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Of Genre, System and Process

Music Theory in a »Global Sonorous Space«

Brian Hulse

Drawing on Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of a »global sonorous space«, this essay considers the radical nature of today's listening environment; an environment saturated with musics from around the world. Made possible by such technologies as recording, ipods and the internet, any music can be anywhere at any given time. This situation has profound implications for traditional notions of genre in which musical systems and cultures are treated as isolated from one another; namely it can be argued that these systems are far more interconnected and dynamic than is generally thought. Following Michael Tenzer's speculation about the potential for a »world music theory«, a conceptual space is laid out in which such a theory could be founded. This space is modelled upon concepts developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari such as the rhizome, smooth space and the idea of unstable systems »at the edge of chaos«.

In his essay *Listening* Jean-Luc Nancy refers to what he calls a »global sonorous space«, which he describes as being of an »extraordinarily mixed nature – popular and refined, religious and profane, coming from all continents at once«.[1] Although Nancy is describing something unique to the world today, I would point out that in an important sense the world has always been a »global sonorous space«. In the past the limits of music's heterogeneity, connection and transformation have seemingly only been checked by the state of technology; the means we have of moving people and information around the world. Extreme changes over the past century reflect not so much some fundamental difference in music as technological advances in travel, recording, transmission, production etc. If the global sonorous space is something new, something unique to the present, then it is a radical de-hierarchization in our exposure to and experience of music caused by extraordinary changes in technology – resulting in a spectacular commingling of styles and an unprecedented explosion of creative possibilities. This situation puts into question notions of closed cultural contexts or self-contained musical systems and their theoretic models. Acknowledging the reality of a global sonorous space challenges long-standing images of music and places in doubt certain assumptions about what music is now; and perhaps about what it has been all along.

Michael Tenzer's recent book *Analytical Studies in World Music* inaugurates a musical-analytic consciousness oriented towards a global perspective. Seemingly in harmony with Nancy, Tenzer observes that »we are approaching multi- or a virtual panmusi-

1 Nancy, *Listening*, p. 12.

cality«.[2] He argues that »[m]usic theory in Europe and North America, oriented so heavily toward Western art music, fails to address the needs, selves, and likely life trajectories of more and more musicians«.[3] In other words, as the soundscapes in which Western musicians live and create resemble more and more their greater global context, the institutions of music theory which support them become increasingly out of touch.

But the change required to meet this new reality is not easy to achieve. It requires a reevaluation of the assumptions and conditions upon which traditional styles of thought may be grounded. In a global sonorous space genres resound all together – announcing their individuality and their plurality at once. In this context there can be no centre, no single point of view and no rule of a normative system. Genres belong to a pan-global environment or eco-system in which the connections and separations run along pathways too jumbled and multifarious to be understood in terms of structural positions or identities – for these imply a centre or a frame from whose point of reference all relations are determined. But if genre is not to function as a frame, a container or a principle of identity and closure, how should it be thought of? One place to start is to think genres as fundamentally *unstable* systems, rather than stable ones (and in the philosophical work I draw on there is no such thing as a stable system; only unstable systems »at the edge of chaos«[4] and then chaos itself). The distinction between stable and unstable is significant, and it will have us throw out anything that presupposes closure, any structural ensembles, hierarchies or systematic relations-to-context – basically the classic images of thought attributable to the legacy of Euro-American musicology.

As *unstable* systems, genres can be re-conceptualized as series of intensive molecular communications (or repetitions), sonorous intensities passing in thousands of actual encounters from one musical becoming to another, coalescing into discernable bodies of resonance having no clear borders, and yet which transmit to and from an outside. Genres are complex and fluid repetition-webs spreading out simultaneously without any overarching teleology or hierarchization. They form into millions of series: a huge entangled system of micro-resonances and echoes.

Genre is also exceedingly porous, ready to spin off or to colonize onto other genres as well as to be colonized or to become hybridized. Genre is shot through with subterranean flows, noise and rogue communications – what comprises part of a genre's chemistry but which is foreign, autonomous, arising elsewhere. Generally, these transient or subversive migrations are overlooked by scholars in order to support certain kinds of historical or ethnographic projects; those trading in meta-dialectics (the identity of/opposition between cultural or stylistic categories) and in analytic projects which presuppose the insulation and self-identity of genre in order to posit a normative structural enclosure. But in the digital age the notion of stable, traceable and localized genres is quickly becoming a thing of the past. The internet conducts *untraceable* global migrations; multiplying infinitely the ways in which

2 Tenzer, *Analytical Studies in World Music*, p. 34.

3 Ibid.

4 I am borrowing from the title of Jeffrey Bell's book *Philosophy at the Edge of Chaos: Gilles Deleuze and the Philosophy of Difference*.

musical flows are transmitted, moulded, expressed and joined together. When we think of genre, we are less and less able to properly refer to a discrete, spatial location.

There is another level, albeit unpresentable as such, which makes genre possible and at the same time escapes identification with it. At this level genre distinctions give way to a fully virtual potential of sonorous elements and formations which at any point in time may find expression in this or that genre without actually traversing a space or making a physical connection. What testifies to this virtual sphere of potential are the aleatoric connections between unrelated presentations in disparate genres. For example a melodic figure might pop up in both a Mozart Sonata and a *qawwālī* devotional song. A rhythmic pattern in Perotin might form part of a rhythmic *tāla* in Hindustani music. Or a riff in a Robert Johnson tune could turn up in a Turkish *taqsīm*. Each of these couplings is conceivable. And thinking of the repetition of more basic components such as rhythmic motifs, melodic ornaments, sequential patterns, chord progressions, repetitions of scales or scale fragments, chord qualities, interval qualities, metres (especially with 2, 3, 4 or 6 beats), and even timbres (plucked or bowed strings, percussive sounds, reed and brass instruments etc.), the possible connections between disparate genres explode. The infinitely combinatorial potential of this vast virtual reservoir makes it entirely conceivable (and rather likely) that formations just above this level, strings of notes, rhythmic figures and countless other possible combinations repeat independently by the thousands and thousands, cutting indiscriminately across genres. Placing the actuality of genre in perpetual relation to the virtuality of the »other« from which it draws its difference and recognizing the continuous movement of transmission and hybridization genre undergoes begins to capture the sense in which it is an unstable, rather than a stable system and why it is inaccurate to construe genre as something closed or isolated from a larger global system.

The more our musical awareness reflects this larger »pan-genre« perspective, the less notions of generic separateness and closure presupposed by many established paradigms can be justified. If types of music cannot really be said to exist in isolation, on their »own terms« in this listening environment, how can they be treated so in analysis? The problem with restricting analysis to representations abstracted from genre such as harmonic function, formal archetypes etc. is that one of the most important functions of genre is overlooked – which is to be *limited* in its control over musical situations; to yield to a kind of space in which the possibilities are not predetermined or preconceived; to be vague – allowing for music to remain, so to speak, »ontologically adrift«; genre as a portal, rather than as a ground or frame. In genres, like in any system, there must be, as Elizabeth Grosz describes, »something fundamentally unstable about both its milieu and its organic constitution«.[5]

The classic or »metaphysical« system, the system of *being*, comes completely formed – like the systems of functional harmony or atonal pitch space. Events occur within these systems, but only as variations or modular transformations of the sites, functions, and identities pre-established by the system. On the other hand, a system of *becoming* is not given in advance, is never fully stable and does not operate accord-

5 Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, p. 6.

ing to any dialectics of identities, functions, sites or nodes. Such a system is open, always in motion, always in formation. What appears as »solid« at one moment of time may dissolve the next. This process of consolidation and dissolution, what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari refer to as territorialization and deterritorialization, becomes of primary interest in imagining a new kind of analytic technology – a technology of musical process.

Tenzer speculates about the potential for a »world music theory«[6], and this is basically what I am arguing for as well. But I would urge against two potential pitfalls. First, the »whitening« or making generic of the global sonorous space. No particularity of genre or any particularity for that matter can or should be masked in a world music theory – for surely it is not masked in the global sonorous space. A world music theory should be no less diversified and eccentric than the musics of the world themselves are; it should define a conceptual zone where all belong and none are taken as model or as exemplary. I would hate to see all forms of music reduced to pitch-class sets, Schenkerian composings-out or any other stratagem attempting to reduce all music to a common organ or a central intelligence. This is not so much because such a scheme invariably favours certain forms of music over others (although it arguably would do this), but because it would artificially close or limit the perspective on even those repertoires it best fits. As soon as we are able to see how Beethoven, for instance, travels a decentred, ranging musical path, a path *around the globe and across time*, I think we are in the territory of a world music theory.

My second concern is this: A world music theory has to scrutinize its philosophical and conceptual heritage. It may be necessary to drop some of the conceptual models which presuppose a Eurocentric perspective. And here is where I differ somewhat from what Tenzer argues in his book. He defines musical analysis as an activity of the »hierarchy seeking mind«.[7] I would challenge this condition. I think musical analysis can be the activity of a mind *not* seeking hierarchies. Thinking in terms of hierarchies belies the architectonic image perpetuated in theories of Western Classical music, and for this I think we should scrutinize it. Tenzer states »we need to know structure in order to grasp and admire the accomplishments of musicians as designers, builders, and inventors of ingenious frameworks for sound«.[8] Designers, builders, inventors of frameworks – these are all familiar analogies which strongly reflect their roots in structural, hierarchic and architectonic musical thinking. I suggest these are not pre-ordained images of theoretic or analytic comprehension but in fact represent a Western-centred viewpoint which I believe is insufficient for founding a global music theory.

One approach to a world music theory would be to pursue something along the lines of a Deleuzian rhizomatics. The idea of the rhizome has been suggested as a musical-analytic paradigm before – although unfortunately it has been used to put old theory wine into sexy new Deleuzian bottles (so, for example, a pitch-class set becomes a rhizome; a motif becomes a rhizome, the Ursatz is a rhizome, and so on). Rhizomes in a Deleuzian sense are fundamentally unstable – they have no preor-

6 Tenzer, *Analytical Studies in World Music*, p. 34.
7 Ibid., p. 6.
8 Ibid., p. 9.

dained unit of structure such as pitch-class intervals – and nothing prevents a rhizome from consisting of radically eclectic ingredients or becoming something fundamentally other. Scott O'Sullivan remarks that

> [t]he rhizome names a principle of connectivity. It implies contact, and movement, between different milieus and registers, between areas that are usually thought of as distinct and discrete. Such a smearing is creative; it can produce surprising compatibilities and novel synthesis.[9]

The principle of the rhizome can be used to engage the formation and migration of genres, the creation and dissemination of musical instruments (for example: a Medieval military horn → Baroque/Classical trumpet → Jazz line; or a Middle Eastern free-reed → Harmonium/French Salon → Colonialism → Hindustani music line) and other dynamic becomings from vast trends traversing centuries, continents and peoples to the most supple and intimate passages of sound-sensation. It can serve as a technical apparatus for an analytics of musical movement, a movement that is not a transmission from sound to subject, but between virtual and actual dimensions of a musical becoming and irreducible to subjects and objects. It can also be used to discover relationships and untangle components which have no physical, historical, cultural or other »sensible« fields of transmission or of reference.

Thinking of musical expressions from Andrew Hill to Ali Akbar Khan according to a rhizomatic approach begins to conceive of a theoretic system along the lines of what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as a »smooth space« (which they oppose to »striated« spaces). A smooth space stands in a receptive, flexible relation to its material, subordinating its operations to the »sensible conditions of intuition and construction – *following* the flow of matter«.[10] Smooth space is occupied by intensities, »wind and noise, and sonorous and tactile qualities«.[11] In it musical events become »nonmetric multiplicities« of a »minor geometry«; an axiomatic that is »purely operative and qualitative, in which calculation is necessarily very limited, and the local operations of which are not even capable of general translatability or a homogenous system of location.«[12]

Abandoning a »homogenous system of location« would seem completely unlike the standard procedures of music theory. And yet, there are trends away from this model. Christopher Hasty's groundbreaking book *Meter as Rhythm*[13] asks us to abandon the spatial representation of musical time (which is a homogenous system of location if ever there was one) and instead think of duration as a perpetually becoming process. Hasty's theory defines a new image of musical thought, one where time is not homogenous and striated but rather is continuously drawn together and qualitative; where time and its sonorous »content« become indivisible. The challenge is (of course) to devise techniques, new methods of visualizing and mapping musical process. It will mean learning to hear »inside« sonorous environments, which are

9 O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari*, p. 17.
10 Deleuze / Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 373.
11 Ibid., p. 479.
12 Ibid., p. 484.
13 Hasty, *Meter as Rhythm*.

always temporally wide and vibrant, but which are also inaccessible to the externalized, object-oriented representations we might be accustomed to.

Obviously this is not the context to explore analytic technologies of a duration-as-process paradigm. But it is germane here to mention another quite significant advantage to it: for it neither presupposes nor implies any specific genre. Instead, duration-as-process applies to musical becomings of any kind. Its results – the analytic product or yield – would not mask any sonorous particularity. It is a becoming particular, a becoming sonorous, a becoming musical to which thought and prose, maps and dissections are always something added and supplemental.

In closing let me mention that I am not proposing we abandon benign theory concepts – those whose utility is in their pedagogic value and which are found in all sorts of musical practices – to an esoteric, proto-Deleuzian music theory. The more eclectic and diversified these concepts remain the better. But I do think that the classic undergraduate theory core in American and European institutions has a difficult task ahead if it is to reclaim its relevance to the growing global consciousness of today's musicians and listeners. How to balance rigor with scope, technical facility in one style with a degree of competence in others, is a question for another day. My goal here has been to attempt to project a sense of some of the challenges and potential for a music theory conscious of and productive within a global sonorous space.

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