

SPEAKING WITHOUT TONGUES

**Steve Sweeney-Turner introduces
deconstruction for musicians**

When Derrida was present at a press conference organised in Cambridge the day he took his honorary degree, he was asked to spell out his views 'in a nutshell'. The implication being that what could not be ground down for busy people into bite-sized pellets must in some sense be bogus or at least 'merely academic'¹

Such attitudes are evidently prevalent throughout what Peter Franklin has recently dubbed 'anti-intellectual English-speaking musicology'.² In this world of rising student numbers, dwindling resources, staff assessment, quality assessment, performance-related pay, etc., etc., it appears that what our poor, overworked academics require is the theoretical equivalent of the Pot Noodle. Simply get back from a hard day's administration (whatever happened to lecturing?), slam some Derrida in the microwave and presto – *Fast Food Theory*, no bother, no fuss, no *effort*.³

However, there is another side to the dismal situation which Marian Hobson describes above – it is also evident that the reception of deconstruction within musicology has been hampered by its philosophical complexity.⁴ But if, with Deleuze and Guattari, we can think of philosophy as a 'pedagogy of the concept',⁵ then there might be a certain amount of value in attempting to serve up deconstruction Macdonalds-style, so long as we realise that our MacTheoryburger will not be anywhere near as meaty as a plate of unprocessed Derrida – T-bones and all.

Firstly, some history. Deconstruction began its life in late-60s Paris in the *philosophical* writings of Jacques Derrida. In his classic texts *Of grammatology* (1967), *Writing and difference* (1967), and *Différance* (1968) he instituted a critique of metaphysical philosophy from the ancients to the 20th century.⁶ Given that this is the provisional basis from which deconstruction moves out, a short detour into traditional philosophical concepts will be required in order to finally arrive at the links between music and deconstruction.

The problems in metaphysical philosophy which deconstruction identifies emerge right at the very beginning of philosophy's

recorded history – with Pythagoras. We begin, then, not only with the 'first philosopher', but also the 'first music theorist'. Pythagoras's ostensibly innocent idea of the Table of Opposites was his greatest and worst legacy to western (and middle eastern) thought. The Table of Opposites is a scheme whereby everything in the universe can be categorised according to two columns, the one 'positive' (the 'Monad', or number 1, meaning 'unity'), the other 'negative' (the 'Dyad', or number 2, meaning 'division'). According to Aristotle, it looked like this:

<i>The Monad</i>	<i>The Dyad</i>
Limited	Unlimited
Odd	Even
One	Many
Right	Left
Male	Female
Rest	Motion
Straight	Crooked
Light	Darkness
Good	Bad
Square	Oblong ⁷

Porphyry notes that the column headed 'The Monad' is superior to the column head 'The Dyad'.⁸ Instantly you can see where the problems of this kind of metaphysical oversimplification arise – especially if you happen to be black, a woman, or left-handed. Nevertheless, this kind of oppositional thinking is at the historical and metaphysical root of western philosophy, and its influence cannot be underestimated. The defenders of such ideas will always point out that the third term in this kind of series, the Triad, represents the 'marriage' of the male and female principles. Quite so, but let us not forget that this 'marriage' (named by the Pythagoreans *harmonia*, with all of the attendant musical resonances of that term) is described by Hippolytus as a 'male number'.⁹ So to bring about a union of male and female opposites results in a male conclusion. In this way, female 'numbers' are surrounded by, controlled by their more perfect masculine counterparts.¹⁰

Much the same can be said of dialectics *per se*, which emerge most forcefully in the writings of the 18th- and 19th-century German philosopher George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Hegel's contribution to this ancient metaphysical debate was to develop dialectical thought into the model we now slight oversimplify as: thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Briefly put, one begins with a proposition (thesis) which turns out to be incomplete. Therefore, one creates its opposite (antithesis) to compensate for this incompleteness. By then combining the best elements of the two, one achieves a higher unity (synthesis). However, the similarity of this model with the male-female-male structure of the Pythagorean *harmonia* is striking: note that the antithesis is effectively the product of the thesis. As the negative of the thesis, the antithesis is the shadow of the thesis – its other side. Hence, the final synthesis is actually achieved by the thesis 'mating' with its self-created opposite in order to improve its own lot. Rather onanistic, really. It is no surprise therefore that Hegel conceived of the synthesis as capable of becoming in its turn

another thesis, thus resuming the whole process, and so on. One can easily see here the similarity between the thesis-antithesis relationship and the Adam-Eve relationship, where Eve is created from Adam's own body (his 'spare rib') in order to produce, for his benefit, some fine male heirs.¹¹

Musically, it is often said that such dialectics regulate the contrasts between tonic and dominant regions: the I-V-I of perfect cadences; thematic contrasts, etc. Susan McClary, for example, identifies a dialectical relationship between 'masculine' and 'feminine' themes within sonata forms, where the first theme (male thesis), after encountering its opposite (second, feminine theme), struggles with it during the development section, finally overcoming it in the recapitulation.¹² It would seem, then, that the question of dividing the world into a series of oppositions, even if one then attempts to re-unite both sides of an opposition, can lead to some interesting political and methodological questions.

OK, for those of you who are never convinced by arguments about gender, and for those of you who find the metaphysical meanderings of dialectics thoroughly meaningless, try this one: consider the well-known phrase 'All wogs start at Calais'. Obviously, this is a more than slightly unsavoury phrase, but forget even that, and let's look at how it *works*. As we do so, it will become obvious very quickly that oppositional thought shoots itself in the foot as soon as it begins.

'All wogs start at Calais' – the phrase is oppositional, but hardly includes the idea of a Hegelian synthesis, a union of opposites. No dialectical reconciliation here. It represents, in fact, a pure antithesis.¹³ The opposition upon which this phrase is based is, obviously enough: 'Brits' vs 'wogs'. In other words, 'Brits' are 'not-wogs' and 'wogs' are 'not-Brits'. 'Brits' are on the same column of the Pythagorean table as 'good', whereas 'wogs' are on the same side as 'bad', and never the twain shall meet. But who are the 'wogs'? They evidently begin at Calais, and include *all* not-Brits: 'frogs', 'krauts', 'wops', 'spiks', 'dagos', 'nigs', 'nips', 'paks', 'kaffirs', 'ruskies', 'micks', 'abos' and any other derogatorily labelled group we care to throw in. In other words, the term 'wog' is not a singularity, but contains a vast multiplicity. To consider it as a discrete entity which we can easily oppose to the term 'Brit' (which is hardly a unified concept in itself, as the existence of 'jocks' and 'tuffs' demonstrates) is to make a gross over-simplification. In this way, oppositional thought chooses one element from a vastly multiple reality and reductively categorises all other elements under the heading of a single dirty little negative: 'all wogs start at Calais'.

Fine, so because it inadequately describes the complexity of the world and leads to over-simplified insults, oppositional thought – dualism – is the enemy (and remember that dialectical 'reconciliation' cannot occur without a prior opposition). Jacques Derrida notes that:

in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of [two terms], but rather with a violent hierarchy [in which] one of the two terms controls the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), holds the superior position.¹⁴

According to Derrida, if this situation is to be avoided – if an opposition is to be destabilised, dissolved – then the hierarchical control of the thesis, or first term (e.g. Adam, 'Brit', etc.) must be dislocated in order to allow the other term in the structure a certain autonomy. How, then, is this to be done?

The following 'recipe for deconstruction' will probably lack so much meat as to represent a veritable MacTheoryburger with more fat than all the above simplifications put together, but I can vouch for the fact that it is collected from similar 'recipes' cooked up by Derrida himself.¹⁵ The three 'stages' of deconstruction are:

1. *Engagement*: locate within a text (e.g. the structure of sonata, the phrase 'All wogs start at Calais', etc.) the oppositional structures on which it is based (i.e. masculine-feminine themes, 'Brits' vs 'wogs', etc.).

2. *Reversal*: provisionally maintain the structure of the opposition, but reverse the polarity of its hierarchy, thus destabilising it from within its own structure (hence the feminine and wogs become 'good', while the masculine and Brits become 'bad' – but *only* provisionally).

3. *Displacement*: use the instability created in step 2 in order to fully collapse the hierarchy between the two poles of the opposition, thus setting them both 'free' from the structure of that opposition (note that it is not so much the terms themselves which are annihilated, as the structure which bound them into a hierarchical relationship). We thus exchange a positive and a negative for a whole field of *affirmative* terms.

Inevitably, in a real deconstruction, these three stages will be continuously mixed up and constantly interrupting each other. Note also that one does not begin in thin air, but connects into a text which is already in circulation, whether this text is musical, historical, philosophical, literary, political, etc. As Derrida has commented, one 'borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself'.¹⁶ This fact has led to various criticisms of deconstruction. Leo Treitler, for instance, has said of Susan McClary's deconstructive work that she 'adopts the very stereotypes that she has deplored'.¹⁷ However, this is often (but not always) a basic misunderstanding – deconstruction aims to adopt such stereotypes from a cultural heritage precisely in order to *interrogate* them. In engaging with a binary opposition, one accepts its structure merely as a *provisional* stage which will eventually (hopefully) lead to the dissolution of that structure. Deconstruction is a form of *theoretical intervention*.

In *Of grammatology*, Derrida deals with an opposition which has direct bearing on music aesthetics. The latter sections of *Of grammatology* deal mainly with the writing of Jean-Jacques Rousseau – particularly his *Essay on the Origin of Languages, which also treats of Melody and Musical Imitation* (1760). In the *Essay* we find much of the famous debate between Rousseau and Jean-Philippe Rameau around the question of the origin of music. Briefly put (in Derrida's reading), Rousseau claimed that the *origin* of music is in *melody*, whereas Rameau

claimed it to be in *harmony*. For Rousseau, the opposition between melody and harmony is also the opposition between what he saw as, on the one hand, the single, undivided vocal line of Italian song and, on the other, the intervallic, vertically structured chords which formed the new French instrumental style. Derrida picks up on this opposition, which in Rousseau's text begins to fall into a rather grand scheme: Italianate melody represents a pure, undivided, centralised organism, while French harmony represents a fracture, machinic anarchy by contrast. Further, melody becomes associated with the ancient, the natural, the pure, and so on, while harmony becomes associated with the modern, the fabricated, and the perverted. At the same time, the melody-harmony opposition also correlates to Rousseau's famous opposition between speech and writing within language – speech (like vocal melody) is pure and natural, whilst writing (like harmony) is derivative and mechanical.

Rousseau's basic terms which underly these strings of oppositions can easily be mapped on to a table of opposites not unlike that of Pythagoras. However, the two over-riding headings of each column are identified by Derrida as *origin* (good) and *supplement* (bad). In other words, for Rousseau, harmony is the unnatural, corrupted *supplement* to the natural melodic *origin* of music – harmony is the bastard offspring of melody (and thus writing is the bastard offspring of speech).

At this point we can trace Derrida's deconstructive methodology. As we can see, he has already *engaged* with Rousseau's text – in the *initial* stages of his deconstruction he has to establish what it is that will later be deconstructed. Hence he quotes Rousseau's text, paraphrases it, and rehearses the oppositional structures which lie within it.

Next, he questions the validity of Rousseau's hierarchical opposition between melody and harmony – what would happen if he were to *provisionally reverse* Rousseau's opposition, and hold that *harmony* is the origin, while *melody* is its supplement? After all, as Rameau claims, a melodic line moves not only 'forwards' in time, but also 'vertically' in space – in other words, melodies necessarily have to rely on harmonic motion, up and down. Derrida does not stick strictly with Rameau, though. His interest is in what this 'fact' about melody's reliance on harmony might do within *Rousseau's* theory – the theory which he is deconstructing. If harmony produces melody, then this would mean that harmony now takes on the aspect of the ancient, the natural, the pure, etc., while melody is now seen as a modern perversion of it (*and note that this is not quite what Rameau argues*). In other words, Derrida reverses the polarity of Rousseau's opposition, but without breaking its structure as such – it is destabilised from within.

'Finally,' now that harmony has taken the place of the origin, Derrida recalls that the structure of harmony is intervallic, divided. Hence, if harmony is the origin, it is not in any way the kind of pure, undivided, organic origin which Rousseau attempted to think of. Now the origin becomes a pseudo-origin – an 'origin'. This deconstructed 'origin' has a *supplementary* character – the effect of Derrida's strategic reading of Rousseau is that the origin is shown to be a supplement after all. Hence, if an origin is merely the supplement of another origin, and so on *ad infinitum*, then there

are no 'true' or 'natural' origins at all – one can never trace anything back to its absolute source, since one will eternally be sliding along an infinity of regressing concepts. In other words, the beginning has been fully *displaced*. At this stage of displacement, Rousseau's opposition has not only been turned on its head, but is now thoroughly disintegrated: melody and harmony are now seen in a different relationship, one where neither can be viewed as positive or negative, beginning or end. Both now rest on a more generalised idea of an affirmative, intervallic, supplementary motion.

The problem in all of this is that, as far as music theory is concerned, Derrida never fully gets to grips with harmonic theory as such, by Rameau or anyone else. His view of harmony is conditioned almost entirely by Rousseau's alleged paranoia of it. Hence, Derrida's idea of Rameau is actually *Derrida's idea of Rousseau's idea of Rameau*.

If one looks at harmonic theory itself, one finds that it has, in fact, many potentially *dialectical* aspects. Significantly, both Susan McClary and Arnold Whittall agree on this, albeit from quite different sides of the musicological field (cf. note 12). If, then, we were to read Derrida's text in the context of some *actual* harmonic theory, we might find that he continually runs into the very problem which he attempts to avoid: being captured within the structures of the dialectic, and thus of the very oppositional structures which he attempts to break (dialectics – particularly Hegel's, are very good at re-absorbing any attempt to 'oppose' them. This is a constant theme within Gilles Deleuze's more fully post-structuralist philosophy¹⁸).

This limitation of deconstruction – of being so closely tied to the limits of the very structures which it attempts to delimit – is precisely the point at which I diverge from deconstruction into a more generalised version of post-structuralism in my forthcoming book.¹⁹ There, I do not provide a 'reconstruction' to 'solve' the problems of Derrida's text, but rather, I attempt to accelerate Derrida's deconstruction further, until it too is thoroughly displaced.

Nevertheless, Derrida is quite aware of his shortcomings in the musical field, and has no pretense to hide the fact. Recently, when asked to consider what the relationship between his work and music might be, he stated that:

music is the object of my strongest desire, and yet at the same time it remains completely forbidden. I don't have the competence, I don't have any truly presentable musical culture. Thus my desire remains completely paralyzed. I am even more afraid of speaking nonsense in this area than any other.²⁰

What Derrida does have to offer musicology is a powerful technique of critique, so long as we handle a deconstructive approach to music with as much care as he handles philosophy and literature within his own writing. The fact that Derrida himself is not 'competent' to write on musical matters does not disqualify those who are competent in both deconstruction and musicology from making the connection, and of using his techniques to provide alternative perspectives on musical thought.

Significantly, when Derrida connects Rousseau's melody-harmony opposition to the speech-writing opposition, some rather interesting things occur.

If instrumental harmony turns out to be the supplementary origin of vocal melody, then, as Derrida argues, writing becomes the supplementary origin of speech. Writing, as a discontinuous form of signification (it places a physical distance between addressor and addressee), thus effects a rupture within what Rousseau wishes to maintain as the perfect continuity of speech (direct, 'face-to-face' communication). In other words, organic, vocal signification becomes subject to the more mechanical nature of instrumental, non-representational signification:

I am also interested in words, paradoxically, to the extent that they are nondiscursive, for that's how they can be used to explode discourse... [it] probably has something to do with a nondiscursive sonority, although I don't know whether I would call it musical.²¹

I argue that we can call this 'nondiscursive sonority' musical, and have done at length elsewhere. This idea of a 'nondiscursive sonority' which operates from within discourse to explode it is easily recognised in the musicalisation of language which John Cage achieves in his approach to the performing voice. When we hear his indeterminately-generated reading through Joyce's *Finnegans wake* in *Roaratorio* (1979), what we hear is a vocal delivery which does not so much *communicate* something as *perform* it – the voice has become an instrument, and is all the more musical for that.

Taking this idea one step further, we can see that Derrida's position on language (particularly when we take his deconstructive critique of semiology into account²²) inverts one of the basic tenets of most recent attempts to 'apply' linguistic theories to music. The attempt to apply semiological theories of language to music continually runs into the problem that semiology sees language as something which communicates a distinct message – language is, unlike instrumental music (as the old and dodgy chestnut goes), a *representational* form of signification. Music, as seen by formalist analysis, represents only its own structures, existing outwith the possibility of representation. What Derrida claims, however, is that the idea of *linguistic communication* is in fact itself ruptured at every point by 'nondiscursive sonority'. In this context, representation becomes a kind of a subset of a more generalised form of signification which looks more like the kind of classical ideas about the way in which instrumental music works (but in an intertextual field which deconstructs any sense of 'aesthetic autonomy'). If Derrida isn't sure whether or not his idea of a 'nondiscursive sonority' has a connection with music, then I advise him to look again.

Perhaps, instead of musicologists looking to linguists for new paradigms and methodologies, it should be the linguists knocking on *our* doors. Derrida, for all of his professed 'incompetence' in matters musical, has nevertheless provided musicology with an immense lever with which to open other disciplines up in a *non-parasitic* manner; perhaps even to challenge some of their basic tenets with this newly-found alignment of our (almost) traditional concept of 'nondiscursive sonority'. If this is what 'speaking nonsense' about music means, then let's hear some more. Bring on the psycho-babble...

t hlht shh sw h e atveth mf dn nd e aie
ean byo odo

[John Cage: the 'end' of *Empty Words*²³]

Notes

1. Marian Hobson: 'Dead and read' in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (2 September 1994).
2. Peter Franklin: 'An open and shut case' in *MT* (September 1994).
3. cf. Jonathan Stock: Letter to the Editor, *MT* (October 1994).
4. Equally, as Ruth Solie points out in her article 'On "Difference"', 'the arguments of French feminism – subtle, playful, and grounded in somewhat unfamiliar philosophical traditions as they are – are all too easy for American scholars to misread.' [Solie:ed., *Musicology and difference: gender & sexuality in music scholarship* (Berkeley, 1993), p.4]
5. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: *What is philosophy?* (London, 1994), p.16.
6. Jacques Derrida: *Of grammatology* (Baltimore, 1976); *Writing and difference* (London, 1978); 'Différance' in *Margins of philosophy* (Brighton, 1982).
7. Aristotle: *Metaphysics*, i.5 986 a 23.
8. Porphyry: 'The life of Pythagoras', in Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie ed.: *The Pythagorean source-book* (Grand Rapids, 1987), p.130.
9. Hippolytus: fragment in Guthrie: op.cit., p.312.
10. As with most of this article, the reader is warned of certain simplifications due to strictures of space.
11. As a whole host of recent publications demonstrate, the idea of dialectics is still very much alive and well within musicology, music criticism, and composition. A random trawl might include: Richard Middleton: *Studying popular music* (Milton Keynes, 1990); Jean Jacques Nattiez: *Music and discourse: toward a semiology of music* (Princeton, 1990); John Shepherd: *Music as social text* (Cambridge, 1991); Rose Rosengard Subotnik: *Developing variations: style & ideology in western music* (Minneapolis, 1991); Ben Watson: *Frank Zappa: the negative dialectics of poodle play* (London, 1994); Arnold Whittall: 'The bottom line' in *MT* (September 1994).
12. Susan McClary: *Feminine endings: music, gender, sexuality* (Minnesota, 1991). However, for a critique of McClary's arguments in this respect, see Steve Sweeney-Turner: *The sonorous body: music, enlightenment & deconstruction* (PhD Thesis, Edinburgh University, 1994, publication forthcoming). It should also be noted that Whittall basically agrees with this mapping of dialectics onto thematic processes, even if he may not entirely agree with deconstructive critiques of them, such as McClary's cf. Arnold Whittall, op.cit.
13. And in this, wierdly enough, has a similar structure to both Marx's and Adorno's conceptions of dialectics – no synthesis, just opposition, struggle, and overcoming (the trick with Marx and Adorno is to make sure you're on the 'right' side of the battle).
14. Derrida: *Positions* (London, 1987), p.41.
15. Ibid. pp.39-96; *Margins of philosophy*, p.17; *Writing and difference*: p.282. Also see *Of grammatology*, pp.xv-xx.
16. Derrida: *Writing and difference*, p.282.
17. Treitler: 'Gender and other dualities of music history', in Solie, op. cit.
18. In this connection, I would recommend reading the works of Gilles Deleuze rather than Derrida. Deleuze's post-structuralism achieves the Nietzschean 'affirmation' which Derrida claims to achieve, but fails to do so through his stance being based in the critique of concepts from within, rather than the search for new concepts as such. Deleuze offers *alternatives* which are not deconstructed *per se*, and tends to label his philosophy *constructivist* (which is not the same as effecting a 'reconstruction' at all, at all).
19. Sweeney-Turner: op.cit.
20. Peter Brunette & David Wills: 'The spatial arts: an interview with Jacques Derrida', in ed. Brunette & Wills: *Deconstruction and the visual arts: art, media, architecture*, p.21.
21. op.cit., pp.20/21.
22. *Of grammatology*, pp.44-65 in particular.
23. John Cage: 'Empty words', in *Empty words: wrtings '73-'78* (London, 1980), p.76.