

Music: The Harbinger of Death

“...*A passion for abolition. Just like music – why does it give us the urge to die?*”

(*Dialogues 140*).

Does music make us want to die? To what purpose does Deleuze feel compelled to say such a thing, and further to ask this question *why*? In his perennial work *A Thousand Plateaus* coauthored with Félix Guattari, Gilles Deleuze explores exactly this question. It is not a question easily answered; a cursory examination suggests that Deleuze intends no answer, and further that no attainable answer is sufficient. In order to ask why music ‘gives us the urge to die’ we must first agree that this is precisely what music does. Often we hear music described as that which gives us the urge to dance, or sing, or tap ones feet; or even fall in love. But dying? Dying seems contrary to these claims, and yet we can corroborate them first-hand. It seems then that it is important to understand what Deleuze meant by ‘die’—what death did Deleuze have in mind for which music is to be a cause? But music isn’t so much a *cause* for death, but a muse, a harbinger of sanguine tidings. Music is to provide for us a port of access; by which we can finally liberate ourselves—giving us the potential to die. But how is this to be made possible by music? How can this be true? Why?

It is true that music does not always make us want to get up and dance, and sing, or love. Sometimes music makes us want to die; or rather sometimes we want to die and music helps cajole us toward such suicidal contemplations. This is a facial contour, a line, a specific and relatively uninteresting edge of the [facial] area of possibilities which music avails. A happy tune will maintain an already happy person’s happiness. A sweet

tune will intensify one's lovelorn yearning. The assembly of these lines—these edges of music—comprise the plane of consistency whereby music is merely functional; music as mechanic assemblage. Music, when it gives us the urge to die, is a line of flight away from the plane of consistency. It is in this way which allows us to see that when music truly *moves* us, it must be superficially: literally above the face; on the surface. Thus it cannot be by intention that music has the ability to urge us toward death, but by something more basic and necessary to music. Deleuze suggests:

Certain modern musicians oppose the transcendent plan(e) of organization, which is said to have dominated all of Western classical music, to the immanent sound plane, which is always given along with that to which it gives rise, brings the imperceptible to perception, and carries only differential speeds and slowness in a kind of molecular lapping: *the work of art must mark seconds, tenths and hundredths of seconds*. Or rather it is a question of freeing of time, Aeon, a nonpulsed time for a floating music, as Boulez says, an electronic music in which forms are replaced by pure modifications of speed. (ATP 267)

By juxtaposing the transcendent plane of organization (our current understanding of the facial area of music) with the immanent sound plane (an organization of the becoming-music of sound) Deleuze dispels what we might have thought to be a sure way to draw a line of flight away from the transcendent plane of music. We might have thought that if we were somehow able to seep into the imperceptible superficiality of the musical plane of consistency by avoiding intentionality (one way we might understand intentionality in music is by recognizing the difference between music and sound, rhythm and tonality, melody and harmony, song and vocalization, instrument and noise-maker) we might be

able to escape our plane. But the plane of musicality is a double articulation—a double pincer which captures lines of flight away from one plane (transcendent, immanent) and organizes it into the other (immanent, transcendent).

If we were able to then differentiate properly between these functional elements in music we might be abler at grasping which ways were better for drawing a line of flight away from the musical plane of consistency. In *Difference & Repetition* Deleuze distinguishes between rhythm and meter, doubtlessly two important concepts in musical composition and performance. He writes:

A period exists only in so far as it is determined by a tonic accent, commanded by intensities. Yet we would be mistaken about the function of accents if we said that they are reproduced at regular intervals. On the contrary, tonic and intensive values act by creating inequalities, or incommensurabilities between metrically equivalent periods or spaces. They create distinctive points, privileged instants which always indicate a poly-rhythm. Here again, the unequal is the most positive element. Cadence is only the envelope of a rhythm, and of relation between rhythms. (D&R 21)

As such, rhythm is not a matter of repetition of the same accentuation, but rather a loosened sense of ‘repetition’ of different accentuations. This loosened sense of ‘repetition’ is what indicates poly-rhythm in music—that one may not re-produce an accent means that in so far as one is able to produce accents, they bear a poly-rhythmic relation to any and all other accents of any and all varying types. Similarly, notable composer and musicologist Olivier Messiaen observes:

Suppose that there were a single beat in all the universe. One beat; with eternity before it and eternity after it... That is the birth of time. Imagine then... a second beat. Since any beat is prolonged by the silence which follows it, the second beat will be longer than the first. Another number, another duration. That is the birth of Rhythm. (CdB 32)

Thus the illusion of cadence as the uniform basis for rhythm is exposed as purely auxiliary in the wake of poly-rhythmic, varying accents. This has to do with the way Deleuze contrasts the measure of duration as Chronos (a discrete, regulated, metered passage from past to present to future) with Aion (an indiscrete, unregulated, unmeasured, 'nonpulsed' passage which blurs passage so as to render the temporal concepts 'past', 'present', and 'future' incomprehensible). Cadence fits with a chronological understanding of duration, whereas Deluzian rhythm fits with a Aionic understanding. Chronos persists in the plane of consistency, while Aion persists in the cracks and fissures between planes of consistency; Aion is the pervasive line of flight, the differential diagonal across "a deterritorialized rhythmic block that has abandoned points, coordinates, and measure" (ATP 296). Instead of jumping among chronological notes and measures, punctualities and movements, the Aionic diagonal line of flight slides between speeds and slownesses "like a drunken boat that melds with the line or draws a [new] plane of consistency" (ATP 296).

But how does all of this explain any further what it means for music to "give us the urge to die"? If nothing else, we've learned that differentiating between meter and rhythm, rhythm and tonality, melody and harmony, vocalization and instrumentation, instrumentation and orchestration, does not advance our understanding of how music

urges us toward death. These differentiations, though illuminating with respect to the inner-workings of the Musical [War]-Machine, will not release us from the musical plane of consistency—and thus cannot explain *why* music urges us to die. However, knowing and understanding these differences gives us a better perspective of what exactly this musical plane of consistency consists. With this perspective we might now be able to consider how or what ways one might draw a line of flight away from the musical plane of consistency; even if we are unable to actually draw such a line.

Deleuze and Guattari demark the territory of music by the term ‘refrain’: “Music is a creative, active operation that consists in deterritorializing the refrain. Whereas the refrain is essentially territorial, territorializing, or deterritorializing, music makes it a deterritorialized content for a deterritorializing form of expression” (ATP 299). So in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, the goal of being able to say *why* music makes us want to die is a matter of successfully deterritorializing the refrain. The expression of music is then the same as one’s becoming: becoming-woman, becoming-Jew, becoming-child, becoming-animal. The music produced by these becomings-minoritarian is likewise a becoming-imperceptible (becoming-dead or dying) of the identity of the music; of the refrain. To deterritorialize the refrain is precisely to urge it to die—to become music is to urge one to lose his/her identity; drawing a line of flight from ones becomings or mechanic assemblages.

But how exactly does one go about ‘deterritorializing a refrain’? Is this not the creative process of writing music? Deleuze and Guattari ask “What does music deal with, what is the content indissociable from sound expression? It is hard to say but it is something: *a* child dies, a child plays, a woman is born, a woman dies, a bird arrives, a

bird flies off” (ATP 299). Music then addresses some referential subject matter or ‘block of expression’. The refrain is essentially territorial, and thus so is the subject matter of music. Becoming woman, becoming dead, etc. are all territorial; they are stories, novellas explaining ‘*what happened?*’. Music then acts as an interrupter—a transversal cutting the plane of consistency. By introducing rhythm and tonality, melody and harmony, vocalization and instrumentation, instrumentation and orchestration we’ve effectively stammered the movement of the story or block of expression:

Why does the child die, or the bird fall as though pierced by an arrow? Because of the “danger” inherent in any line that escapes, in any line of flight or creative deterritorialization: the danger of veering toward destruction, toward abolition... Music is never tragic, music is joy. But there are times it necessarily gives us a taste for death; not so much happiness as dying happily, being extinguished. Not as a function of a death instinct it allegedly awakens in us, but of a dimension proper to its sound assemblage, to its sound machine, the moment that must be confronted, the moment the transversal turns into a line of abolition.

(ATP 299)

Music is then necessarily borne of choice: the choice to transverse or to abolish; the choice to fit with numeric rhythm or not (chronos or aion), to choose tonality or atonality, consonance or dissonance. Music is the possibility of the refrain versus failure and death, and the possibility to choose to swarm in the imperceptible fissure between the two.

“Peace and exasperation. Music has a thirst for destruction, every kind of destruction, extinction, breakage, dislocation.” (ATP 299)

Songbirds are meant as an exemplary instance of deterritorializing the refrain; of a line of flight away from identity, and of true music. A composer is a becoming-birdsong, a performer becoming-songbird. It is because of this particular characteristic that Messiaen describes the music of birds as “the greatest musicians existing on our planet” (M&C 51). In Deleuze’s philosophy of difference and repetition, birdsong is the height of music. Ronald Bogue notes “a bird sings an impromptu aria at the break of day, and thus opens its territory to other milieus and the cosmos at large. A point of stability, a circle of property, and an opening to the outside—these are the three aspects of the refrain” (DMP&A 17). The bird’s song is a point of stability in that it opens the day—it is comforting to hear birds singing at dawn. The sound-waves produced by the birdsong demark a circle of property radiating outward from the songbird. By singing, the songbird makes itself available for interaction between other beings and ‘milieus’. However, Messiaen confounds the issue with his *Catalogue d’oiseaux* which is meant for a piano to imitate the songs of thirteen birds in meticulous detail; a veritable becoming-bird (animal) of the refrain. Is Messiaen’s work a submission to and reiteration of the refrain established by the milieu of birdsong? Or is it a line of flight from the traditions conventional to Western music? The problem is a bit more ominous: if Messiaen’s work can be construed as reiterating a refrain, then what is yet-another-bird-singing-at-dawn doing? After all, “A woman has to become-woman, but in a becoming-woman of all man. A Jew becomes Jewish, but in a becoming-Jewish of the non-Jew” (ATP 292) then so too does a songbird have to become-songbird, but in a becoming-songbird of the non-bird. Deleuze & Guattari remark:

We shall see that in certain cases even the animal refrain possesses [intense] forces of deterritorialization... We must therefore take a number of factors into consideration: relative territorialities, their respective deterritorializations, and their correlative reterritorializations, several types of them (for example, intrinsic reterritorializations such as musical coordinates, and extrinsic ones such as the deteriorations of the refrain into a hackneyed formula, or music into a ditty).

(ATP 303)

In his investigation, Messiaen found that “at every stage a deformation and mutation of the bird’s music takes place” (DMP&A 29). It may just be that the repeated deformation and mutation within the composition and performance of *Catalogue d’oiseaux* is what saves it from the lack-luster fate of a mere hackneyed, formulaic ditty.

Regardless as to whether sound is repetitive, rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, orchestral, birdsong, or a hackneyed ditty; it affects us. If the sound is music, it makes us want to die. It makes us want to lose our identities and become imperceptible—to swarm in between the cracks and fissures of sound blocks and musical planes of consistency. It makes us want to do this, but moreover we find time and again that we cannot—that we are unable to attain this absolute deterritorialization. Each time we find that we look back on our line of flight away from one plane of consistency we find ourselves sliding in another one. Each deterritorialization returns a reterritorialization—we were unable to accelerate away fast enough, which makes us want to die. Perhaps Deleuze and Guattari said it best:

Sound invades us, impels us, drags us, transpierces us. It takes leave of the earth, as much in order to drop us into a black hole as to open us up to a cosmos. It

makes us want to die. Since its force of deterritorialization is the strongest, it also effects the most massive of reterritorializations, the most numbing, the most redundant. Ecstasy and hypnosis. Colors do not move a people. Flags can do nothing without trumpets. Lasers are modulated on sound. The refrain is sonorous *par excellence*, but it can as easily develop its force into a sickly sweet ditty as into the purest motif, of Vinteuil's little phrase. And sometimes the two combine: Beethoven used as a "signature tune." The potential fascisim of music.

(ATP 348)

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