

Eastman School of Music

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Landscapes of Ruin: Tristan Murail's *Winter Fragments*

Jonathan CROSS (University of Oxford)

ABSTRACT

This talk will take as its focal point a singular and striking work for chamber ensemble and electronics – Tristan Murail's *Winter Fragments* (2000). It stands as an exemplar of the so-called spectral music movement, of which Murail was a founder in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and which rejected post-War structuralism/serialism in favour of a new approach, where the very nature of sound itself formed the starting point. It prompted new musical forms and new modes of listening, as well as articulating an awareness of the fragile natural environment in and from which it was formed. I shall examine some of the ways in which this particular piece is built from a melodic fragment taken from a work by Murail's late friend Gérard Grisey, and discuss the role of electronics in transforming the work's materials. But I also wish to situate *Winter Fragments* within wider debates about the complex relationship between romanticism and modernism, extending and deepening recent re-thinking of musical modernity. Via such critical tropes as lateness and nostalgia, I shall ask how the aesthetics of modernism can reframe an understanding of spectral music. But equally, I shall ask how spectral music can refigure an understanding of (late) modernism. In its evocation of nature's fragility, *Winter Fragments* (and many other works by Murail) refract larger concerns of the later 20th century with environmental catastrophe. At the heart of the piece – like much spectral music – lies a late-modern paradox between technology as progressive, creative tool, and technological modernity as (ecological) destructive force. I shall propose an approach based in ruin theory that might begin to re-evaluate the relationship between nature and culture represented in this work in order to point towards a radical kind of critical listening.