

Denis Dufour

Complete Acousmatic Works Vol 1

Kairos 16×CD/DL

Those unfamiliar with the work of French composer Denis Dufour may come away from this massive trove of his acousmatic work (16 CDs clocking in at nearly 18 hours of music, with further volumes to come) disturbed that he's not more of a fixture in experimental music circles. Born in Lyon in 1953, Dufour attended the Paris Conservatoire, where he studied with both Pierre Schaeffer and Ivo Malec. He has managed to be insanely prolific, writing over 180 pieces, while maintaining a teaching career since the mid-1970s, working at Paris-Boulogne-Billancourt since 2010.

Dufour was a founding member of TM+ with Yann Geslin and Laurent Cuniot – which developed a live performance practice of electroacoustic and electronic music beginning in the late 1970s – and a key member of Ina-GRM between 1976–2000. The set covers 1977–2020, with the pieces arranged thematically – “Electronica”, “Sacred Music”, “Melodramas” and “Suites”, and so on – rather than chronologically. However it's sequenced, there's no missing the sustained curiosity and experimental impulse at work across its entire span.

The range of the material is astonishing, whether short studies or epic radio work. Dufour reveals a deep engagement with literature and psychology which informs many of the programmatic pieces. The 1980 piece *The Apocalypse According To Angers* for example, pairs texts written by St John with scenes depicted on a variety of 14th century tapestries that had been displayed in an exhibition at the castle of

the titular French city when he composed it, while his 2007 work *L'Esprit En Étoile* seeks to trace the emotions slaloming between melancholy and elation in a person afflicted with a bipolar condition. The set includes three significant booklets (100 pages each in English, French and German) with annotations for every piece – some written by the composer, but most courtesy of collaborators Jérôme Nylon and Thomas Brando – that reveal Dufour's intellectual inspiration. Those explanations are helpful, especially since the bulk of the frequent spoken word is in French, yet such context isn't necessary to get lost in these soundworlds. The punch packed by the music is fully self-contained.

The nearly two hour 2017 radio piece *Le Cris De Tatibagan* is focused on memories of the expat Indian sound artist Hamish Hossain through a mixture of field recordings, spoken word and imagined soundscapes from Tatibagan, a neighbourhood in Kolkata, which Dufour summoned based upon the subject's stories. As with many of the pieces here, the voice is central to a scrambled, allusive narrative, and in this piece we hear texts in French and English, creating a sense of place both abstract and visceral.

A series of works catalogued as “Melodramas” occupy the first three discs of the set, delivering loose narratives such as *Blue Rocket On A Rocky Shore*, which chronicles hallucinatory visions of a shipwrecked man alone an island when he encounters a decaying rocket. The 2018 piece *BlindPoint* is a commentary on information overload, spitting out a disorienting profusion of voice and sounds that forcefully pull the listener along in a way that threatens context or meaning. Another

set of pieces are homages to some of Dufour's most important mentors: Pierre Schaeffer, Pierre Henry and Karlheinz Stockhausen. The 1998 work *Terra Incognita* is dedicated to Schaeffer, as he summons the experience of an explorer encountering a new world. The annotation quotes the honoree, with an elementary description of the acousmatic: “movement, breath, style; let's close our eyes in order to see them better”. He also creates 12-tone portraits of ten of his closest friends on the 1984 suite *Dix Portraits*, using analogue and digital synthesizers to characterise particular traits of each subject with subtle rhythmic choices.

The composer's mastery of materials is dazzling, working with tape, computers and, here and there, real instruments, and despite a range of more than four decades his production sensibility renders era irrelevant – pieces from the late 1970s sound just as fresh as anything from the last decade. Classic musique concrète methods are clear in the 2011 work *Acousmatic Variations* where a series of fixed sounds – glass, an operatic vocal phrase, and creaking door – appearing in a 66 second opening collage, are transformed in 11 subsequent pieces of the same duration in the composer's morphologic style.

Organa, one of the works in the section dubbed “Electronica”, deploys electronic beats of contemporary dance music in a way that sounds clunky and dated, but on the same disc is a swirling purely electronic 1979 piece called *Rond de Jambe* that feels oddly prescient in terms of ambient abstraction. The overwhelming bulk of the collection feels as vital and exploratory as anything released over the past 12 months. □



Denis Dufour at Studio 116C, Ina-GRM, Paris, 1978

The first volume of a new box set series indicates the remarkable range of acousmatic composer Denis Dufour. By Peter Margasak

Courtesy Ina-GRM