutler to the Recommended Records Label, founded in 1978).	Danielle Palardy Roger – Joane Héту – Diane Labrosse
1985	First 33rpm output by Wonder Brass, <i>Ravir</i> (label <i>Ambiances Magnétiques</i> )	Danielle Palardy Roger – Joane Héту – Diane Labrosse
1986	First 33 rpm output by Les Poules, <i>Les Contes de l'amère loi</i> (label <i>Ambiances Magétiques</i> )	Danielle Palardy Roger – Joane Héту – Diane Labrosse
1987	Foundation of the group <i>Les Poules</i> , parallel to <i>Wondeur Brass</i>	Danielle Palardy Roger – Joane Héту – Diane Labrosse
1988	Festival International des Musiciennes Innovatrices  Festival Montréal Musiques Actuelles	Productions SuperMusique  Jean Piché
	Recurrent use of the term “Musique Actuelle” in the press, precisely referring to the group of actualists	Andrew Jones (Montreal Mirror) – Lyne Crevier (Le Devoir) – Andrée Laurie (Le Musicien Québécois), etc.
1990	European tour of <i>Les Granules</i> <i>Wondeur Brass</i> becomes <i>Justine</i>	Jean Derome – René Lussier  Danielle Palardy Roger – Joane Héту – Diane Labrosse – Marie Trudeau

	The labels <i>Ambiances magnétiques</i> , <i>Productions Supermémé-Supermusique</i> are reorganized and the label DAME (Distribution Ambiances Magnétiques Etcetera) is founded	Danielle Palardy Roger – Joane Héту – Diane Labrosse – Jean Derome, André Duchesne, René Lussier et Robert M. Lepage
1991	The review <i>Circuit</i> dedicates its Volume 1, n°2 to Montréal/Musiques actuelle	Jean-Jacques Nattiez – Jean Piché
1992	<i>Super-Mémé</i> becomes <i>SuperMusique</i>	Danielle Palardy Roger – Joane Héту – Diane Labrosse
1993	1st concert titled „Une théorie des ensembles: Ambiances magnétiques en concert” – Productions Super-Mémé	Danielle Palardy Roger – Joane Héту – Diane Labrosse – Jean Derome, André Duchesne, René Lussier et Robert M. Lepage
	Foundation of the group Jean Derome et les Dangereux Zhoms	Jean Derome – Pierre Cartier – Guillaume Dostaler – René Lussier – Pierre Tanguay – Tom Walsh
1994	Foundation of the group Castor et Compagnie	Joane Héту – Jean Derome – Diane Labrosse – Pierre Tanguay
1995	First airing of the radio program <i>Navire Night</i> , Radio-Canada	Hélène Prévost – Mario Gauthier
	Publication of the book <i>Plunderphonics, 'Pataphysics &amp; Pop Mechanics. An Introduction to musique actuelle</i> (Wembley, SAF Publishing, 1995)	Andrew Jones
	The review <i>Circuit</i> dedicates Volume 6, n°2 to musique actuelle	Jean-Jacques Nattiez – Jean Derome – Danielle Palardy Roger – Joane Héту – Michel F. Côté – Raymond Gervais – Hélène Prévost
1998	Foundation of the Ensemble SuperMusique	Productions SuperMusique
	Early activities of the Jeune Public des Productions Super-Mémé, „Dans le ventre de la musique actuelle”	Danielle Palardy Roger – Joane Héту – Diane Labrosse – Jean Derome – Pierre Tanguay – Martin Tétreault
2000	Festival SuperMicMac – Hommage à La Bolduc	Diane Labrosse – Danielle Palardy Roger – Joane Héту – Jean René – Lori Freedman – Lee Pui Ming - Marie Pelletier – Allison Cameron
2001	Foundation of the group <i>Nous perçons les oreilles</i>	Jean Derome – Joane Héту
	Foundation of the Plinc! Plonc!	Jean Derome – Pierre Tanguay

- Sociology theses: *Sociological study of contemporary music in Quebec: the case of Supermusique Productions and International Week of Today's Music in Victoriaville* [Étude sociologique de la musique actuelle du Québec: le cas des Productions Supermusique et du Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville], University of Montréal  
2004 Anne Robineau  
25 years of SuperMusique... Productions SuperMusique
- 

My interviews with Actualists and specialists on the history of music in Quebec<sup>11</sup> bring out facts allowing me to map out the chronology of “musique actuelle” since Mercure’s event: this event (SIMA) was truly the starting point of the constitution of this musical movement.

It is also important to make mention of the other gathering places of “musique actuelle” in Montreal: the Sala Rossa, the cafés-concerts (such as: *Le Cheval Blanc*, *l’Alizée*, *Pub Saint-Ciboire* and *l’Usine C – Centre de création et de diffusion pluridisciplinaire*), Théâtre La Chapelle, *Traquen’Art* and the *Casa Obscura*. We can also point out the specialized publications that were instrumental in increasing the visibility of “musique actuelle”, such as *Musicworks* or *The Wire* magazine.

Thus, to quote Danielle Palardy Roger: “we all participate with the same musical thought, both from an artistic point of view and with respect to the industry. If Mercure hadn’t given us this momentum, the musical landscape would have been vastly different – at the very least things would have been slower to be set in motion, we wouldn’t have been able to grasp the urgency of creating an identity for ourselves”<sup>12</sup>.

### III Musical identity

The early 1980s thus mark the beginnings of “musique actuelle” and the identification of its participants as members of a group:

Between 1980 and 1985, *Wondeur Brass* evolved principally within groups of women and at feminist events. However, we wanted so deeply to be considered first as mu-

---

<sup>11</sup> As well as the Archives des Productions SuperMusique, we refer to the very important book written by Marie-Thérèse Lefebvre and Jean-Pierre Pinson, *Chronologie musicale du Québec, 1535-2004*, Québec, Septentrion, 2009, 299–300, 324–325, 330–331, 333.

<sup>12</sup> Danielle Palardy Roger, propos recueillis par Paul Cauchon, “Wonder Brass, une nouvelle harmonie”, *Le Devoir*, 15 juin 1985.

sicians, and after as feminists, not the reverse. When *Ravir*, *Wondeur Brass*' first microgroove record, was published, we could finally describe ourselves as a 'musique actuelle' group. It was the beginning of a new adventure.<sup>13</sup>

[*Wondeur Brass* was initially a nine-piece feminist, activist, theater-and-music group; it started as an outsider big band of sorts. The group evolved into Montreal's sharpest avant-garde rock proposal of the time. Its members were Danielle Palardy Roger, Joane Hetu or Diane Labrosse – three pillars of Montreal's 'musique actuelle' scene.

In the May 4th 1989 edition of the *Globe and Mail*, Mark Miller wrote about a CD produced by "Ambiances Magnétiques" ['musique actuelle' label]:

The latest LP from Montreal's east end, like all the rest, must come with the qualification that it's not, ah, exactly, um, jazz [...] *musique actuelle*, they call it at the corner of St-Denis and Mont-Royal.<sup>14</sup>

This comment leads me to believe that Actualists have a specific musical identity, geographically settled and culturally structured. As such, and "thanks to Ambiances Magnétiques and Productions SuperMusique, the expression *musique actuelle* has history, a place in time and an evolution through the cultural circumstances and musical personalities that gave *musique actuelle* its letters of claim."<sup>15</sup>

Jean Derome, René Lussier, Robert Marcel Lepage and André Duchesne were founders of the *Ambiances Magnetiques* Label along with Danielle Palardy Roger, Joane Héту and Diane Labrosse, the women of the music group SuperMémé (founded in 1979 and today called Productions SuperMusique). They would all eventually join together around the same management structure: *Distribution Ambiances Magnétiques Etcetera*.

Known by its acronym, DAME was founded in 1982; it is a non-profit, Canadian musical collective. The entity was created out of necessity: the avant-garde tastes of the members proved to be too challenging for prospective distributors and commercial record labels. The result has been the creation of Canada's largest and most active label devoted to a variety of improvised musical styles that include jazz, avant-garde, rock, and a-typical hybrids devoted to improvisatory practices.

Moreover, Ambiances Magnetiques established itself as a pillar of 'musique actuelle' in Quebec by defining the musical directions of the movement and by attempting to produce and present music without regard for profit, for the trends

---

<sup>13</sup> Joane Héту, propos recueillis par Frédérique, "Entretien avec Joane Héту", Montréal, 11 décembre 2004, *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, Vol. 1, n° 2, 2005, 4–9.

<sup>14</sup> See *Circuit*, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Joane Héту, in ARROYAS, Frédérique, "Entretien avec Joane Héту", Montréal, 11/12/2004, *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation*, Vol. 1, n° 2, 2005, 8.

of the day or for academic conventions, but with a concern for bringing women artists forward in their search for musical innovation. Controlling its own production is another way to guarantee the group's continued cohesion and consistency, its unity, freedom and artistic identity.

Because of self-reliance, self-management and self-sufficiency, our works have a specific colour, and all the members strive to maintain it.<sup>16</sup>

Actualists are organized as a network. In the words of Manuel Castells, we can say that “they no longer content themselves with organizing the action and circulating information. They create and spread cultural codes.”<sup>17</sup>

This kind of maintenance of identity is also thanks to media exposure: the *Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville* (FIMAV) was very important in the development of the group. We can say that festivals are an important ingredient in the constitution of ‘musique actuelle’ identity due to the geographic coverage that provides the opportunity for a showcase and for developing new sociocultural links. This also gives members of the community the possibility to identify with each other through feelings of belonging to a place and to a shared history.

This identity is tangible, and as put forward by Chris Cutler:

What I like about the ‘musique actuelle’ in Quebec, is that there we can find one of the rare communities that is easy to define geographically. There is a specific sound that fans of “musique actuelle” all around the world can recognize [...] ‘Musique actuelle’ network may be relatively humble, but its foundations are solid. This music has grown both in confidence and in maturity.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

“Musique actuelle” is part of the history of Quebec culture and has participated in building it: “musique actuelle” provides evidence of the development of culture in Quebec and of the sociocultural events that have turned society upside down since the 1960s. “Musique actuelle” also shows Quebec society’s pursuit of identity through the seeking out of its own musical specificity. “Musique actuelle” is a direct reflection of Quebec, particularly when it is connected to artistic conceptions from other cultural trends that have marked the province since the *Refus Global* (*Total Refusal*), without forgetting the SIMA, an event thanks to which Pierre Mercure could introduce, and connect, Quebec culture to the most experimental artistic research.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Marcel Lepage, cité par BRUNET, Alain, *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> CASTELLS, Manuel, *Le Pouvoir de l'identité*, Paris, Fayard, 1999, 435.

<sup>18</sup> Chris Cutler, cité par BRUNET, Alain, “Un batteur atypique et une musicienne incontournable”, *La Presse*, vendredi 9 avril 1999, 7.

“Musique actuelle” drew its identity strategies from the same aesthetic and social principles as Mercure when he founded the SIMA in 1961. That’s why it is a “deconstruction” of certain normative aesthetic criteria, reinforcing the idea that: “Art should be subversive, disruptive and thoughtful. Art is a celebration of life. The Artist disturbs.”<sup>19</sup>

According to Jacques Derrida, the goal of deconstruction is to break down, through analysis, those structures that have been built up, meaning all the structures that form the discursive element (such as culture, references, etc.). “Musique actuelle” positions itself against the binary conceptual opposition inherent in our system of thinking about music history. Actualists seek another meaning for musical creation by “deconstructing” its foundations using approaches that were made obscure by “serious music” conforming to an established form (approaches such as: spontaneous collective music, places of musical creation, listening conditions) so as to bring forward an unclassifiable art (because this art is mixed, cross-cultural, hybrid).

Therefore, analyzing the notion of identity in “musique actuelle” so as to understand its capacity for operating as part of a historical music process, and subsequently participating in the development of “a brand new universe of sounds” as sought by Mercure, is motivated by an interest in those who listen to it, those who live by it, and those who reject it. This shows all the influence of the context in which “musique actuelle” continues to expand. The context leaves its mark on “musique actuelle”, its history and its theory.

The expression “musique actuelle” was thus used in this presentation in two specific ways:

- 1) The meaning given by Pierre Mercure (which means *experimental music* within the surrounding North-American context, and music of our time),
- 2) The meaning given by the movement’s founding members in the 1980’s; since 1990, its definition has stabilized and specifically refers to *Productions SuperMusique*.
- 3) Between these two, we can observe the long process of evolution demonstrated by the chronology I have presented and onto which I have mapped out the development of the expression “musique actuelle”.

I must insist on the fact that this is mainly a question of the process of development and maturation of an expression that went on to become a musical trend as of the 1980s. Pierre Mercure’s SIMA was a catalyst for musical creation in Quebec, which was in full swing starting in the 1960s. However, as specified by

---

<sup>19</sup> LÉANDRE, Joëlle, *À voix basse. Entretien avec Franck Médioni*, op. cit., 118–119.

M.-T. Lefebvre, “it is *Mercuré-producer* rather than *Mercuré-composer* who is at the heart of this reference: it is not his compositions that we retain in the constitution of ‘musique actuelle’ in Quebec.” None of his works are historical points of reference: rather, it is his Festival, his spirit and his programming choices.

## REFERENCES

- Arroyas, Frédérique, ‘Entretien avec Joane Héту’, Montréal, 11/12/2004, *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation*, Vol. 1, n° 2, 2005, 4–9
- Cage, John, *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961, 13–17
- Castells, Manuel, *Le Pouvoir de l’identité*, Paris: Fayard, 1999, 435
- Léandre, Joëlle, *À voix basse. Entretiens avec Franck Médioni*, 118–119
- Lefebvre, Marie-Thérèse, ‘L’influence de John Cage au Québec: résistances et convergences’, *Les Cahiers de L’ARMuq*, n° 14, 1992, 87–107
- Rivest, Johanne, ‘La représentation des avant-gardes à la Semaine Internationale de Musique Actuelle (Montréal, 1961)’, *RMUC*, 19/1, 1998, 50–68
- Rivest, Johanne, ‘Atlas Eclipticalis, commande montréalaise’, *Circuit, ‘Québecage’*, Vol. 8, n° 2, 61–69