

Sonic Thinking:
A Media Philosophical
Approach

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Images of Thought | Images of Music

Adam Harper

A few years ago I was asked by the Belgian-Dutch magazine *Gonzo* (*circus*) to write a new music manifesto to mark the centenary of Luigi Russolo's essay *The Art of Noises*, typically regarded as the futurist musical manifesto, and along with the aims of that genre of writing I adopted the bombastic tone of manifestos, hopefully with a tongue recognizable in my cheek and a twinkle in my eye. It began, "We demand the future of music, and a musical future. This is to say we demand new and greater thought, communication, and representation in relation to sound, in relation to each other" (Harper 2013). Demands, futures, greatness. "We." A little while later I read it out at an event in Philadelphia also marking that centenary, where it was followed by a reading of *The Art of Noises* by a performance artist in character and dress as the early-twentieth-century futurist, complete with false beard. The resurrected Russolo roared his dreams and frustrations with high camp, bringing out all the absurdity and disquieting violence of his era's aesthetics to much audience laughter. With the shades of Charlie Chaplin's character in *The Great Dictator* recalling the association of futurism with fascism, this was not just the text of a manifesto but the image of one, and it was something distanced, historicized, and palpably ironic.

What might a manifesto for new music look like today, after the many failed dogmas of the twentieth century and the violence with which they are tainted? What fresh departure could such a call possibly make from a contemporary cultural milieu in which everything is (allegedly) possible, especially those departures made in the past? Such broad and tendentious proposals, particularly in the English-speaking

world, not only appear ridiculous but dangerously blinkered or universalizing. Yet we live in a world—there's that “we” again—that once again incites the imagination and makes a list of demands. Once again we have begun to dip our toes into a new, challenging and dangerous century, with new formations of collective subjectivity both necessary and emergent. A newly political musicology, animated by continental philosophy, has already begun to reject neoliberal postmodernism's “end of history,” reconsidering some of the tenets of modernism in the process (e.g. Harper-Scott 2012; Currie 2012; Shank 2014). Music is called upon for its ability to philosophize and imagine new and better futures.

In a bid to avoid the excessively prescriptive or assumptive nature of past manifestos, my *Gonzo (circus)* text focused more on critique of existing and naturalized structures within music-making than offering any concerted specification of tomorrow or any one particular set of ideas about the musical future. It hoped to dissolve music's traditional ontologies in increasingly radical steps, moving from melody to harmony, rhythm, the work, the performance, the style, the instrument, the composer, the audience, and finally to “music” itself. Its main assumption was the direct equation of music with thought. The manifesto began with music obliquely defined as the sending of information relative to sound and society: “new and greater thought, communication, and representation in relation to sound, in relation to each other.” “Communication” and “representation” might also be considered types of thought, of the passing on and processing of information—different semantic facets of the same activity. Later, I elaborated on this processing of information and its political character:

It often appears that music is a form of entertainment, but it is one of our species' most important modes of communication. In the way it sounds and the way it is performed, it represents us all, our feelings, identities and desires. Music is a vote that all too frequently goes uncounted. It is a thought passing along the neural net formed by our entire planet.

The manifesto's final sentence offered one of its few actual predictions, again, oblique: "Music and the world and life will leave their cages, the ear will return to the brain, and there will only be the movement of information in thought." Alluding to the poetics of John Cage, this implied the dissolution of any distinction between music and non-music and between the creation or perception of music and the wider activity of information (neural or otherwise) of which it is a part and with which it is continuous.

Such a broad assumption of music's ontology upholds, in the extreme, the ideal of open-mindedness that composing and listening to new music requires. It was also the central assumption of the book I had written before the manifesto, *Infinite Music* (Harper 2011). Although in many ways dressed as a manifesto and calling for a revival of the spirit of modernism, the substance of the book was its highly flexible, relativistic account of what constitutes music and musical forms. Following the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and much of the work he did with Félix Guattari, it was only musical difference, or change, itself that could be counted on as the one permanent characteristic of music up and down the ages, in the distant past and distant future. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze (1994) equates true thought with difference in itself, and in parallel it is difference that is the deepest fact about music, once all the lesser, impermanent specifics, ideas, and techniques—the manifestos—are stripped away. If music is to be philosophy, this musical difference is none other than thought itself. Whatever the word or concept of "music" means a millennium from now, whatever its significance, making any claims other than that it will involve difference and thought would reduce it to a finite concept. Whatever specifics there might be about music in the future, the one thing we can be sure about is that it will involve or be involved in "the movement of information in thought," whether this event happens within a human mind, between two or more human bodies, or, more likely perhaps, between a multiplicity of nodes that we today might not immediately recognize as "human."

Of course, this "thought" is by no means exclusive to music. Nor is thought somehow exclusively musical. But defining music as a discrete

concept with necessary and sufficient conditions for being is besides the point. Music is continuous with other art forms such as dance, art, film, and gaming, even with life itself. Thought flows through all of these things without showing a passport or going through customs. Indeed, like thought, the domain of music is no more or less than the domain of the entire universe. This is the end of the road that John Cage reached when he would say “everything we do is music.” This is also the univocity of Deleuze’s philosophy, his and Guattari’s plane of immanence, Spinoza’s God, even. Definitions of music or musical activity, or “musicking”—the use of music as a verb that Christopher Small popularized and that crucially encompasses both composing and listening as well as everything else (Small 1998)—melts away into all of its super-categories, becomes infinite and, technically at least, useless. On a more practical basis, particular definitions and aesthetics of music and its subcategories do and will emerge, but hopefully provisionally, against the backdrop of infinite difference, to fulfill particular socio-political purposes (or not) just as thoughts do. Mindfulness of this backdrop, returning to it in moments that demand musicking and philosophizing, improves the potential richness and utility of these musics and these thoughts. In any case, there is a distinction, then, between particular “thoughts” and thought itself, between particular instances of or objects in musicking and musicking as possibility.

Again, this lies in parallel with Deleuze’s account of philosophy. His concept of The Image of Thought represents a particular set of ideas about the properties of thinking—its relationship to truth, its end of recognition, its morality and so on—that reappears throughout the history of Western philosophy. True thought and philosophy questions and transcends that image:

As a result [of Nietzsche’s critique of philosophy] the conditions of a philosophy which would be without any kind of presuppositions appear all the more clearly: instead of being supported by the moral Image of thought, it would take as its point of departure a radical critique of this Image and the “postulates” it implies. It would find its difference or its true beginning, not in agreement with the *pre-philosophical* Image but

in a rigorous struggle against this Image, which it would denounce as *non-philosophical*. As a result, it would discover its authentic repetition in a thought without Image . . . as though thought could begin to think, and continually begin again, only when liberated from the Image and its postulates. It is futile to claim to reformulate the doctrine of truth without first taking stock of the postulates which project this distorting image of thought.

Deleuze 1994: 167–8

We can similarly talk of an Image of Music, against which a music “without any kind of presuppositions” would struggle, “as though [music] could begin to [music], and continually begin again.”

What might the “postulates” of this Image of Music be? One of them is the aforementioned “music [as] a form of entertainment.” But certainly, the strongest one defines a certain relationship to sound, specifically, that music is sound(s), is sound(s) primarily, and even is sound(s) only. The composer and theorist Edgard Varèse famously called his own work “organized sound,” and this has persisted as the broadest definition—and indeed aesthetic—of music (Varèse and Wen-chung 1966: 18). Firstly, the “organized” nature of this music presupposes an active agency (human or otherwise) behind the making of sound(s), and might even imply a kind of order within it. We might say that neither is necessary for an experience of musical thought, and following Deleuze, we can radically critique this image of order as “non-musical.” It could be precisely in its disorganized and disruptive nature that true music and thought becomes possible.

Secondly, music is widely considered an inherently and primarily sonic medium, rather than one that simply relates to sound. Moreover, for many composers and critics, sound is often held to be a more progressive category than music; music is seen as a less relevant subcategory of the more modern, more direct world of sound, one that often somehow circumvents the apparently corrupting mediation of culture and traditional musical technocracy (such as classical or industrial establishments). But sound is by no means a larger, more essential category than music. It could be seen the other way around,

with sound as a subcategory of music, or at the very least, sound and music overlapping with neither subsuming the other. I have used the word “sonocentric” to describe both this privileging of sound and the reduction of music to sound or to plural definite or indefinite article sounds (Harper 2012: 33).

It is wrong to apparently deny that music has a significant non-sonic dimension. Visual art, dance, and costume is a major part of music and this should be acknowledged both in terms of creativity and aesthetics. This is obviously true in popular music cultures, but is equally true outside them. Even when we try to pretend otherwise, music—and sound itself, too—is a multimedia event with purposes and effects that extend beyond sound. Sonifying music makes it discrete from the non-sonic. This is another area where the exclusivity of standard definitions of music begins to dissolve.

Thinking of music in terms of sound(s) also makes it sonically determined and internally discretized, something composed of a specific sound or a collection of specific sounds, of sonic objects that can have fixed and recognizable identities. Owing to the semantic leakage between “sound” and “timbre,” sonocentrism can all too easily collapse music’s multidimensional differences into those of determined timbres. For example, a rhythm such as one might read from notation can be ontologically independent of specific “sounds”—it is a musical object that cannot be reduced to a sonic object, or an object made of determinate sound or sounds. Granted, it cannot be manifested without sounds at the point of performance, but its identity and ontology as an object is not inherently a definite or determined timbral identity. It is more deeply representative of the possibilities of music to begin with the idea of difference and change, before these patterns coalesce into sonic “objects” for either composer or listener.

Rather than sonic objects, these differences can be specified as particular variables constrained to particular values or ranges of values. Most famously, in music these variables are pitch, volume, timbre, and duration or time, with values such as 440Hz, 23dB, five seconds, or sine wave respectively. There are, however, many more variables that can be

considered in the creation and aesthetics of music, involving space, aspects of listening, non-sonic variables and complex categories such as rhythm, harmony, and melody (in fact, in some cases there are only two variables—amplitude of a sound wave and time). It is collections of these variables and values, irrespective of sound, that form subcategories of music as a whole, musical objects. This is where musical difference becomes information and indeed, thought, since a constrained variable constitutes a piece of information.

But it would be wrong to consider this information absolutely or objectively derived. Rather, it is generated by thought, with music and thought reciprocally constituting one another. It is through a socially, culturally, and psychologically mediated musicking that musical objects become subjectively and provisionally generated patterns or spaces of information, that is to say, thoughts. Philosophy conforms to an Image of Thought in the same way, and thus music conforms an Image of Music. In fact, just as we can talk about musical objects as subcategories of music, so we can talk about images of music without capital letters and in the plural, as mediated versions of particular musical objects. We could talk of images of melody, of the piano, of jazz, or of particular musicians, even of images of musical novelty itself.

Every instance of musicking, as well as musical objects away from performance strictly defined, generates an image of music: an idea about and perception of its difference and repetition, both internal to the musicking and between musickings. Composing, performing, and listening are ultimately the same activity: the constituting of images of music, and they regulate and are regulated by aesthetic responses. They discriminate between all the potential pieces of information musicking can offer a listener and come to constitute a particular informational structure or subset of features, effectively presented to them as a structure of constrained variables. This process will only constitute some variables, values and musical objects while the rest will be discounted, effectively undetected, or allotted a more peripheral status. It affects our assumptions, opinions and expectations about what we think make up certain musical objects away from actual musical

performances. Images of music are musical objects as they appear in the mind or between minds, that is, in culture: they are “imagination” of music. They comprise internal and external differentiations, orderings of perceptions, aesthetic priorities, assumptions and expectations. Without images of music, all we encounter are disorganized sounds—actually, without the information processing capabilities that create these images for us, our brains would not really be functioning at all.

Images of music delimit what is thinkable as music, and, most importantly, thinkable through music. They can have a detrimental effect on the ability to appreciate and even imagine music that does not fit to their templates. Just as in Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy, what lies outside of them is cast as disruptive and apparently irrational, and often labeled “noise.” An inability or unwillingness to observe and comply with the implicit images regulating the perception and aesthetics of art and life in general is often classified as madness or put down to limited or altered mental capacity, or simply suffers from a lack of cultural capital.

Like thought, musical creativity works and is perceived in relation to these images of music and their blind spots, and when it manages to expand or supersede them it could be considered genuinely new, “modernist” perhaps. This musical creativity is not just the preserve of those areas of music-making considered traditionally creative (composition, improvisation and performance), but since all musicking generates and can potentially expand images, it is also something possible through music criticism, critical listening and repeat performance. It is only half the struggle, then, for composers to compose new music. Listening equates to composing in that both activities constitute musical thought, so without an appropriate way of listening—an appropriately adapted image of music—new music will not appear new, viable, or recognizable at all. New music demands new ways of listening. Indeed, the dichotomy is largely false because the two activities both constitute music: new music *is* new listening, and new listening *is* new music, even if it is “old” music with a fresh perspective.

The notion of an infinitely variable music-without-images can be seen as both the destination and the source of a modernist musicking, one that truly equates to thought. It cannot actually be manifested, since images are unavoidable if any information is to be gleaned from or through music at all. Yet musicking can hint at it, striving for richer images of music, images more suited to modern capacities and challenges. This process is achieved through, or at the very least in metaphorical parallel with, the development and usage of modern technologies and scientific discovery, and reflects modernity. Modernity is constantly “beyond” images and as such necessitates the creation of new images that better reflect the changed possibilities and structures of the modern world.

As with Deleuze’s Image of Thought, so with the sonocentric Image of Music, which all too readily associates what are limited images of music with an objective, sonified truth of discrete objects, thus listening with a minimum, or absence, of difference or thought. Musicking is not an encounter with these objects, but their ontological disruption, still less is it authenticated by some disavowal of the mediation of culture, “musical” or otherwise, by the bracketing off of life and the non-sonic in a realist search for sound-objects in themselves. It should be a continuous meditation on pure difference, before or instead of its division into sound and sounds. Music and listening should not be a museum full of given sonic objects, but a seething quantum foam that could give birth to a new dimension at any second. True listening, and true composing as well perhaps, is in not knowing what, or not knowing *yet* what sounds are or might be present, but nevertheless sensing change and the potential for change. This, one hopes, is modernist sound in the twenty-first century. It is not *a* sound.

Ultimately, it is the equation of music with thought that justifies the project of new music, of musical difference. If music and the world is in constant, continuous change, and needs to resist and replace limited, outmoded images of itself over any given time period, then music and thought alike should be at their most receptive to difference. We can endlessly pass images of music and of the world along the neural net

unthinkingly, even images of new music with or without costume and manifesto in hand, or we can hope to improve and think anew. If music and thought are not just the purely aesthetic flickering of the mind but the sending of new information across neurons and across cultures and any living system, a technology of self (DeNora 2000) and of society, then we do not have to argue that music can be called upon to improve ourselves and our world simply because it provides fresh metaphors for it. Whatever its relation to sound, music is the very thinking of the world itself and of us *as* ourselves—it is not just us that creates music, it is also music that creates us.

I close, then, with the words of the composer Peter Ablinger: “Die Klänge sind nicht die Klänge! Sie sind da, um den Intellekt abzulenken und die Sinne zu besänftigen. Nicht einmal das Hören ist das Hören: Das Hören ist das, was mich selbst erschafft” (Ablinger 2002). “Sounds are not sounds! They are here to distract the intellect and to soothe the senses. Not once is hearing ‘hearing’: hearing is that which creates me.”

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