

## **Of Genre, System, and Process: Music Theory in a ‘Global Sonorous Space’**

**Brian Hulse  
Assistant Professor  
College of William & Mary  
bchuls@wm.edu**

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...”<sup>1</sup> 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 some fundamental difference in music so much as technological advances in travel, recording, transmission, production, etc. etc. If the global sonorous space is something new, something unique to the present then it is as a radical de-hierarchization in our exposure to and experience of music caused by extraordinary changes in technology; resulting in a spectacular comingling 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 longstanding 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* (Oxford, 2006) inaugurates a musical-analytic consciousness oriented towards a global perspective. Seemingly

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, Fordham University Press, 2007, p. 12

in harmony with Nancy, Tenzer observes that “we are approaching multi- or a virtual panmusicality...”<sup>2</sup> He argues “Music 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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 center, no single point of view, and no rule of a normative system. Genres belong to a pan-global environment or ecosystem 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 center 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” and then chaos itself).<sup>4</sup> 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.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Tenzer, *Analytical Studies in World Music*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 34

<sup>3</sup> Tenzer, *Analytical Studies*, p. 34

<sup>4</sup> I’m borrowing from the title of Jeffrey Bell’s book *Philosophy at the Edge of Chaos: Gilles Deleuze and the Philosophy of Difference*, University of Toronto Press, 2006

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

There is another level, albeit unrepresentable as such, which makes genre possible while 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 Qawwali devotional song. A rhythmic pattern in Perotin might form part of a rhythmic tala in Hindustani music. Or a riff in a Robert Johnson tune could turn up in a Turkish Taksim. 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, meters (esp. 2, 3, 4, 6), and even timbres (plucked or bowed strings, percussive sounds, reed and brass instruments, etc.) and so on, 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 how 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, and so on, 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.”<sup>5</sup>

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 according 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 Deleuze and 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,”<sup>6</sup> 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, if I can put it that way, 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

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*, Columbia University Press, 2008, p. 6

<sup>6</sup> Tenzer, *Analytical Studies*, p. 34

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 favors 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 decentered, 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.”<sup>7</sup> 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...”<sup>8</sup> 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-centered viewpoint which I believe is not especially optimal for founding a global music theory.

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<sup>7</sup> Tenzer, *Analytical Studies*, p. 6

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9

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 motive becomes a rhizome, the Urzatz is a rhizome, and so on). Rhizomes in a Deleuzian sense are fundamentally unstable – there is no preordained 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 “The 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.”<sup>9</sup> 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 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

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<sup>9</sup> Scott O’Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 17

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.”<sup>10</sup> Smooth space is occupied by intensities, “wind and noise, and sonorous and tactile qualities...”<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup>

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* 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 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 upside to it: for it neither

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<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, 2005, p. 373

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 479

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 484

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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## Summary

Drawing on Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of a "global sonorous space," this paper 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, 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 modeled upon concepts developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari such as the rhizome, smooth space, and the idea of unstable systems "at the edge of chaos."

## **Biography**

Brian Hulse (PhD '99 Harvard) is Assistant Professor of Music at the College of William & Mary in Virginia (US). His research interests include temporality, process, repetition, improvisation, and the writings of Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze. His work has been published in *Perspectives of New Music*, the *Dutch Journal of Music Theory*, and *GAMUT*. He is also contributing to and co-editing a book of essays on the application of Deleuzian thought to the theory and philosophy of music, which is forthcoming from Ashgate Publishers. As a composer, Hulse specializes in chamber music and opera, and currently directs the composition program at the soundSCAPE Festival in Pavia, Italy. A CD of his music is forthcoming from Albany Records.