

Territories of Music

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Volume 37, Number 1-2, 2017

Sémiotique et musique. Tome 2
Semiotics and Music. Tome 2

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1051472ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1051472ar>

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Publisher(s)

Association canadienne de sémiotique / Canadian Semiotic Association

ISSN

0229-8651 (print)

1923-9920 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Nelson, P. (2017). Territories of Music. *Recherches sémiotiques / Semiotic Inquiry*, 37(1-2), 27–38. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1051472ar>

Article abstract

Music can be understood as a phenomenon that entwines sound and listening : sounds are not just there for the taking, they have to be identified – constructed even – in an interplay between the phenomenon of the sound and the phenomenon of the listening. This formulation goes to the heart of a contemporary *ethos*, which is an evening out of the hierarchies of the world in a way that places humans as no more than equal with other phenomena. Thus listening actually constitutes sound, in the sense that our activity of listening in the world negotiates a territory, where the negotiation has to deal with, rather than impose on the world. What are the territories of music? And in particular, what territories can only be negotiated through music?

Territories of Music

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One of the difficulties of speaking about music is that it appears to be outside us and inside us simultaneously, and the history of speaking about music has had difficulty conceptualising a connection between these two appearances. Vladimir Jankélévitch, for example, begins his discussion of the ethics and metaphysics of music by stating that “Music acts upon human beings, on their nervous systems and their vital processes ...” (Jankélévitch 2003 : 11). Thus at the start he places music outside of the “human being”, as a perceptual flow or set of signs : sounding objects, “out there” and available for human perception and interpretation. Jankélévitch goes further by characterising the mode of address by which the music outside is directed at the inside of human perception and understanding :

One doesn't 'listen to' a pianist playing *before* his public ... in the same way that one 'listens to' a lecturer speaking to his audience, because for the lecturer the listener is the second person – 'you', the object of invocation or allocution – whereas the listener is the third person, the outsider, for the pianist sitting at the piano. (Jankélévitch 2003 : 21)

This proposes the listener almost as *voyeur*, involved in the music but only indirectly, and provides the strategic positioning from which Jankélévitch can maintain that music “suggests without signifying” (2003 : 73). In this reading, music is not so much listened to as overheard, and since we are not being addressed directly, there is no imperative to understand. Listener and music are not connected by semiotic intention. As listeners we are free to choose for ourselves whatever meaning we please : except that *meaning* is not the purpose.

The act of listening that Jankélévitch proposes has a sort of radical

make “music” disappear altogether? In a late interview, Cage indeed asserts that, “... finally I’d rather just listen to traffic” (1961). This tricky situation requires some sort of conceptual apparatus in order for us to approach it, and it is here that the writing of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari provides, I think, some significant assistance.

The Instruments of Music

Music occupies a particular place in the thought of Deleuze and Guattari. It appears both explicitly, and by means of certain key terms that pervade their discourse, perhaps most notably that of the *refrain*. However the imperatives of a philosophy of process continually move the focus of the discussion *between* the words “music” and “sound”. Music is always dissolving into sound molecules, as those molecules then reconstitute themselves into the musical substances of the *air*, or the *motif*, or the *theme*, in the analysis of “the little phrase of Vinteuil’s sonata” from Marcel Proust’s novel, *Swann’s Way*, where Deleuze and Guattari track the passage from sound to music :

... it is said that sound has no frame. But compounds of sensation, sonorous blocs, equally possess sections or framing forms each of which must join together to secure a certain closing-off. The simplest cases are the melodic *air*, which is a monophonic refrain; the *motif*, which is already polyphonic, an element of a melody entering into the development of another and creating counterpoint; and the *theme*, as the object of harmonic modifications through melodic lines. These three elementary forms construct the sonorous house and its territory. (1994 : 189)

This proposes music as the perception of certain possibilities in sound, and those possibilities arise from the sound molecules possessing a sort of valency : the single, the multiple and the group. Sounds thus appear as social, and their functioning as music operates through a social dynamic with its own cluster of affects : the solitary; polyphonic entanglement within “the madness of all conversations” (*ibid.* : 188); the temptations of power within the notion of harmony. The nature of this description of the passage from sound to music demonstrates that Deleuze and Guattari are concerned with details and not just with principles. At the same time, the three elements of music that they propose, which clearly operate within the domain of nineteenth century French music alluded to by Proust, are only emblematic when it comes to considering music more generally. Other musics operate differently, even if they expose “sonorous blocs”. How can these principles, of valency and coagulation help us to an idea of the necessity of music? Pascal Criton presents the situation a little differently when she writes that, “The question that interests Deleuze is the capture of material–energetic relationships that have not been pre–established” (2012). What are the “materials” and “forces” that are captured by music?

As they track the passage from sound to music – in *What is Philosophy* – so – in *A Thousand Plateaus* – Deleuze and Guattari also track

the passage from music to sound :

The properly musical content of music ... tends, under all sorts of influences, having also to do with the instruments, to become progressively more molecular in a kind of cosmic lapping through which the inaudible makes itself heard and the imperceptible appears as such : no longer the songbird, but the sound molecule. (1988 : 248)

What is it about music that is to do with instruments? In making music, it is centrally apparent that some *other thing* is required. Music appears already in the writing of Deleuze and Guattari as what they call “an assemblage”, but the nature of this assemblage is only partly revealed in their account. I will return to this in a moment, but first the passage reminds me of one of my favourite remarks of Pierre Schaeffer, the founder of *musique concrète* : that other “music”, revealed by technologies of recording. In a paper presented to the UNESCO conference on “Music and Technology”, held in Stockholm in 1970, Schaeffer writes :

I think that people had to cry out, that people had to sing ... but that people, probably, did not perceive music until it had passed onto an instrument, even if that was a stone, or a skin stretched on a gourd. Probably they needed to go outside of themselves, to have another object: an instrument, a machine. (My translation. 1971 : 56)¹

This imaginary moment of musical pre-history sets a scene for the ‘inaudible’ to ‘make itself heard’ *as music*. The assemblage requires not just an act: listening, and a sense of transformation, but also a sense of difference between the listener and the sound source : a difference that requires the listener to leave themselves and then re-enter bearing sound. As Schaeffer continues :

It is true ... that the more the machine, the more the instrument is incorporated in the person, the more the person communicates with the sound ... the more the person communicates with themselves.² (My translation. 1971 : 56)

This presents the instrument as something that gets integrated intimately into the assemblage of music, and it demonstrates one of the key advantages for this discussion of the very notion of the assemblage. Deleuze and Guattari’s term constructs a site upon which biological bodies, thoughts and emotions, acts of perception, inanimate objects, and energetic vibrations can coalesce without hierarchy. It also proposes music itself as a *refrain*, in the description of Pascal Criton as, “A composite cross-operation, linking territories” (2012).

I want to propose here that music presents itself not as perceptual flow or as a set of sounding objects, ‘out there’ and available for human perception and interpretation, but rather as a sonorous network of disparate components, unfolding in time. Thus one could say that music is open to what sound has to give. Music searches in sound. It listens, in the sense of seeking to find and construct processes, images and affects. Music is the consequence of listening, in the presence of bodies, animate

and inanimate. The network of Music contains, of course, vibrations or signals through a set of mechanically or electrically connected media, but also locations within those media that are themselves connected by constructions of space that are made by and contain agents, or actors. It is the roles and identities, both material and immaterial, taken by those actors, that help to define the nature of the network and its purposes, that are social, material, aesthetic, economic and so on. The influence of Bruno Latour on this description is immediately apparent, but also that of Félix Guattari, when he says, for example in *The Three Ecologies*, “interiority establishes itself at the crossroads of multiple components, each relatively autonomous in relation to the other, and if need be, in open conflict” (2008 : 24f).

Thus the actual components of the music–assemblage can be, for example, musical instruments or other sounding objects, wires, computer code, mobile devices, human beings, sonorous blocs, sensuous images, each with some contingent effect, and without hierarchy. As with any network, this one can be tapped into at many places, and each point of tapping yields a different perspective on the nature of the network itself, its sonic presence, revealing its motives, its flows of reciprocation, its forces, affects and its spatial and temporal constructions. What I am trying to get at here is an image of music as something that arises out of a composition of machines, objects, physical phenomena, personae, people, social structures and tensions, and everything else that constitutes a site for action: “something to do with the instruments”, where that something could depend on the presence of what Deleuze and Guattari call the “sound molecule”.

The Sound Molecule

“...no longer the songbird, but the sound molecule” (Deleuze & Guattari 1988 : 248). *Sound molecule* is an evocative, and at the same time a mysterious term. In my understanding, it does not equate to what you might colloquially refer to as ‘sound’, in the sense of some mechanical instigation of a vibration, or a property of that vibration transduced by the ear. The sound molecule seems to me to inhabit what Deleuze calls the domain of the virtual : something that could be heard, if we only had ears to hear it; or something for which our ears are ready, if it could only sound. In this formulation, ears have to be constructed somehow, as a sensory ability to search for and respond to the virtual sound molecule and to reveal it, as a “sonorous bloc” : something we could say that we had actually heard. Sound, in this formulation, is thus an amalgam – an assemblage – of sound potential and listening potential. Sound has to be heard, as hearing has to be sounded. This is not just a weird word–play. It appears as a situation in normal anecdote : for example in this passage from *The African Child*, an autobiography by Camara Laye, a “son of Malinke” in what was French Guinea, in which he describes the intimate interaction of sounding and listening as his

father works to make a small piece of gold jewellery :

The praise-singer would install himself in the workshop, tune up his cora ... and would begin to sing my father's praises ... The harp played an accompaniment to this vast utterance of names, expanding it and punctuating it with notes that were now soft, now shrill ... I could tell that my father's vanity was being inflamed ... While my father was slowly turning the trinket round in his fingers, smoothing it into a perfect shape, [the praise singer] during the whole process of transformation, had kept on singing his praises, accelerating his rhythm, increasing his flatteries as the trinket took shape, and praising my father's talents to the skies. (Floyd 1999 : 2)

This passage describes a sort of improvisation at a number of levels : by the musician, singing and playing; by the craftsman, shaping a piece of jewellery; by the musician hearing the sounds of the jeweller; and by the jeweller hearing the sounds of the musician. It is not too fanciful to say that the harp strings shape the gold, and the whole amalgam of sounding music involves calabash, wood and strings, several pairs of hands, a voice, gold, the rhetoric of praise, the affects of vanity and desire, and so on. You can understand how a number of writers have characterised music as essentially erotic. These items do not just clash in a strange mechanics, they desire to be in contact with each other.

Music as Searching

In the dialogue, *Cratylus*, Plato shows Socrates searching for meaning by considering the origins of words in a sort of linguistic genealogy. At one point Socrates, in speaking of Apollo, says : "The name of the Muses and of music would seem to be derived from searching and their making philosophical enquiries ((μωσθαί)" (Plato 1961 : 406a). Here Music is understood not as some sort of object or artefact, however intangible and transitory; nor is it the focus of a sort of craft or manufacturing. There is certainly a process at work, but that process is one of questioning and the forming of relationships : to search is to define and establish contact with an area, having a purpose in mind, but also open to the activity of *reading*. What has this area got to tell, or to counsel? (Ingold 2013) This image of searching is also evident in Charles Peirce's notion of the 'index' : the sign as 'clue', trace or imprint. In this way music can be understood as a phenomenon that entwines sound and listening : sounds are not just there for the taking, they have to be identified – constructed even – in an interplay between the phenomenon of the sound and the phenomenon of the listening. This formulation goes to the heart of a contemporary *ethos*, which is an evening out of the hierarchies of the world in a way that places humans as no more than equal with other phenomena. Thus listening *actually constitutes* sound, in the sense that our activity of listening in the world negotiates a territory, where the negotiation has to deal with, rather than impose on the world. What are the territories of music? And in particular, what territories can only be negotiated through music? In order to consider these questions, it is

necessary to revisit the notion of listening.

Listening

In our normal, colloquial representations, listening could be represented as the formation of a link between a conscious subject and an external source of energy vibrating within a specific frequency range. It probably also includes the notion of attentiveness on the part of the conscious subject. The fact that I have to resort to this rather abstracted description I hope lays bare the fact that listening turns out to be not that easy to describe. The composer and theorist, and founder of *musique concrète*, Pierre Schaeffer, tries to categorise different types of listening in an attempt to reveal the problems. Thus he distinguishes between, causal listening (*Écouter*) – the determination of the source of a sound, semantic listening (*Comprendre*) – the determination of the meaning of a sound, passive perception (*Ouïr*) – the determination of the fact of a sound, without recourse to the definition of either source or meaning, what he calls “reduced listening” (*Écoute réduite*), where the vital qualities of a sound are explored without regard for the definition of either source or meaning, and attentive listening (*Entendre*) – which I suppose he intends to include listening to music.

Even these listening types might not be so exhaustive. In his astonishingly erudite book, *Sinister Resonance*, David Toop (2010) speaks of what he calls the ‘mediumship of the listener’, proposing the act of listening as an accessing of the uncanny and even the inaudible : sounds represented within the silences of books and paintings, and intuited out of the atmospheres of rooms, spaces and geographical locations, as if listening were also a sort of “sixth sense”, attuned to those vitalities that precisely evade corporeal presentation. In a similar way, the composer and theorist Agostino di Scipio has spoken of “the way we make ourselves present to sound”, which proposes listening not as reception but as an active orientation and engagement with a world where sound seems to be an equal and active participant. Sounds and music may be ‘imaginary’ as well as ‘real’ : indeed listening links these two eventualities.

Knowing through Music

In his essay, *Footprints through the Weather-World : Walking, Breathing, Knowing*, Tim Ingold considers knowledge-making from a temporal perspective. He begins by establishing the co-ordinates of human beings as “terrestrial creatures” (2010 : 116) in a pragmatic sense, with their feet on the ground, their heads in the air, and subject to the vagaries of wind and weather. The ground is the first point for discussion, and here Ingold distinguishes his own understanding from that of Kant and Marx, for whom “the ground still appears as ... an interface between the mental and the material”. Thus Kant figures knowledge as finite, and “arrayed as if on the surface of a sphere” that can be mapped

(2010 : 117). Ingold, following the ecological approach of Gibson, is more concerned with the actual, material surface of the ground of the earth, its rises and hollows, vegetation and textures, rather than with its “metaphysical significance”. Thus he tracks the ways in which both the ground and its human inhabitants grow together, change together and produce knowledge in a continual and infinite, in-time process. Does music have a ground?

Michel Serres, in his book *Genesis* writes of the sea and the wind, the sounds of the earth, as the ground from which perception arises :

Sound cannot be a phenomenon, all phenomena detach themselves from it, figure on ground, like a beacon in the fog, like all messages, all cries, every call, every signal has to detach itself from the din that occupies silence, in order to be, to be perceived, to be known, to be exchanged. (My translation. 1982 : 32-33)³

Where Ingold’s ground is the physical globe of the earth, experienced as a series of living localities, sound is the apparent energy of the world. The world is not bathed in sound in the way that it is bathed in light; there is no sonic equivalent of ‘darkness’, and the fact that we hear without the aid of a source of sonic ‘illumination’ gives sound an energetic quality that is inherent, un beholden to any extra-terrestrial power source. Every sound is evidence of a particular, earthly vitality, thus the sociologist Henri Lefebvre can claim that “Physical space has no ‘reality’ without the energy that is deployed within it” (1991 : 13).

This ground of music clearly contains more possibilities than we normally recognise, and musicologists such as Rosalia Martinez and Hollis Taylor, for example, have spoken eloquently of the way a musical practice can actually mediate between what we understand as ‘nature’ and what we understand as ‘culture’, and of the ways in which a musical practice can include non-human entities such as plants and birds. This ground of music, of the same sort as Ingold discusses, supports a listening whose space of engagement is constructed in a certain way. This is Eric Clarke’s account of the situation, following on from the theorisation of visual perception originated by James Gibson :

Rather than considering perception to be a constructive process, in which the perceiver builds structure into an internal model of the world, the ecological approach emphasizes the structure of the environment itself and regards perception as the pick-up of that already structured perceptual information. The simple, but far-reaching, assertion is that the world is not a blooming buzzing confusion, but is a highly structured environment subject to both the forces of nature (gravity, illumination, organic growth, the action of wind and water) and the profound impact of human beings and their cultures; and that in a reciprocal fashion perceivers are highly structured organisms that are adapted to that environment. (Clarke 2005 : 2)

In this account, sounds arise in a listening subject where source and listener are presented as being in a symbiotic, adaptive relationship.

This is not the sympathetic “resonance” proposed by Jankélévitch, but a process of continual encounter with and adaptation to an environment, in sonic terms.

The temporal aspect of Ingold’s process of knowledge-making involves what he calls “wayfaring”; the actual encounter between a ground and a body, along a particular, contingent pathway :

Walking along, then, is not the behavioural output of a mind encased within a pedestrian body. It is rather a way of thinking and knowing – ‘an activity that takes place through the heart and mind as much as through the feet’ (Rendell 2006 : 190). Like the dancer, the walker is *thinking in movement*. (2010 : 129)

This “wayfaring” is a pragmatic, human activity, but it is also perhaps an image of the possible pathways through sound, engaged by playing and listening. The temporal aspect is not a “decoding” but an encounter with a sonorous domain, “... in which the lives and minds of its human and non-human inhabitants are comprehensively bound up with one another ... tangling with the trails of other beings ... (*ibid.*)”. This proposes music-making as both personal and social, and the engagement with music as an encounter with a territory which itself is subject to growth and change. It proposes music as a path through sound, encountered by thinking and sensing, as well as by a process of making, since a path both presents itself and is formed by the act of passage.

Conclusion

The idea of musical “representation” appears in a different light when we consider music itself as a more uncertain phenomenon. In Ingold’s discussion, walking on the earth – whether literally or metaphorically – is precisely not a mapping or discovery of representations, such as he attributes to the philosophical projects of Kant and Marx. It is an engagement, in the present, with a living part of ourselves. An engagement that provokes story telling about the encounter, and that leads to an embodied knowledge that grows as we do :

Thus the ground comprises a domain in which the lives and minds of its human and non-human inhabitants are comprehensively bound up with one another. It is ... a composite, woven from diverse materials, and its surface is that of all surfaces. By the same token the knowledge that runs in the ground is that of all knowledges. Or in a word it is *social*. It is when it percolates the ground, tangling with the trails of other beings, and not on some transcendent surface of reason, that mindfulness enters the realm of the social. (Ingold 2010 : 129)

In this telling, music is what springs to our senses from the ground and engages our already ready beings, both individual and social. It is presentation as much as representation. It is not the resonant overhearing of Jankélévitch but it is significant, in that it pulls together a network of operative entities, as in Camara Laye’s story about his

father, and allows those entities to interact in productive ways. It is the production, rather than the representation, that marks music as engaging. Its significance is our own, though shared with others as we share the stories we tell about the encounters we experience, and about the paths we make and follow through the ground of music. Our knowledge of music grows with each encounter. Rhythm plays a part in this engagement, both with music and with others, as the mode of interaction between the component parts.

Ingold's account of walking on the ground is an attempt to talk about the process of knowledge-making itself. Faced with the mysteries of our existence, he celebrates our inventive and productive capacities, rather than our interpretative ones :

... whereas the Kantian traveller reasons over a map in his mind, the wayfarer draws a tale from the impressions in the ground. Less a surveyor than a narrator, his aim is ... to situate each impression in relation to the occurrences that paved the way for it, presently concur with it, and follow along after it. (2010 : 128)

Perhaps this insight releases the musicologist from the imperative to explain, and allows us to celebrate our gifts for story-telling.

Notes

1. “*Je pense que l’homme a dû crier, que l’homme a dû chanter... mais que l’homme, probablement, ne s’est aperçu de la musique que lorsqu’il est passé à travers un instrument, même si c’était une pierre, ou une peau tendue sur une calabasse. Probablement l’homme a eu besoin d’aller à l’extérieur de lui-même, d’avoir un autre objet : un instrument, une machine*”.
2. “*Il est bien vrai ... que plus la machine , plus l’instrument est incorporé à l’homme, plus l’homme communique avec le son ... plus l’homme s’auto-communique*”.
3. “*Le bruit ne peut être un phénomène, tout phénomène se détache de lui, figure sur fond, comme un feu sur la brume, comme tout message, tout cri, tout appel, tout signal, doivent se détacher du vacarme occupant le silence, pour être, pour être perçus, pour être connus, pour être échangés*” (Serres 1982 : 32-33).

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Abstract

Music can be understood as a phenomenon that entwines sound and listening : sounds are not just there for the taking, they have to be identified – constructed even – in an interplay between the phenomenon of the sound and the phenomenon of the listening. This formulation goes to the heart of a contemporary *ethos*, which is an evening out of the hierarchies of the world in a way that places humans as no more than equal with other phenomena. Thus listening actually constitutes sound, in the sense that our activity of listening in the world negotiates a territory, where the negotiation has to deal with, rather than impose on the world. What are the territories of music? And in particular, what territories can only be negotiated through music?

Keywords : Music; Listening; Wayfaring; Network; Actor-Network Theory.

Résumé

La musique peut être comprise comme un phénomène mêlant son et écoute : les sons ne sont pas là uniquement pour être consommés, ils doivent être identifiés – construits même – dans une interaction entre le phénomène sonore et le phénomène de l'écoute. Cette formulation est au cœur même d'un *éthos* contemporain, lequel met fin aux hiérarchies du monde d'une façon qui place les êtres humains à égalité avec les autres phénomènes. Ainsi l'écoute constitue en réalité le son, en ce sens que notre activité d'écoute dans le monde négocie un territoire, sur lequel la négociation doit "traiter avec" plutôt que de s'imposer au monde. Quels sont les territoires de la musique? Et en particulier, quels territoires ne peuvent être négociés que par la

musique?

Mots-clés : Musique; écoute; voyageur; réseau; théorie des réseaux d'acteurs.

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