

## To Speculate – On Music – and/as the Sound of *Différance*

This paper was originally composed as an *oral* presentation to both exemplify and explore our experience of sense and/as sound, sound and/as sense, *in* music – in speech. Taking inspiration from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception and expression and Derrida's elaboration of *différance*, and putting traditional musicology out of play, the presentation takes the sound of music – not its organization but its sound – as its point of departure for (re)thinking the relationship between sense and sound, music and words, ethics and aesthetics in/as/for a *music(ologie) originaire*. *Music(ologie)* articulated from the other side of language that is, the *hither* side of language, in/from the space between the instituted categories of sedimented thought: between sense and non-sense, what is and what is (not) to be (music, for example), between silence and speech, necessity and chance/choice. Which is *the* ethical space. The space of a response-ability that cannot not be assumed. The space of becoming. Of poethics. Of kinaesthetics. Of a *music(ologie)* to come. Of the future. *À-venir*. A *music(ologie) originaire*.

### 1. Now, that's what I call musicology

'I once had a talk with Leon Kirchner in the labyrinthine darkness of a New York concert hall. I'm told that the following morning at Harvard all Kirchner's students knew of our tête-à-tête. Now, that's what I call 'musicology'.'<sup>1</sup>

Like Morton Feldman I don't like to talk about musicology either. And wish that I could dismiss it as efficiently as he does – with a joke, as a joke. So I can get on with my own work – in music, on music – on my own terms, on its terms, without the disciplinary demand of (music) history, theory, and method that I know what I will hear before I hear it and what I will say – indeed, what I *can* say, what can be said – before I even begin the effort of speech.

Would that musicology could be so easily wished away. With a joke. As a joke. As the affectation and obsession of academics with names and reputations greater than their own. But, as those of us gathered here today know all too well, musicology can't and won't be wished away. Whether we like it or not, it constitutes the conditions, indeed the subject, of our work – the terms and relevancies of the very textuality of music – within which we are caught. It defines, that is, our own bound place. At this very moment. In *this* work. Here. I am. All bound up. In musicology.

Like Western metaphysics  
Mick Jagger  
Mozart  
And Madonna  
Musicology looks as if it's here to stay.

Besides I have a debt to pay.  
It is the topic of the day.  
Nevertheless,  
I'd like to see what happens  
If we put it out of play.

This at least is what I decided I would try and do today.

To take advantage of this expert meeting to speculate on music and *différance*.

On music as/and the sound of *différance*, and – in deference to my host – the implications of this for the future of music(ology) and ethics, for music(ology) and ethics to come. *À-venir*.

To speculate *on* music(ology) and/as the sound of *différance*. The way one says that something functions *on* such and such an energy source, 'or such and such a fuel – for example, to run on high octane. To the point of exhaustion.'<sup>2</sup>

To speculate. To reckon with. To risk losing. To invest in a future without surety of return. To let go.

To stage an encounter between (the silence of) *différance* and (the sound of) music, between music(ology) – the logos of music/the music of logos – and ethics.

To hear and see them otherwise. Music. Logos. Ethics. *Différance*. As originary (*originaire*). Truths in the making. Truths to be made. Not found. In music. To be made as music. Not found in the pre-established harmonies of sense or sound. But made. In music. In the space

1 Morton Feldman, "Conversations without Stravinsky", in: *Give My Regards to Eighth Street. Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, Cambridge: Exact Change, 2000, pp. 50-62, p. 53.

2 Jacques Derrida, "Ja, or the faux-band II" in *Points ... Interviews, 1974-1994*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995, pp. 30-77, p. 48.

between sense and sound and (as Derrida might say) 'beyond the tranquil familiarity which links us to one and the other occasionally reassuring us in our illusion that they are two'.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Waving goodbye to Boulez

My objective then is to give place to another kind of music(ology), a music(ology) of the other, which is neither exegesis nor commentary, analysis or interpretation, but much more like a *conversation* – literally: a turning oneself about, or dwelling – with the other: with the unknowable and the unknown, the future-to-come not given in the present or the past; like an *invitation* or *appeal* to the other; a *solicitation* of or *response* to the call of the other; an *engagement* or *encounter* with the other. With all the risk and responsibility entailed by the reversibility and ambivalence of these terms – conversation, invitation, appeal, solicitation, response, encounter – epitomized in the undecidability of 'engagement' which in English can designate equally betrothal and battle.

To give place to (the necessity and possibility of) what Merleau-Ponty calls *expression*: truth in the making – *parole originaire*, *parole parlante* – which he likens to a step in the fog: no-one can say where, if anywhere, it will lead.<sup>4</sup> And which he contrasts with the ready-made significations of sedimented speech – *parole secondaire*, *parole parlée* – empirical language which he describes as 'the opportune recollection of a pre-established sign', 'the worn coin placed silently in my hand'.<sup>5</sup>

There. Here. Where?

We are already speaking about ethics. All round from outside. All round from a center. Somewhere near. Here and there. About. What is to be or not to be. Made. Music(ology). True. Of the future. About. What is to come. (True). To be made not found. In the space between what is and what is (not) known, what is and what will come. To pass.

A step in the fog. Without the guardrails of institutionalized thought. Who know where, if anywhere, it will lead.

Here. There. Anywhere. We are already on our way. Waving goodbye to Boulez, Morton Feldman's favourite *bête noire* who, he rejoices in telling us, must know everything before *he* steps off the carpet.<sup>6</sup>

## 3. Stepping off the carpet

Stepping off the carpet – giving up the guardrails of established thought, the sedimented speech of *parole parlée*, *parole secondaire* – to give place to, to give time to another music(ology), a music(ology) of the other – a *musicologie originaire* – makes possible and (I believe) necessary, a (renewed) phenomenology of music, which takes the concrete phenomena of music and our lived experience of it as its point of departure, its object, and its measure, rather than the ideal(ised) abstractions of (music) history, theory, or method. Abstractions which cannot, nevertheless, be ignored – cannot *not* be engaged – since, like it or not, they set the terms within which music appears, within which our experience of music appears, and what is called music – what calls to us as music – is sustained, named, framed and contained *as* music.

The institutionalized categories of musicology must therefore be engaged. Not to make them make sense otherwise i.e. to deploy them in the interests of another ontotheology of music – an ontotheology of an other music/of the music of the other – which seems to me to be the present danger of 'new musicology': exchanging the hallucinated hypostasis of the identity of the One (one Truth, One History, one Method, one Music, one Man) for the equally hallucinated hypostasis of the identity of the Many. But rather to *unmake* the sense the institutionalized categories have made. To put them to work only and always as instruments of their own undoing, their own de(con)struction. To disarm them and put them out of play. To release music(ology) from the dogmatism of a logos that stifles expression (in Merleau-Ponty's sense), from the prisonhouse of principles that insist on more of the Same.

This does not mean that anything goes. On the contrary, giving up the guardrails of institutionalized thought – the categories and canons that name, frame, tame and contain what can and cannot be seen, heard and said (about/in/as music) – requires enormous (self-) discipline and relentless and rigorous vigilance and respect for the *singularity* of the musical phenomena, the particularity of our own relationship to it, and the irreducible ambivalence and ambiguity (undecidability) of the space between.

It does mean, however, that nothing is ruled out *a priori*. Except, of course, the imposition of a rule, a law, a set of terms – a logos of finalities and ends (of terms): a terminology – which *predetermines* what can be seen and heard in and as music(ology).

3 Jacques Derrida, "Différance" in *Margins of Philosophy*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986, pp. 1-27, p. 5.

4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 3.

5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence", in: *Signs*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, pp.39-83, 44.

6 Morton Feldman, "Crippled Symmetry", in: *Give My Regards to Eighth Street*, pp.134-149, p. 146.

It means also that there can be no final solutions. No resolutions. No end terms. That all descriptions, creations, compositions, expressions, elaborations, conversations, conclusions ... are provisional, open, available for dissemination, revision, interruption. For, the purpose – indeed the condition – of a *musicologie originaire* i.e. a music(ology) of/for the future is not to fix or settle or resolve anything but to maintain the openness of the music(ologic)al field to the space between what is and what is (not) named, framed, contained. What is and what is (not) known. To solicit and sustain the space-between (existence and essence) which is for me the ethical space – the space of becoming not-knowing, of judgement and decision, of chance and necessity, or responsibility, of *existence*, of *différance*.

So, finally, let's start what we have come into the room to do. To speculate – on music – and/as the sound of *différance* (the way one says that something functions on such and such an energy source).

#### 4. Neither a word nor a concept

*Différance* is neither a word nor a concept, according to Derrida. It is a neologism – one of many 'nonsynonymous substitutions',<sup>7</sup> coined by Derrida to designate the movement of differentiation and delay (deferral) which never appears *as such* but which makes the appearance of the *as such* possible: subjects, objects, signification, structure, system, sense, non-sense etc. It is a silent movement which takes place *between* words – between chance and necessity, speech and writing, the sensible and the intelligible, existence and essence – which sustains, maintains, detains, retains, contains what appears to be and not be ('beyond the tranquil familiarity which links us to one and the other occasionally reassuring us in our illusion that they are two').

Derrida speaks of *différance* as if it belonged exclusively to language, to phonemes, or at least to signification. But in his essay on '*Différance*' he locates it at the juncture of what he considers to have been most decisively inscribed in the thought of our 'epoch' with reference to: 'the difference of forces in Nietzsche, Saussure's principle of semiological difference, differing as the possibility of [neurone] facilitation, impression and delayed effect in Freud, difference as the trace of the other in Levinas, and the ontic-ontological difference in Heidegger'.<sup>8</sup>

To which I would add the movement of '*écart*' (dehis-

cence, divergence) in Merleau-Ponty, the (im)possibility of *jouissance* in Lacan, the relation of the 'between' in Buber. (The list is, of course, not exhaustive.) And I draw on/from all these moments – these nonsynonymic movements of differentiation, deferral, and delay – in my own work, in this work, on music and/as the sound of *différance*.

For Derrida, this silent movement of *différance* which produces effects of difference and sense is monumentalized in/by the 'a' of *différance*, which makes all the difference between '*différence*' with an 'e' and '*différance*' with an 'a' but which – like the movement of *différance* itself – is not heard. Cannot be heard. Is 'silent, secret, discreet, like a tomb ... that cannot even be made to resonate. For I cannot even let you know, by my talk, now being spoken ... which '*différance*' I am now talking about at the very moment I speak of it.<sup>9</sup>

As long as the 'I' that is speaking is speaking French, that is. In English – in this talk, by my talk, now being spoken – the 'a' of *différance* which makes all the difference and which cannot be heard in French can be made to resonate in English at the very moment that I speak (of) it. And the difference between (the) two (languages, letters, phonemes) which enables them to operate made to resound. *As/in différence*. Which sounds like a word in French (*différence*) which is the same as a word in English (difference) spoken in English as if it were a word in French. The sound of *différance*. Of the other within the same. Undecidable. Between English and French. Between difference and *differ(ence)* and beyond the tranquil familiarity which links us to one and the other occasionally reassuring us in our illusion that they – that we – are two.

The sound of *différance*. In English in French. In French in English. Undecidable. Like a modulation that refuses to happen. A shift in tonality that doesn't go anywhere. Like a step in the fog. No-one knows where, if anywhere, it will lead.

I am here to make this undecidable tonality of the 'a' of *différance* – the play of *différance* – resonate with against as in the sound of music. To speculate on music and/as the sound of *différance*. To speculate. On the future of music(ologie) in music. On ethics. In music.

To speculate. To assume an inheritance. To reckon with it. To risk losing it. To let go. *À-venir*.

7 Jacques Derrida, "*Différance*", op.cit., p. 12.

8 Jacques Derrida, "*Difference*", in: *Speech and Phenomena*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, pp.129-160, p. 130.

9 *Ibidem*, p. 132.

## 5. To speculate ....

What happens when we listen to the *sound* of music – not to its organization but to its sound? What do we hear?

Let's listen.

[At this point in the presentation I played the first 3 or 4 minutes of *Let's Start* from the *Live* album by Fela Ransome Kuti and The Africa '70 with Ginger Baker. The track begins with these words from Kuti: 'Let us start what we have come into the room to do' spoken first in his own language (Yoruba?) then in an English which echoes its rhythms. The reader is encouraged to take time to listen to some music – any music – at this point to serve as a point of reference for the speculations that follow.]

(i) What we hear when we listen to the sound of music – not to its organization but to its sound – is not sense and not non-sense but (the) *b e c o m i n g ( o f ) s e n s e*, (the) coming-to-be sense of a sense that never actually arrives, a *jouissance* that never comes. What we hear, that is, is the temporalizing and spatializing movement of *différance*: making time, taking time, giving time (and place) to the play – to the 'a' – of *différance*. Differentiation and delay. Like a step in the fog, no-one knows where if anywhere it will lead. 'Let us start what we have come into the room to do,' says Kuti. But what is it? We won't know until we go. Until we start, let ourselves be carried away, carried along, by the sound. Until we stop. And then it will be too late. Music comes and goes. Comes to pass. Comes as always already passed. Past.

(ii) What happens when we listen to the sound of music – not to its organization but to its sound – is that we find ourselves/lose ourselves *s u s p e n d e d* in this transitional space/time of becoming. *En passant*. In suspense. Between – time and space, self and other, essence and existence, necessity and chance, here and there. Coming and going. Between something and nothing, silence and speech, sound and sense, the sensible and the intelligible.

And beyond the tranquil familiarity which links us to one and the other occasionally reassuring us in our illusion that they – that we – are two.

(iii) We find ourselves/lose ourselves, that is, in the temporalizing-spatializing movement of *t r a n s c e n d e n c e*: not of the contingent and complex materiality of our lives, but of the impoverished categories which abstract us from it; which frame, name, maim and contain it and strive to suture our experience of the undecidability of the space-between – the ethical space of creativity, response-ability and becoming (other than more of the same) – to the categorical claims and proper names of Reason and Right.

(iv) We find ourselves/lose ourselves, that is, on the other side of language: not outside or beyond language but on the *h i t h e r s i d e o f l a n g u a g e* in the undecidable space/time *b e t w e e n parole parlée* (sedimented sound, sense, speech) and *parole originaire*.

(v) Caught up in an *i n t e n t i o n a l i t y* which is *n o t o u r o w n*, which belongs to no one but to the sounds themselves, to the threads of silence that music is mixed together with that runs between the sounds.<sup>10</sup> That sustains them. Maintains them. Retains them. *Ce qui reste à force de musique*.<sup>11</sup> An intentionality which is corporeal and organic. Located neither here nor there – neither in me nor in the sounds – but somewhere here-and-there in the space between myself and the sound of music. An intentionality which is kinaesthetic, proprioceptive (not cognitive) and (for that reason) muted (disavowed) by the discursive technologies (the logos) of signification and sense.

(vi) An *u n s i g n i f i e d a n d u n s i g n i f i a b l e i n t e n t i o n a l i t y / r e a l i t y*.<sup>12</sup> To which I cannot *not* respond – assume an attitude, a relationship, a responsibility: lend my body to its truth (*sens*) in the making, consent that my body become involved in it<sup>13</sup>, start what we have come into the room to do. Or not, as the case may be: withhold, withdraw, refuse or resist that consent. And as you will no doubt have discovered for your-

10 Cf. Merleau-Ponty: 'Or, to put the matter another way, we must uncover the threads of silence that speech is mixed together with.' "Indirect Language ...", p. 46.

11 Cf. Jacques Derrida, "Ce qui reste à force de musique", in: *Psyche*, Paris: Editions Galilée, 1987, pp. 95-103.

12 Cf. David Appelbaum: 'I take as a primary question concerning Derrida's thought the following: is the terminal or originary point at which signification abruptly collapses the moment when the voice reveals itself resoundingly? An hypothesis follows from the query: that the shock of recognition – "Whose voice is this?" – liberates the kinaesthetic impulses to participate in and be interrogated by an unsigned and unsignifiable reality.' In: *Voice*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1990, p. xiv.

13 Cf. Jacques Derrida: 'My experience of the signature of Van Gogh is possible only if I myself countersign, that is to say, if in turn my body becomes involved with it.' In "The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida", in: Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 9-32, p. 16.

self, the choice is not always ours to make.

(vii) For it is the sound of music – the acoustical part and not the grammatical part – which is *i n f e c t i o u s*,<sup>14</sup> which catches me and which I catch, which solicits my corporeal consent, my e-motion, in spite of what may or may not be my own better judgment. Not the intentionality of its organization – its system, structure, or sense – which names, frames and contains it *as* music and gives (intelligible) direction (*sens*) to the (corporeal) inf(l)ection of its sounds, turning the undecidable into the effect of a decision: transforming the spatializing and temporalizing movement of *différance* into discrete intervals of space-time. Turning indeterminate sounds into tones, each one in its proper place – properly named, framed, tamed and contained. Turning the sound of music, that is, into a sign – of Nature, Culture, Reason, Order, Spirit, God, Music, or Man, for example. Of Sex, Sin, Satan, Soul, Disorder, Woman, and the Other. (The possibilities are endless). Harnessing sound to drive the message home.

*Tantum ergo sacramentum*<sup>15</sup>

*Veneremur cernui:*

*Et antiquum documentum*

*Novo cedat ritui:*

The acoustical part gives the grammatical (structural, semantic) part effectivity, agency, and force by giving it direct access to the body. While the grammatical (structural and semantic) part confers legitimacy, authority and *sens* on sound.

*Praestet fides supplementum*

*Sensuum defectui.*

But the *sens(e)* of sound is never secure(d). The force of its corporeal inf(l)ection always exceeds the cognitive structures of signification that claim (aim) to name and contain it.

*Genitori, genitoque*

*Laus et jubilatio,*

*Salus honor, virtus quoque*

*Sit et benedictio,*

*Procedenti ab utroque*

*Compar sit laudatio.*

*Amen.*

Ce qui reste à force de musique.

In the space between

Force and signification

Sound and sense

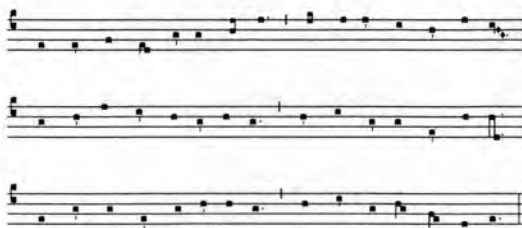
Intelligible and sensible

What is and what is (not) to be

## 6. There is no relief

There is no relief. No *relève* (no *Aufhebung*) from this infection, this inflexion of the sound of *différance*.

(Like Western metaphysics, Mick Jagger, Mozart, and Madonna, it looks as if it is here to stay.)



*Tantum Ergo*

14 Cf. David Appelbaum: 'Of laughs and coughs, the acoustical part is infectious, the muted grammatical representation, not.' In: *Voice*, p. 19.

15 *Tantum Ergo* is a Blessing sung by the congregation during the Benediction service of the Roman Catholic Church. In the original presentation of this paper I sang the italicized words of the Benediction whenever they occurred as they would be sung during the service. To my surprise – and delight, since it demonstrated in practice the truth of my argument about the infectiousness of sound – several members of the audience joined in this singing so there was quite a chorus for the final 'Amen'.

*Genitori, genitoque*

The wind one morning woke up from a sleep<sup>16</sup>  
 Saying now for a frolic now for a leap  
 Now for a mad-cap galloping chase  
 I'll make a commotion all over the place  
 Every baron had something to say  
 To poor perplexed King John that day

Were we not weaned 'til then  
 But sucked on country pleasures childishly?

Our eye-beams twisted and did thread  
 Our eyes upon a double-string

Now my guitar gently weeps

**7. I am obviously under the influence**

Of music and the sound of *différance*

At this very moment

In this work

Here I am

Singing  
 Thinking  
 Writing  
 Reading  
 Speaking

Under the influence

There is no law against it  
 Is there

Is there

**8. We both seek and fear this infection**

This inflection by the sound of *différance*

Not knowing where it's going

Not knowing where

We're going

**9. The anti-dote is dialectics**

Obviously

An aesthetic anaesthetic

No ethic

No kinaesthetic

No response-ability in for of the space between

What is and what is not and what will be

Determinedly

Definitively

Dialectically

So

(And So and So and So)

Busy with the yardstick

Dot and carry one

Counting out the seconds

<sup>16</sup> These lines and those that follow (until the end of section 6) are fragments of poems and/or songs that have stayed in my mind/my body over the years without my quite knowing how or why (like the *Tantum Ergo*). 'Were we not weaned' and 'Our eye-beams twisted' are from poems by John Donne I learned in Grammar School. 'The wind one morning' is from a poem recited by a friend whenever we are out walking in the wind. 'Every baron' is from a poem about King John that I learned in elocution class in junior school: John was a tyrant / John was a tartar / But John put his name / To the great big charter / Every baron from Thames to Tweed / Followed the road to Runnymede / Every baron had something to say / To poor perplexed King John that day / ...). 'Now my guitar' is, of course, (how I remember) a George Harrison song. The sound of *différance*?

Divide and rule

Categorize and contain

No wasted motion

(No e-motion)

Disappear

Arrest

Detain

The in(de)terminable play of *différance*

Dot and carry one

#### 10. This has got to stop

If only as a courtesy to my host. And the others. And of course the music(ologie) to come. Which is as good a reason as any to abandon this particular foray into the fog of (music[ologic]al) speculation, expression and *différance*. To return to the security and silence of the carpet ...

... if it is still there ...