

4 ROBERT NORMANDEAU'S *JEU DE LANGUES* (2009)

Montreal composer Robert Normandeau's (b. 1955) electroacoustic signature is premised on the genre's inherent game, as described in the last chapter. The concept of a "game," plays directly into electronic music's philosophical underpinnings—electronic music of every kind plays with overt and disrupted associations, whether simulated, synthesized, or concretely captured. Normandeau, who rose to prominence in the 1990s, embraces the French concrete lineage from Schaeffer through Ferrari, often relying on sampling and production in his works.¹ He even composed an electroacoustic composition focusing on the electroacoustic game released on his first album with the opportune title *Jeu* (1989).²

The word *Jeu*, not easily translated to English, takes its dual meaning from the noun "game" and the verb "play," as in, to play a game, but also to play a musical instrument or a musical piece. *Jeu* invokes all of these different connotations in a strategic cat-and-mouse chase between the perceived source, cause, and effect. The work is divided into the following five movements: I. *Les règles du jeu* (Rules of the game), II. *Mouvement d'un mécanisme* (Movements of a mechanism), III. *Ce qui sert à jouer* (Things to play with), IV. *Les manières de jouer* (Playing styles), and V. *Les plaisirs du jeu* (Joys of playing). And Normandeau provides a description of the work:

La règle du jeu. Jeux du cirque, du stade. Jeux d'adresse. Jeu de massacre. Jeux de société. Être hors-jeu. Mettre en jeu la vie d'un homme. Aimer le jeu. Se ruiner au jeu. Faites vos Jeux. Les jeux sont faits, rien ne va plus. Le jeu d'un verrou, d'un ressort. Donner du jeu à une fenêtre, à un tiroir. Jeux d'orgue.

Jouer prudent. Jouer dangereux. Jouer double-jeu. Un jeu brillant, nuance. Des indications de jeu. Jeux de mains, jeux de vilains. Jeux de prince. Jeux de l'imagination, de l'esprit. Jeux de mots. Un jeu d'enfant.

Rules of the game. Circus games, Olympic games. Games of skill. Wholesale massacre. Parlor game. Out of Play. To gamble with one's life. To like to play. To ruin oneself at gambling. Make your play. The die is cast, "rien ne va plus." The play of a bolt, of a spring. To loosen a window or a drawer. The game of skittles, of bowls. To have every opportunity. To hide one's game. The big play. Organ stops. To play carefully. To play dangerously. Double play. A brilliant, nuanced manner of playing. Stage directions. "Stop fooling around or it will end in tears." Plays of Prince. A game of imagination. Play of words. A child's play.³

In *Jeu*, Normandeau draws inspiration from Ferrari's view of electroacoustic music as a "cinema for the ear," which determines that a sound's "meaning is as important as the sound." The "cinema for the ear" aims to arouse the minds of its listeners. As Normandeau explains: "The sound of a train will trigger the imagination of the listener in such a way that they are reminded of their own train—and not a train that can be viewed by everybody, like in a film. It is like reading a novel, where everybody imagines their own landscapes and characters."⁴ Leaning on the surrealism of painter René Magritte, Normandeau exclaims, "the sound of a train is not a train, it is the sound of a train."⁵ Thus, sound is neither representative of tangible, actual objects nor is it reduced to a free-standing form; rather, the sound of the piece is representative of sound in some conjured mental reality. Normandeau conceives of this "cinema" as a technique of abstractable concepts and a skill developed uniquely in electroacoustic music. Just as film found its own cinematic techniques distinctively from filmed theater, electroacoustic music is distinct from other forms of musical composition on the basis of the "cinema for the ear." The essence of a sound collectively imagined—perhaps an erotic essence, perhaps the essence of a train—is shared among audience members, but the image, context, or narrative evoked, if indeed one is invoked, is not necessarily shared (though nothing prevents such mutual participation).

The electroacoustic game secures a performer's anonymity—unless credited there is no way to know for sure who plays. Cloaking the players' identities dehumanizes the figures and simultaneously increases the game's

competitiveness. For example, Sergei Prokofiev's famous opera *The Gambler* takes place in a casino where many unidentified characters compete together in roulette. Anonymity encourages listeners to immerse in the work, to identify with the competing characters and their performed actions.⁶ In *Jeu*, anonymity is secured electroacoustically, precisely in the gap between source and sound. One gambles to win, and so the game requires players to retain individual standing and fight for what's theirs. Tension is high, since, at any moment, the tables can turn. The game forces one to become hyperaware of one's neighbors on the right and left, to suspect and hence hold one's cards close to their chest; hoping never to betray an ounce of excitement, lest one disclose their hand. Substitute emotion for the playing cards and the rivalry compares to the stoicism adopted by classical or "art" music audiences.

Jeu opens with an inconspicuous sample of (an uncredited performance of) Pérotin's famous *Viderunt Omnes* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9XaeYjxHglg>). At a time when undergraduate university elective courses in music overwhelmingly presented surveys of the greatest hits in particular eras of Western Art Music, for many scholars of the Western classical tradition, Pérotin's famous work would have "represent[ed] the acme of development in musical technique from the time of Hucbald on."⁷ That is to say, Normandeau chooses a sample that would be easily recognized by his target audience.⁸ By choosing to keep intact source/cause associations, Normandeau communicates expressly with his listeners—not unlike how sampling functions in hip hop as a way of "paying dues" as well as "signifying on" a particular musical heritage and its contextual meaning.⁹ Normandeau uses this reference similarly to Nas's citation of Beethoven's *Für Elise* in the opening of his song "I Can" (2002), to cite the famous sample as a product of a particular tradition and to position the new track within this history, whether to critique or reinforce the tradition as canonical. It's not that the sample needs to be recognizable (i.e., Normandeau's train) or that it should originate in a purely musical source (i.e., Normandeau's Pérotin sample), but the electroacoustic composer nevertheless employs sampling strategically to align a piece with a particular tradition just like the hip-hop producer. I sow the seeds of this comparison here but give it due diligence only in the second half of this book.

Returning to *Jeu*, after a few minutes Perotin's recognizable music dissolves into harshly panned aftereffects, flickering continuously left and right and simultaneously also ascending and descending within the constructed soundscape still occasionally littered with distant recollections of Pérotin. The familiar sustained chorus that opens the Pérotin sample is quickly defamiliarized when Normandeau superimposes the work with this flickering. The effect persists to various degrees throughout the work, functioning as a dividing boundary between the somewhat identifiable cinematic samples characterizing each section of the work. The result of this manipulation is that despite the recognizable sample of *Viderunt Omnes*, one of the earliest polyphonic works and a piece that any student of music history will immediately identify, the interference of the flickering alters Pérotin's work to such an extent as to become hardly recognizable. Normandeau says that this beginning introduces the rules of the game. The recurring audible flickering structures (i.e., fragments) the music, disturbing any sense of progression in it. Normandeau's *Jeu* thereby simulates gambling's compulsive cycle—the impulse to keep playing regardless of the stakes, to listen regardless of whether what we hear progresses sensically.

Swathed in flickering are brief scenes depicting the various idioms of Normandeau's description and supported by electronically granulated ambient samples of Pérotin joined also by Stockhausen's *Hymnen*, mechanical sounds (movement II), organ sounds and dropping bowling pins (movement III), fragmented speech (movement IV), and children's voices (movement V). Given the great disparity between samples, these sounds could not possibly occupy a single real-world environment collectively. Indeed, Normandeau deliberately fragments the various samples, isolating each by the recurring panned flickering, to ensure that the cinema that emerges is not of images, but only of sounds. In this way, similar to the "Erotica" movement of *Symphonie*, the sounds of Normandeau's *Jeu* dance around a given theme disclosed by the title of the work.

A later work is titled *Jeu de langues* (2009), "A game of tongues."¹⁰ It is made up of women; well, fragments of women's creative practice. Three women perform the works cut up and spliced into this one, but only one woman—the composer's lover—knows of his sexual intent. With *Jeu de*

langues, Normandeu claims to have stumbled upon a new field of opportunity in the electroacoustic genre: the erotic.

The piece was commissioned by the organizers of the Música Viva Festival held annually by the Lisbon-based Miso Music Portugal, an organization dedicated to the preservation and support of electroacoustic music. In 2009, electroacoustic composers and musicians involved in Miso Music Portugal gathered to discuss how apparently absent erotic depictions were from electroacoustic music as a genre. While perhaps some representative examples existed previously, those gathered observed that, compared to acoustic music and the other arts, theater, the plastic arts, or opera (which elides many arts), eroticism seemed not at all present in electroacoustic music.¹¹ The organizers of Miso Music Portugal hoped to resolve this gap by commissioning a concert of electroacoustic works under the heading “Cinema Dos Sons Ficções Sonoras Eróticas” (Cinema of Sounds, Erotic Sonic Fictions). Commissioned works came from five composers, Cândido de Lima, Robert Normandeu, Beatriz Ferreyra (recall she was once Schaeffer’s colleague at the GRM), António de Sousa Dias, and José Luís Ferreira for a concert held on September 19, 2009, and another commission from the festival’s co-organizer, Miguel Azguime’s *L . . .* (2010), was later added to the archived materials. The 2009 concert was prefaced by a roundtable, “Debate Música e Erotismo,” with presentations by Delfim Sardo, Vasco Tavares dos Santos, Pedro Amaral, António de Sousa Dias, and Monika Streitová.¹² Due to its popularity, the concert program was repeated under the title “Erotic Sound Stories” and broadcast on the *Arte Eletroacústica* radio program of Antena 2 on March 2, 2013, and repeated again in August 2014.¹³ This is one of many recent “new music” concerts to thematize eroticism and sex, as I have learned from being contacted by organizers of such events, including the “new music & erotica” event Série Rose, staged at Warsaw Autumn in 2017 and the Darmstadt Summer Courses 2018 (more on this in the next chapter).

After the first of these concerts, I interviewed Normandeu to ask of his experiences and of how the concert came about. Though he was convinced of the importance of dealing with erotic topics in electroacoustic music, one of the things that struck him about the concert is that three of the

five commissions featured only an erotic text, and did not, to his mind, capture eroticism *musically*. In Normandeau's words: "To me who doesn't speak Portuguese, the erotic part of these pieces was completely absent." Further echoing the composer's long preoccupation with composing onomatopoeically, Normandeau continued, "I thought that it was a kind of resignation from the composers to use words instead of sounds only to evoke erotic content. Words belong to literature not to music."¹⁴ And so, Normandeau hoped to evoke eroticism in *Jeu de langues* through other, as he suggests, more universal means.

Normandeau told me that he imagines audiences responding to *Jeu de langues* as he believes they must to his many onomatopoeic works, such electroacoustic pieces as *Bédé* (1990), *Éclats de voix* (1991), *Spleen* (1993), *Le renard et la rose* (1995), *Palimpseste* (2005/2006/2009) and more recently, the acoustic *Baobabs* (2012), works in which the titles of each movement attend to a particular emotional state.¹⁵ Below are the titles of each work's movements in what Alexa Woloshyn titles Normandeau's "onomatopoeias cycle":¹⁶

Éclats de voix (1991)

1. *Jeu et rythme* (Play and rhythm)
2. *Tendresse et timbre* (Tenderness and timbre)
3. *Colère et dynamique* (Anger and dynamics)
4. *Tristesse et espace* (Sadness and space)
5. *Joie et texture* (Joy and texture)

Spleen (1993)

1. *Musique et rythme* (Music and rhythm)
2. *Mélancholie et timbre* (Melancholy and timbre)
3. *Colère et dynamiques* (Anger and dynamics)
4. *Frustration et espace* (Frustration and space)
5. *Délire et texture* (Frenzy and texture)

Le renard et la rose (1995)

1. *Babillage et rythme* (Babbling and rhythm)
2. *Nostalgie et timbre* (Nostalgia and timbre)

3. *Colère et dynamique* (Anger and dynamics)
4. *Lassitude et espace* (Weariness and space)
5. *Sérénité et texture* (Serenity and texture)

Palimpseste (2005/2006/2009)

1. *Furie et rythme* (Fury and rhythm)
2. *Amertume et timbre* (Bitterness and timbre)
3. *Colère et dynamique* (Anger and dynamics)
4. *Fatigue et espace* (Tiredness and space)
5. *Sagesse et texture* (Wisdom and texture)

Looking at the titles of these pieces, we can see that Normandeau uses common musical parameters to tie the works of the cycle together. Each piece represents a state of mind characteristic to the population it is intended to depict: childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age, respectively.¹⁷ Rather than use text to convey his intentions, Normandeau concentrates on certain onomatopoeic expressions he finds to be more universally recognizable. In the words of the composer: “Onomatopoeias require no translation, they may represent feelings, you have the feelings in the sounds and cannot clean them.” When composing with onomatopoeias, he says, “I can make a piece directly with feelings.”¹⁸ But onomatopoeias are hardly universal. The sounds still require some interpretation and a basic familiarity within a particular linguistic idiom, as is clear to anyone who has inquired about the sound of an animal call in an unfamiliar language (a goose call, for example is “*honk honk*” in English, “*ga-ga*” in Hebrew, and “*ca car*” in French).¹⁹ For instance, without Woloshyn’s analysis, I was not able to intuit Normandeau’s intended states of mind merely from listening to the onomatopoeic pieces.

Unlike the onomatopoeias cycle, *Jeu de langues* is not based in language, onomatopoeic syllables, or even in alimentations. In *Jeu de langues* we hear fragments of breath by women performers, which we may be able to determine by timbral qualities listeners attribute to the intonation and inflection of the breaths (as examined in chapter 9). *Jeu de langues* employs a common practice in electroacoustic music, sampling existing works from the composer’s recorded catalog. The piece uses two previously composed pieces, for flute and saxophone respectively, and a third in-studio recording

made specially for this work. Each source has its own correlation to intimacy based in an actual sexual encounter experienced by the composer.

Jeu Blanc is the first piece incorporated in *Jeu de langues*. Premiered by flutist Claire Marchand in the late 1990s, *Jeu Blanc* is an improvisation with extended techniques and, like Normandeau's earlier *Jeu*, the work receives its title from a common turn in gambling, meaning to break the bank or to lose all of one's money—a strategic failure that perhaps foretells of the work's eventual fate: *Jeu Blanc* has since been withdrawn from the composer's catalogue. The second sample incorporated in *Jeu de langues* is *Pluie Noire* (2008), a work premiered by baritone saxophone player Ida Toninato at the 2008 Música Viva Festival. For the *Jeu de langues* recording sessions held specially in 2009, Normandeau invited into the studio Terri Hron, a flutist he met at the Música Viva Festival the prior year. Hron, Normandeau's romantic partner, was the only performer who knew of the composer's intentions for her recording. Given this contextual history, the composer's intended reception of the work is conveniently situated within the compositional history of its three sources.

Jeu de langues seems to follow Ferrari's anecdotal approach in some ways, by using a collage of multiple recordings so as to construct a particular cinematic soundscape (without conjuring a definitive scene), and intimate attention to the subjects who are collected, for the most part, without their knowledge. Normandeau exerted his greatest compositional efforts in removing the pitch material (the exhalations of the wind players) from each recording post-production, leaving only the performers' inhalations, slight gasps, and hesitations, and the involuntary mechanical sounds made by the performers' bodies striking their respective instruments. The resulting result—inhalation paired with ambient electronic sustained tones—undergoes minimal if any development, which, as mentioned in my discussion of Ferrari's *Les danses organiques* in the previous chapter, can be quite taxing on a listener attending to the work for close to twelve minutes. The only change occurs toward the end of the piece (8:23–11:24), when overlapping inhalations are spliced together with instrumental *flautando* effects and occasionally reversed in playback. This arrival is climactic in comparison to

the rest of the work, but, comparable to Schaeffer's "Erotica," it is hardly a notable arrival.

Outside of the throat clearing that opens the work, we recognize the voice(s) in this piece only through inhalations. And because eroticism is commonly voiced through exhalations (moaning, breath, vocalization), Normandeau jokes that *Jeu de langues* may actually be "anti-erotic," representative as it is of the antithesis of how composers might usually conceive of electrosexual music. Nevertheless, the work fits the "electrosexual" criteria as a piece in which composers and listeners come into contact by way of the sexual allusion. The sexual imaginary binds these entities in a contract of suspended disbelief, in the virtual simulation of sex through associations (heavy breathing), common tropes (pulsating and building intensity of volume and periodic repetition), and musical idioms (climax mechanism). Eroticism becomes a shared means of arriving at the *experience* of the musical work, which may be shared, though it probably is not in the end. Only the intentionality is collective, not the experience. For this reason, we might say that in the act of hearing an erotic composition, composers and listeners enter into a "plural subject-hood," a term Andrea Westlund uses for two people involved in a romantic relationship in which each person remains an *individual* rather than becoming "fused" psychologically or ontologically as a coupled unit.²⁰ In this way, although listeners may not actually become aroused by erotic electronic music, if the audience is told a piece is meant to be erotic, or if listeners themselves pick up on cues by way of association, each individual enters into the collective intentional state. The erotic work comes to serve as a sort of institution bearing deontic powers by way of its suggestive overtones—in the very quality of sounds employed *and not merely by facet of* "the recorded character of the recording." In short, there exist certain established or agreed-upon habits necessitated by sound, in how sound is collected, organized, and auditioned within the context of the work simply by virtue of being "music" and thus acceding to its collective experience.

Pluie Noire, sampled in *Jeu de langues*, takes its title from the play *Blasted* scripted by UK playwright Sarah Kane and with music by Normandeau.

As the composer writes in the notes, “the title is referring to pauses indicated in the play that punctuate it: spring rain, summer rain, fall rain, and winter rain. But all these rains can hardly wash the darkness of the human soul at war, especially that of Bosnia that the play makes implicit reference [*sic*].”²¹ The expansive gaps between breaths, hardly supported by the wispy fluttering of the ambient background, draw out anticipation, each inhalation suggesting that an exhalation is to follow, but our expectations are never met. Thus, the pauses from *Pluie Noire*—the negative spaces between sounds—carry over also to *Jeu de langues*. The silent gaps gain additional weight, when combined in *Jeu de langues* as this previously existing piece maintains its original length running in entirety from beginning to end, burdening our ears with an absence of the sounds it once bore.

After the premiere of *Jeu de langues*, an audience member, drawn to the silences and periodic inhalations, commented on this loaded significance, exclaiming, “I don’t know what your conception is of eroticism, to me the piece is about death,” as if hearing the gasps of someone’s suffocating last breath.²² Such was Normandeau’s deliberate allusion, a subtle connection to death and “*le petite mort*,” a French idiom for achieving orgasm.

In the words of Roland Barthes, *le petite mort* is the moment in literature when language breaks down: “ce que [le plaisir] veut, c’est le lieu d’une perte, c’est la faille, la coupure, la deflation, le fading qui saisit le sujet au cœur de la jouissance [What pleasure wants is the site of a loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation, the dissolve which seizes the subject in the midst of bliss].”²³ Barthes’s linguistic breakdown recalls the punctured surface of the language in Deleuze’s schizoanalysis. As Elizabeth Locey elaborates, “The ‘text of jouissance’ (as opposed to the ‘text of pleasure’) is that text in which the reading breaks down. The ‘coupure,’ or cutting, that produces this ‘inter-dit’ occurs when one (or more) signifier latches onto another and carries—or cuts—the reader away from the text into that place of jouissance that is beyond language.”²⁴ An overabundant lack is conjured in the absence of exhalations in *Jeu de langues*, the literal cutting of the tape is done in service of *jouissance*, penetrating silence with a desire to hear more. The gaping holes left in the wake of sound-that-once-was evoke curiosity, seducing us with

perforations in the texture of a perceivably preconceived reality. Here, sense emerges from *non-sense*, from nothing (*rien*); absence produces presence.

This chapter has shown some confluence of composing electrosexual music between Normandeau and his predecessors, Ferrari, Schaeffer/Henry, and Lockwood. I have also shown that, within these conventions, there exist many diverse engagements with sex, including, of course, potentially diverse *responses* to the music from listeners—not least of which is the tension between those aroused by *Jeu de langues* and those repulsed by the composer's sexual manipulations of performers' recordings without their knowledge or consent. Combining several analytical methods on the basis of musical commonalities can highlight similarities across categories or genres of electronic music, such that we can redraw a disciplinary axis of inclusion that insists on sexuality as a crucial and robust paradigm at the intersection of music, society, and technology. If we bend our hearings of Schaeffer/Henry and Ferrari to similarly emphasize men's control over or violence inflicted on women's voices, we deemphasize women's roles in this significant body of music. In a way, we simply repeat and reinforce this violence.

Instead, a feminist approach acknowledges these women's works, their voices used as a foundation for a new genre of music, a genre that is sexual in content and electronic in medium—electrosexual music. Electroacoustic composers desire to assert control over how women conduct themselves in electrosexual works by cutting up, displacing, and intermingling their voices with various other sounds. And music theorists, operating in service of these composers, may very well reinscribe this misogynist dominance. But maybe, whether patriarchal modes of knowledge dissemination ultimately succeed in *taking* control is up to how we listeners interpret the works and how we correspondingly either echo, confront, critique, or contradict this desired-narrative/narrative-of-desire.

