

Music and Network. A Becoming Insect of Music

Marcel Cobussen

One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug. He lay on his armour-hard back and saw, as he lifted his head up a little, his brown, arched abdomen divided up into rigid bowl-like sections. From this height the blanket, just about ready to slide off completely, could hardly stay in place. His numerous legs, pitifully thin in comparison to the rest of his circumference, flickered helplessly before his eyes.

(Franz Kafka: *The Metamorphosis*)

1. Exposition (Territorialization)

In *The Rise of the Network Society*, Manuel Castells defines a network as a set of interconnected nodes, an architecture that cannot be controlled from any center. The topology defined by networks determines that the distance (or intensity and frequency of interaction) between two points is shorter (more frequent, more intense) if both points are nodes in a single network than if they do not belong to the same network. Actually, within a given network, flows have no distance, or the same distance, between nodes. Thus, distance (physical, social, economic, political, cultural) for a given point or position varies between zero (for any node in the same network) and infinite (for any point external to the network). According to Castells, the inclusion or exclusion in networks and the architecture of relationships between networks, enacted by speed-of-light-operating information technologies, configurate dominant processes and functions in our society.¹

Although Castells states that networks are open structures, able to expand without limits, he also emphasizes that new nodes can only be integrated as long as they are able to communicate within a network; namely, as long as they share the same communication codes (for example, values or performance goals).

What interests me here is this inclusion and exclusion of/in/by networks. Which nodes are on the inside, and which are on the outside? Which belong to the network, and which do not? Which communicate within a network, and which do not? And how is this decided? How does one demarcate a network, for example, the network of music?

To conceptualize music and network (music *as* a network), Serbian philosopher Miško Šuvaković introduced the term *intermusicality*, alluding of course to the (poststructuralist) idea of intertextuality. He distinguishes between three possible meanings of intermusicality: (a) the relation between two (or more) musical texts: their exchanges, referentialities, (dis)placements, inscriptions, mutual coverings; (b) the relation between a musical text and music as a cultural, historical, and political institution; (c) the relation between musical texts and so-called 'extra-musical' texts.²

What the concept of intermusicality makes clear in the first place is that a musical text always exists only through its relationship with other musical texts, as well as with other (artistic) texts that are operative in a spatial and temporal field. Music is not autonomous

but cross-refers endlessly (and not necessarily only in the more literal sense of quotation or citation). Music as a text is not isolated or self-contained; instead it is a network, a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of other texts blend and clash. The musical text is a tissue of references drawn from the innumerable centers of culture.³ It has intertexts. It is an intertext (network) in the sense of an 'internal' textual multiplicity. For each text, there are many textualities. Each text is considered divisible into other texts, indefinitely. The musical text is difference itself.⁴

The third meaning of intermusicality as described above most clearly (de)situates music as an *off-center*, located where the intra-musical meets the extra-musical, and de-defines its borders. Here 'textuality' is the condition of not setting clear lines of demarcation between the inside and the outside. What counts as part of the musical text and what does not? Which nodes are on the inside, and which are on the outside? How is a network demarcated? What interests me here are the interconnections between what are conventionally regarded as musical and/or extra-musical matters. In *Deleuze on Music, Painting and the Arts*, Ronald Bogue introduces the matter as follows: "The various themes enunciated in opera librettos, song lyrics, program notes, and composition titles, the diverse connections drawn by composers between their works and mythical, religious, philosophical, and social ideas – these are not extraneous impositions on a musical form, but indexes of *becomings*, elements proper to music yet unassimilable within a mimetic model of musical imitation or representation of a discursive content."⁵ How and to what extent do these (and other) alleged extra-musical matters become part of the musical domain, part of the music, without relapsing into the old ideas of mimesis, resemblance, or, ultimately, identification?

Let us investigate and linger over the impact of this quote through a procedure of thinking that Immanuel Kant called 'reflective judgement:' a way of thinking not guided by rules and laws to process, categorize or analyze data but able – if necessary – to derive these rules from 'reflectively' obtained results.

2. Development (Deterritorialization)

Things were turned upside down. There were terrifying things in the air ... they found their way into Black Angels.
(George Crumb)

I would like to introduce and discuss George Crumb's *Black Angels (Thirteen Images from the Dark Land)*. This is a work for electronic string quartet. In addition, the performers are instructed to shout, chant and whisper in six different languages and to play maracas, tom-toms, and crystal glasses. According to its composer, the work was completed on Friday the Thirteenth, 1970. Black angels. The angels of doom. The image of the black angel was a figurative convention in early pictorial art, symbolizing the fallen angel, Lucifer. Here, the piece in relation to the title functions as a kind of parable over tragedies aspects of the world's recent history. Crumb's musical lamentation symbolizes death and destruction; the composition is intended to pay homage to the victims of the Vietnam War. Thirteen audible panels allow us to hear (feel, sense) how an

American composer perceived and coped with the martial laws in that ‘dark land’ in South-East Asia. The first panel, the first image, the only image that will be considered here, is called “Night of the Electric Insects.”

Night of the Electric Insects. Please, listen to it. Play it loud. Play it often. Words will never be adequate to describe (this) music. You should *hear* the sounds of the jungle. Hear the night. Hear the Dark Land. Hear the fear. No, not only hearing: experiencing. *In tempore belli.*⁶ Foreign warriors moving in an unknown land, fighting an invisible opponent. No dramatized lamentation, no still moment of contemplation after a lost battle as in Samuel Barber’s *Adagio* in *Platoon*, but rough and raucous, all-penetrating sounds of an inconceivable terror, approaching relentlessly like the night and the enemy. Lethal insects. Creaking, shrieking, rattling. Hungry for blood and destruction.

Crumb not only compels us to listen to this experience. He makes us smell it, feel it, see it as well. This is no music for the ears alone. This is music for the whole body, including the brain.

Night of the Electric Insects. Electric Insects. Electric insects and music. In music. Through music. Music as electric insects. The issue at stake here is what Deleuze and Guattari call *becoming*. Becoming entails an unfixing of common coordinates of time and identity, the word itself emphasizing that actuality is a dynamic process rather than a state of being. Becoming is the externality and exteriorization of relations, the accident that destructures the essential form and decenters the substantial subject. In a becoming, one is deterritorialized; it is a moving away from any major position, a passing from one to the other, opening one onto the other, not following any fixed order or determined sequence. Becoming opens a space in the grid of categories delineating identity, creating new trajectories, new virtual land- or soundscapes. This can happen through anything at all, through the most unexpected as well as the most insignificant. Through Vietnamese nocturnal insects for example. Through music. Through amplification.

The music is a becoming-insect; the insect is becoming music. It is a becoming-insect that can only occur in proportion to the extent that the insects themselves are becoming something else: pure sounds, amplified and modified violins, crystal glasses. Therefore, becoming is never imitating. One does not imitate, no matter what claims to representational fidelity a composer might make; one constitutes a block of becoming, that is, lines of deterritorialization. Imitation is present only as an adjustment. “Imitation destroys itself, to the extent that he who imitates enters unknowingly into a becoming, which conjugates with the unknowing becoming of that which he imitates.”⁷ It is clear that the music is not ‘really’ becoming an insect (music is not like Kafka’s Gregor Samsa) any more than the insect is not ‘really’ becoming music. Instead, they form a block. In other words, there is no identification between insect and music; there is a zone of proximity because both change; both are affectively redefined. In the process of transposing the sounds of insects into the sounds of a string quartet, at every stage a deformation and mutation of the insects’ sounds takes place. But it is a double translation.⁸ Far from exemplifying programmatic impressionism, these transformations of the sounds of insects constitute a dynamic interaction between music and nature, one that reveals both music and nature to be open systems of difference engaged in a process

of mutual becoming.⁹ Becoming is involutionary (not to be confused with regressive) and creative, forming a block that runs its lines *between* the terms in play.

Chittering, cawing, creaking, shrieking, rattling, shaking: *Black Angels* make(s) a lot of strange noises. Where lies the difference between technological sounds and noises from tropical rainforests? Between electric and acoustic sounds? Between human and artificial sounds? Between culture and nature? This music is a biotechnology. Producer and jungle artist Dr. S. Gachet calls it the *audiomaze*, the electric insect-land that incites invisible excitement. Invisible because it teems with sounds that are evolved into unseen insectile life forms ...: *Night of the Electric Insects* becomes a nonlinear malevolence.¹⁰

According to Deleuze and Guattari, all genuinely creative composers proceed in inventing diagonal, transversal lines of deterritorialization. Great composers create becomings. Crumb has created a becoming. Did Deleuze and Guattari have Crumb's string quartet in mind when they wrote that "the reign of birds seems to have been replaced by the age of insects, with its much more molecular vibrations, chirring, rustling, buzzing, clicking, scratching, and scraping. Birds are vocal, but insects are instrumental: drums and violins, guitars and cymbals. A becoming-insect has replaced becoming-bird, or forms a block with it. The insect is closer, better able to make audible the truth that all becomings are molecular (cf. Martenot's waves, electronic music)."¹¹ Insects – music turning into the sounds of insects –succeed better in making clear that all becomings are molecular. Deleuze and Guattari make a sharp difference between what they call 'molecular' and 'molar' structures. Molar multiplicities are organizable (hierarchical), disciplined, and display a stable nature; they are systems of territorialization or reterritorialization. Molecular structures are structures which display the quality of giving rise to more connections (to the outside) and to the potential for change in nature. They are not unifiable nor totalizable, which is to say that these forms are most likely to give rise to revolutionary becomings. "It effects a dissolution of form that connects the most diverse longitudes and latitudes, the most varied speeds and slownesses, which guarantees a continuum by stretching variation far beyond its formal limits."¹²

Create the following triangle: insect – becoming – molecularity. Insects connect to a generalized chromaticism where pitch, rhythm and timbre are infinitely complex and extensive. Their sounds lend themselves for wide research on the possibilities of musical material. It seems that when sound deterritorializes, it becomes more and more refined. Scraping and buzzing, chirring and scratching: refined effects. Like the position of music in Kafka's novel *The Metamorphosis*¹³, the first part of *Black Angels* seems to be more about sonorities, intensities and sound colors than musical form or signification. Using a multitude of sound options, ranging from several 'unconventional' bow techniques and the use of amplification to the inclusion of percussion and various voice techniques, Crumb turns effects into instruments, dissolving the boundaries between violins and crystal glasses, maracas and voices.¹⁴ Effects are the lead instruments, decoupling sound from source, derealizing the sonic from the origin. Kodwo Eshun puts it this way: "Effects are now acoustic prosthetics, audio extensions, sonic destratifiers, electric mutators, multipliers and mutagens ... Electronic effects are destratifiers because they dissolve the organization of the instrument, liquefy the stratification of sound [...] Effects

defect from cause, redistributing themselves until it's impossible to hear which instrument generates which sound. A sound-vision schizmatix emerges; audio escapes from its acoustic body.¹⁵ A permanent de-identification, a permanent becoming. A deterritorialization. Music deterritorializing 'itself'.

Deterritorialization. "The question in music is that of a power of deterritorialization permeating nature, animals, the elements, and deserts as much as human beings."¹⁶ Music is presented here as the opponent of the territorial, of territorialization or reterritorialization: in short, music as the opponent of the *refrain*.¹⁷ The refrain can be defined as a pattern that stakes out a territory, perhaps a network, as described by Castells. I will give three examples. One: a child in the dark sings a song to reassure herself. The song is like a calming and stabilizing center in the heart of chaos. Two: radios and stereo equipment can be considered as sound walls around a household. They mark territories. If the first example is the determination of a center, the second example organizes space. Three: a bird sings an aria and thus opens its territory to other milieus: an opening to the outside, not to the old forces of chaos but to a region created by the territorializing forces themselves. One hazards an improvisation; one ventures from home on the thread of a tune.¹⁸

The latter example indicates that a territory is never really and totally 'occupied'; it is the place from which all movement takes place. A territory is always a position that is being abandoned. Becoming is an immanent process of escape that is always already at work. In other words, music is the deterritorialization of the refrain, but the refrain also deterritorializes itself. However, despite its deterritorializing power, the basic function of the refrain is essentially territorial: a point of organization, a specialized rhythmic organization of milieu components. And music deterritorializes the refrain, detaches or unfixes elements and reorganizes them within new assemblages.¹⁹ The process through which a refrain is deterritorialized – in music, through music, by music – is essentially one of becoming: a becoming-molecular, a becoming-insect, a passage *between* milieus and territories.

In the first image of *Black Angels*, the music has a becoming-insect as its content. But the animal simultaneously becomes, in sonority, something else: night, fear, war. Music takes as its content a becoming-insect; but in that becoming, the insects take as their means of expression shrieking violin bows, squeaking crystal glasses, electronic effects.

What might seem a mere imitative exercise is actually the inauguration of a creative passage between insect and music(ian), a process whereby the insects' buzzing becomes other as an unforeseen string quartet composition takes shape.²⁰ All musical invention proceeds via such a becoming-other, since music is the deterritorialization of the refrain and deterritorialization is itself fundamentally a process of becoming.²¹

3. Recapitulation (Reterritorialization)

Never ask what [music] means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will instead ask what it functions with, in connection with what other

things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed
(Deleuze and Guattari).

The becoming-music of insects. The becoming-insect of music. Music and insect form a block that runs its lines *between* the terms in play, that is, in the middle. “Thought-in-becoming starts in the middle, in the milieu common to two bodily dynamisms. The interiority of the bodies involved does not concern it. It lodges itself instead in the distance separating them, in their space of interaction, the field of their exteriority to one another. It is that plane of consistency [a holding together of disparate elements, MC] that is the ultimate object of the process. To become a new body, an old body needs a new milieu through which to move. Becoming-other orchestrates an encounter between bodies, considered from the point of view of their virtuality, in order to catapult one or all onto a new plane of consistency, in the kind of leap in place characteristic of incorporeal transformation.”²²

In my opinion, there is no limit to what Massumi calls above ‘spaces of interaction’. The concept of becoming refers to an infinite possibility to expand networks, to endless intermusicalities, to a fundamental impossibility to close off. Music has to be considered an open structure that permeates and is permeated by the world, the molecular domain of transverse becomings. Deleuze and Guattari name this a new form of redundancy. “AND ... AND ... AND ... There has always been a struggle in language between the verb *être* (to be) and the conjunction *et* (and) between *est* and *et* (is and and [which in French are identical in pronunciation – Trans.]). It is only in appearance that these two terms are in accord and combine, for the first acts in language as a constant and forms the diatonic scale of language, while the second places everything in variation, constituting the lines of a generalized chromaticism. From one to the other, everything shifts ... AND is less a conjunction than the atypical expression of all of the possible conjunctions it places in continuous variation.”²³

The simple conjunction ‘and’ immediately undermines Castells desperate endeavor to somehow restrain the reach of a network. Furthermore, by placing ‘everything in variation’, Deleuze and Guattari seem to regard a network as not primarily an accumulative entity but as an ever-changing flux of relations, never identical to itself. Through the becoming-animal of music, Deleuze and Guattari deconstruct Castells restricted (because too sociological) idea of a network. *Night of the Electric Insects* deterritorializes the idea of music as a concept that can be closed off, fixed, delimited.

In this sense ‘thought-in-becoming’ also applies to thinking and writing on or around music. Or, to be more cautious, what are the consequences of endless intermusicalities for musicology, for the *logos* that tries to come to grips with music? Through the constitutive network - network of powers and counterpowers - the bodies of both music and the study of music are continually reformed. The networks of music(ology) are structured in a *fundamentally* boundless and inclusive architecture, an *essentially* open architecture.

Musicology must enter the age and space in which music is a becoming-insect. I repeat my (open) question: what implications do the possible reformulations of a network as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari have for the tropics of musical discourse? How endless becomes musicology? How endless does it need to become? What are its boundaries, its

restrictions? Far from being able to provide these questions with satisfactory answers here, I would like to propose a simple criterion for future writings on music. Like any genuine creative (contemporary) composer, every musicologist should ask herself questions such as: do my texts work? What new thoughts do they make possible to think? What new emotions do they make possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions do they open in the body? These considerations should replace the question "Is it true?" However, this is neither a claim for an unrestrained relativism, nor a plea for a post-modern 'anything goes'; instead it should be considered as the beginning of a new ethics of musical discourses: an ethics of creativity, an ethics of becomings.

Marcel Cobussen (Ph.D) teaches Music Philosophy and Sound Studies at Leiden University and the Royal Conservatory of The Hague, the Netherlands.

Cobussen can be contacted at: M.A.Cobussen@umail.leidenuniv.nl

¹ Castells, M.; *The Rise of the Network Society*. Cambridge (MA), 1996: 1-28 and 469-478.

² Suvakovic, M. (ed); *Exclusivity and Coexistence*. Belgrade, 1997: 36.

³ Barthes, R.; *Image, Music, Text*. London, 1977: 146.

⁴ Cobussen, M.; 'Music is a Text', in: *Deconstruction in Music* (<http://www.cobussen.com>). Rotterdam, 2002.

⁵ Bogue, R.; *Deleuze on Music, Painting, and the Arts*. New York, 2003: 53 (my italics).

⁶ This is one of the two inscriptions the score bears, meaning 'in times of war'.

⁷ Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F.; *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis, 1987: 304-5.

⁸ "Deterritorialization and reterritorialization meet in the double becoming. The Autochthon can hardly be distinguished from the stranger because the stranger becomes Autochthonous in the country of the other who is not, at the same time that the Autochthon becomes stranger to himself, his class, his nation, and his language: we speak the same language, and yet I do not understand you. Becoming stranger to oneself, to one's language and nation" (Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F.; *What is Philosophy*. London, 1994: 110).

⁹ Bogue: 31

¹⁰ Eshun: 7-8.

¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 308.

¹² Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 309.

¹³ See first quotation.

¹⁴ "Music is a deterritorialization of the voice, which becomes less and less tied to language ... Voice and instrument are carried on the same plane in a relation that is sometimes one of confrontation, sometimes one of compensation, sometimes one of exchange and complementarity ... a becoming-molecular in which the voice itself is instrumentalized – where the instruments speak no less than the voice, and the voice plays no less than the instrument" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 96 and 302-7).

¹⁵ Eshun, K.; *More Brilliant Than The Sun*. London, 1998: 6-7.

¹⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 309.

¹⁷ The French word for refrain is 'ritournelle', literally a 'little return'. Deleuze and Guattari extend this term to refer to a more general return to the restricted circuit of a territory.

¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 311.

¹⁹ "Music is a creative, active operation that consists in deterritorializing the refrain" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 300).

²⁰ "Robert de Niro walks 'like' a crab in a certain film sequence; but, he says, it is not a question of his imitating a crab; it is a question of making something that has to do with the crab enter into composition with the image" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 274).

²¹ Bogue: 33-4.

²² Massumi, B.; *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari*. Cambridge (Mass), 1992: 98 (my italics).

²³ Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 98-9.