

Henri Chopin

From the Paper Civilization to the Electronic Age

ABSTRACT Henri Chopin (1922–2008) is best known for his work in concrete poetry and sound poetry. Both practices evoked a Dada legacy, but this paper considers Chopin as an essentially postwar figure. Through examination of his writings, the paper charts the intellectual background of Chopin’s sound works—created using his mouth, magnetic tape, and microphones—and argues Antonin Artaud and Marshall McLuhan were important sources for Chopin’s personal artistic theories. Borrowing from both thinkers, Chopin attempted to recover an orality lost within written language, finding what he called the “human sound” at the junction of the human vocal anatomy and magnetic tape. Additionally considered are Chopin’s experiences in labor camps during the period of Vichy fascism as one motivation for his attempts to find a language to communicate the uncommunicable. **KEYWORDS** sound poetry, media studies, concrete poetry

INTRODUCTION: “THE HUMAN SOUND”

Henri Chopin (1922–2008) is known for his work within the interrelated art forms of sound poetry and concrete poetry. In addition to his oeuvre, which includes novels, poems, works on paper, electroacoustic compositions, films, and performance, he was a key contributor to the experimental “new poetics” as editor, publisher, and designer of the magazine *Cinquième Saison*, later renamed *Revue OU*. The magazine is a significant example of postwar artists’ publishing as well as the neo-avant-garde’s embrace of new media, including vinyl records alongside a range of prints and texts by an international array of artists. Chopin is best known as an exponent of a sound-based art form: *poésie sonore* (his preferred term over “sound poetry”). He believed that *poésie sonore* was a significant artistic discovery, and represented an expansion of the communicative capacities of the voice through the technologies of the microphone and open-reel magnetic tape. By way of biographical and historical context, this article seeks to clarify and expand upon Chopin’s understanding of his use of sound as poetic medium.

Born in Paris to a family of painters, “among whom no study was necessary,” Chopin began working at the age of 12 in a hardware store.¹ He escaped Paris during the June 1940 evacuation and found himself in Versailles, where he temporarily studied French literature between “very poorly paid jobs, in shops or farms.”² After deportation to forced labor in 1943, he spent years in prisons and camps in Eastern Europe, returning to France in 1945. In the late 1940s, Chopin worked, took night classes, met figures such as Valentine Hugo and Fernand Leger, and began writing poetry. To contend with financial

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problems, he enlisted in the army in 1948, and spent four years in Austria and Indochina. During this time, he met Jean Ratcliffe, a British student of literature who introduced him to the work of James Joyce. She would later become his wife, the sole earner for their family with two children, and the translator of his writing into English, the latter work becoming especially important after the family moved to Essex, England, in the mid-1960s. Chopin's literary work began to take clearer shape during the early 1950s. He became acquainted with the Lettrists and Ultralettrists, including Isidore Isou, François Dufrêne, and Maurice Lemaître, who published two of Chopin's earliest books of poetry, *Signes*, in 1957, and *L'Arriviste*, in 1958.³ While the end of this decade saw some of Chopin's first published writings, his poetic output had begun to move beyond conventional poetry and away from the book form. In *Revue OU* and elsewhere, Chopin distinguished himself through concrete poems made using typewriters, which he termed *dactylopoèmes*, as well as poster poems inspired by Raoul Hausmann and Pierre-Albert Birot.

In 1957, Chopin composed his first *audio-poème*. These works, of which he created over one hundred, highlight the sonic qualities of the human voice as recorded through microphones, as well as the characteristics of magnetic tape including distortion, speed adjustments, and superimposition. While *audio-poèmes* retain links with poetry in that they started from spoken utterances and vocalizations, they ventured into nonlinguistic sonic regions through tape manipulation.⁴ The word "poetry," Chopin noted in 1974, is "often inadequate, and has clearly become so since the use of electronically filtered vocal energy."⁵ Chopin came to understand his activities as "research . . . [into] the pure sounds of the voice and in obtaining the various effects that, before electronics, were not perceptible."⁶ *Poésie sonore* recovered a "human sound" lost to written language, by revealing the "microparticles" of the human voice. These were sounds that were never previously heard as such, but they simultaneously revealed an ancient and lost "orality."⁷ This paper will examine the themes and background of several *audio-poèmes* including *Pêche de nuit* (1958–66); *Le Corps* (1966); *La Civilization du papier* (1974–75); and *La Peur* (1958–69) as a means of illustrating Chopin's intellectual formation as an artist working with sound. The thematic content and background for these pieces, taken together, represent a coherent artistic worldview rooted in Chopin's personal experiences as well as his artistic milieu.

"POÉSIE EXPÉRIMENTALE? POÉSIE DE RECHERCHE?"⁸

It is useful to consider the history of sound poetry before the mid-1950s, which is a challenging task. As poet Steve McCaffery noted in his 1978 anthology *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue*, sound-poetry historiography is a "doomed activity from the very outset," in that the field amounts to a "rich, varied, inconsistent . . . genealogy."⁹ The anthology Chopin edited on the subject, *Poésie sonore internationale* (hereafter *PSI*) provides a highly detailed, personalized, and opinionated account.¹⁰ Through many invectives, the book illustrates Chopin's participation in the discursive norms of the Parisian avant-garde; as

he complained in 1973, “I [will] note the kind of sentence in fashion (hm!) in this great city: ‘I did it before you,’ ‘It’s already been done,’ ‘just the same as the rhythm I invented’ and so on.”¹¹ As the scholar Claudia Reeder writes, *PSI* remains valuable as a document of Chopin’s “search for his artistic roots and his attempt to situate his own work vis-à-vis other artists he has known.”¹²

Chopin examines contemporaries and precedents in *PSI* as remote as Aristophanes. In a notable section, he advances a brief “history of periods before and after 1950,” which can be read as a self-referential account of his closest peers and influences.¹³ Before 1950 he notes the Paris and Berlin Dadaists (Ball, Hausmann, Schwitters) as well as a group of mostly Parisians: Pierre-Albert Birot, Camille Bryen (“ami d’Antonin Artaud”), Arthur Pétronio, Altagor, Isidore Isou, Paul De Vree, and Gil J. Wolman. After 1950, Chopin places Dufrière, Bernard Heidsieck, and himself. In his accompanying commentary, Chopin notes that Hugo Ball had written poems using nonsense words, while Hausmann and Schwitters had gone further by breaking language into free-floating phonemes. By the early 1950s, Chopin explains, the Ultra-Lettrists moved “beyond” phonemes into non-phonetic grunts and other mouth sounds, which set the stage for *poésie sonore*. Chopin had already written a similar story in 1967:

If timid essays by Aristophanes showed that sound was indispensable . . . that does not mean that it was sought after for its own sake. . . . [Sound] will not be liberated by the Expressionists since they needed the support of syllables and letters as did the Futurists, Dadaists and Lettristes. The buccal sound, the human sound, in fact, will come to meet us only around 1953, with Wolman, Brau, Dufrière, and somewhat later with my audio-poèmes.¹⁴

Chopin’s terminological distinctions are unclear, relying on sonic qualities for which there are no words in existing criticism. The concepts of *poésie sonore* and *audio-poème* are hardly distinguishable from the sea of micro-genres conceived by Chopin’s colleagues—including “megapneumie” (Gil J. Wolman); “cri-rythme” (François Dufrière); “méta-poésie” (Altagor); “verbophonie” (Arthur Petronio); and “poèmes-partitions” (Bernard Heidsieck).¹⁵ And yet, Chopin’s “histories” clearly illustrate his belief that recording technology played a decisive role, by the early 1950s, in revealing “sound . . . for its own sake” within the concrete poetry field. In 1964, after his embrace of recording, Chopin had written about a transition from “poésie phonétique” to “machine poems.”¹⁶ By stressing a change in sound poetry after 1950, Chopin invoked what was then newly accessible recording technology as a decisive site of artistic action. His enthusiasm for the “buccal” is more easily understood through reference to early recordings by Brau, Wolman, and Dufrière, which showcase fugitive mouth sounds and vocalizations that explore subtle tape speed adjustments. Chopin responded to these works by treating such sounds as the basis for his complex, multilayered electroacoustic compositions.¹⁷ He evangelized recording because it represented, for him, a means to explore the sonic element of the voice. As he wrote in 1966 in a letter to Raoul Haussmann: “it is indispensable that you get a tape machine.”¹⁸



FIGURE 1. Henri Chopin at the International Festival of Sound Poetry, Toronto, 1978. Photograph by Larry Wendt.

PÊCHE DE NUIT (1957) AND SOL AIR (1961-64): THE "TOTAL ACTION" OF LANGUAGE IN SOUND

In 1957, on the island of Ré off of the western coast of France, Chopin composed an *audio-poème* entitled *Pêche de nuit*. Having lived on Île-de-Ré for several years, Chopin had come to enjoy a crude form of trap-fishing, which made use of stone walls that he erected in tidal waters, capturing fish when tides rose and fell. Inspired by this pastime, his “grande joie” on the island, Chopin intoned into a microphone a series of words—*bar*, *muge*, and *courlis* (bass, mullet, and curlew; the last a type of seabird)—emphasizing their phonemes through slow enunciation and repetition. Through misuse of the tape machine, Chopin sped up, slowed down, and superimposed these utterances into a complex sonic terrain. The process unfolded by way of Chopin’s interaction with tape. His



FIGURE 2. Henri Chopin, “Pêche de nuit,” 1958–66. © Henri Chopin (audio file).

open-reel, Brenell-brand machine (seen in Figure 1) came with built-in speed adjustments, and he also overrode the machine's normal functionality by holding a match under its "erase" head—which typically removes whatever was previously recorded onto the tape—allowing for infinite dubs onto a single track; as he put it, "48 superimpositions" recorded at "six speeds."¹⁹ This allowed Chopin to turn his voice into a rich and varied orchestra, and to extend his own vocal range outside his capacity, creating dozens of parallel performances in absentia. It should be noted that Chopin thereby participated obliquely in the *musique concrète* pioneered by Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry in the early 1950s, with the important difference that he did so using commercial, at-home technology rather than the large, state-funded studios of Schaeffer and company.²⁰ Sonically, *Pêche* reflects the multi-sensorial experience of the maritime context. One can hear in the piece a variety of mimetic imitations of the sea, including rushes and whooshes of waves against the shore, low underwater frequencies (glugs and plunks), horns and whistles of ocean liners or tug boats, and chirps and trills of seabirds. One of Chopin's accounts of his time at Ré includes a description of such a seascape: "I had as my witnesses the Tides [*sic*], big and small, the forces of the winds, the cries of birds, the marvelous swishing of the waves, the comings and goings of the Atlantic."²¹ Other sounds evoke nothing as much as themselves: sped-up vocal cries, breathy repetition of phrases ("sans cesse, sans cesse, sans cesse," "course, course, course," "pêche, pêche, pêche") but retain a rhythmic connection with the maritime context. Chopin would later maintain an interest in imitating soundscapes, and in 1993 he composed a work titled *Les Mirifiques tundras et compagnie* conveying the sounds of the Russian tundra, including wind, snow, and ice melting at mid-June, which he had heard and felt during the war.²² By replicating natural sounds, Chopin approached composition through means that can be described as prelinguistic. Evoking this line of thinking, the American composer Bernie Krause wrote in 2012: "[a]t [an early] stage of their development, sound-rich habitats are humans' most significant acoustic influences. . . . They have limited language skills to express what they feel, but they borrow some from what they hear all around them to convey emotion."²³ *Pêche de nuit* and *Les Mirifiques tundras* can be said to do the same. *Pêche* was later adapted into a film of the same name in collaboration with artists Tjerk Wicky and Luc Peire (Figure 3), which notably used images of water to evoke a landscape.

The term "*poésie sonore*" is an accurate description of *Pêche's* composition, first conceived as a series of words and later becoming a largely nonlinguistic composition. Indeed, a similar process occurred within Chopin's work as a whole, as he transitioned from composing phonetic poetry to sonorous poetry. Since *Pêche's* original words (*bar, muge*, etc.) were ultimately lost to the listener's ears, the words may seem to have been merely a pretext for the disfigured sonic material of the finished work. But semantic meaning and its relationship to sound were conceptually important starting points for early *audio-poèmes*. As Chopin wrote in 1963:

Our language, directed completely by monologue, has known nothing of the dialogue that man undertakes with the universe. No word, no sentence, no description can account for the experiences of the present, those which will allow mankind to adapt

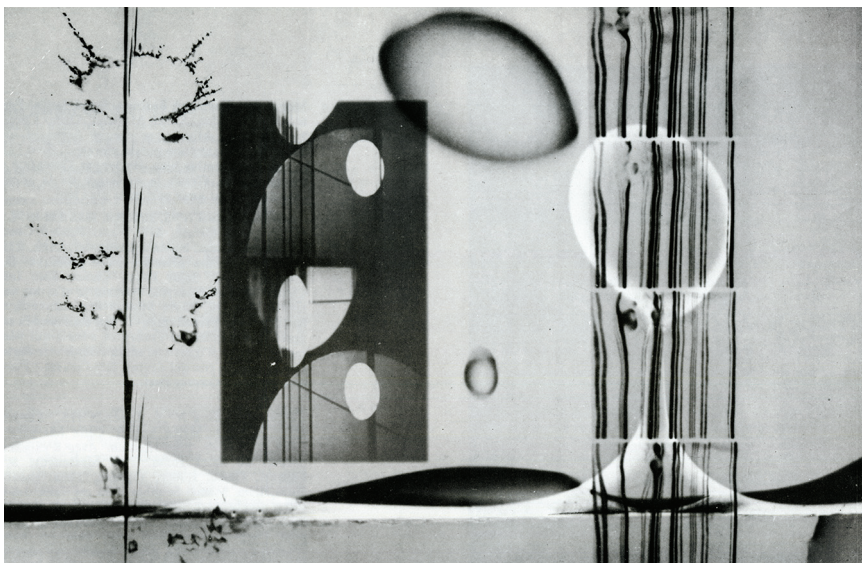


FIGURE 3. Still from *Pêche de nuit* (1962) by Luc Peire, Tjerk Wicky, and Henri Chopin. Reproduced in Henri Chopin, *A propos de OU—Cinquième Saison 1958–1974: Un quart de siècle d'avant-garde* (Tielt, Belgium: E. Veys imprimeur-éditeur, 1974). © Henri Chopin.

little by little, helping us understand that our old materials—words—are themselves transfigured as soon as they find their breath. It's then that we can recognize that a word like *siffle* (hiss) holds hissing within itself. That the word *saute* (jump) is its own action. That the word *vol* (flight) is a word, and flying . . . is its act.

And the word *vol* becomes an act within the air. It becomes phonetic as soon as it's sung. It transfigures just as sounds are emitted from it. Thus, *VOOOLLL* is a song that cannot betray its own meaning. From “v,” a sonorous fricative, the breath can emerge, and prolong itself through the “o”; through the liquid “l,” there is total action.²⁴

Per this account, words contain elemental communicative depths that can communicate cosmic depths, and these depths are revealed in their full power at the point of words' decomposition. Chopin had begun to formulate a cosmic viewpoint that he would never leave behind. When summarizing his work in the late 1950s, he wrote: “the best art today is that of breath, in order to regain the breath of the universe.”²⁵ This can be compared with a 1936 statement by Antonin Artaud:

Sound, movement, light, gesture, voice, and even the shape of voice are part of this new language of theater. It is primarily because of the way it is said and the place in which it is said that a word lives, and what is most alive is the rhythmic heat of the breath, which is solar and lunar, male and female, active and passive.²⁶

Chopin's move from language toward nonlinguistic sound can also be considered through a similar work, *Sol air* (1961–64), for which he published what might be called a score (Figure 5). Chopin later abandoned the use of texts for most of his works. *Sol air's*



FIGURE 4. Henri Chopin, “Sol air,” 1961–64. © Henri Chopin (audio file).

score—the words “sol” and “air,” or sun and air, broken down into phonemes—also explores cosmic themes. The piece’s title can be heard once or twice in the recording, whispered amidst layered and speed-adjusted voiceless consonants and vowels. A significant portion of what one hears in *Sol air* is accounted for by only one line in the text: “exclusively treble sounds, either the smacks of lip or mouth.” Through the use of amplified sounds that in normal life often escape audition—breaths, gurgles, growls, clicks, and pops—the recording is remarkably rich and complex. This work shows that Chopin started with written texts but later abandoned them to explore the complexities of the voice through microphones, embracing not only the phonetic “microparticles” of words but increasingly also the amplified artifacts of speech and saliva. His compositional logic developed through what can be described as a feedback-based, cybernetic interaction with tape; the sum of *Sol air*’s parts is not simply vowels, plosives, fricatives, nasals, and liquids but also other non-phonetic sounds not part of normal speech, which became more clearly audible through interaction with the recording apparatus.

It is valuable to compare these two works with Chopin’s earlier *audio-poème, Rouge*, from 1958.²⁷ *Rouge* consists of words and phrases (“rouge,” “choc,” “bruit,” “chair,” and “nu”) repeated to foreground their sonic quality. While the words arguably undergo what psychologist Leon Jakobovits James called “semantic satiation,” they also, through repetition, might be experienced as evoking the color red, as well as human flesh (“chair”).²⁸ *Rouge* can easily be described as a synesthetic imaging of a sonorous human body. This effect is accomplished through only words, while the more “sonorous” works that would come later (*Pêche* and *Sol air*) investigated the power of nonsignifying sounds. As Chopin embraced the above-mentioned artifacts of speech (including clicks, clacks, gurgles, and swallowing) he recognized that sounds originated not from language, but from the body, and he shifted his poetics to explicitly account for the corporeal.

LE CORPS (1957–66): DISCOVERY OF THE BODY’S SPEECH

Le Corps was one of Chopin’s first works to thematically foreground the body. It is intriguing that unlike many of his other works, this one used not only his own voice but also those of his wife and their two children, superimposed at multiple speeds.²⁹ The

SOL AIR

Prème-1961. Audio-poème 1964. Pour ballet et chorégraphie.
 Durée: 10'. Superpositions timbrales: 4. Exclusivement réalisé par la voix de l'auteur.
 Recherche: fission de particules buccales et timbrales, anatomie du verbe.
 Composition intégrale avec les deux mots précédents: soit Sol et Air.

Vitesses du magnétophone: 9,5 cm
 19 cm
 4,75 cm
 Mixage en studio. Recueilli sur v. 38 cm/s.

(fragments)

v. 9,5 cm: soooooLrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
 rrrrrrrrrrrrrllossssssS SôôôLRRRRRRR
 siiiiiTTTTTTTTTTTT (" s " = spirance)
 airffffle (variation) rrrrrllloooooosssSSS sol air rrrRRR
 soooooLrrrrrrrrrrrrrr sssssssssssssss...
 fragments pour 10 " sur une piste.

v. 9. 5 cm: rrrrrrrrrrrr (appoints claquements de lèvres)
 iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii (pizzicato sur v. 4, 75 cm " aigü)
 s
 o
 l
 a i r (chute du timbre presque inaudible)
 (recouvert par) sol RRR
 rrrr LosSS (recurrence)
 fragments pour 10 " sur une autre piste.

v. 4,75 cm: (exclusivement des aigus soit des: claquements de lèvres et bouches, des voyelles «ü» et «eu» couvrant les enregistrements précédents; emploi de plus du volume sonore par augmentation des intensités ou diminution. Superpositions: 4)
 l l l l ll ll ll llllll ll llllllll l l l l l
 SSS OOOOOO (puis liquide) èèèèèè (diminuendo) RRRR
 (succession ininterrompue, en augmentant le volume) :
 HHHHHHHHHHHH HHHHHHHHHHHH HHHHHHHHHHHH HHHHHHHHHHHH
 fragments pour les 10 " précédentes sur les deux pistes.

Emploi des graves, a la suite des 10 «précédentes, celles-ci ayant donné un climat sonore. Les graves atteignant parfois moins de 12 p/s. constituent un fond ou masse sonore presque inerte, couvrant, d'une part, le «souffle» de la bande magnétique», et d'autre part établissant — ce qui est important — le sol ou terre de l'audio-poème.

Les libertés timbrales là sont prises. Elles naissent de l'impératif du mot «sol». Lorsqu'on veut déterminer ce mot, on peut lui donner tous les sens possibles, voire lui adjoindre d'autres valeurs qui viennent le couvrir. Dire «sol» ou terre est mieux qu'une image ou un mot, c'est une planète. C'est pourquoi la bouche pulvérisera le mot, tout en lui donnant d'autres valeurs.

- V. 9, 5 cm :** ssssssss
- V. 4,75 cm :** ssssssss
- V. 9, 5 cm :** sssssssiiii
- V. 19 cm :** ouououououououououou
 (mots sur une piste pour une durée : 3")
- V. 19 cm :** ououououououououououououou
- V. 19 cm :** RrRrRrRr (intensité par augmentation du volume, diminuendo par diminution du volume)
- V. 4,75 cm :** iiiii
- V. 9, 5 cm :** sssiffille (puis soufle magnétique, puis aspiration et respiration dont le principe a été publié en 1960)
 (mots sur l'autre piste pour une durée : 3")
- V. 19 cm :** hoooooooooooooooooooooosoooooooooooooooooooo.....
 (durée 5 ")
- V. 9, 5 cm :** sol
 r
 r (chule, shunlée)
 iiii
 rrrr
 solair
 (durée 5 ")

ENSUITE VIENDRONT SE HEURTER LE «SOL» et «L'AIR».
 Henri Chopin. Déc. 63
 Aout. 64

FIGURE 5. Henri Chopin, "Sol Air," in *Poesia experimental 2*, Oficinas Gráficas da Escola de Artes e Ofícios, Funchal, 1966. Courtesy AcquAvivArchives, London. © Henri Chopin.

piece is a chorus of vocalizations pitched up and down, along with a wide array of textural elements, such as breath, salivation, and the clacking of teeth. In the mind's ear, *Le Corps* evokes a voyage to the inner recesses of the lungs, with an array of sounds that one might imagine to be the flowing of blood—even if, like almost all sounds in Chopin's works, they in fact come from the mouth.



FIGURE 6. Henri Chopin, “Le Corps,” 1966. © Henri Chopin (audio file).

With *Le Corps*, Chopin began to thematize “the body’s voices,” to use art historian Michel Giroud’s phrase; this preoccupation would become predominant in Chopin’s writings, titles, and other texts for the remainder of his life.³⁰ One year after he finished *Le Corps*, he wrote: “I’m fond of my noises and of my sounds, I admire the immense complex factory of a body, I’m fond of my glances that touch, of my ears that see, of my eyes that receive.”³¹ The idea of the body as “sound factory” would recur in a litany of other titles, including, to name a few: *Gouffres des bronches*, *Jouissance des lèvres*, *Échos de bouche*, *Dentales soufflées*, *Throat Power*, *Le voyage labiovélaire*, and *Cantata for Two Farts and Juan Carlos the First*—although the latter, curiously, does not include recognizable recordings of farts.³² To varying degrees, however, most of these works focus on sounds created by each named body part. In *Le voyage labiovélaire*, for instance, Chopin used two microphones—one in the mouth and one in a nostril—and claimed to have swallowed a small microphone to his stomach in 1974 for the work *La Digestion*.³³ Chopin began to present himself as an artist whose primary medium was his body, and he foregrounded the body as a multipart sound-producing machine. The body is shown to be not simply a conduit for language, but a corporeal, “speaking” presence in its own right, producing sounds reducible neither to words, nor letters, nor phonemes. In 1966, Chopin collaborated with artist Gianni Bertini on the film *L’énergie du sommeil*, titled after his *audio-poème* of the same name, which is the film’s soundtrack. The explicitly bodily poetics of *poésie sonore* are directly illustrated through the film’s montage, with footage of a hand retrieving a vinyl record from an issue of *Revue OU*, putting the disc on a record player and dropping the needle. As the sound begins, the film proceeds to a sequence of body imagery, including a mouth licking its lips, an anus, and a pair of nostrils.³⁴ Listening to *poésie sonore*, the film suggests, invites a communicative experience with the human body through the medium of sound.

To fully understand Chopin’s views on the body’s role in poetry, it is helpful to consult the writings of Paul Zumthor (1915–95). A collaborator with Chopin on the 1993 artists’ book *Les riches heures de l’alphabet*, Zumthor frequently commented on Chopin’s work and incorporated Chopin into his own wide-ranging scholarship on oral poetry, influenced by media and cultural theorists such as Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong.³⁵ In a late text titled “Orality,” Zumthor distilled his framework on the subject, and no doubt

can be understood as having had Chopin partly in mind.³⁶ The oral, Zumthor wrote, was a dimension of human communication that depends primarily on sound in ways “purely utilitarian” communication could not.³⁷ Orality, in everyday language, emotes, and the effect of speech depends to a large extent on its prosodic and sonic qualities. According to Zumthor, the communicative capacity of language attains its highest degree, or quintessence, in oral poetry.³⁸ Following McLuhan, Zumthor maintained that the medium is the message, and the medium of spoken language is, before anything else, the body. Prelinguistic communication, then, is separate from semantic communication. Before writing, Zumthor suggests, all communication depended on the body insofar as speech was transmitted through sound. The voice, despite carrying linguistic information, could never have existed without the oral/vocal anatomy—the nasal cavity, larynx, pharynx, glottis, trachea, lungs, and other organs—that produce it, and that predate semantic language.³⁹ All language depends elementally on breath, as channeled through the human oral and vocal anatomy; and poetry, writes Zumthor, more than most other forms of art, is rooted in the breath. As Zumthor writes: “[The voice] is breath; it comes from the body and, symbolically, is a precondition of the body’s very being.”⁴⁰ In a 1992 interview, Chopin cites a quotation by Zumthor, and it is difficult to imagine a better description of *poésie sonore*:

Poetry, with the first impetus that pushes it into existence, is anterior to language. Let us be clear: in the successive phases that mark its momentum, poetry encounters language, but it crosses through language, sometimes passing to its other side; or else it marries language, transforms and is transformed by language. It remains the case that despite the diversity of these outcomes, one can still argue, paradoxically, that there is no exclusive or even absolutely necessary link between poetry and language.⁴¹

Chopin’s works foreground the voice’s bodily origin and strip the human vocal machinery to its bare essentials. The body in Chopin’s works is a living, organic system of expression and prelinguistic articulation, and *Le Corps*, fittingly, begins with breathing as one of its first recognizable sounds. Within Zumthor’s conception of poetry, Chopin is a poet in the essential, primordial sense.

Zumthor’s work on medieval poetry and oral tradition parallels Chopin’s interest in what he called “les millénaires oraux,” or “oral millennia.” For Chopin, electronic media allowed a return to an ancient orality eclipsed by written language; as he wrote, “the richest result of . . . recent electroacoustic developments is the re/discovery of our *oral millennia* that literary poetry had effaced.”⁴² Like Zumthor’s work, the concept of orality in postwar intellectual culture had emerged out of media studies. As Geoffrey Winthrop-Young notes, “orality” derived from several publications by authors including McLuhan, who had “belonged to the first generation to be shaped by a world in which a print-based media ecology had been altered by new ways of recording, storing, and transmitting sounds and voices.”⁴³ Chopin’s artistic project, especially owing to his own emphasis in his writings, must be seen in this intellectual context. As Chopin wrote, his interest in the voice had a direct relationship with his historical moment, as “the tape recorder seems to have come at a moment when the voice wanted to appear—when it had already known

itself to be multiple.”⁴⁴ Zumthor’s work shows that the physicality of *poésie sonore* is not just bodily, but also technological. Just as the human body bears a direct physical relationship to the speech it produces, the medium of magnetic tape, which rearranges bits of ferric oxide, bears the same relationship to the sounds it reproduces.

LA CIVILIZATION DU PAPIER (1974): PROBING THE MACHINERY OF MEDIA

Chopin’s 1974 *audio-poème* titled *La civilization du papier* helps illustrate the links between *poésie sonore* and media theories. This piece features Chopin’s pitched-up voice repeating the following refrain: “Je n’ai jamais accepté une poésie sans voix et sans corps [I’ve never accepted a poetry without voice and without body]” from within a dense, layered landscape of feedback and breath. Chopin blurts out the following interjections: “danse électronique! danse avec le corps! danse avec le gorge! [electronic dance! dance with the body! dance with the throat]”; “la voix électronique! [electronic voice!]” and the work’s title, negated: “plus de civilization-papier [(no) more paper civilization].”

Through an invective against “the paper civilization,” Chopin positions himself against the entirety of written literature, and thereby invokes Artaud, who inveighed against the literary in favor of sound and vision, even if he remained a prolific writer.⁴⁵ Artaud’s rhetorical emphasis on the multisensorial had been taken up by the Lettrists, who explored sound through works such as Isou’s film *Traité de bave et éternité*, with chanting by Dufrière on its soundtrack. This film foregrounded its own media technology through its scraped and painted film strip.⁴⁶ Chopin, who attended the film’s premiere in 1952, started his artistic career within this social environment, and his thinking on artistic media is closely related to that of the Lettrists.⁴⁷

In his writings Chopin frequently evokes a “monde électronique,” “environnement électronique,” and “ère électronique,” in opposition to printed language.⁴⁸ The terms evoke William S. Burroughs’s book *The Electronic Revolution*, which Chopin had published in French in 1971, and which Burroughs described as his “media-theory work.”⁴⁹ More directly “ère électronique” evokes McLuhan’s *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1964), which theorized the relationship of orality to electronic media. As McLuhan wrote:



FIGURE 7. Henri Chopin, “La Civilization du Papier,” 1974. © Henri Chopin (audio file).

In the electronic age which succeeds the typographic and mechanical era of the past five hundred years, we encounter new shapes and structures of human interdependence and of expression which are “oral” in form even when the components of the situation may be non-verbal.⁵⁰

In the same text McLuhan states that the “eye mode of Western man” that had been inaugurated by print was quickly being eclipsed by “our present shift into the auditory mode of electronic man.”⁵¹ For McLuhan, electronic media marked a return to orality, and a change from the written to the auditory. These theories on electronic media and print culture can be compared with a remark by Chopin:

It’s through wanting to enter into the multiplicities of being that we will reveal our electronic and spatial knowledge, which has not had equivalence in the past ages of writing, of alphabets: whether ideographic, pictographic, or even gyrometric, with Cyrillic and above all Latin.⁵²

Chopin argues for a rupture with the history of written literature. As noted elsewhere, he implies a recovery of prelinguistic orality, rendering his idea similar to McLuhan’s in *Gutenberg*. McLuhanism’s intertwinement with many preeminent artists of his generation has been noted in recent scholarship.⁵³ Chopin had been interested in his work by 1967, when upon meeting the Quebecois painter Pierre Coupey, and hearing that he was from Canada, asked: “So you are aware of Marshall McLuhan?”⁵⁴ For Chopin, theorizing the future of media had a direct relationship with his artistic practice, and the work itself resonates with many media-based enthusiasms of the period.

Through what he viewed as his rediscovery of the roots of language, Chopin believed he could transcend writing, noting in a 1992 interview that “[w]riting, which was a necessary invention in its own time, is today only relatively so. We make use of writing, like the musician uses sheet music, but it is no longer anything but a relative element.”⁵⁵ Chopin remarked he had imagined making “books” consisting entirely of recordings, and experimented with this idea through *OU’s* inclusion of records.⁵⁶ His work with typewriter-based concrete poetry should also be noted here, showing an interest in the technology of typewriting and the mediation of typography.

Chopin wrote in 1964: “What’s at stake is TOTAL SPECTACLE . . . [which] comprises plenty of things, if you think of what Antonin Artaud wanted to realize.”⁵⁷ According to Chopin, “these discoveries were completely unknown when I began working with sound poetry—I was starting from very basic literary ideas. It’s thanks to the new technologies that I’ve discovered all these new values.”⁵⁸ However utopian this rhetoric may appear, *poésie sonore* did not imply uncritical evangelism for new media. Chopin’s misuse of tape recorders is best compared with Isou’s manipulation of the film strip in *Traité*, a practice that can be considered in relation to the Lettrist International’s practice of *détournement*, described a few years later by Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman as offering “concrete possibilities in various current sectors of communication . . . [which are] significant only in relation to present-day technologies.”⁵⁹ Media technologies, in Lettrist thinking, were to be manipulated and controlled. Similarly, Chopin wrote in 1964:

The important thing is to have defeated the machine. To have found, through the infinite possibilities of timbral and sonorous orchestration, the voice of a single being, a sole man. It's important to give back this primacy to man, and to creation, which controls the machine. Back to man, who has bent the machine toward his own creative desires. Who has found, through the machine, a particular language to join the cosmos. [...] Yesterday we thought that machines were going to begin creating. I defy the machine. It cannot be as rich as man. Because what I do once is never repeated. I seek, and find anew.⁶⁰

Chopin used audio recording as a device, or a tool. His work hardly ever sounds mechanical in origin, and even when it embraces distortion and feedback, these remain rooted in Chopin's corporeal sound sources. He noted in 1995 that music created using computers lacked a physicality that he had found important for his purposes, and that he was not interested in "new media" as such.⁶¹



FIGURE 8. Performance photomontage by Brigitte Morton. Henri Chopin Papers. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/archival_objects/284466. © Henri Chopin / Brigitte Morton

Insofar as he used media technology as a tool, an idea of poetic authorship never fully disappeared from Chopin's work. His origins as poet enabled him to maintain that his work was more poetic than musical. Chopin excluded his work from *musique concrète*, despite its similarity with the work of Schaeffer, and noted that *poésie sonore* should even take "precedence" over that of electroacoustic composers.⁶² While this may be understood as an amusingly petty claim, it points toward Chopin's artistic worldview. He wrote that "in fact, poetry is the basis of all expression, and with electronic sound we have rediscovered this."⁶³ Like his colleague Arthur Pétronio, a friend of Wassily Kandinsky—both theorists of sound who'd been inspired by folkloric tradition—Chopin was motivated by *poiesis* as expression, and believed that all expression began with the body.

LA PEUR (1958–69): FINDING THE SOURCE OF THE CRI

Chopin wrote that *poésie sonore* is the "rediscovery of a space of limbo" and paraphrased Flaubert by saying that many things escape language.⁶⁴ This statement conveys the extent to which *poésie sonore* tried to tap into bodily experiences that were not captured by language. Chopin's personal stake in this attempt was, to some extent, finding a means to convey emotional damage. Like several other of Chopin's *audio-poèmes*, *La Peur* was composed over many years, from 1958 to 1969.⁶⁵ In a memoir Chopin describes writing a conventional poem in 1958 that would later become *La Peur*. With the written poem, he writes, he had attempted to describe

the fears lived through during the course of the "death march" in East Prussia at the end of 1944, the anguish equally felt in 1949 in Indochina; but to make this fear real, words were powerless, as they remained within frameworks of description, of figuration.⁶⁶

Chopin's hardships did not begin with the war. In 1940, at the age of 17, he left his family and worked for three years in poorly paid jobs. In 1943, the Vichy government initiated the "service du travail obligatoire," resulting in the deportation of thousands of French workers to forced-labor camps in Germany. Chopin was sent to East Prussia in June 1943, where he refused to work, and was punished on that account by being deprived of food. In July 1944, he was sent to prison in Königsberg, and he later wrote of the experience:



FIGURE 9. Henri Chopin, "La Peur," 1958–69. © Henri Chopin (audio file).

There I learnt to be beaten, to eat one slice of bread per day . . . to be afraid, to walk seven kilometers every Tuesday—walking skeletons chained two by two—and to become aware of extra-verbal communication, where understanding and distrust need not be formulated.⁶⁷

After being freed by the Russians in 1945, Chopin returned to France for several years, but enlisted in the army in 1948 to escape poverty. He was deployed to Austria and Indochina, where he spent four months sick in hospital in Saigon, in a “perpetual state of agony.” It was not until 1952 that he finished his service and returned to France.

Taken together, these experiences of deprivation and pain make their way into Chopin’s oeuvre with *La Peur*. The composition can be understood as an attempt at working through memories retained on a prelinguistic level. *La Peur* insists on the limitations of language, beginning with Chopin’s voice intoning the words “jusqu’au rire, jusqu’au chant, jusque la peur, jusqu’au cri (until laughter, until song, until fear, until a cry).” This refrain suggests *La Peur* illustrates a move from language into bodily expression, typified by laughter, song, fear, and cries. The work thematizes a breakdown of language in favor of “inarticulate” or prelinguistic expression.⁶⁸

La Peur is harsher than most of Chopin’s other recordings, with its emphasis on feedback and distortion. If other works described above imitated natural environments, *La Peur* might evoke engine roars, air sirens, bombs, rockets, and machine guns. Another refrain Chopin repeats in *La Peur* is “me traverse, me traverse, me traverse.” Being traversed or overrun by fear might call to mind Freud’s description of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In this text, where he pioneered his theory of the “war neuroses,” Freud describes trauma as an over-excitation of stimuli that break through the psychic “protective shield.” For Freud, considering that trauma is continuously repeated through dreams, this compulsion to repeat can be seen as “endeavoring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis.”⁶⁹ If *La Peur* repeats the psychosomatic overstimulation of Chopin’s wartime experience, the work can be seen as his attempt, conscious or unconscious, to fully “develop the anxiety” that was too much to bear, by newly re-experiencing overwhelming, traumatizing events. To “make this fear real” meant concretizing fear, thereby feeling it again—but for the first time in a psychically bearable context, i.e., sound.

The wartime background of *La Peur* serves as entryway into considering Chopin’s politics. His oeuvre frequently touches on fascism, dictatorship, and demagoguery, represented by Hitler, Stalin, Nixon, and George W. Bush, who frequently appear in his works on paper and in novels. Chopin’s antifascism was a lens through which he viewed many aspects of the world. Even the mediatic dimension of *poésie sonore* had political ramifications; as he wrote in 1977:

[F]or 22 years there has been a poetry . . . which is no longer on paper. It is the poetry of sounds: fugitive, elusive, that cannot be contained by a wall or an iron curtain, that cannot be stopped by two rows of electrified barbed wire [. . .]. Messieurs poets who oppose us . . . stop calling us “destroyers” of languages; we amplify them, multiply them, allow them to travel.⁷⁰

In a 1992 interview, Chopin remembered a labor camp in Czechoslovakia where he had heard an “infra- . . . or ultra-linguistic” communication between Serbs, Croats, Slovaks, and Czechs.⁷¹ This is a description of a Joycean multiple language, a “fugitive” tongue that could escape the ethnolinguistic purity enforced by fascist or otherwise authoritarian states. This concept bears comparison to a work by Chopin’s colleague Bernard Heidsieck entitled “Vaduz,” a liberal-humanist sound poem evoking the variety of world languages.⁷²

The Swedish text-sound composer Sten Hanson wrote that Chopin was best understood as an individualist anarchist, in his approach to art as well as his ethics.⁷³ Chopin attested to his Nietzschean individualism in his writings, which frequently referenced Nietzsche, as well as his refusal to sign concrete poet Pierre Garnier’s 1963 spatialist manifesto, to which he wrote in response: “I am not a member of a movement but I am ‘with’ movement. I am movement.”⁷⁴ Radical individualism appears to have meant, for Chopin, resistance to fascism. Chopin wrote:

I am absolutely convinced that the group does not exist, any more than societies. I believe only in the disorder of each person, which is ultimately restricted within conflict, and not in collective order, which has no fewer than some fifty million deaths to account for in the name of order, as in 1939–45, for instance.⁷⁵

His emphasis on individuality has parallels with the forms of *poésie sonore*. Like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Chopin situated himself on the side of the molecular (the individual) rather than the molar (the group, or state); this concept can be compared with Chopin’s discussion of vocal “microparticles” and their communicative liberation from the Word’s strictures. Writing his novel *Le Dernier roman du monde*, he noted, allowed him to “compare the *major word* with its ideologies, its directives (. . . dying for one’s own country, etc.) to the infinite and vast voice . . . which liberated me from a morbid century.”⁷⁶ The voice, as produced by the body, is radically individual in that it contains the body’s memory. Indeed, *poésie sonore* is an art form that was “downright individual, just like the voice itself. Because, without our own voices, we do not exist.”⁷⁷

CONCLUSION: THE SOUND OF THE UNIVERSE

Chopin’s theories represent a coherent artistic individuation. His interest in media stemmed from his contemporaries’ research into the capacities of magnetic tape to reveal the complex sonic material underlying the sounds one hears in everyday life, including spoken language. Thus encountering the sonic origins of language, and their roots in the physical body, Chopin understood his work as research into the body behind the voice, at once primordial and grounded in technologies of his contemporary technological moment. Interest in the body’s speech and prelinguistic communication led Chopin to an exploration of unprocessed trauma, which, through artistic sublimation, appears to have been tied to his understanding of the relationship between artistic, individual, and political freedoms. Chopin trafficked in a certain utopianism, tying an avant-gardist evangelism for media and technology with nondenominational anarchism. The English

translation of his work *Le homard cosmographique* (The Cosmographical Lobster) contains the following passage near its end; combining the sonic, cosmic, and bodily, it can be read as a summation of Chopin's work.

The SPACE SHIP went on its course, it had traveled
1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000, etc. . . . , light years.
The infra-etc. vibrated the airrrrrrs, the infra-sounds too, the airrrrs and the individuals.
Everything was beginning to awaken. Humanity, that had become dumb in the
twentieth century, was thrilling to life once more.
The bodies moved, in spasms that were almost invisible but still perceptible.
The eyes of the individuals that had been dull, slowly began to glow, the fingers which
could no longer grasp, seemed to grow and felt for objects to grip.
The shoulders that were so soft to the touch hardened.
The muscles re-embodied themselves.
The nerves echoed like chords that the slightest touch of a bow would have vibrated.
The feet began to walk.
The bodies followed, clumsy at first but gradually transformed by a feline grace.
[. . .]
THE SOUND OF THE UNIVERSE WAS HEARD.⁷⁸ ■

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NOTES

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13. Chopin, *Poésie sonore internationale*, 42.
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