

Being the other: defamiliarization processes in musical composition

Sendo o outro: processos de desfamiliarização na composição musical



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Abstract: In the spirit of Artistic Research as an investigative method, we apply the post-humanist theories of “defamiliarization” and “monism” to musical composition. We intend to achieve artistic perspectives that encourage critical distance in the creative process. To achieve this, we start from the writings of philosopher Rosi Braidotti and contrast them through the voices of Theodor Adorno, Arnold Schoenberg, John Cage, Luigi Nono, Ming Tsao, Steven Takasugi and Pauline Oliveros, always with an analytical and critical eye of the composer as a researcher. From this, we are faced with the central need to reevaluate or even abandon our musical composition habits if we want to compose works that dialogue with the present time. This approach has become necessary due to the saturation of subjectivity, of the artistic “I”, as pointed out by Jonathan Kramer. Moreover, how can the interaction with the human, the anti-human, or the post-human enlighten the artist in her or his decisions? The result we achieve is, first of all, a re-encounter with the music of the 20th century and being able to understand it from a new perspective. Furthermore, we believe that applying this artistic method will stimulate the way artists understand the pre-compositional stage of a sound project.

Keywords: Defamiliarization in musical composition. Post-humanist theories. Re-thinking new music analysis. Musical language. Artistic research.

Resumo: Dentro do espírito da Pesquisa Artística como método investigativo, aplicamos as teorias pós-humanistas de “desfamiliarização” e “monismo” na composição musical. Nosso intuito é alcançar perspectivas artísticas que encorajem o distanciamento crítico no processo criativo. Para conseguir isso, partimos dos escritos da filósofa Rosi Braidotti e os contrapomos pelas vozes de Theodor Adorno, Arnold Schoenberg, John Cage, Luigi Nono, Ming Tsao, Steven Takasugi e Pauline Oliveros, sempre com o olhar analítico e crítico do compositor enquanto pesquisador. A partir disto nos deparamos com a necessidade central de reavaliar ou mesmo abandonar nossos hábitos na composição musical, se de fato queremos compor obras que dialoguem com a atualidade. A necessidade desse olhar se mostrou necessário pela saturação da subjetividade, do “eu” artístico, como apontado por Jonathan Kramer. E como interagir com o humano, com o anti-humano ou mesmo com o pós-humano pode elucidar o artista em suas decisões. O resultado que alcançamos é, primeiramente, um reencontro com a música do século XX e poder entendê-la sob uma nova perspectiva. Ademais, acreditamos que a aplicação deste método artístico estimulará a forma como os artistas compreendem a etapa pré-composicional de um projeto sonoro.

Palavras-chave: Desfamiliarização na composição musical. Teorias pós-humanistas. Repensar a análise de música contemporânea. Linguagem musical. Pesquisa artística.

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On the saturation of the speaking voice¹

The tradition of written musical composition is historically rooted in authorship. Creating an artistic work, in essence, is a means of expressing one's ideas. This implies that most existing musical works have dealt with the "human" in different aspects: human as the author — the speaking voice, one who makes or creates — , human as the audience, human as language, human as Self, human as the measure of all things. There is a particular *modus operandi* when we discuss music making. Consequently, the music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has addressed this issue alongside many fields of study, such as music and language, music and sociology, or music and politics. Furthermore, the *human* element became a paradox: it is simultaneously the source of invention and creation and the origin of culture and conservatism. Every creation has the potential to become a cultural product, and, in one understanding, the self/human has reached a critical moment: has the presence of the "I" (the composer) reached a saturation point? Could we affirm that the Self — as a subject for expression — has been exhausted for composers? To what extent has the *selfie* generation reached saturation? Jonathan Kramer stresses the impact of saturation on composers from a social point of view: "Composers, like others who live in a saturated society, have personalities shaped in part by their social context" (2016, p. 19).

What I propose in this text is a compositional exercise. Can we envision a musical expression in which the human element — specifically, habits and inertia — is decreased, rethought, or even "erased"? Can we imagine an anti-humanist music (not necessarily from computer-assisted composition or even artificial intelligence)? Moreover, how has the human element operated as a measure of all things in music history? My intention is to provoke a re-thinking of music creation in

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terms of its subjectivity, to rethink music today, in the age of social media networks and the Anthropocene — the era when human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment — and to examine how composers have dealt with this specific aspect, even if not intentionally. I believe it is crucial to the development of today's artists that these concerns are brought to their awareness. Yet, we can agree that they are absent in the study routines of composers in conservatories, universities, and other composition schools; i.e., although finding a personal compositional voice is the goal of most professors and institutions, freeing oneself from the bounds of cultural heritage is not a common practice in the tradition of teaching composition.

Artistic Research

The task of rethinking musical composition will be assisted with methods of artistic research (ASSIS, 2018; BRAGAGNOLO, SANCHEZ, 2022; PACE, 2016). The perspective of artistic research can contribute to our investigation since it considers the knowledge involved in the process of creativity as valuable information (COESSENS *et al.*, 2009, p. 24). It assists methodologically by reimagining the artists' voices and processes and considering both artwork and artistic practice (research) as valid sources. It becomes a tool to help, in our case, the composer to understand the artwork as a musicologist, and vice versa.

For this investigation, it is essential to state that the analysis comes from a personal approach — as it happens in artistic research — given that the author is a composer himself. Therefore, subjectivity and personal listening experiences are part of the analysis procedures. Nevertheless, composer Chaya Czernowin reminds us that “every piece has to teach the listener how to listen to it: what matters, what does not matter, what is at work” (CZERNOWIN, 2007, p. 3).

Finally, to undertake our task, I would like to invite the readers (artists?) to experience this analysis as a possibility, an experiment in the same spirit as in Foucault (2001, p. 240): “I’m an experimenter in the sense that I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same thing as before”. If it makes sense to you in the end, then we share common artistic intuition and spirit. It becomes “(...) a shared tool for others, helping them to understand and learn about this specific artistic practice.” (COESSENS *et al.*, 2009, p. 23). And before we start our investigation, I would like to remind you of Boulez’s statement at the end of his monumental analysis of Stravinsky’s “Rite of Spring”:

Obviously I am not trying to analyse the creative process as it actually happens, but simply, a posteriori, the musical facts which result from it.

(...)

I may perhaps be accused of exaggerating the arithmetical relationships and paying too little attention to the unconscious. (...) If I have succeeded in noting all these structural features, it is because they are there, and it therefore makes no difference to me whether they were put there consciously or unconsciously (...). (BOULEZ, 1991, p. 79, 107)

Let us start our analysis with this same spirit.

The concept of posthumanism in art

To begin this investigation, I will rely on the theories of Rosi Braidotti as a strategy for music composition. Braidotti is an Italian philosopher best known for her contributions to feminist theory, cultural politics, and postcolonial studies. For this research, our interest is focused on her recent publications on posthumanist theories, specifically her ideas on *defamiliarization* and *monism*.

Putting it simply, posthumanism investigates the world that no longer assigns the human as the measure of all things — or even [white] Man, as stated in some feminist studies. Posthumanism is a well-known concept in social and political sciences, but not frequently applied in the music field, at least not within the scope of contemporary music composition. According to Braidotti, “posthuman theory is a generative tool to help us re-think the basic unit of reference for the human in the bio-genetic age known as ‘Anthropocene’, the historical moment when the Human has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet” (2013, p. 5). In a way, Braidotti’s concept of posthumanism has always been at the core of new music initiatives. It is not new, but it has presented itself with different terminology. In our analysis, one should consider it a way to stretch old musical habits. In some cases, these “posthuman” musical manifestations were approached unconsciously. We will examine a few examples in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century repertoire that illustrate this.

To imagine music without *the human* makes almost no sense. Yet, Morton Feldman once said, “For art to succeed, its creator must fail” (2000, p. 26). Nevertheless, not even computer-assisted composition nor artificial intelligence studies assume that premise. This is not, of course, what Braidotti is suggesting. However, this is exactly what I propose for reflection and as a challenge for composers. To achieve this, I explore Braidotti’s concept of defamiliarization: a way to allow oneself to maintain a critical distance regarding an object of study and, most importantly, to question the constant (yet passive) cultural heritage that affects us all. Defamiliarization can be defined as disidentification or deterritorialization (DELEUZE, 2017; COSTA, 2012). It allows critical distance. Defamiliarization enables us to re-think sounds and the structure of a work since, for certain composers, composition is not regarded as simple sound construction or, as stated by Adorno (1993), a mere succession of physical stimuli. Tsao reminds us of that:

Without positioning one's materials to one's grammar (i.e., how materials are structured, juxtaposed, layered, developed, counterpointed and thus given expression), the assumption is to merely rely on the material's 'foreignness' as a means to create the illusion of something new. (TSAO, 2020, p. 5).

We understand, therefore, that to re-think the human has become the essence of this investigation. And to re-think the human means to re-think parts of human behavior. For instance, to re-think the human as a citizen brings us to the idea of self and the other — of *being the other*, to re-think identity brings us critical distance. Consequently, a change in expression and re-thinking language forces us to re-signify expression, to give a few examples (BIRÓ, 2013, p. 6).

Cultural heritage in music composition can be regarded as all artificial and physiological knowledge, highly preserved and passed on through generations, either by the traditional master-pupil methodology described by Fux or in the modern age of academia and social networks. Such knowledge is, for instance, the concept of consonance, the perception of an octave, the feeling of pulsation, the tradition of musical instrument making, the tradition of harmony and voice leading, and so forth. Therefore, my goal is not to proffer a new musical genre deprived of the human element. I believe that a deep self-examination — or defamiliarization — can reveal important aspects of today's music to the composer: "The painter achieves mastery by allowing what he is doing to be itself. In a way, he must step aside in order to be in control. The composer is just learning to do this. He is just beginning to learn that controls can be thought of as nothing more than accepted practice" (FELDMAN, 2000, p. 26-27).

So, "failing" and "stepping aside", according to Feldman, shift the composer from the control of things and are crucial aspects of the creative process. This brings to mind Luigi Nono's *Error as*

a Necessity: “Other thoughts, other noises, other sonorities, other ideas. When we listen, we often try to find ourselves in others” (2018, p. 367). I will return to these ideas of finding ourselves in others later.

The concept of defamiliarization in music composition

Braidotti provides the following definition to our discussion on defamiliarization:

The post-anthropocentric shift away from the hierarchical relations that had privileged ‘Man’ requires a form of estrangement and a radical repositioning on the part of the subject. The best method to accomplish this is through the strategy of defamiliarization or critical distance from the dominant vision of the subject. Dis-identification involves the loss of familiar habits of thought and representation in order to pave the way for creative alternatives. (BRAIDOTTI, 2013, p. 88-89).

There are a few examples in music history of composers who somehow managed to effect significant changes in their thinking through critical distance. For instance, when most scholars talk about the development of the Viennese Schools of Composition, there is a tendency to understand music as a linear and coherent development, i.e. from Haydn to Beethoven, from Schoenberg to Webern. What is revealing, in this case, is that tradition is passed on, but through many difficulties and singular characteristics. It is only with Schoenberg (and later with Webern) that this heritage is radically questioned, and the common language of music is somehow altered. French composer Pierre Boulez stated in his famous text “Schoenberg is dead” that:

With Schoenberg, we attend one of the most important revolutions ever affecting musical language. The material,

properly speaking, certainly does not change: the twelve half-tones. However, the structural organization is altered: from a tonal organization, we pass to a serial organization. How did the idea of the series materialize? (BOULEZ, 1968, p. 268).

Although the idea that “semitones will certainly not change” is quite questionable (what about microtonal music?), Boulez points out the key issue in Schoenberg’s twelve-tone music: the alteration of the structural (pitch) organization. Much has changed, namely the idea of melodies, chord progressions and harmonic language, voice leading and counterpoint rules, orchestration, and, of course, temporality. As we know, Boulez was an avid enthusiast of serial procedures and made his own contributions to re-thinking pitch structure. About that, Adorno stated:

[Boulez’] instinct seems to lead him toward composition **in segments** [emphasis added]. Such a reorganization of the musical structure according to the immanent laws of the material, as it unfolds, would also alter the entire language of music. Even the subtlest small articulations would be the result of tiny differentiations within the series, along with equally fine differentiations of the various forms of the series itself, and serial music would no longer have to speak as if its syntax were the one it inherited from tonality. (ADORNO, 1993, p. 413).

As we know, dodecaphony changed the history of music, leading to the Serial school and many other compositional approaches, such as Ligeti’s micropolyphony or even Lachenmann’s instrumental *musique concrète*. Around 1908, Schoenberg introduced the first pieces based on his 12-tone composition method. As a result, the heavy influence of the artist’s (tonal) expression got re-signified. One might say, following Adorno, that Schoenberg re-thought music through defamiliarization,

by re-thinking musical language. Also, rethinking language can lead to re-imagining the entire structure of a composition, such as instrumental approach, pitch organization, consonance and dissonance meanings, or even temporal decisions. However, the “I” — the composer’s expression — is at the core of this discussion. In 1947, Nadia Boulanger declares her surprise at Schoenberg’s music, which in essence reveals a way of redefining expressivity that was until then a standardized language within concert music. Boulanger states:

Unfortunately, the artistic devices this music uses are so complex that it is difficult to ascertain them all through hearing, and, what is more, because it seems that everything is sacrificed for the sake of intellectual pursuits, this music remains enigmatic and **inhuman** [emphasis added]. So much effort made to elicit emotions that do not spring forth naturally is sterile; in this determined and yet indecisive world, no internal joy can be found. Could it be that so many stunning technical discoveries, that such a sureness of hand, that such a complete lucidity result in nothing but a sort of negation? If only one could chase away such fears. (BOULANGER, 2020, p. 55).

The ability to reexamine oneself within the compositional process and as the speaking voice (the author, an authority), that is, the traditional narrative impressions in tonal musical language — even if momentarily — is what is at stake. To re-think language, to re-think the human / the “I”, and to ultimately re-think compositional structure and expression through the chosen instrumentation — and why not re-think instrumentation (yes, we are still writing string quartets and orchestra pieces)? But this would lead us to another text, maybe for another time, involving pioneers such as Donald Buchla, Harry Partch or Walter Smétak. The strategy of defamiliarization is somehow at the core

of the twelve-tone music technique since its primary purpose was to give, at first, perhaps, an anti-humanistic experience to the common language of that time — what Boulanger called “inhuman”. Thus, one could argue that the process of rethinking, of critical distance, is innate to new music.

Monism as a method for defamiliarization

In a certain sense, Schoenberg’s approach to twelve-tone composition could be interpreted with Braidotti’s “planetary dimension”, within the strategy of *monism*:

The conceptual frame of reference I have adopted for the method of de-familiarization is monism. It implies the open-ended, interrelational, multi-sexed and trans-species flows of becoming through interaction with multiple others. A posthuman subject thus constituted exceeds the boundaries of both anthropocentrism and of compensatory humanism, to acquire a **planetary dimension** [emphasis added]. (BRAIDOTTI, 2013, p. 89).

Monism is relatively close to the idea of *emancipation of dissonance* (chromaticism). As Schoenberg put it, “The method of composing with twelve tones grew out of a necessity. In the last hundred years, the concept of harmony has changed tremendously through the development of chromaticism.” (1950, p. 103). In our present case, the *development of chromaticism* could be seen as an attempt at pitch and harmonic monism, that is, an expansion, a way to lessen the dichotomy of root and dominant. Therefore, Schoenberg’s adventure with the *Method of Composing with Twelve Tones Which are Related Only with One Another* (1950, p. 107) could be interpreted as a strategy of defamiliarization in music composition. With twelve-tone music, there is a tendency to embrace all tones equally, as opposed to music based on the tonal system. In his *Harmonielehre*,

Schoenberg criticizes the radical polarization of root/dominant, and consonance/dissonance in tonal music through an analysis of *non-harmonic tones*:

The expression, 'non-harmonic tones', I can interpret only to mean that a number of tones are declared unsuitable, or under certain conditions unsuitable, for forming harmonies; that such tones, because they intrinsically lack the ability to form harmonies, i.e. chords (*Zusammenklänge*), are designated as having nothing to do with music and consequently are thrown out of the art and out of its theory... Before anything else, then, [let us affirm that] the non-harmonic tones do form chords (*Zusammenklänge*), hence are not non-harmonic; the musical phenomena they help to create are harmonies, as is everything that sounds simultaneously... All the same, we should not really speak of accidental harmonic structures. (SCHOENBERG, 1978, p. 309-310).

Again, we are reminded of Nono's *Error as a Necessity*:

Perhaps what you did not choose is more correct. In the work in the studio, in electronic music, this is what happens. There are many unforeseen events, issues, errors — errors that are of great importance... Because error is what happens and breaks the rules. Transgression. (2018, p. 368).

In addition to Schoenberg and Nono, many other composers have similarly spoken on this topic. Within the context of electronic music, Varèse addressed this issue as the *liberation of sound*, music with new instruments able to bring about:

(...) liberation from the arbitrary, paralyzing tempered system; the possibility of obtaining any number of cycles

or if still desired, subdivisions of the octave, consequently the formation of any desired scale; unsuspected range in low and high registers; new harmonic splendors obtainable from the use of sub-harmonic combinations now impossible; the possibility of obtaining any differentiation of timbre, of sound-combinations; new dynamics far beyond the present human powered orchestra; a sense of sound-projection in space by means of the emission of sound in any part or in many parts of the hall as may be required by the score; cross rhythms unrelated to each other, treated simultaneously, or to use the old word, “contrapuntally” (since the machine would be able to beat any number of desired notes, any subdivision of them, omission or fraction of them) — all these in a given unit of measure or time which is humanly impossible to attain. (VARÈSE, 1966, p. 12-13).

Incorporating errors and dissonance became an important goal for composers in the twentieth century. To achieve this, such “monism” became a trend. Stockhausen also talked about a different type of monism in electronic music — combining all sound parameters in music composition, integrating form and timbre (1962, p. 39). Not coincidentally, Grisey mentioned that same attitude when talking about the philosophy behind spectral music:

More ‘ecological’ approach to timbres, noises, and intervals. Integration of harmony and timbre within a single entity. Integration of all sounds (from white noise to sinusoidal sounds) (...) Integration of time as the very object of form (...) More ‘organic’ approach to form by self-generation of sounds. (2000, p. 2-3).

It seems that the idea of monism was embraced and encouraged by many composers during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The term, however, was indeed not

employed at the time. However, Braidotti's strategy of monism, its "planetary dimension", corresponds in music to the idea of unity stated by some composers, Stockhausen being the most direct analogy. In the case of Schoenberg, unity in twelve-tone music embraces non-harmonic tones and seeks comprehensibility and logic through their relationships. So, according to Schoenberg, unity deals with form, logic, and therefore language: "In music there is no form without logic, there is no logic without unity. I believe that when Richard Wagner introduced his *Leitmotiv* — for the same purpose as that for which I introduced my Basic Set [Twelve-Tone row] — he may have said, 'Let there be unity'." (1950, p. 143)

Nonetheless, it is with John Cage that another radical rupture occurs. Coincidentally, Cage was Schoenberg's former counterpoint and analysis student, although according to Nattiez, "Schoenberg never accepted him as a composition pupil" (1993, p. 4). Although Cage's relationship with Schoenberg had some problematic issues — such as his disappointment with how Schoenberg became "a pedant demanding excellence in the study of Austro-German craft" (NEFF, 2014, p. 454) — it is pretty clear how Schoenberg's ideas were always provocative to Cage, especially to the older Cage. For our present investigation, it is curious to see how Cage finds his own method of composition. He embraces *noise* as a tool for defamiliarization, a means similar to Braidotti's monism and Schoenberg's twelve-tone system: "Noises are as useful to new music as so-called musical tones, for the simple reason that they are sounds." (CAGE, 1973, p. 68). Cage's idea of noise as valid musical material comes from Edgard Varèse:

However, more clearly and actively than anyone else of his generation, he [Varèse] established the present nature of music. This nature does not arise from pitch relations (consonance-dissonance) nor from twelve tones nor seven plus five (Schoenberg-Stravinsky), but arises

from an acceptance of all audible phenomena as material proper to music. While others were still discriminating 'musical' tones from noises, Varèse moved into the field of sound itself, not splitting it in two by introducing into the perception of it a mental prejudice. That he fathered forth noise — that is to say, into twentieth-century music — makes him more relative to present musical necessity than even the Viennese masters, whose notion of the number 12 was some time ago dropped and shortly, surely, their notion of the series will be seen as no longer urgently necessary. (CAGE, 1973, p. 84).

Moreover, one might affirm that Cage is closer to Braidotti than Schoenberg since he seeks the complete dissolution of dichotomies: "This decision alters the view of history, so that one is no longer concerned with tonality or atonality, Schoenberg or Stravinsky (...) nor with consonance and dissonance, but rather with Edgard Varèse who fathered forth noise into twentieth-century music." (1961, p. 68-9 apud HOLMES, 2008, p. 121).

It becomes clear at this point that our investigation — defamiliarization in music composition — is a task with multiple complex issues. So far, we have approached composition through the perspective of posthumanist theories, and this led us to some severe reflections on understanding the music of the twentieth century, specifically. The idea of monism in music, as a method, has been applied thus far to musical language and structure. But the human element has also experienced emancipation through the idea of *being the other*. To approach this issue, we will examine an analysis linked to belonging, borders, and borderland.

Being the Other

We have seen that defamiliarization can unleash many discoveries in music composition. The task of defamiliarization in music depends on rethinking the musical structure

and dealing with extra-musical aspects. So, rethinking the composer brings us to rethink the human. At this point, we remind the reader about Feldman's "stepping aside" from the artwork and of Nono's attempt "to find ourselves in others." In this case, defamiliarization unfolds into the dichotomy of self and other in a complex manner. As a strategy for the artist's *critical distance*, the composer as a being must, in addition, reassess himself/herself as a citizen. All of this also leads us to the idea of border and borderland: "While borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them, a borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. The borderlands are loaded with meaning." (ANZALDÚA apud MARCHEVSKA, 2017, p. 181)

Borders, borderland, and borderspace are geographic concepts that can illustrate the idea of self/other. This dichotomy between the "I" and the other is closely related to the life experience of borders and borderlands. However, the borderland is a special place, as mentioned by Anzaldúa, not only in geographical meaning but also as a human and cultural experience. In this sense, new music is rooted in borderlands since it breathes and sprouts much more from resistance and uncertainty than lying inactive (and safe) in one place. In addition, *belonging* is a special term for this discussion. The true artist is somehow always searching for the other, always situated in a place with some moving force, a disturbance. Fernando Pessoa (2015) would describe this moving energy as *disquiet*:

My soul is impatient with itself, as with a bothersome child; its restlessness [literally, *disquiet*, *desassossego* in Portuguese] keeps growing and is forever the same. Everything interests me, but nothing holds me. I attend to everything, dreaming all the while: I note the slightest facial movements of the person I'm talking with, I record

the subtlest inflections of his utterances; but I hear without listening, I'm thinking of something else, and what I least catch in the conversation is the sense of what was said, by me or by him. And so I often repeat to someone what I've already repeated, or ask him again what he's already answered. But I'm able to describe, in four photographic words, the facial muscles he used to say what I don't recall, or the way he listened with his eyes to the words I don't remember telling him. I'm two, and both keep their distance—Siamese twins that aren't attached.

Steven Takasugi's *The Flypaper* (2005, 2012 rev.) is an excellent work to illustrate this issue. In the original piece, for tape, Takasugi developed a musical language from the ambiguity of the English and the German languages (BAČA, 2011). To expand this discourse, the composer made in 2012 a live-mixed version for voice, flute, and electronic playback. Figure 1 shows an excerpt from wasteLAnd's performance for two flutists and tape.

Figure 1 – Steven Kazuo Takasugi's *The Flypaper*, version for two flutes and electronic playback, performed by Stephanie Aston and Elise Roy (wasteLAnd concert series, Art Share LA on May 15, 2015).



Source: <<https://youtu.be/pM7X98iKbHI>>. Photo credit: Micki Davis

We see in this example Pessoa's illustration of the detached conjoined twins: two performers on stage with the same gender, identical posture, and the same robotic standing position. Both flutists rest their instruments on what seems to be two adapted microphone stands. This strategy ensures the avoidance of natural [human] gestures, which inevitably correspond to a [human] musical language — i.e., the speaking voice. Takasugi masterfully achieved to amplify the dichotomy of the twins (symmetry while being the other), the complexity of both languages, all the interruptions and fragmentations in the discourse, and built from that a coherent musical expression. The strangeness in this piece is precisely what makes it singular. In this work, there is a powerful "disobedience" in traditional instrumentation, especially when the fragmented voice material blends with bits of flute sounds (key clicks, air sounds, vocal sounds within the tube). From a certain perspective, this ambiguity does not allow these sounds to remain here or there but instead marginalizes them. American author and social activist bell hooks "identifies marginality as the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. Marginality offers the possibility to imagine alternatives, new worlds." (apud Marchevska, 2017, p. 189). The blurred dual sense in Takasugi's piece, the idea of freedom mistaken as an outlaw (*vogelfrei*²) is exactly what bell hooks discusses as a space to imagine alternatives. That same perception reminds one of Brazilian visual artist Hélio Oiticica, with his 1968 slogan (in Portuguese) "Seja Marginal, Seja Herói", which translates to "Be marginal [an outlaw], be a hero" (JUSTINO, 1998). According to Justino, Oiticica's attraction to marginality — what he called *marginália* or the culture of the marginal — was a means to develop freedom nourished by anarchism³.

² The German language has an interesting word for this specific discussion: *vogelfrei*, which translates to outlaw or, in a more poetic translation, *free as a bird*.

³ About Oiticica, Justino states that: "He's not the kind of person you could call reasonable. He will always be in search of new situations, challenges, the experimental. His art was the relentless pursuit of decolonization and the unblocking of behavior, conditions for man's recovery from the alienations of a mutilating daily life. For him, art was an ethical way of being in the world. Following closely the Dadaists, he preferred to call his art anti-art, to differentiate it from the vanguard art close to the system." (Justino, 1998, 1). Original text: "Não é aquele tipo de pessoa que poderíamos chamar de razoável. Ele estará sempre em busca de situações novas, de desafios, do experimental. Sua arte foi a perseguição sem tréguas da descolonização e do desbloqueio do comportamento, condições para a recuperação do homem das alienações de um cotidiano mutilador. A arte foi, para ele, uma maneira ética de estar no mundo. Seguindo de perto os dadaístas, preferiu chamar a sua arte de antiarte, para diferenciá-la da arte de vanguarda próxima ao sistema."

Back to the trichotomy between borders, borderland, and borderspace, Morton Feldman makes a bold statement on that matter, but aimed more towards conflicts that emerged between the European and American schools:

For ten years of my life I worked in an environment committed to neither the past nor the future. We worked, that is to say, not knowing where what we did belonged, or whether it belonged anywhere at all. What we did was not in protest against the past. To rebel against history is still to be part of it. We were simply not concerned with historical processes. We were concerned with sound itself. And sound does not know its history.

The revolution we were making was not then or now appreciated (...). Our work did not have the authoritarianism, I might almost say, the terror, inherent in the teachings of Boulez, Schoenberg, and now Stockhausen.

This authoritarianism, this pressure, is required of a work of art. That is why the real tradition of twentieth-century America, a tradition evolving from the empiricism of Ives, Varèse, and Cage, has been passed over as 'iconoclastic' — another word for unprofessional. In music, when you do something new, something original, you're an amateur. Your imitators — these are the professionals. (FELDMAN, 2000, p. 22).

From a certain perspective, Feldman's statement is in accordance with Braidotti's criticism of the "Universal Man", but Feldman's criticism lies with the European composers. This criticism raises artistic questions that touch upon the concepts of citizenship and marginality. Similarly, Cage criticizes Boulez on the topic of chance and indeterminism:

After having repeatedly claimed that one could not do what I [Cage] set out to do [chance operations], Boulez discovered that Mallarmé *Livre*. It was a chance operation down to the last detail. With me the principle had to be rejected outright; with Mallarmé it suddenly became acceptable to him. Now Boulez was promoting chance, only it had to be *his* kind of chance (...). (CAGE apud NATTIEZ, 1993, p. 19-20).

In the many letters they exchanged, one can perceive that admiration and criticism come and go between them. And while many composers after Cage embraced indeterminism in music composition, including Boulez, Cage's Number Pieces are still some of the best examples for our topic. This series of pieces is very well known for its *time brackets* temporal technique, a straightforward "stepping aside" approach to time. We see, again, a "disobedience" towards formal notation, since Cage allows for multiplicity and indeterminism in rhythmic, polyphonic, and harmonic possibilities. Although Boulez also applied chance/indeterminist procedures in his music, it seems that much disagreement occurred, especially according to Cage and Feldman's accounts. So now the question of *being the other* faces the problem of *belonging*, which leads us to think about the artist in terms of his/her citizenship:

Citizenship is a concept that is derived from a specifically **European lineage** and so represents a kind of conceptual **imperialism** that effaces other ways of being political (...). For all the innovations in how we conceive of citizenship, the concept remains deeply embedded with **practices that divide humanity** according to race, ethnicity, gender and geography. (NYERS apud MARCHEVSKA, 2017, p. 188).

At this point, we can see how much is at stake when one investigates the process of defamiliarization in music. Suddenly, it is not merely about writing little dots on staff paper. Does writing music become a political process — wasn't it always? The struggle of an artist dealing with the idea of self/other also raises the question of what it means to be a citizen in our culture. So, *being the other* and dealing with the concepts of *citizenship* and *belonging* raises the question of whether "us and them" is a binary/opposition logic that also needs to be readdressed. Twelve-tone technique was about that. Monism is about that. And Cage and Feldman's criticisms were about that. Therefore, all these critiques present a paradoxical issue to address: to seek Braidotti's concept of monism, a way "to acquire a planetary dimension," diminishing major hierarchies, but at the same time to envision and ensure *the other* as a good experience. At first, these may appear as opposing ideas, as a contradiction. However, therein lies a vital outcome: to experience the other is to rethink the Self. Only then can one embrace monism. The citizen (composer), inscribed in a particular organized sphere, needs to experiment to nourish his/her own creation. Contact with the *other* becomes a necessity in art.

So, to experience the other also brings us to the idea of *influence* — bringing the other into my world — something perhaps unavoidable to an artist. As stated by French painter Henri Matisse in a conversation with Apollinaire:

I have never avoided the influence of others (...). I would have considered this cowardice and a lack of sincerity toward myself. I believe that the personality of the artist develops and asserts itself through the struggles it has to go through when pitted against other personalities. If the fight is fatal and the personality succumbs, it is a matter of destiny⁴ (MATISSE, 1972, p. 56, my translation).

⁴ Je n'ai jamais évité l'influence des autres (...). J'aurais considéré cela comme une lâcheté et un manque de sincérité vis-à-vis de moi-même. Je crois que la personnalité de l'artiste se développe, s'affirme par les luttes qu'elle a à subir contre d'autres personnalités. Si le combat lui est fatal, si elle succombe, c'est que tel devait être son sort.

This struggle with influences and other personalities is exactly what Pessoa mentioned in his *Book of Disquiet*, regarding the experience of detached Siamese twins. Artists truly create due to their interactions with others: other people, individual experiences, differing environments, etc. The subjectivity, the self, is imbued with the other. Similarly, Oiticica also struggled with influences. According to Justino, Oiticica had

the almost sickening desire to ward off influences, even when it comes to his influences on himself. But things have their genesis, their sources. The forms inaugurated by Oiticica keep their traces. His sources are the widest, even opposite, but he, as a great artist, knew how to imprint his uniqueness on them⁵ (JUSTINO, 1998, p. 7).

In addition, Nattiez mentions an interesting fact about creation and influence in The Boulez-Cage correspondence: “When Henry Cowell asked Cage what he owed to Boulez, he replied with the apparently surprising words: ‘Boulez influenced me with his concept of mobility’. Thus, in a sense, Boulez owed total serialism to Cage, and Cage the concept of chance to Boulez?!” (NATTIEZ, 1993, p. 15).

Pessoa’s image of the *Siamese twins that aren’t attached* is a perfect metaphor for understanding this unusual aesthetic bonding between Boulez and Cage, which history usually frames as opposites expressions. *Being the other* is no longer an abstract illustration in our discourse, nor an analogy, but a fundamental aspect of becoming an artist. The idea of influence and being the other strongly connects with our proposal on defamiliarization. Moreover, another technique for defamiliarization by incorporating the other, largely used throughout music history, was *quotation*. According to Ming Tsao, “Quotations allow a composition to provide shelter

5 (...) o desejo, quase doentio, de afastar as influências, mesmo quando se trata de suas influências sobre si mesmo. Mas as coisas têm a sua gênese, as suas fontes. As formas inauguradas por Oiticica guardam seus vestígios. As suas fontes são as mais amplas, até opostas, mas ele, como um grande artista, soube imprimir-lhes a sua singularidade.

for ‘sounds in exile,’ that is, sounds which have exhausted whatever energy that was once attributed to them and now only persist as congealed, fossilized clichés” (TSAO, 2014, p. 20-21). Therefore, one may quote as a way to remove oneself from the expressive voice.

Suddenly, the idea of posthumanist music becomes a postmodernist approach to music, which embraces certain particularities and contradictions: to make use of external references and quotations, to lessen dichotomies and binary divisions, to make use of discontinuities and fragmentations in the musical discourse, and to employ temporal plurality, to name a few (KRAMER, 2016). Such procedures are applied in many musical works in the literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. One recent example is Ming Tsao’s *The Book of Virtual Transcriptions* (2004-05), a work where the composer’s musical language exists through the experience of being the other, more specifically based on Mozart’s oboe quartet (K.V. 370):

Figure 2 – Ming Tsao’s *The Book of Virtual Transcriptions* (2004-05): “The Constellation of a Labyrinth” (Ming Tsao, Edition Peters, mm. 1–17), for oboe, trumpet, horn, trombone, violin, viola, violoncello.

Source: http://www.mingtsao.net/the_book_of_virtual_transcriptions/

This piece makes substantial use of quotation procedures, but not in the traditional postmodernist sense. There are no shocks between past and present, nor any ironic misplacement or referential materials. Instead, Tsao shifts all Mozart's gestures into his musical language; all the actions and energies are *transferred*. According to composer Steven Takasugi, Tsao's *The Book of Virtual Transcriptions*:

— offers a way out of the conventional narrative, deconstructing and reconstructing contexts that then resist assimilation into readily understood continuities. If there is any consistency, it is one of perpetual strangeness and alienation. The incessant ties and occasional fermata, that which in music might spell cadence and resolution, only prolong the sensation of incongruity and enigma, and by the end, even the most banal of scalar material acquires a sudden and surprising quality of *out-of-place* unfamiliarity in music.⁶

On that matter, Ming Tsao reminds us that adornments and embellishments through quotations in his music are not meant as “a place of familiar orientation or even beauty for the listener” (TSAO 2012, p. 203). Another way to put this is to regard quotation as a means to avoid creative endogeny; in other words, one is constantly experiencing the other.

Tsao and Takasugi are not talking about posthumanism, yet many of their procedures agree with the ideas presented thus far. Compositional procedures such as quotations are strong allies in our search for defamiliarization since they allow the idea of “stepping aside”. In Tsao's music, most of the musical language comes from deconstructing Mozart, while retaining a few selected forces: the bow energy gesture, the sensation of cadences, or even altering the overall rhythmic structure (from periodic to aperiodic). It is clear at this point that *being the other* allows one to rethink and reevaluate musical language.

⁶ Retrieved from: <http://www.mingtsao.net/the_book_of_virtual_transcriptions/>

Final impressions

Posthumanist theories and practices have allowed us to examine musical composition from a different perspective. It helps us clarify that the *speaking voice* in music composition—the composer, the expression of the Self—is a major issue to be investigated. It is dangerous to mistake compositional thinking simply as something original and born out of inspiration. Instead, the abundance of influences should be made conscious and digested, as Matisse previously suggested. Throughout this text, I have applied several strategies to illustrate this, such as the concepts of *defamiliarization* as critical distance, *monism*, and the idea of *being the other*. All these issues have led us to realize that a wide diversity of common questions addressed in the art scene of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—the sensation of belonging, of absence, of borderlands; the concept of resistance, disobedience, and noise as stimulating forces; and the awareness of critical distance as a necessity for the artist—were all used to re-identify oneself to the process of making art. They were a means for achieving critical distance and reaching a new understanding of artistic language.

We have seen many attempts (consciously or not) to achieve significant changes concerning these questions. For instance, John Cage and Arnold Schoenberg achieved critical distance by rethinking musical language altogether. With Cage, silence played a crucial role in his investigations and his ideas of indeterminism and noise. We have seen that silence can potentially cease participation, and it can drive our investigation on how to rethink the speaking voice almost as an anti-humanist approach. With Schoenberg, musical language is rethought by eliminating traces of tonality and, consequently, allowing the rethinking of language and temporality. Either way, it seems that rethinking our gestural habits, such as tonality, silence, articulation, or cadences, allows us different communicative perspectives. Kennan Ferguson states that “If language (...) is identity, then lack of language can only be the

demise of identity” (FERGUSON, 2002, p. 3). More recently, Ming Tsao and Steven Takasugi’s music have also touched on this matter. Quotation and ambiguity (but not incoherence) were the foundations for a new approach towards musical expression. Therefore, I firmly believe that rethinking musical parameters is a crucial step for defamiliarization and allowing a new understanding of musical language.

However, all these examples were still strongly tied to Eurocentric lineages: from Adorno to Schoenberg and from Boulez to Stockhausen. Perhaps with Cage and Feldman, we testify a different turn since it spreads outside Europe. Although all this seems to be, at first, the opposite of what Braidotti advocates (feminism and decolonization), it is necessary to recognize that they are the ones who started the movement of changing the view of art away from the common sense of the Vitruvian man, who in the history of music composition was always a white male composer. Even within our selection of composers, there is such conflict: should not Cage and Boulez also be remembered as gay composers instead of the standard label of white males? Schoenberg and Feldman raise the question of religion of the tradition of white Christian males. Feldman was deeply raised within the Jewish culture in America, while Schoenberg lived a lifelong conflict between Judaism and Christianity: he was raised as a Jewish; in 1898, he converted to Protestantism; and in 1933 his reconversion to Judaism. Finally, Steven Takasugi and Ming Tsao are Asian American composers (yes, we forget that!).

The disobedience to concert music tradition was an important period of defamiliarization. From its beginnings, we continue to witness the emergence of new forces — especially with electronic music, soundscape composition, minimalism, and all sorts of experimentalism — that embraced music by women and LGBTQ+ composers or by Latin-American, Black and First Nation composers. This was common in the American Experimental Music tradition of John Cage, Morton Feldman,

David Tudor, Gordon Mumma, Pauline Oliveros, Christian Wolff, and so many others. In “The Autobiography of Lady Steinway” (1979), Pauline Oliveros gives a good example of such change.

Figure 3 – Text score of “The Autobiography of Lady Steinway” by Pauline Oliveros

**THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF LADY STEINWAY**
for Speaking Voice, Steinway Grand Piano, and Lighting Designer

The piano is used only as a prop.

Actor

Describe the piano as if it were you (first person singular). Tell your story as if you were the piano and talk about how you have been tuned and played-the physicality (whose touch you liked the most etc.), journeys, memories and dreams. Use a dialect unfamiliar to your audience.

Sound Technician

Use close microphone technique with the voice of the unseen actor to create the sound of intimacy and to create the illusion of the voice coming from inside the piano. Place the loudspeaker so that the voice of the unseen actor seems to come from the depths of the piano.

Lighting Designer

Use a spotlight on the gleaming, shining, spotless piano. The background should be a black curtain. Begin with brilliant illumination, then use soft colors and gradually fade with just noticeable differences in sync with the actor’s story until the piano disappears in darkness when the story ends.

1979

Source: transcribed by the author from OLIVEROS (2013, p. 18)

There are elements of traditional concert music, but there is much more. The first element that calls our attention is the “text-score” format. No staff paper. It is a musical composition and a theatre-scene composition: there is a grand Steinway piano on stage, but only the piano, without the player. It is

specifically a Steinway piano (a symbol of power? an homage?). Finally, lighting instructions are given, spotting the piano. Oliveros describes her sound world without a timeline in this text-score so that the piece can have different durations. An unseen actor incorporates the piano's voice and describes itself according to instructions. Only words from the actor, no piano sounds. Some minimal electronic requirements, such as voice amplification to bring a better sense of public-private atmosphere and instructions for loudspeaker placement close to the actual piano on stage, to mimic a personage.

Through her own practice of Deep Listening⁷, Oliveros comes close — like Cage — to Braidotti's understanding of monism and defamiliarization. In her music and sonic practice, there is much room for attentive listening — the perception of the external world and an inner perception — subjectivity. Oliveros' "The Beauty of Sorrow" (1987), for instance, is an excellent example of that: an orchestration of slow clouds of sounds, awareness of an instrument (accordion) tuned in just intonation, and long digital delays helping to build a textural soundscape. It feels as if the entire attention is focused on a single *crescendo* from within the instrument. There is so much attention to the details of a single sound that her music is full of long gestures, just like in Spectral Music. That is necessary because the listener needs plenty of time for perception. Temporality is re-identified, and musical language becomes something else, a dialect perhaps.

At the beginning of this text, I proposed a compositional exercise: to imagine music absent the human creative force. Can we actually do it? Possibly not, but one might even speculate that the best step forward in this task — and the most radical posthumanist thought regarding musical composition today — would be to stop composing entirely. However, the idea behind this composition exercise was, of course, not simply to follow some rules with staff paper and write a new composition. Instead,

⁷ Retrieved from: <<https://www.deeplisting.rpi.edu/>>

we aimed to provide a pre-compositional stimulus to abandon one's natural gestures and tendencies and, consequently, to conceive a new expressivity. After investigating numerous composers' struggles with the tonal language cultural heritage — from Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique to Feldman's "stepping aside" — we have seen that to accomplish critical distance, it is not so much about denying humanistic gesture, but rather to engage with it genuinely and to encourage a different awareness to emerge. It is more a question of *posthumanism* as a critical view, as a resistance force than just *anti-humanism*. One might affirm that the history of music composition, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is a constant search for defamiliarization, dis-identification, and re-identification. And it is necessary, in my understanding, to keep encouraging that, especially in these times when concert music has undergone significant changes, whether in struggling to reinvent its tradition of opera and symphonic music or in adapting itself to a world that is increasingly moving towards interaction with different media.

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