

Imagined Music, the problem of deterritorialization

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As a practicing composer, I hope that my music can speak for itself — that is, that those philosophical strands of thought which inspire me, or those that I conversely push against — will not take away from the deeply personal experience of each listening individual. I am not, nor will I ever, prescribe how to listen to my music. I can only share the ideas which I find myself dialoguing with when reflecting upon my own creative practice, and hopefully leave listeners free to listen in whatever way they find most personally meaningful.

When considering how my work might dialogue with Gilles Deleuze's concept of deterritorialization, it is important first to describe my relationship with some of the more problematic aspects of Western music culture. I am skeptical of the positivist notion that music can somehow have universal appeal — that it can take on characteristics separated from culture and history. A number of scholars in the last quarter-century, including the philosopher Lydia Goehr, the musicologist Richard Taruskin, the musician Christopher Small and the musicologist and writer Nicholas Cook have convincingly challenged the "classical" (i.e. classical aesthetics) model that considers music as a universal language with absolute standards. Nicholas Cook, in *Music: A Very Short Introduction* (1998) — an excellent overview of Western music culture's obsession with these problematic Platonic concepts — writes:

"[...] it becomes the hallmark of true art that it transcends social or historical context and embodies eternal values. It follows from this that art must be appreciated and enjoyed for itself, in an act of almost religious contemplation. In this way classical aesthetics created the image of the autonomous connoisseur or critic, someone who is detached from the processes of artistic creation but who upholds and applies timeless standards of artistic truth and beauty."¹

Music in my view is so clearly a social-cultural practice that is intrinsically tied to time and place. It follows that the "self-contained" work of music, while for so long the marker of a "masterpiece," seems almost absurd today — how could music ever truly transcend the anchoring socio-cultural milieu from which it came and even more, the socio-cultural milieu in which it is again performed or experienced? Music is unavoidably perceived through the lens of culture and history. As Lydia Goehr aptly points out in her book *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*², it is a far more illuminating line of inquiry not to ask what makes a musical work, but rather to step back and ask when, how, and where did people even begin to think of music as musical works.

In Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's last book *What Is Philosophy?* (1994), they engage with similar issues and reach quite different conclusions:

"Art preserves, and it is the only thing in the world that is preserved. It preserves and is preserved in itself [...] It is independent of the creator through the self-positing of the created, which is preserved in itself. What is preserved — the thing or the work of art — is a bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects [...] Sensations, percepts, and affects are beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived [...] The work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself."³

Breaking this down, Deleuze and Guattari are suggesting that art is no more than "a bloc of sensations" — it is not a cultural-historical product, nor is it a "work" in the 19th century sense, but rather purely the sensation itself. As the philosopher and musicologist Michael Gallope summarizes in his article "Is There a Deleuzian Musical Work?" (2008), a musical composition for Deleuze is thus the "self-positing, abstract, and autonomous unity of sonorous material and sensation that stands immediate to itself. It does not wait for the subject to interpret it as a representation of something,

to attribute it a positive meaning, to historicize it, or to account for it in any medium external to it. It is, in itself, a self-positing preserved bloc of sonorous sensation, a compound of percepts and affects".⁴ This deterritorialization of music, its removal from the social and its transformation into something "other", turns sound into a phenomenon of immense power. As Deleuze writes in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (2003), music is so rich with intense sensation from moment to moment that it "strips bodies of their inertia, of the materiality of their presence: it disembodied bodies".⁵ In other words, the flux of sensations brought on by music moves at such a dizzying pace that one loses grips with the self. Once one has cognized one aural sensation, another has already come and gone, leaving no space or time for self-affirmation.

As a creator, I find these ideas deeply inspiring despite their problematic detachment from culture and society — after all, I consider art first and foremost a cultural phenomenon. When setting out to create a new work, I like to imagine that I may be able to reach beyond the limitations of Western music culture to create music that appeals to the immediate sensuous experience of the listener — the ears, minds, and cognitive systems of human beings. With psychoacoustic principles as a guide, my perception-based approach is driven by a continual search for new, communicative forms of musical expression — ones that somehow bring to the fore the blurred perceptual lines that color every individual's listening experiences. With the aim of audibly projecting the energy and activity of partials within complex sounds, my compositional approach combines an awareness of the pitches of the overtone spectrum with a special emphasis on the subtle variations in amplitude, frequency, and tone color of instrumental sounds. What intrigues me most about these veiled inner properties of sounds are the irregular noise elements that accompany them — elements as diverse as the static hiss of air from the human breath on a clarinet to the chaotic beating within the electronic-sounding buzz of a cello multiphonic. These micro-level components give

each sound what I believe to be its inner life: a complex, many-layered play of fluctuations. Acoustic phenomena like beating and combination tones color these fluctuations and give listeners an intangible sense of sonority that defies the simple quantifiable scientific parameters that "describe" that sound. It is these elemental fluctuations and the perceived acoustic phenomena that accompany them that I most seek to explore in my music.

It is not a giant leap from here to an imagined Deleuzian music — "a bloc of sensations [...] a compound of percepts and affects." While I may aspire in some way to this idealized concept of a deterritorialized music when creating, it is simply not realistic in practice. It is not possible to remove music from culture, from history, regardless of how tempting this idea may be artistically. I am happy to embrace this conceptual friction in my work. In fact, I believe it is often frictions like these that make for the most compelling art. As a composer, I believe it is my duty to imagine a more ideal world — a more ideal way of listening outside (or perhaps beyond) our current culture and society. And in imagining this evocative Deleuzian idea — a music of pure sensation — perhaps I may discover, in the process of creation, new and meaningful ways of reaching audiences through sound.

¹ N. COOK, *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, coll. "Very Short Introductions", 1998, 75.

² L. GOEHR, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992.

³ G. DELEUZE & F. GUATTARI, *What Is Philosophy?*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, 163-164.

⁴ M. GALLOPE, "Is There a Deleuzian Musical Work?", *Perspectives of New Music*, 46(2), 2008, 103.

⁵ G. DELEUZE, *Francis Bacon: Logic of Sensation*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 47.