

From dystopian electronics to immersive theatrical spectacles combining hallucinatory visuals and sci-fi storytelling, the composer seeks new worlds to explore

By Antonio Poscic
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"I once played in Paris at IRCAM, with serious music and people listening and waiting for something that had a strong foundation in composition," Franck Vigroux reminisces over a video call from a residency at the Art Zoyd Studios in Valenciennes in the north of France. "The next day, I was playing at 7am at Berghain. One week later, I was showing a performance I created at a dance festival. I've been able to experience all of this."

Over several decades, the French musician, composer and performance director has crafted an imposing body of work. With their aggressive soundscapes, his albums, performances and stage pieces often appear as monoliths of impenetrable, thorny facades. Yet they radiate presence and charisma, full of frayed heaviness. From the freewheeling electroacoustic rock improvisation of his early records, hallmarked by the *Lilas* trilogy (2003–05), to the aestheticised, dystopia-fuelled audiovisual performances and club-adjacent works he makes today, he has maintained a fascinating artistic rigour, sculpting and ablating the darkest of sonic masses.

Still, the common thread is conceptual rather than practical. "I come from the working class," declares Vigroux. "My father was a mason, my mother was a nurse, and we had no music at home. I remember a couple of vinyl albums. It was Michel Sardou, a classic popular singer from the 1970s, and one Pink Floyd album, *The Dark Side Of The Moon*. But when I was a teenager [in the 1980s], I saw Pink Floyd's concert on TV, and I was like, wow, I want to play guitar like that."

These days the Floyd link is a formative anecdote rather than an inspiration he actively pursues. Yet a sense of glacial drift and celestial immensity remains an eternal passenger in his music.

Vigroux explains that an appreciation for guitar shredders like Joe Satriani and Steve Vai in adolescence led him to playing in metal and rock bands. But his true interest lay elsewhere. "I was particularly attracted to blues music, but mainly the Delta blues. Just one chord, one note – super primitive music. This is maybe something I still do. Everywhere in my work, there is always something very primitive, very minimalistic, just very simple."

In the 1990s, Vigroux had become a fixture of the free improvisation scene in the South of France, but travelled around quite a bit, conducting "free jazz orchestras", from Japan to Leeds (where he met future collaborator, pianist Matthew Bourne). "Improvisation has always been my practice because of the blues," he continues. "I've never been good at reading scores, but I always improvised. I met other musicians, and I started to get into jazz improv, free jazz – all these things."

By the end of the decade, he had connected with kindred heads such as guitarists Marc Ducret and Elliott Sharp, double bassist Bruno Chevillon and drummers Joey Baron and Michel Blanc, later recording with them and releasing their albums on his D'Autres Cordes (DAC) imprint. If he feels distanced from that period and scene, he remembers it fondly. "It was good because I went into this different dimension and practice. My artistic life has always been a lot of cycles, and that was one of them."

The early 2000s saw Vigroux exploring increasingly unconventional forms. "I started to use more effects and discovered

experimentation, guitarists playing less with virtuosity, but more with sound itself," he notes. "I experimented with other instruments, with violas or reel-to-reel tape machines. I bought a synthesizer and drum machines. I moved from guitar music, these rules and harmony, and learned to focus on sound. It took time to stop completely. I was still playing guitar, mixing all these instruments, but slowly, I went to only electronic instruments or experimentation."

This experimentation reached a peak in the apocalyptic collision of extreme electronics, industrial, musique concrète and noise of albums like 2021's *Atotal*. But the album also reveals architectures that are meticulously minimal, stark and punishing, a continuation of earlier interests in streamlined compositional clarity. The technoid rhythms and metallic surfaces of *Atotal* are also echoed in 2016's *Rapport Sur Le Désordre*, from Vigroux's dystopian series of vocoder-heavy music inspired by the speculative fiction of Yevgeny Zamyatin.

Vigroux's two most recent works – 2025's *Nacht* and this year's *Sonnailles* – embody the further evolution of his style, distilling his vast catalogue into narrative-driven, often more approachable song cycles. Like its predecessor *Grand Bal* (2024), *Sonnailles* presents itself as a cinematic, beats-driven affair. Jermaine Saunders's mid-century modernist cover image of an estate car submerged in a motel pool evokes an absurdist take on Edward Hopper's paintings, setting the stage for music that veers between synthwave, industrial à la HEALTH and Youth Code, pulsing techno patterns, and Jan Hammer-esque scores for 1980s TV. Sleazy synth lines sneak through a humid, neon-lit night-time dérive, only to end up in frantic bursts of futuristic, glassy noise, equal parts Aho Ssan and Merzbow.

"*Atotal* was very strong, dystopian," he observes when I ask about this recent arc. "But after years of minimalism – no melody, no chord progression, nothing that could sound like classical – I wanted to add some melodies inside. The most important thing is the dramaturgy. That's what I'm trying to do, even if it's tracks and tracks and tracks, they are all making one big whole."

Sonnailles represents the fruit of his more overtly musical efforts. "This album initially was a live set," he says. "I play a lot in the digital art or electronic art scene, but almost two years ago, I had some gigs in China, where we mainly played live AV in clubs. I like it because people have different expectations – they are here for partying, for dancing, but also to experience this surprising proposal. I wanted to do something new, between sophistication and the possibility of dancing to it." Even so, there is very little that could be called typical in Vigroux's vision of club and dance music as heard on *Sonnailles*. Some parts exude a rock energy reminiscent of Ren Schofield's Container sets.

In 2025, Vigroux again ventured outside his comfort zone, playing the "underground rock, punk, metal festival" MordorFest at the Cascade du Déroc in Nasbinals, southern France, appearing alongside post-hardcore and noise rock bands. "It was very unexpected to be invited. The audience thought I was a DJ," he laughs. "I like these challenges. Usually, in my previous work, it's a mix of atmospheric beats and sophistication. But this album [*Sonnailles*] is really beat-oriented. In these festivals or clubs, they don't come only for you, so you have to keep the audience in front of you. You have to be – it's not a bad word! – catchy. Otherwise, they leave, and they go to the bar. So this was the

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motivation. How can I do something that is me, while also making a lot of beats?"

Nacht meanwhile reveals Vigroux's interest in film, theatrical pieces and audiovisual performances. "I don't know exactly when, but more than 25 years ago, I was also attracted by experimental films, radio and everything narrative. I started to learn how to make films, but without cameras," he explains, name-checking Stan Brakhage. "I was attracted by the visual and wanted to create sound for it. I started to really experiment, mixing everything."

Created with visual artist Antoine Schmitt and vocalist Loïc Varanguien de Villepin, *Nacht* draws from Vigroux's drone and ambient-oriented side, unfolding dramatic musical and lyrical arrangements, then pressing them against generative video artworks that react to singing in real time.

"I met Loïc in the South of France, where he's based. He's a countertenor singer, but also an experimentalist, and he makes noise with his voice," explains Vigroux. "He imitates birds, which is quite crazy, so I invited him to perform in what I call an electronic opera in 2024. It's a big performance with dancers, singers

and a lot of cinematography. Then, I also decided to do something different with him, so we created *Nacht*."

Nacht eschews a traditional scenario in favour of an abstract narrative. Here, the vocalist's incantations simulate the dissolution of human language inside a ruined post-industrial landscape. Visually, the performance is similarly minimal and crumbling, built out of monochrome particles undulating in a generative video and paired with heady strobing effects. This phantasmagorical story of memory, loss and transformation shifts through what Vigroux calls sonic tableaux, with Varanguien's voice transforming from angelic falsetto to Diamanda Galás-esque growls and shrieks. The electronic backdrop falls through segments of overloaded, feverish textures, industrial thrum, breathless rhythms and heavy yet bright fuzz of the Sunn O))) variety, all of it broken up by breakbeats and stabs of static.

"We just did an Australian tour, and we had a lot of people crying," responds Vigroux when I ask about the emotional dimension of the work. "I remember one guy who came and said, 'I thought God was talking to me.' Another one told us, 'I saw your show, after that, I'm not afraid of dying any more.'" While Varanguien's



poignant delivery and Schmitt's gliding particle streams instil a sense of gravitas, the piece never buckles under its own weight. The subtle sonic architectures avoid tearjerking clichés in favour of elegant ambient shapes, punctuated by grittier electronics.

While Vigroux's output includes mercurial works that exist between music, theatre and film – such as *Entrailles* (2012) and *Transistor* (2015), both directed by Gregory Robin – today he divides his stage works into two categories. "There's my work with Antoine Schmitt and Kurt d'Haeseleer. These are live AV concerts. I'm on stage, [the visual artist] is on stage, the video is generative – it's still a concert. The idea is to create something synaesthetic, where your brain is not able to distinguish the sound and the visual – it totally integrates."

Cascades (2022) started as Schmitt's "waterfall of pixels" for which Vigroux then provided music. Here, Schmitt turns dots of light into kinetic forces, creating sparse but mathematically precise choreographies of swarming, mutating particles. There's a contrast with d'Haeseleer's visuals, as seen in 2020's *The Island*, maximalist concoctions of cinematic, dystopian and strangely organic elements, imbued with a faint post-internet aesthetic.

"It's always a different process because we like to change," he says of his AV concerts. It's a contrast with his work in the theatrical realm. "But when I do the big performances, it's another world. After all these years, I know a lot about contemporary dance, movement, cinematography, costume design and light design. I learned how to make it, I learned how to discuss with the technicians, with the dancers, with the assistants. I have advisors. I always have a strong theme to develop and create the dramaturgy. Most of the time, the music comes during the process. But it's for theatre, it's not for music venues, it's a different way of creating, it's much more collaborative. There are very few musicians like me who are directing these kinds of productions. That's why I like to call it electronic opera."

Though he no longer defines the likes of *Flesh* (2018), *Forêt* (2021) and *Chutes* (2023) as Gesamtkunstwerk – since a musicologist pointed out to him the authoritarian undertones of the Wagnerian term co-opted by the Third Reich – these are trans-disciplinary works that fuse heavy electronic soundscapes, video art, dance and lighting design.

Regardless of medium, Vigroux's treatment of sound as tangible objects – to be textured, morphed and stretched – alongside his use of concrete materials and hardware manipulation techniques, echoes the ethos of the INA-GRM tradition. When I mention this, he gravitates immediately toward Bernard Parmegiani. "*De Natura Sonorum* is still very impressive, because of the sound production and the quality of the timbre," he says. "The work sounds electronic, yet he only used acoustic sounds. He really went very far, and I think the quality of the production, and how he selected the sounds, how he created something new with them, was very influential for me."

"Christian Zanési was [a] previous director of the GRM," he adds. "In the 2000s and 2010s, he organised performances that opened the GRM to non-academic musicians, and I was part of it. When they invited me first, it was very important, because it was also a way to validate my work. When you are self-taught, when you are just doing it by yourself, isolated like I was, you don't know if you're legitimate. You have to trust yourself – it's not easy."

While Vigroux's works never directly reference French electroacoustic tradition, the minute tectonic shifts, microsound detail and industrial clatter heard on the likes of 2020's *Matériaux* come remarkably close.

In addition to his enduring partnerships with Schmitt and d'Haeseleer, Vigroux's career has been marked by productive musical collaborations with a network of sympathetic experimentalists including Zeitkratzer's Reinhold Friedl and Matthew Bourne. Most notable among these is his work with the late Mika Vainio, immortalised in the unstable structures and decaying pulses of 2015's *Peau Froide*, *Léger Soleil* and 2018's posthumously released *Ignis*. "I had a lot of collaborations, but I learned a lot with Mika Vainio – for instance, he taught me how to tune sounds simply." Their collaboration began in 2012 with a one week

residency in Paris, followed by a performance. Vigroux and Vainio each brought their own raw material to the table, either layering one over the other or blending them entirely.

As Vigroux recalls, the process of recording the music was swift and effortless. "I know we had some material that we never recorded," he adds wearily. "I made an album called *Ciment* in 2014, which I recorded with a 50 euro guitar, just open tuning, and a bottleneck, very classic Delta blues, but I was not trying to play blues, I was only using these tools, and I remember [Vainio] really liked it."

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With the current state of the world, Vigroux's older works sound remarkably prophetic. "Well, the older I get, the less dark my music is. I think it's maybe a bit more melancholy," he quips. "I'm working on an album with a young rapper from Atlanta, z!lster. I'm collaborating with young people, and they think differently, and they have different influences. The music doesn't sound so dark for me now. I know the world is in a weird chaos, and it's more and more dangerous. But in the 1980s, it was already like this. Post-punk, the nuclear threat – there's nothing new. Maybe the sound of this period still resonates in me, from Kraftwerk and others, but also *Blade Runner* and this period of sci-fi. We already went through that, and the generation before, my grandparents, they went into World War Two. I don't want to be too pessimistic. I'm an optimistic person, even if the music sounds dark."

On the topic of authoritarian fiction, Vigroux and Bourne adapted Yevgeny Zamyatin's 1924 novel *We* into a live theatrical piece for piano, voice and electronics. "All this dystopian literature, all these Cold War things, they influenced me. Of course, in the 1980s, we were into George Orwell," he says. "Art in the 20th century was quite dark. I was influenced by composers like Xenakis, Penderecki and Ligeti, as well as sonorism. Mentioning these three, their music was very dark in a certain way. And it was a big rupture, a big cut with the pre-war work."

Having closed his DAC label and reduced involvement in festival organisations, Vigroux today appears more focused on his own work. Yet he remains a "very social person" associated with two French national theatres, and, with writer Michel Simonot, occasionally hosting Bruits Blancs events with the idea of uniting musicians and writers for improvised moments of reading and musical creation. He also connected Raster with events organisers in Bagnols-les-Bains, where their Electric Campfire programme returns for a third time this year. In a way, he brought the festival to France. "All my life, I tried to organise events, to create companies, labels – everything I could do to be autonomous. I think that's the key. I have no advice for anyone, but I would say, don't wait. Don't expect anything, just do it. That's most important. If you have energy, give it, and everybody will follow."

While *Sonnailles*'s pumping cuts capture his relentless drive, Vigroux is already preparing for the next and likely final big multimedia theatrical production. The "anti-road movie" *Hunger*, set to premiere this autumn, follows the tragic regression of a character crushed by the weight and isolation of hyper-modernity. "It requires a lot of production, pre-production and work. I want to do something different now. We want to explore immersive installations – immersive in terms of big installations with sounds and visuals." At 53, Vigroux looks back at his eclectic oeuvre with satisfaction. Having spent his career sliding seamlessly between digital art, performing arts and electronic music – "maybe next time it will be rap and hip-hop" – he attributes his trajectory to being self-taught. "I just do what I want," he concludes. "It's me as I hope to be." ● *Franck Vigroux's Sonnailles is released by raster – artistic platform*