

Chapter III: Thinking Musical Difference

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I. Introduction

Gilles Deleuze is a vigorous critic of the Western intellectual tradition (what he ironically calls the “philosophy of difference”). Despite its ambitions, Deleuze is convinced that Western philosophy fails to truly grasp (or *think*) difference as such. The implications cut across virtually all epistemological domains (at least those comprising Western academia), including music. Some of these implications are pursued in this chapter. It will be argued that longstanding methods of conceptualizing music are vulnerable to Deleuze’s critique. But, as Deleuze himself stresses, more important than merely critiquing established paradigms is developing ways to overcome them.¹ To this end Deleuze’s own concepts apply well to music. This chapter develops some potential aspects of this application in pursuit of a genuinely Deleuzian conception of thinking *musical* difference.

Deleuze believes that difference is at all times and everywhere the positive condition of things and beings. But *thinking* difference proves elusive to rational thought. It is in the very nature of reason to temper and order difference, transforming it to the orders of representation and identity.² In certain areas this has unmistakable advantages (technology, science, medicine, etc.). But Deleuze is interested in a more spiritual, more creative potential for thinking difference – a potential whose object is not the practical uses it may serve, but rather the range, quality, and novelty of thought itself. He wants thought to reach beyond the limitations of good sense,

beyond styles of thought which operate upon pre-established possibilities, in order to open thought to a difference that presents itself uniquely and unilaterally in each case.

Although philosophy is defined as the “art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts,”³ Deleuze by no means reduces thought, including conceptual thought, to those concepts. There is an interiority or depth that obscures any possible transparency between a concept and itself. Concepts are “made and unmade” within a complex and turbulent milieu of thought.⁴ Whether it is conceptual or not, Deleuze calls a properly creative thought an *Idea*: “Ideas are not concepts; they are a form of eternally positive differential multiplicity, distinguished from the identity of concepts.”⁵ This is not to say that concepts cannot inhabit Ideas, but rather that concepts are always exceeded by an indivisible concatenation of thought “components” which make them up.⁶

Not all concepts rise to the level of Ideas. For Deleuze, this level is attained when “schemata of concepts” are conceived as “dramas of Ideas.”⁷ Such dramas are intensive, rather than extensive; they consist of quantitative and qualitative intensities, “centers of vibrations,”⁸ and points of view:

...it is a question of producing...a movement capable of affecting the mind outside of all representation; it is a substituting of direct signs for mediate representations; of inventing vibrations, rotations, whirlings, gravitations, dances or leaps which directly touch the mind.⁹

While he doesn't ultimately grant art quite the creative becoming as philosophy, Deleuze nonetheless treats the arts as unique thought-contexts for the creative production of Ideas. No space is left open for representation or mediation. Producing “vibrations” and “gravitations” as