

Towards a Morphological Composition

Sound morphology, holophony and the mediation of live electronics
in a lecture-concert at Tokai University

カタルーニャ現代音楽の現在 · *The Present of Catalan Contemporary Music*
Morphosis LAB · FLEXUS PROJECT, 5th Edition (2025–2026)

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Lecture-concert held on 5 October 2026, 15:20–17:00,
Tokai University, Shonan Campus, Building 13, Room 13-201,
Composition & Music Production Lab, Department of Arts,
School of Humanities and Culture (programme by Prof. Tomonari Higaki).

Abstract. This article documents and theorises a lecture-concert given at Tokai University (Kanagawa, Japan) on 5 October 2026, within the fifth edition of the FLEXUS PROJECT. The session articulated three moments — guided listening to four Catalan electroacoustic works, a collective improvisation with Japanese students and faculty, and a lecture-concert with three works for voice and electronics — around a single compositional hypothesis: that musical writing may begin from the morphology of sound rather than from pitch, and that electronics in mixed music operates through three distinct functions, namely *generating* material, *articulating* form and *fusing* heterogeneous layers into what I call a *holophonic* global sound. After situating the hypothesis within the lineage that runs from Schaeffer’s *objet sonore* to Smalley’s spectromorphology, the article describes the pedagogical design of the session, presents the morphological vocabulary (point, line, iteration, texture) used as a protocol for cross-cultural improvisation, and analyses the author’s *IB: GOTA* (2022–2026) for voice, electronics and video as a case study in which the material, the dramaturgy and the metaphor of the work converge on a single morphological object: the water drop. The conclusions argue that a reduced morphological vocabulary functions as an effective lingua franca for collective creation across languages and notational traditions, and that the lecture-concert format itself constitutes a legitimate — and under-used — site of artistic research.

Companion material. The slides of the session are published as an HTML presentation with per-slide links at <https://www.joanbages.com/research/towards-a-morphological-composition/presentation/>; a reference of the form *slide 12* resolves to [presentation/#12](#). The article

and the companion article *Composing Relations* are available at <https://www.joanbages.com/research/>.

Keywords: sound morphology; spectromorphology; holophony; mixed music; live electronics; free improvisation; music pedagogy; artistic research; Catalan contemporary music; Japan.

Resum. Aquest article documenta i teoritza la conferència-concert feta a la Universitat Tokai (Kanagawa, Japó) el 5 d'octubre de 2026, dins la cinquena edició del FLEXUS PROJECT. La sessió articulava tres moments — escolta guiada de quatre obres electroacústiques catalanes, improvisació col·lectiva amb estudiants i professorat japonesos, i concert comentat amb tres obres per a veu i electrònica — al voltant d'una hipòtesi compositiva: que l'escriptura musical pot començar per la morfologia del so i no per l'altura, i que l'electrònica en la música mixta opera mitjançant tres funcions diferenciades: *generar* material, *articular* la forma i *fondre* capes heterogènies en el que anomeno un so global *holofònic*. L'article situa la hipòtesi en la línia que va de l'objecte sonor de Schaeffer a l'espectromorfologia de Smalley, descriu el disseny pedagògic de la sessió, presenta el vocabulari morfològic (punt, línia, iteració, textura) emprat com a protocol d'improvisació intercultural i analitza *IB: GOTA* (2022–2026) com a estudi de cas.

Paraules clau: morfologia del so; espectromorfologia; holofonia; música mixta; electrònica en directe; improvisació lliure; pedagogia musical; recerca artística; música contemporània catalana; Japó.

要旨 本稿は、2026年10月5日に東海大学湘南キャンパスで行われたレクチャー・コンサート（FLEXUS PROJECT 第5回）を記録し、理論化するものである。音高ではなく音の形態（モルフォロジー）から作曲を始める *GOTA* の分析を通して検証する。

キーワード： 音の形態学；スペクトロモルフォロジー；ホロフォニー；混合音楽；ライブ・エレクトロニクス；即

1. Introduction

A lecture-concert is an awkward object. It is neither a paper, because it must sound, nor a concert, because it must explain itself. In the context of artistic research, however, this awkwardness is precisely its value: it forces the researcher to state a hypothesis in words and then, within the same hour and in front of the same listeners, to submit that hypothesis to the only verification that music admits, which is to be heard.

On 5 October 2026 I gave such a session at Tokai University (Shonan Campus, Kanagawa) at the invitation of Prof. Tomonari Higaki and the Composition & Music Production Lab of the Department of Arts. The session closed the Japanese leg of the fifth edition of the FLEXUS PROJECT, after a lecture and composition masterclass at Nagoya College of Music (29 September), an open rehearsal and concert in Nagoya (30 September–1 October) and a concert with the Japan Society for Electronic Music (JSEM) at Ryōgoku MONTEN Hall, Tokyo (3 October).

The present article has three aims. First, to set out the compositional hypothesis that organised the session — a morphological approach to musical writing and a holophonic conception of the mixed sound — and to situate it within the lineage it belongs to. Second, to describe the design of the session itself as a piece of pedagogical method, and in particular the reduced vocabulary used to make collective improvisation possible between musicians who shared neither a language nor a repertoire. Third, to analyse one work, *IB: GOTA*, as a case in which the theoretical claim, the compositional material and the poetic image of the piece are, I shall argue, the same thing seen from three angles.

What follows is therefore documentation and reflection rather than experiment. The observations in Section 7 are qualitative and were gathered in a single session with a single group; they are offered as working hypotheses for further sessions, not as results.

2. Context: FLEXUS PROJECT as a model of circulation

Morphosis Ensemble is a mixed electroacoustic ensemble based in Barcelona, founded in 2014 and directed by the author. Two features of the group are relevant here. The first is the absence of a fixed line-up: the ensemble ranges from a duo to a large formation and changes shape with each project, so that the ensemble itself behaves like a morphology rather than an instrument. The second is that creation is treated as research — new works, new notational solutions, spectromorphological and graphic scores, staging — rather than as the production of a programme.

The FLEXUS PROJECT, launched in 2023, is the international platform through which this work travels. The name is deliberate: *flexus* is Latin for bent, flexible. FLEXUS is not a touring circuit but a network with a cycle: composers from different countries are invited into an edition; they write new works for the ensemble, frequently using open or graphic notation; the works are premiered, recorded and publicly discussed; and each composer then hosts the ensemble in their own city, at festivals, conservatoires and universities, adding new composers to the following edition. Previous editions have passed through ESMUC (Barcelona), the Contemporaneus Festival (Reus), the New York

City Electroacoustic Music Festival and Tallinn Music Week.

The fifth edition, *Morphologies of Sound* (2025–2026), took the network to Japan. This matters methodologically: a network of this kind does not export a repertoire, it exposes a method to conditions it did not design. The Tokai session was the point at which that exposure was most direct, because it required the method to survive being handed over to musicians who had encountered it twenty minutes earlier.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 From the sound object to spectromorphology

The hypothesis that organises my work is not new, and I state its genealogy plainly. Pierre Schaeffer’s *Traité des objets musicaux* [20] proposed that the unit of musical thought need not be the note but the *objet sonore*, described through a typo-morphology of mass, grain, allure, dynamic profile and melodic profile — a taxonomy made usable for practitioners by Michel Chion’s *Guide* [6] and, for English-speaking readers, by the translation of the *Traité* by North and Dack [21]. Schaeffer’s *écoute réduite*, the suspension of causal and semantic listening in favour of the sound’s own properties, remains the condition of possibility for everything that follows, whatever one thinks of its phenomenological claims [12].

Denis Smalley’s spectromorphology [22] converted this taxonomy into a vocabulary of motion and growth: onset, continuant and termination; gesture and texture; spectral space and its occupation. The decisive move, for a composer, is that spectromorphology describes *shapes in time* at every structural level, so that the same descriptive language can account for a two-second event and for a twelve-minute form. Smalley later extended the model to the listener’s spatial experience [23]; Trevor Wishart’s *On Sonic Art* [26] offered a complementary account of sonic transformation as a compositional continuum. Eric Clarke’s ecological account of listening [8] provides a useful corrective: listeners do not hear morphologies in a vacuum, they hear them as the behaviour of something.

My own position, developed first in the doctoral thesis *Création musicale et sonore avec des systèmes musicaux interactifs* [3] and in subsequent writings on interactive musical systems [2], is that this descriptive vocabulary can be inverted and used *prospectively*, as a compositional grammar. One does not begin with pitches and later decide the timbre; one begins by deciding the grain, the attack, the sustain, the decay and the trajectory of a sound in space, and pitch — when it appears at all — is a consequence of that decision. Spectromorphological and sonorous scores are the notational device by which such decisions become transmissible to performers [19].

3.2 Holophony: a working hypothesis

The term *holophony*, as I use it, does not denote a spatialisation technique. It names a perceptual target: a *global sound* constructed from layers of heterogeneous nature — acoustic instrument, voice, live-processed signal, fixed media, and sometimes image — which the ear nevertheless integrates into a single sounding body.

The hypothesis is that this integration is not a by-product of good balance but a compositional object in its own right, which can be written for. It requires that the layers share morphological properties even when they do not share physical origin: a common grain, compatible attack profiles, coordinated trajectories of growth and decay. Where those properties diverge, the ear separates the layers and hears an instrument accompanied by a loudspeaker; where they converge, it hears one sound.

This is where my position departs slightly from the literature on mixed music, which has tended to frame the problem as one of *interaction* — Marco Stroppa’s critique of naive interactivity [24], Jean-Claude Risset’s reflections on real-time composition [17], Flo Menezes’s proposal for a morphology of interaction [14], and the long technical tradition descending from Rowe [18] and Winkler [25]. Interaction describes how the parts exchange information. Holophony describes what the result should sound like. The two are not in competition, but the second is, I think, the better compositional criterion: a system may interact impeccably and still produce two musics in the same room.

4. Three functions of electronics in mixed music

For pedagogical purposes — and this was the single slide the Tokai students were asked to retain — I reduce the role of electronics in mixed music to three functions. The reduction is deliberate and, like all reductions, lossy; its justification is that composition students encountering electronics for the first time generally need a question to ask of a piece, not a map of the field.

Generate material. New sounds are derived from the instrument itself: a breath, a key click, a consonant or a vowel becomes a texture, a cloud, a resonance. The electronics here is an extension of the instrument’s own morphology, and the relation between source and result is one of descent.

Articulate form. The electronics marks sections, prepares an entry, prolongs a gesture beyond the performer’s breath, or answers them. Here it operates at the formal level, as punctuation and as memory; much of what Emerson describes as the negotiation of local and field languages [9, 10] happens at this level.

Fuse the layers. Acoustic and electronic sounds meet in the room and are heard as one global sound. This is the holophonic function proper, and it is the one most often left to the mixing desk rather than written into the score.

The three are not exclusive; most pieces use all three, and the analytical question — which I put to the students before each work in Part A — is which of them *dominates*, and why.

5. Session design

The session lasted one hundred minutes and was built in three parts, framed by a twenty-minute presentation. The dramaturgy was deliberately inverted with respect to the usual

masterclass format: the students listened first, played second, and received the theory last, as a retrospective explanation of what they had already done.

5.1 Part A — Listening: three generations of Catalan electroacoustic music

Four fixed-media and mixed works were presented, each with a listening instruction rather than an analysis (Table 1). The programme was chosen to represent three historical strata of electroacoustic practice in Catalonia rather than a stylistic preference.

Composer	Work	Dur.	Listening instruction
Xavier Gelabert	<i>Sleepless</i>	7:00	How is time perceived? Where does the music stop moving?
Joakim Sandgren	<i>ainsi formées</i>	8:45	How does each gesture carry energy into the next?
Andrés Lewin-Richter	<i>Homenaje a Bruno Maderna</i>	6:47	What does the studio itself contribute to the material?
Anna Bofill	<i>Vita quotidiana</i>	7:53	How are space, proportion and structure built in sound?

Table 1: Part A: programme and listening instructions.

Andrés Lewin-Richter (b. 1937) and Anna Bofill (b. 1944) belong to the founding generation of electronic music in Barcelona. Lewin-Richter held a Fulbright fellowship at Columbia University in 1962, working in the orbit of Ussachevsky, Davidovsky and Varèse at the Columbia–Princeton Electronic Music Center, and was a founding member of the Phonos studio in 1974, the first electronic music studio in Spain and still active today within Universitat Pompeu Fabra [16]. His *Homenaje a Bruno Maderna* is a homage from one pioneer to another: Maderna (1920–1973) co-founded the Studio di Fonologia Musicale of the RAI in Milan with Luciano Berio in 1955. Bofill is simultaneously a composer and an architect — co-author of Walden 7 in Sant Just Desvern and of the Barri Gaudí in Reus — who studied electroacoustic music with Gabriel Brnčić [4] and computer music with Xavier Serra, and attended Iannis Xenakis’s course at CEMAMU in Paris in 1985. The architectural filiation is audible, and the Xenakian lineage [27] is not merely biographical: both composers think in proportion and in built space.

Joakim Sandgren (b. 1965) represents a second stratum: trained in Stockholm, then at IRCAM’s composition and computer music course (2000) and at Université Paris 8 (2003). He conceives his works as sound sculptures in which form emerges from the exploration of energy flows inside the material — a description that is, in effect, a morphological poetics, and whose title *ainsi formées* (“thus formed”) states it outright. Xavier Gelabert, who was present and introduced his own piece, stands for the current practice: synthesisers, voice, immersive formats and collaboration with dance.

Placing these four works before any theory was a methodological decision. The stu-

dents were told in advance that they would be asked to play in Part B, and were therefore listening instrumentally, for materials they might use, rather than historically.

5.2 Part B — A shared morphological vocabulary

Part B was a collective improvisation between Morphosis DUO (Joan Martí-Frasquier, saxophones; the author, live electronics) and students, faculty and professional musicians of Tokai University, on any instrument or voice.

The obstacle in such a situation is well known to anyone who has tried it: without a shared score, a shared language or a shared repertoire, collective improvisation defaults either to timid imitation or to undifferentiated density. The solution adopted was to distribute, in ninety seconds, a vocabulary of four morphological categories and four relational operations (Table 2). The categories are a deliberate simplification of Schaefferian typology and of Smalley’s gesture/texture pair [20, 22]; the operations are borrowed from the ordinary practice of free improvisation as described by Bailey [5] and theorised, in the computational case, by Lewis [13].

Material	Definition given to the players	Operation	Definition
Point	short impulse, attack, click	Imitate	adopt the incoming shape
Line	sustained sound, held tone or noise	Contrast	answer with another shape
Iteration	repeated pulses, trills, grains	Transform	modify it gradually
Texture	a cloud of many small sounds	Wait	withhold; silence as material

Table 2: Part B: the improvisation protocol. Four materials, four operations.

Two further instructions completed the protocol. First, silence is material, not absence: waiting is a legitimate move and was named as such. Second, the live electronics captures and transforms what the players produce, so that any sound a player makes may return to them changed — which makes the fusion function of Section 4 immediately experiential rather than theoretical.

The session was conducted in four stages adapted on the spot to the instruments present: (i) points only; (ii) lines are admitted; (iii) free play with all four materials; (iv) a collective ending in silence. No conductor, no pitch material and no agreed duration were specified.

5.3 Part C — Three ways of singing with electronics

The final part was a lecture-concert in which each work was introduced immediately before its performance, as a practical application of the framework presented. The three works were chosen because each exemplifies a different relation between voice and electronics.

Hideki Kozakura’s *ZWEI EULEN*, for solo voice, served as the bridge to the Nagoya portion of the tour: Kozakura studied at Tokyo University of the Arts and the Royal

College of Music in Stockholm, briefly with Tristan Murail, and teaches theory and composition at Nagoya College of Music; his declared influences range from the German classical tradition through Kabuki and Kyōgen to acid techno. Xavier Gelabert's *VAGINA DENTATA*, for mezzo-soprano and electronics, takes its title from a mythical motif widespread in folk narrative, and poses the question put to the audience before the performance: is the electronics a mirror of the voice, its shadow, or a second character? The author's *IB: GOTA* closed the session and is examined in the following section.

The performers were Anna Tobella (mezzo-soprano), Joan Martí-Frasquier (baritone and alto saxophone), Xavier Gelabert (electronics and voice) and the author (electronics).

6. Case study: *IB: GOTA*

IB: GOTA, for voice, electronics and video, belongs to the *IB* cycle, which also produced the electroacoustic opera *IB: le cornu ancestrale* (2022). The cycle stages two characters, **H** and **O**, who travel through mental landscapes and who, taken together, form a single element: H_2O , the drop of water. The syllable *ib* lies at the root of many Iberian toponyms and hydronyms; in Catalan, *gota* means drop. The title is thus simultaneously a chemical formula, an etymology and a character list.

What interests me analytically is that the work's central image and its compositional procedure are the same object. A drop has no shape of its own: it takes the shape of whatever it passes through and remains the same drop. This is, precisely, a morphological definition — identity as persistence of material through transformation of form — and it is also a reasonably exact description of what live electronics does to a voice. Gaston Bachelard's reading of water as the element of becoming, in which matter is defined by its capacity to take form rather than by any form it holds [1], is the poetic substrate; the compositional consequence is that every electronic transformation in the piece must preserve some invariant of the vocal material, or the metaphor collapses.

Three technical consequences follow. First, all electronic material is derived from the voice, so that the fusion of Section 4 has a physical guarantee: the layers share a grain because they share an origin. Second, the processing chain is written as a trajectory of states rather than as a set of effects, so that the listener perceives continuous deformation rather than switching. Third, the video is treated as a further morphological layer and not as illustration — the relation sought is the *synchresis* described by Chion [7], in which image and sound weld into a single percept, extended here to the case where the image is itself an abstract morphology.

In performance, with Anna Tobella's voice, the piece functions as the demonstration the lecture could not give in words: the audience is asked to locate the boundary between the singer and the loudspeaker and, when the writing succeeds, cannot.

7. Discussion

Three observations from the session seem worth recording, with the caveat stated in the introduction: they are qualitative impressions from one group on one afternoon.

On the vocabulary. The four-category protocol functioned as a *lingua franca*. Within the first stage — points only — the group achieved a coordinated texture without verbal negotiation, and the restriction appeared to lower rather than raise the threshold of participation: players who hesitate to improvise “music” will readily contribute “a short sound”. The naming of silence as material visibly changed behaviour, reducing the defensive over-playing typical of first encounters. I would hypothesise that the effectiveness of the protocol lies less in its content than in its size: four plus four is small enough to be held in memory while playing.

On the inversion of the format. Presenting the repertoire before the theory, and the theory before the concert, meant that the students met the concepts twice — once implicitly, as listeners and players, and once explicitly, as terminology. In the discussion that followed, questions concerned the *function* of the electronics in specific passages rather than the technology used, which suggests that the three-function reduction of Section 4 did some analytical work.

On circulation. The FLEXUS cycle described in Section 2 assumes that each node eventually becomes a host. The Japanese edition tested this against a context with its own long and independent electroacoustic tradition — institutionally anchored in JSEM, whose trajectory Mikako Mizuno has documented [15], and whose acousmatic performance practice, including the acousmonium work developed by Tomonari Higaki [11], differs appreciably from Catalan practice. The lesson of the week is that circulation of this kind is productive precisely where the practices do not coincide: what travelled was not repertoire but a way of listening, and it returned modified.

8. Conclusions

Three conclusions may be drawn, of unequal strength.

First, and most securely: a reduced morphological vocabulary is a workable protocol for collective improvisation across linguistic and notational boundaries. It requires no common repertoire, no common notation and almost no common language, and it produces musically coherent results within minutes. The protocol of Table 2 is offered for reuse and criticism.

Second, with the status of a working hypothesis: holophony — the construction of a single global sound from heterogeneous layers — is a more useful compositional criterion for mixed music than interaction, because it specifies a perceptual result rather than a signal-flow architecture, and because it can be written into the score rather than delegated to the mixing desk. Establishing this properly would require listening tests that this session did not attempt.

Third, and most speculatively: the lecture-concert deserves to be treated as a form of artistic research in its own right, and not as the dissemination of research conducted

elsewhere. Its specific epistemic virtue is that it does not permit the gap between claim and evidence to remain comfortable. One says what one believes about sound, and then, in the same room and within the hour, the sound either bears it out or does not.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A. Session programme

カタルーニャ現代音楽の現在 — The Present of Catalan Contemporary Music

Morphosis LAB · FLEXUS PROJECT, 5th Edition 2025–2026

Tokai University, Shonan Campus, Building 13, Room 13-201

Monday 5 October 2026, 15:20–17:00

Host: Composition & Music Production Lab, Department of Arts, School of Humanities and Culture

Presentation (20 min) — Morphosis Ensemble; the three functions of electronics; the FLEXUS PROJECT.

Part A — Listening (≈30 min)

Xavier Gelabert, *Sleepless* (7:00) · Joakim Sandgren, *ainsi formées* (8:45) · Andrés Lewin-Richter, *Homenaje a Bruno Maderna* (6:47) · Anna Bofill, *Vita quotidiana* (7:53)

Part B — Collective improvisation

Morphosis DUO (Joan Martí-Frasquier, saxophones; Joan Bagés i Rubí, live electronics) with students, faculty and professional musicians of Tokai University.

Part C — Lecture-concert

Hideki Kozakura, *ZWEI EULEN* (voice) · Xavier Gelabert, *VAGINA DENTATA* (mezzo-soprano and electronics) · Joan Bagés i Rubí, *IB: GOTA* (voice, electronics and video)

Morphosis Ensemble in Japan: Joan Martí-Frasquier (baritone and alto saxophone) · Joan Bagés i Rubí (electronics, artistic direction) · Anna Tobella (mezzo-soprano) · Xavier Gelabert (electronics and voice).

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