

Decomposition:
Musical Occampanyments
to Stravinsky's *Poetics of Music*

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I am a believer in Wagner's art and theory, a condition I have come to by conversion. As is typical with converts to most anything, I have reacted to my former blindness with an extra measure of fervor and zeal. The positions enunciated in Stravinsky's Poetics of Music stand in stark contrast to nearly everything about my new-found artistic faith. There stands now on the horizon of musical thought a theory which, while continuing the directions taken by Stravinsky in the Poetics, not only further negates Wagner's theory and art, but also calls into severe question the theories espoused in the Poetics.

This paper will outline briefly the positions taken by the Poetics on the matter of the relationship between music in sound and music in performance, then present relevant concepts advanced by the deconstructionist school of literary critics concerning the relationship between writing and speech, principally as enunciated by Jacques Derrida¹ in Part One, what he calls the theoretical matrix, of his Of

¹A good introductory essay on Derrida, accompanied by similar essays on related figures in contemporary French thought, can be found in Jonathan Culler, "Jacques Derrida," in Structuralism and Since: From Levi-Strauss to Derrida, ed. John Sturrock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

Grammatology,² and finally speculate upon their application to sounded and written music.

The Poetics argues against what it takes to be the extra-musical accretions of Wagnerian theory, and repostulates what it takes to be musical integrity. "The phenomenon of music is nothing other than a phenomenon of speculation. . . . The elements at which this speculation necessarily aims are those of sound and time. . . . Composing, for me, is putting into an order a certain number of these sounds according to certain interval-relationships."³ Anything more betrays music's integrity, invites an understanding of music on extra-musical considerations, considerations other than the speculative putting of sound through time, and results in an understanding of music that is rather literary than musical. A false sense of performance accompanies this, in which the performer aims not at realization in sound of the printed score but at delivery of a supposed inner meaning of the music. "It is not without reason that the worst interpreters usually tackle the Romantics. The musically extraneous elements that are strewn throughout their works invite betrayal, whereas a page in which music seeks to express nothing outside of itself better resists attempts at literary deformation."⁴

Accepted in this is a notion of notation versus speech that has been the accepted concept since the Greeks, namely, that notation exists outside of the reality it notates, that writing is a means, albeit imperfect, of recording speech, but is extraneous to the phenomenon of speaking. In other words, it records but it does not share in the nature of that which it records. The word is the reality, its written form simply an external record of it; the music is the reality, its written form an external record of it.

The impossibility of these external records capturing all of that which they record, and thus the impossibility of the records actually being records, has long been recognized. Writing, notation has always been suspect precisely because of its imperfect nature. Plato speaks of the misunderstandings that may arise in reading a written text: the author is not there to correct our misreadings and thus we may fall into errors through the written word that do not occur when being spoken to. These are analogous to the problems of interpretation. In confronting a musical score, we consider ourselves to be in the presence of an imperfect record of

²Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, Spivak tr. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

³Igor Stravinsky, Poetics of Music, Knodel and Dahl tr. (New York:Vintage, 1947) pp. 28,39, passim.

⁴Ibid., p. 130.

the composer's intentions. Notation cannot convey everything, and thus the performer is responsible for decisions on matters that cannot be notated. Misreadings arise, which we are more accustomed to call problems of performance practice, and all of this arises from the exteriority of writing, of notation, to the phenomenon it notates. Stravinsky himself acknowledges this difficulty: "But no matter how scrupulously a piece of music may be notated, no matter how carefully it may be insured against every possible ambiguity through the indication of tempo, shading, phrasing, accentuation, and so on, it always contains hidden elements that defy definition because verbal dialectic is powerless to define musical dialectic in its totality."⁵

Let us here recognize the exteriority of music notation to music in sound Stravinsky completely accepts. He fundamentally distinguishes the piece of music from its notation; he then lists several operations the notation may take to insure itself as a complete record of the piece, which the record is not a part of but simply a record, then acknowledges that the record will never wholly record this totality which does not need a record to be a totality. Music is music in sound, a totality; the notation is a completely exterior record of it.

Notation can then be regarded as a supplement to the music itself, as writing is seen as a supplement to the spoken word. What is assumed is that the entity or phenomenon which the supplement supplements exists as a totality, as a plenitude. Yet, if it is whole, if it is a plenitude, why should there be supplements? The traditional answer is the one given above: the supplement is marginal to the plenitude, and unrelated to it in essence. Another answer may be that perhaps the totality was not total after all, that insofar as the supplement functions as a substitute for its plenitude, perhaps the plenitude was not an entity previously existing in its entirety for which a supplement later arose, but perhaps both plenitude and supplement create each other, arise from each other in a primary, primal, or ordinary process as yet unrecognized.

The fundamental exteriority of the signifier to that which is signified is recognized. A word and that for which it stands have no necessary relation to each other. That which in English is signified by the word "tree" is signified by other sounds in other languages. Modern linguistics adds the insight that what is signified to an English speaker by "tree" is not the trees that actually grow in the park, but the associations with that word that exist in his own mind under the term "meaning." Tree stands

⁵Ibid., p. 127.

not for tree but for the meaning in each speaker's mind associated with it. The signifier is an arbitrary external entity, the signified is a mental construct; the two together create a sign which exists in a system of signs.

When the verbal signs are spoken, we experience the phenomenon of presence. When he whose mind contains the signifieds produces their signifiers, he has the experience of his own presence, the sense of hearing himself speak.

The process of signification allows us to conceive ourselves as entities, as presences, and an intermediary stage such as writing, the notation of signifiers, has no role in that. In fact writing, notation, by its assumed exteriority to the signifier and thus to the presence of self experienced in the simultaneous location of signifier and signified in the speaker, disturbs this perception of presence and thus is regarded as suspect and relegated to a role considered to be marginal, exterior.

Yet no signifier exists except within its own system: we do not understand "tree" by itself, but rather, involved in the recognition of that signifier is the recognition of what it is and what it is not. In other words, part of recognizing "tree" is recognizing that it is different than the others, that "tree" is not "not-tree." Corresponding to this is a system of signifieds which, for the purposes of our example, splits the world into tree and not-tree. Signifiers and signifieds alike betray an identity based on differance, and in that differentiation each identity differentiated bears a trace of that from which it has been differentiated: "tree" bears within it a trace of "not-tree" or else it could not have its identity as "tree." No entity can remove from itself the trace of that which it is not or else it ceases to be that which it is. Every presence contains within itself, precisely as the condition of being present, the trace of that which is absent. There can be, therefore, no absolute presence, no plenitude, because presence or plenitude in the very process of construing itself or of being construed as presence or plenitude, must contain a trace of absence or partialness.

Absence is then not the opposite of presence but part of the very nature of presence. Presence and absence are not primary givens that oppose each other, but in fact arise together, create each other, and maintain within each other as trace through the process of differentiation. The origin, then, or that which is original as given, the originary is neither presence nor absence but difference. One thus sees that difference does not produce opposites, and that in difference what is taken to be exterior, to be marginal, to be supplementary is in fact interior, integral and essential. Absence is not exterior to presence but part of its interior; exteriority itself is part of interiority. Because difference leaves traces of that from which something is

differentiated within the thing, presence, in constructing itself, also deconstructs itself. Presence constructs itself by relegating absence to its exterior, but this very relegation by which presence creates itself leaves the trace of absence within itself, and thus presence deconstructs itself through its need for absence as a trace to construct itself. We are thus in an irreconcilable dialectic of construction and deconstruction, where as we see the difference needed to construct presence we also see the deconstruction of presence into difference.

Derrida has given this seeming contradiction, this paradox of a thing constructing itself through deconstructing itself, the term differance. The French term means both to differ and to defer. Insofar as anything, in reality, in signifieds and signifiers, exists, it exists by deferring all else to its exterior, by differing. Differance, then is both the passive existence of difference which is the precondition of the formation of signs as signifiers and signifieds and the active acts of deferring and differing that effect difference. Derrida also calls differance by the term espacement, or in English "spacing," a term perhaps more suitable for English speakers.

Finally, differance or spacing, that originary process, is not speech but a writing, or rather an arche-writing, an originary inscription not of letters or graphemes on a page but an inscription on the fabric of reality itself—in fact the inscription, the arche-writing, is reality itself. If writing in the ordinary sense has been excluded as exterior to language of any kind, it has been to preserve the illusion of presence, of plenitude, particularly that of the speaker, through the phenomenon of hearing himself speak. But the very factors which were the basis for the relegation of writing to marginality or supplementarity have turned out to be the characteristics of language itself. What is discovered at the origin is not a presence but differance, a spacing, an inscribing, an arche-writing, a process of interrelated constructing and deconstructing. To represent this in writing in the ordinary sense, one writes terms—usually only those whose meaning radically requires the concept of presence, of completion, of plenitude, of an interior whose exterior is wholly other—to acknowledge the necessity of such deluding tools to communicate at all, but one crosses them out, or puts them under erasure (sous rature) to show that such presences or plenitudes can only be such by virtue of the trace and simultaneous origin of absence and partialness.

Most especially must "trace," differance, etc. be placed under erasure, because they are not presences whose presences deconstruct any pretenders to presence, they are the origin of presence though no such thing as origin exists. This is not to say that origin disappears, but rather

that it never appeared, and though the concept of an originary non-origin of differance, or trace, or spacing must to be communicated be expressed in language based on a metaphysic of presences and plenitudes whose interiors are wholly other from their exteriors, the erasure expresses awareness of the limits of language systems to express something that does not arise by distinction from its opposite because it is precisely that arising by distinction that is being expressed.

Let us now turn our attention to the applicability of these things to the relationship of musical sound to musical notation. While much of current musical thought is carried on in terms of linguistic theory, of symbology and semiology, it may be objected that the thought expressed above does not apply to musical linguistics because the signifiers, the sounds, refer to a different kind of signified in the human mind. To put it another way, though in the case of both verbal and musical language one deals with a symbology, musical symbols are not discursive as are verbal symbols.

This objection does not apply, for the reason that the analysis of the process differance in signification has been carried out without reference to the kind of signifier or signified. In other words, it does not matter whether or not the symbols are discursive or non-discursive since symbols in general are a product of, and produce, differance. The very splitting of symbol into discursive and non-discursive is differance, and so even if our criticisms did not apply, they would apply by the logic of supplementarity, that what is excluded as exterior is yet included as trace in the interior. Discursive and non-discursive arise together in differance; that the question should arise of the applicability of deconstruction to non-discursive symbols answers itself in the affirmative.

Derrida takes up music in the course of Part Two of the Grammatology, which is a discussion of Rousseau, specifically in the course of his discussion of Rousseau's Essay on the Origin of Languages. Derrida notes that, in spite of the title, it is principally Rousseau's disquiet at certain developments in music that prompts the book, even though music itself is only taken up in chapters twelve through nineteen of it. "Why is this?" he asks. Because music does not come before language, because music arises from not simply sound but from the human voice. In other art forms one is confronted by an inanimate object but in music one is confronted by a voice, even when it is instrumental, that announces the presence of another like being. This is why music moves humans and why lower animals have no music. Music, as a phenomenon of voice, is thus a development in the phenomenon of language. In their origins speech and song are the same, yet have pursued ever diverging paths in

history. But as spoken language loses more and more of its musical quality, sung language or song loses much of its former energy through the accumulation of rules.

Rousseau thus identifies the elements of differance but does not recognize them as such and bemoans their effect. Rousseau recognizes the continuing divergence of speech and song, but does not recognize that the degeneration of an original speech-song is in fact the inevitable outcome of its arising, that differance articulates reality with the appearance of the phenomenon speech-song but that the very process of the articulation or inscription makes inevitable its further articulation into speech and song. What Rousseau identifies as degeneration is actually differance, and differance has always already begun. Speech and song take the relationship of supplement, of exterior, to the imagined pure originary speech-song, but the logic of supplementarity points to speech and song having their inception in the same process as speech-song itself, namely differance.

Derrida does not recognize all this as simply an example of differance, but rather as differance itself. Spacing, differance is precisely what is known in music as interval. But the origin of interval happens in the always-already of differance. The era of great art preceded that of great thought in ancient Greece as the entailments of precisely the divergence of speech from song, as Rousseau recognizes, but the eventual accession of speech-thought over song-art happens by precisely the same differance that is the creation of speech-song. What one finds, then, is an infinity of cycles of degeneration-regeneration, where what is lost through degeneration is compensated for by a regeneration. The loss to thought of the powers of song is compensated for by refinements in thought.

Differance interrupts presence through spacing, interval. The essence of art as traditionally understood is imitation. Art is thus supplement to reality or to Nature, to which it adds nothing and yet adds something. This is the danger of art to which Plato called attention in The Republic. Since art imitates nature, it is superfluous to reality, adding nothing to it, but since it does add to reality it is dangerous because it is not reality but rather imitation. To put this into more modern terminology, signifier imitates signified.

When signifier no longer imitates signified, perversion enters. Money does not imitate that which it buys, which is why the love of money itself is a perversion; it is a love of a signifier apart from its signified, possible because of the non-imitative nature of money with respect to what it buys. And yet even in an imitative relationship of signifier and signified a spacing has arisen which leaves room for perversion. Imitation in differance integrity creates perversion. Imitation is not assaulted by an evil

from without, but rather deconstructed from within.

If art indeed imitates nature, then everything in art is a signifier, and we are moved not by the signifiers themselves but by their signifieds. Painting moves us not by color but by that which its images signify; music moves not by sound but by that which the sounds signify, namely feeling or emotion. This signification occurs of course in the context of culture—music that is deeply moving in one culture is not in the next—but the point is rather that in all contexts of culture this signification of feeling occurs. The effect of art is not in art itself, but in that which it signifies, and this through imitation. In music, this imitation is produced by melody, by melodic line, as in painting it is produced by the drawn line.

But as we come back to the earlier point: the instrument of imitation, the line, be it melodic or drawn, rises in differance and differance deconstructs imitation in the very process that gives rise to it. The degeneration of the melody of speech-song into the calculated interval melodies of song happens by the same process, differance, that generated the melody of speech-song.

Rousseau's dispute with Rameau shows he does not understand this. He vehemently denies Rameau's dictum that melody comes from harmony. Harmony to Rousseau is further degeneration into calculation of melody, and to posit its priority to melody is nonsense. Melody is the parent, harmony the child which seeks to overthrow it. The calculations of harmony do not imitate, and they please us only as a result of their harmonic inter-connections, which are operations of melody. Rameau, he maintains, is blind to this, a blindness which is moral before it is theoretical. He criticizes Rameau for ethnocentrism, laying down on the basis of recent European music the basis of all music. But Derrida points out that this criticism is itself ethnocentric in its claim that harmony is a peculiarly European musical evil.

Rousseau himself recognizes that harmonic calculation already resides in melody; it is rather that harmonic calculation has anything to do with musical imitation that he denies. This imitation, in speech, song, or speech-song, has to do with accent, the rise and fall of tone or tone of voice. Yet what is rise and fall but differance, and the cold science of harmonic calculation proceeds from the same process that created the supposed ordinary accent. The sustained use of the analogy of painting to music is no accident: as interval is no example of differance but differance itself, this analogy is analogy itself. In fact, the word chromatic comes from the Greek chroma, meaning color: Rousseau maintains that a calculation of chromatics no more results in musical art than it results in spatial art.

Harmony is supplement to melody. Musical melody is supplement to the melody of undegenerate speech-song. But Rousseau cannot see this process as always-already happening. There was, in the sense that there must have been, a pure origin, an incorrupt pure origin that has been attacked. In other words, there must have been an originary presence—in the instance discussed here, speech-song—that has degenerated from attacks by evils from without—song, harmony. Rousseau sees all the elements of differance, but cannot see differance because he is firmly rooted in the age-old metaphysics of presence, of perfect plenitude. He cannot see that even in speech-song, with its undiminished powers of expression, that an imitative substitution has begun, of precisely the same nature of the degenerations he decries, a substitution that interrupts presence or plenitude and that by its very nature as language, as discourse, deconstructs presence through differance.

Derrida's main purpose in dealing with these matters is to get on to the relationship of writing to speech, but ours is not. Rousseau provides a fine example of the deceptions of the logic and metaphysics of presence, of the idea plenitude exists, that a thing has no reference to that which it is not. He is of interest to musical theorists because one of his concerns is music, and it is in this concern for music that he provides such a fine example of logocentrism.

Let us restate, this time without reference to the Rousseau-Rameau dispute, the central insight gained by examining their dispute as analyzed by Derrida. It is this: there is no original music; insofar as music has an origin it originates in differance, and those things that seem to be additions from without—a science of intervals, of harmony, notation—in the role of supplement to a plenitude, to a whole, in fact originate from within, as it were. Or rather, the plenitude and its supplement arise from the same originary process of differance. Presence, in presenting itself, de-presented itself; a plenitude or whole, in so constructing itself, deconstructs itself. To compose a plenitude decomposes an apparent prior plenitude, ad infinitum; the decomposition of the composition inheres to the composition; this process is the always-already, the irreconcilable dialectic of differance.

The deconstructionist view of music—which is deconstruction itself, if what this paper is saying has been followed—lends support to the anti-Romantic theories of The Poetics of Music. The idea of an "inner meaning" to music, of music expressing something other than itself, of the composer as a priest in art, of the performer as the revealer of the inner meaning—all this deconstruction shows to be nothing more than the metaphysics of presence, the illusion of hearing oneself speak, the illusion that there are

plenitudes such as meaning, art, composer, etc., who speak. But deconstruction also shows the more modern ideals of musical integrity to be illusions as well: music expresses nothing outside itself, scrupulous adherence to the composer's intentions, and so on.

The logic of supplementarity allows no escape, as it allows no entrance. What are "absolute music," "composer's intentions," "faithfulness to the score," or the 'musical dialectic in its totality' that Stravinsky speaks of but again a metaphysic of presence, an illusion that such self-contained plenitudes exist?

Stravinsky himself, in one of the opening quotations of this paper, admits that no matter how carefully notation is done it can never notate the totality of the piece of music. "Verbal dialectic is powerless to define musical dialectic in its totality."⁶ We have seen, though, that here speaks the metaphysics of presence, a belief that a plenitude, the piece of music, exists and now is to be supplemented from without by notation. And if that notation is incomplete, as it admittedly is, we can see by the logic of supplementarity that the composer's alleged intentions must also be incomplete. That which was thought to be the exclusive characteristic, the excluding characteristic, of the exterior supplement is found to be characteristic of the supposed plenitude it supplements. Within the logocentric metaphysics of presence, this is nonsense. Upon the recognition of differance, of trace, of spacing, the logic of supplementarity points in only this way: the incompleteness of the notation indicates the incompleteness of the composer's intentions. In the strictest sense of the terms, it is impossible to notate, it is impossible to compose.

Even within modern musical philosophy of performance, more than one performance or reading is possible within the dictum of fidelity to the score. It is not the deconstructionist contention that more than one reading is possible that is novel, for this problem has long been recognized as attendant upon the nature of notation, but rather the insight that no plenitude such as a composer's conception exists to be notated, that the conception shares the same incompleteness as the notation, that the "musical dialectic in its totality" shares all the flaws of the "verbal dialectic" used to notate it, and this precisely because there is no totality, but rather differance, always-already.

Could not electronic music be excused from this? There is no score, no performance, no interpretation; the composer himself assembles precisely what he wants to hear, or does hear. Or does he? The tape is not what the composer hears,

⁶Ibid.

but a record of it. It is an imitative image, a supplement to a supposed plenitude, a record. There is no escape for electronic music; it simply follows a different course—which is to say, the same course.

And so we are led from sign to sign, wherever we go. We do not arrive at the end of a chain of signifiers at some kind of signified that escapes signification, because we do not arrive at the end of a chain of signifiers. Every signified is in turn a signifier, and we do not find a transcendental signified, as Derrida calls it, a presence, Being, at the end. Reality is something like a dictionary: each word is defined by other words, and if we look up the words used to define one word, we find other words, and so on. By the very system that allows us to look up words, there is no ur-word, no transcendental word, to which the dictionary reduces and which is knowable apart from the relation it bears to its supplements, the other words in the dictionary. It is no accident that the dictionary, the words-book, should so precisely microcosm the differance of the language and reality for which its words are signs. Reality remains unknowable.

Where does all this lead us, or leave us? Nowhere. That is not a problem, nor an objection; there is no Somewhere to be led or left. These lines of thought have been presented, so to speak, as occampaniments to honor a thinker who wrestled mightily with the unknowableness of it all—William of Occam. His conclusion was that, reality being unknowable, propositions are not statements about reality and philosophy is simply the study of the function of terms in propositions. Terms do not refer to reality, only to each other. Stravinsky and Occam portrayed music and language respectively as self-contained systems, that do not depend upon their reference to a larger reality. Beginning in agreement about the larger reality as illusion, deconstruction reveals that the smaller reality is illusion too, that self-contained presence simply is not. The deconstruction of composition we have presented, so to speak, as decomposition, offering it as a musical occampaniment to Stravinsky's Poetics of Music.

Perhaps, though perhaps not, differance was acknowledged in ancient China:⁷

The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.
The named is the mother of ten thousand things.

These two spring from the same source but differ
in name; this appears as darkness.
Darkness within darkness.
The gate to all mystery.

Can a Wagnerian accept all this: trace, spacing, differance and all their implications? The answer might lead us to a philosopher who both recognizes the unknowability attendant upon what has been termed here differance and yet demonstrates the possibility of the experience of presence under those conditions. But, as the lady said, tomorrow is another day.

This paper does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes deconstruction or decomposition. Its primary purpose is to set forth to the best of our ability Derrida's deconstruction and to experimentally speculate upon its application to the relation of sounded to written music.

⁷Lao Tsu, Tao Te Ching, Feng and English tr. (New York: Vintage, 1972).