

Deleuze reads Messiaen

Durations and birdsong becoming philosophy

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Gilles Deleuze was a professed ‘non-musician’ (Deleuze, 2006, p. 156). In contrast to a string of influential books on literature, visual art and cinema, he never produced a sustained study of music. Many of his writings nevertheless refer to musical concepts and repertoires, seemingly sporadically but often at key junctions. Traditional aesthetic understandings of musical immediacy leave manifest marks on Deleuze’s aspiration to create a philosophy beyond, or better, prior to, any primacy of representation. The influential *A Thousand Plateaus*, co-authored with Félix Guattari, provides a natural vantage point to survey his ‘musical ontology’ (Gallope, 2013) and his use of music, replete as it is with musical allusions and references to individual composers.

This iconic work has been judged to provide ‘the most ekphrastic deployment of music for philosophy in the twentieth century ... amalgamating the conceptual and sensual modalities (gestures, images, rhythms, sounds) of modernist music and those of philosophy’ (Scherzinger, 2010, p. 108). Deleuze’s and Guattari’s understanding of music indeed relies heavily on techniques drawn from modernist composers. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Webern, Berg, Messiaen, Varèse, Cage, Stockhausen, Boulez and Berio figure prominently, together with earlier figures such as Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Wagner and Mussorgsky.¹

Among these, Pierre Boulez undoubtedly exerted an unparalleled influence on Deleuze. Mirelle Buydens (1990), Martin Scherzinger (2008, 2010) and Edward Campbell (2010, 2013) have retraced this link in detail. Although Boulez’s one-time teacher Olivier Messiaen surfaces regularly in Deleuze, and consequently also in the secondary literature, this connection has often been affirmed rather than investigated.² Ronald Bogue undertook pioneering work on Deleuze and Messiaen and established thematic emphases of lasting importance.³ Ecological concerns and the role of birdsong count high among them, having later been

¹ For an inventory of references to music throughout Deleuze’s writings, see Waterhouse, 2015.

² ‘Les deux musiciens contemporains qui ont plus attiré l’attention de Deleuze sont sans doute Messiaen et Boulez’ (Waterhouse, 2015, p. 267). Messiaen’s importance is also highlighted in Ardoin, Gontarski, and Mattison, 2014, p. 1; Döbereiner 2014, p. 267; Beckman, 2017, p. 88.

³ The article ‘Rhizomusicology’ (Bogue, 1991) was later incorporated into the book *Deleuze on Music, Painting, and the Arts* (Bogue, 2003). For other texts that touch upon Messiaen in Deleuze, see Bogue, 2004a and 2004b (the later reprinted in Bogue, 2007).

interpreted most significantly by Sander van Maas (2013).⁴ Among further studies to probe deeper than passing comments or allusions, Amy Bauer has shown how ‘for Deleuze, Messiaen’s music [the orchestral work *Chronochromie*] represented the joyful engagement of cosmic forces’ (2007, p. 161). Catherine Pickstock engages with Deleuze and discusses Messiaen as a predecessor of a postmodern turn towards religious transcendence in art music (2008).

The present article differs from previous studies both in scope and in method. It moves below a bird’s-eye view on thematic concurrences between music and philosophy, seeking an enhanced critical insight into Deleuze’s actual use of Messiaen in his own work. The method contrasts conspicuously with Bogue’s programmatic decision to abstain from a retracing of discrete sources and concrete lines of influences. His work seeks ‘to describe the process of ‘becoming’ that takes place between Deleuze-Guattari and Messiaen—one that is paradigmatic of the ‘encounters’ that generate the unpredictable theoretical developments of *Mille plateaux*’ (Bogue, 1991, pp. 85–86). The point is to show how *A Thousand Plateaus* and Messiaen’s music can shed light on each other and thereby aid modern interpreters.

A common outcome of previous studies is that they highlight and interpret notable thematic concurrences between Deleuze (with or without Guattari) and Messiaen, including direct citations and references to the composer. The following analysis offers similar material but also ventures beyond Deleuze’s manifest citations of Messiaen and observations that the philosopher develops topics already treated by the composer. The article moves further into the philosophical workshop and investigates in detail what Deleuze actually heard and read by Messiaen. Its first section maps out Deleuze’s encounters with music, in general, and ends with a summary of his sources to Messiaen. This background enables a more comprehensive insight into Deleuze’s manner of transferring concepts and musical techniques from Messiaen, often setting new accents to make them serve new purposes in his philosophical framework. Close comparisons between texts by Deleuze and Messiaen enable detection of unaccounted quotations or allusions, not least in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

Such an approach may not be immediately relevant in the eyes of scholars who cherish ideals of a free-floating and creative exchange of ideas, inspired by Deleuze’s own model of rhizomatic thought (whose musical aspects are discussed below). Proponents of a Deleuzian turn in musicology are generally less interested in the musical genesis of some of Deleuze’s key concepts than what these very notions may continue to achieve.⁵ The contrasting path taken here illuminates how Deleuze responded to a polarity in modernist music between ‘conceptual

⁴ ‘There has been a trend – a “minoritarian” one, to be sure – in the literature on Messiaen to use references by Gilles Deleuze to this composer as a starting point for an ecocritical appraisal of his music’ (Maas, 2013, p. 175).

⁵ Among recent Deleuzian music studies, see notably Buchanan and Swiboda, 2004; Hulse and Nesbitt, 2013; Macarthur, Lochhead and Shaw, 2016; Moisala, Leppänen, Tiainen and Väättäinen, 2017.

and sensual modalities' (cf. previous citation from Scherzinger). Messiaen is a composer who famously elucidated his musical language in countless interviews, lectures and writings, in the act establishing conceptual contours for its reception. Later scholarship has often sought new approaches to understand and experience his music, highlighting tensions and limitations in Messiaen's own theoretical apparatus (see foremost Healey, 2013). Deleuze's and Guattari's thought provides a noteworthy chapter in the reception history of Messiaen's writings and music, shedding light not least on interrelations between these two modes of communication. Tensions between them also touch upon the complex relation between artistic and conceptual knowledge in Deleuze. The question is particularly thorny since some of his writings advocate a radical transdisciplinarity and transfer of ideas across disciplines, whereas other texts set clear boundaries between science, philosophy and art (Campbell, 2020). Before assuming some kind of 'ekphrastic' transfer always to be at work when a philosopher studies a composer, it is worth investigating to what degree Deleuze drew on musical concepts rather than on sonic experiences of actual music.

The role of writings in the reception of a composer like Messiaen has bearings on a further characteristic premise behind the following analysis. Deleuze and Guattari did not merely establish a direct line of influence from Messiaen: Pierre Boulez's writings functioned as a vantage point and prism for their employment of music, in general and in this particular case. Consequently, it is necessary to discern how some traces of Messiaen in their work are more immediate and how other uses are filtered through Boulez's distinct and tendentious vision of modernist music. Boulez's portrayal of Wagner as an originator of his own modernism here provides a novel point of departure to traverse the latter outlook from a new angle. This depiction of Wagner established interconnections between discrete conceptual motifs and constructed a certain narrative of musical modernism that Deleuze and Guattari readily adopted into their own endeavour of transforming philosophy. The links between motifs in Boulez's portrayal of Wagner also facilitated Deleuze's independent reading of how similar topics interconnect in Messiaen's music.

After that second preamble, the main analysis maps a range of prominent themes upon which Messiaen exerted either a palpable or tacit but still significant influence. The first of them is Deleuze's rhizomatic model of thought, including the idea that individual parameters need to be set free from fixed structures in order to facilitate new connections. The musically derived notion of continuous variation is central to this aspiration and here provides a bridge to the aesthetic concept of a non-pulsed time. The latter outlook is in *A Thousand Plateaus* connected with a theory of different superimposed rhythms, which itself opens for a vision of nature as inherently musical. Deleuze and Guattari employs Messiaen's musical transformation of birdsong within this ecological outlook. The gist of their theoretical use of such techniques highlights philosophical ideals of continuous becoming, virtuality and a general deconstruction and reconstruction of form and

material in art. Finally, Messiaen's notion of rhythmic characters provided Deleuze with a characteristic vantage point to rhythm and colours in painting, as articulated in his work on Francis Bacon.

Students, texts and some listening: Deleuze's path to music

As put by his biographer François Dosse, Deleuze 'started listening to music quite late in his life, listened to very little, and had tastes running to Piaf, Paul Anka, and Claude François. He also liked Ravel's *Bolero*, about which he had planned to write something' (2010, p. 444). Deleuze gradually developed a sufficient interest in music to prepare a (never completed) book on the subject, on which he worked from the late 1980s to his death in 1995 (Dosse, 2010, p. 446). Apart from brief written references to Ravel, the only preserved public comments on these cherished artists stem from a series of television interviews from 1988 and 1989.⁶ Before the camera, Deleuze challenged an understanding that he never listened to music or opera. He claimed to have ventured into music, but only for a brief period, because it required more time than he had available.⁷ On the limited number of musical performances Deleuze visited, he noted that

each time I went to a concert, I found it too long since I have very little receptivity, but I always felt deep emotions. [...] I know that music gives me emotions... Simply, talking about music is even more difficult than speaking of painting. It's nearly the highest point (*le sommet*), speaking about music. (Stivale, n.d., p. 77)

As these comments indicate, strong emotional connections stood side by side with a limited patience for musical experiences. A respect for the need to be sufficiently immersed appears to have restrained Deleuze from speaking superficially on the subject. In the same setting, Deleuze confirmed his passion for Edith Piaf and acknowledged his interest in popular singers Charles Trenet and Claude François. Vocal timbre stands out as a pivotal criterion in his musical taste, together with a desire to experience innovative qualities in an artist (Stivale, n.d., pp. 74–76). These interviews are more suggestive than exhaustive, but they indicate how Deleuze could have analysed the popular music he was most immediately fascinated with.

As a contrast, inspiration from others determined the choice of composers used throughout his writings. Deleuze typically ventured into new fields as the result of encounters with people who opened new areas for reflection. At the time when he took up teaching in Vincennes at the experimental university Paris-VIII, Messiaen's previous student Daniel Charles had founded and been appointed the

⁶ The documentary *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*, directed by Pierre-André Boutang, consists of conversations with Claire Parnet and was first aired in 1995.

⁷ 'I listened to music quite a bit at a particular time, a long time ago. Then, I stopped because I told myself, it's not possible, it's not possible, it's an abyss, it takes too much time, one has to have time, I don't have the time, I have too much to do - I'm not talking about social tasks, but my desire to write things -, I just don't have the time to listen to music, or listen to enough of it.' (Stivale, n.d., p. 74)

first head of its department of music. Deleuze's interest in singing voices echoes themes in Charles's book *Le temps de la voix* (1978). *A Thousand Plateaus* also reveals an influence from Charles's influential *Pour les oiseaux (Entretiens avec John Cage)*. In the same department, Ivanka Stoïanova was first a doctoral student and then herself a professor. In 1972, she published a significant article on Messiaen's employment of ancient Greek rhythms. Messiaen was thus certainly known and studied by musicologists at Vincennes.

In Deleuze's own seminar, students and young artists often functioned as catalysts for explorations of art, a pattern confirmed by music. The young musicians Richard Pinhas and Pascale Criton showed up in 1971 and 1975, respectively, and brought contemporary repertoires into discussions and creative explorations.⁸ Both became longstanding friends, introducing their doyen to music from rock and traditional musics to spectralist Gérard Grisey and the microtonality of Russian-born composer Ivan Wyschnegradsky. At the outset of her time in the class, Criton brought a tape recorder and played a set of works including Messiaen's *Chronochronie*. This appears to be Deleuze's first documented encounter with the composer's music and, more specifically, with a work that would surface at key junctions throughout his writings (Criton, 2005). All in all, and any personal preferences for Paul Anka or Piaf notwithstanding, Deleuze's appreciation of music deepened through contacts with young artists preoccupied with artistic challenges within the French avant-garde scene – albeit not limited to art music (Dosse, 2010, pp. 442–446).

An early record of discussions on music stems from a 1977 teaching session, when Pinhas raised musical queries to Deleuze's repudiation of chronological time and his preference for so-called non-pulsed dimensions of time (Deleuze, 1998a). Deleuze soon let Boulez know of his interest in participating in an upcoming public seminar on musical time at IRCAM. The two had possibly been acquainted since the early 1950s but definitely established common grounds through this high-profiled event. In 1978, some 2000 auditors gathered for a discussion in which, of the three philosophers present, 'only Deleuze entered into the public debate with any enthusiasm' (Macey, 1993, pp. 398–399).⁹

Boulez later praised the philosopher's contribution in programme notes for memorial concerts he conducted in Deleuze's honour:

Gilles Deleuze is one of the very rare intellectuals who are profoundly interested in music. In 1978, he participated with Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault in a seminar organized by IRCAM on musical time, while he was himself engaged in the writing of *A Thousand Plateaus*. In a brilliant presentation he showed the acute and perspicacious

⁸ On Deleuze as teacher at Vincennes, see Dosse, 2010, pp. 345–361.

⁹ Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and Luciano Berio also contributed to the seminar. A video recording is available at <https://www.ircam.fr/article/detail/sons-dessus-dessous-18-le-temps-musical/> [accessed 2021-03-28].

manner in which he grasped the problems of musical composition and perception.
(Murphy, 1998, p. 69)

For the seminar, Boulez had chosen five modern works as a common ground for the participants' exploration of temporal issues in music. Messiaen's iconic *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités* was one of them, but it sparked no interest on Deleuze's part. His speech acknowledges the work as a study in non-pulsed time, but without further comments or any reference to its composer.¹⁰ As a contrast, the text introduces a thematic nexus of landscapes, colours and characters, explicitly connected with Wagner's treatment of musical motifs (Deleuze, 2006, p. 157–159). Deleuze leans heavily on an essay by Boulez, who himself claimed that this piece of writing on Wagner triggered the philosopher's reflection on music (Boulez, Menger and Bernard, 1990, p. 9).¹¹ Boulez would also remain the main composer, or possibly better, the main author behind musical references in Deleuze's writings. Besides passing references in several texts, the 1986 essay *Boulez, Proust and Time: 'Occupying without Counting'* expands on analogies between musical and literary modernism first outlined at the 1978 seminar (Deleuze, 1998b). A reciprocal influence from the philosopher can be detected in Boulez's Collège de France lectures.¹²

Many sources for Deleuze's and Guattari's reception of Messiaen can be retraced from notes in their writings, particularly in *A Thousand Plateaus*. They had studied interview books by Antoine Goléa (1961) and Claude Samuel (1967), as well as a substantial article by Gisèle Brelet on contemporary French music (1977).¹³ Besides recurrent references to *Chronochromie*, a passing allusion to *Visions de l'Amen* is the only mention of an individual work by Messiaen in Deleuze's writings (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, pp. 109–110; cf. Goléa, 1961, p. 95ff).

A tentative conclusion from this inventory corroborates Deleuze's point about having chosen not to listen more extensively to music. There is, for example, no reference to any of Messiaen's major birdsong pieces, despite the manifest influence of this topic in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Consequently, this article almost

¹⁰ The other works were Ligeti's *Chamber Concerto*, Boulez's *Éclat*, Stockhausen's *Zeitmasse* and Carter's *A Mirror on which to Dwell*; see Campbell, 2013, pp. 101–102.

¹¹ The text was Boulez's *Time re-explored*, published in the programme for the 1976 production of *Rheingold* at Bayreuth, later republished in Boulez, 1986, pp. 260–277; cf. Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, p. 643, n.14.

¹² Further references occur in Deleuze's *Dialogues* (with Claire Parinet), *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, *Foucault*, *A Thousand Plateaus*, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, *What is Philosophy?* and *Negotiations*. See Waterhouse, 2015, pp. 267–268, 271; Scherzinger, 2008; Campbell, 2010, pp. 141–153.

¹³ The most important source, by far, is Samuel's book. Citations given here follow Messiaen, 1994a, in so far as they concern passages unaltered in the second French edition (1986), on which this translation is based. Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, p. 354, also criticise a brief reference to birdsong in Messiaen in Moré, 1971, p. 99.

exclusively investigates Deleuze's reading (with or without Guattari) of *writings* by or on Messiaen, together with texts by Boulez relevant for establishing the framework in which Deleuze read and interpreted Messiaen.

Weeds and serialism in a new order

In his influential essay on Wagner, Boulez calls for an immanent and purely musical understanding of the *Ring*, arguing that its composer sought nothing less than to find an entirely new structure of music. Throughout the tetralogy, musical motives gradually attained precedence over the dramatic text. Thus emancipated to fulfil purely musical functions, the expressive potential in Wagner's themes gained liberty from surrounding temporal and harmonic structures. Formal relationships were reconstituted when structure gave way to the fluidity of interaction between themes, themselves capable of infinite malleability. Above all, variation was redefined as a continuous transformation of musical parameters, for expressive purposes.

It was *transition* that gradually became Wagner's chief obsession, and this is conceivable only with material virtually divested of stability. (Boulez, 1986, p. 268)

Boulez's reading tallies with central aspects in Deleuze's and Guattari's thought and aesthetics. Traditional ways to conceptualise structure are discarded in favour of techniques that enable novel, flexible and continuous transitions. While working on *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari also read how Boulez posited himself as an heir of Wagner, having in common with his predecessor the ambition to construct large-scale forms and realise continuity in time from a single thematic kernel. Boulez provided the two authors with an analogy between the self-organising force of a weed and the freedom of musical motifs to seek out novel interconnections:

... a musical idea is like a seed which you plant in compost, and suddenly it begins to proliferate like a weed. (Boulez, 1976, p. 15; cf. pp. 16, 18, 54)

Deleuze and Guattari elaborate on Wagner and the posited connection between thematic development and a broader musical re-exploration of time.¹⁴ They add a distinct stress on the absence of signification in music, but otherwise put Boulez's framework and principle of weed-like procreation into service when they introduce their rhizomatic model of thought in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Their (all too) general portrayal of music echoes Boulez's posited ascendancy of motifs over traditional form:

Music has always sent out lines of flight, like so many 'transformational multiplicities', even overturning the very codes that structure or arborify it; that is why musical form,

¹⁴ See Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, pp. 315 and 371, including a reference to Proust on Wagner mentioned in Boulez, 1976, p. 54.

right down to its ruptures and proliferations, is comparable to a weed, a rhizome. (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, p. 11, with reference to Boulez, 1976, on p. 601, n. 8)¹⁵

Boulez's analysis of instrumental colours in the *Ring* highlights a musical ability to establish new internal connections and so undermine prevalent hierarchies and unidirectional lines. The latter kind is akin to what Deleuze and Guattari call traditional arboreal thinking. As Boulez puts it, Wagner creates complex lines in avoiding giving an entire melodic line or harmonic group to a single instrument. The interplay between colours that arise develops 'virtual' lines beyond the 'real' polyphonic lines, in which 'concept and reality may appear to change roles' (Boulez, 1986, p. 273).

This analysis provides a manifest case of Boulez's conviction that every original artist creates techniques that realise what he calls a diagonal or transversal line. Such lines remain situated in real vertical and horizontal lines but also establish distinct new dimensions. The concepts of virtual and diagonal lines became central in Deleuze's and Guattari's common aesthetics. They also elaborate on Boulez's ideal of diagonal polyphony, in which the traditional coexistence of voices gives way to blocks of sound. Beyond traditional punctual coordinates, such blocks move along transversal lines, located in a free-floating temporality devoid of particular localisable points (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, pp. 345–346).¹⁶

A Thousand Plateaus contains a further brief historiographical sketch of musical modernism, shaped by Boulez's approach. At first sight, there is perhaps no immediate link between Messiaen and the description of how

the ferment in the tonal system itself (during much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) that dissolved temperament and widened chromaticism while preserving a relative tonality, which reinvented new modalities, brought a new amalgamation of major and minor, and in each instance conquered realms of continuous variation for this variable or that. (p. 111)

Below the surface, however, Messiaen plays a notable role in this conceptually dense passage. His well-known invention of a tonal language based on new modes of limited transpositions echoes the sketched historiography of music. Messiaen also reconceptualised the term 'chromaticism' beyond the category of pitches, speaking of a chromatic ordering of different durations (Messiaen, 2004a, pp. 48, 52, 80, 135). A widened chromaticism and continuous variation in different musical parameters (or variables) are part and parcel of Boulez's appreciation of his teacher. Boulez sought to establish a teleological progression from Wagner's chromaticism over Mahler's orchestration of melodic lines and Schoenberg's serialism to Messiaen. A vital premise was that the invention of systematic twelve-

¹⁵ A further musical stress in the first chapter is the excerpt from the graphic score of Sylvano Bussotti's *Five pieces for piano for David Tudor* (the 4th) placed right at the top (p. 1).

¹⁶ On polyphony and the construction of virtual lines described as heterophony, see Boulez, 1971, pp. 115–139, Boulez, 1991, pp. 227–234, Campbell, 2010, pp. 209–216, Kovács, 2004, pp. 82–125.

note techniques was the defining moment that antiquated ‘the diatonic era’ (1991, p. 225).¹⁷ Messiaen’s momentous *Mode de valeurs et d’intensités* is described as a natural consequence and merger of Wagnerian harmony with the serial principles of the Second Viennese School. The piece is famously based on constructed series not only of pitches, but equally of durations (short to long), dynamics (soft to strong), as well as different kinds of attack (articulation) on the piano. For Boulez, this endeavour was seminal in expanding the meaning of chromaticism beyond pitches into a gradual series of values within any musical element. Messiaen’s accomplishment revealed that the notion of chromaticism can be applied to ‘any other smaller common factor which can serve as a basis for an arithmetical or logarithmic scale’ (Boulez, 1991, p. 226).

This particular historiography served to situate Boulez, together with Messiaen’s other students Karel Goeyvaerts and Karlheinz Stockhausen, at the spearhead of an international avant-garde who ostensibly represented the natural course of serialism beyond these epoch-making techniques.¹⁸ Messiaen neither shared the conviction that his extended serialism necessarily entailed an epochal break with diatonic music, nor an interest to present himself as an amalgamation of Austrian (Webern) and French lines of musical progress. The catalytic effect of *Mode de valeurs et d’intensités* and its employment within the avant-garde in fact made him distance himself from the work.¹⁹ Recent studies have also shown how his particular brand of serialism grew out of longstanding concerns for new expressive possibilities, primarily in the domain of rhythm (Benitez, 2009; McNulty, 2014).²⁰

Messiaen’s spurning of Boulez’s historiography was added to the second edition of his talks with Claude Samuel (from 1986), when *A Thousand Plateaus* was already published. Hypothetically, it would have been interesting to see how Deleuze and Guattari would have reacted to such manifest historiographical differences. After all, Messiaen’s artistic decision to work on pieces based on birdsong throughout the entire 1950s – which they made significant use of –

¹⁷ Boulez’s article ‘Chromaticism’ was first published in Michel, 1958, but was also available to Deleuze and Guattari in Boulez, 1966, of which Boulez, 1991, is a translation. On the importance and utopian value ascribed to Messiaen’s systematic techniques, see Boulez, 1976, pp. 13–14, and 1986, pp. 415–418.

¹⁸ More specifically, Boulez sought to realign with Messiaen as part of an ambition to shine forth as independent of René Leibowitz, for whose teaching of serialism he had previously left Messiaen. On this convoluted rhetorical twist, see Erwin, 2021, Delaere, 2002, and, for Boulez’s account of Messiaen’s experimental phase, Boulez, 1986, pp. 411–418.

¹⁹ ‘I was very annoyed over the absolutely excessive importance given to a short work of mine, only three pages long, “Mode de valeurs et d’intensités”, because it supposedly gave rise to the serial explosion in the area of attacks, durations, intensities, timbres – in short, of all its musical parameters. Perhaps this piece was prophetic and historically important, but musically it’s next to nothing.’ (Messiaen, 1994a, p. 47).

²⁰ Benitez helpfully discusses early Messiaen scholarship, which followed a strict dodecapronic norm of serialism. As a result, Messiaen’s serial techniques were frequently called ‘modal’ or ‘quasi-serial’ and his distinct vantage point in rhythm remained nebulous.

constituted a manifest aberration from the vision of music's futurity championed by Boulez.

As it stands, *A Thousand Plateaus* couples the rhizomatic model of thought with a Boulezian view of how Messiaen's widened chromaticism enabled continuous variation in all musical parameters.²¹ Deleuze and Guattari single out John Cage as the epitomic rhizomatic composer, in line with the younger generation who regarded Messiaen's breakthrough as (merely) a step towards novel expressive possibilities. Taking the new autonomy of musical variables seriously, Messiaen had accomplished a break with an author-centred logic of composition, in the act creating an indeterminate space in which musical elements would be free to strike up new connections between themselves.²² Of particular import throughout the book is Boulez's conviction that electroacoustic music enabled a further dissolution of natural constraints in the musical parameters first cast in chromatic series by Messiaen. With the help of electronics, punctual coordinates finally yielded to an 'absolute continuum' in all elements of sound. Boulez described how composition was thoroughly transformed when these novel techniques offered 'a non-limitation of possibilities', a vast continuum of yet undifferentiated potential from which composers were at liberty to 'extract' sounds and structures and chords.²³ Electronic techniques thus consummate a modernist reversal of form and thematic development, playing a seminal role in what Jean-Jacques Nattiez calls 'the impossibility of separating *material* from *invention*...the most long-standing of Boulez's ideas' (Boulez, 1986, p. 23).

This outlook tallies with Deleuze's and Guattari's aspiration to launch a reconceptualisation of philosophy beyond traditional dichotomies between form and matter. As noted by Scherzinger, Boulez's synthesizer functions as 'informing technical principle' in *A Thousand Plateaus*, where it 'becomes a philosophical entry point into the "immense mechanosphere" characterizing a new era: "the age of the Machine"' (2008, p. 131). Deleuze and Guattari regard its production of sound as a momentous event that annihilates dichotomies between musical form and matter. The synthesizer disassembles existing sounds into their constitutive elements and transforms them through an infinite number of potential

²¹ On the presence of a 'Boulezian' Messiaen in the excerpt cited from Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, p. 111, see Scherzinger, 2008, p. 138.

²² 'It is undoubtedly John Cage who first and most perfectly deployed this fixed sound plane, which affirms a process against all structure and genesis, a floating time against pulsed time or tempo, experimentation against any kind of interpretation, and in which silence as sonorous rest also marks the absolute state of movement' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, p. 311).

²³ 'In the domain of electronics, it is pretty obvious that we are dealing initially with a non-limitation of possibilities, whether of timbre, of tessitura, of dynamics, or of duration: an undifferentiated universe from which one has to create the various characteristics of the sound oneself, and thereby extract a work that is coherent not only in internal structure but also in the actual constitution of its sound material' (Boulez, 1991, p. 159).

connections between sonic parameters. The epochal importance of the instrument is coupled with rhizomatics, chromaticism and continuous variation.²⁴

In Deleuze's and Guattari's Boulezian historiography, the synthesizer thus fulfils the reconceptualisation of music which Messiaen ostensibly initiated in the total serialism of *Mode de valeurs*. These interconnected ideas inform a dense passage that reads like a more elaborate articulation of the previously cited excerpt from *A Thousand Plateaus*:

But when chromaticism is unleashed, becomes a generalized chromaticism, turns back against temperament, affecting not only pitches but all sound components – durations, intensities, timbre, attacks – it becomes impossible to speak of a sound form organising matter; it is no longer even possible to speak of a continuous development of form. Rather, it is a question of a highly complex and elaborate material making audible nonsonorous forces. The couple matter-form is replaced by the coupling material-forces. The synthesizer has taken the place of the old 'a priori synthetic judgment', and all functions change accordingly. By placing all its components in continuous variation, music itself becomes a superlinear system, a rhizome instead of a tree, and enters the service of a virtual cosmic continuum of which even holes, silences, ruptures, and breaks are a part. (p. 111)

The quadruple of components in sound mentioned here harks back to Messiaen's experimental phase. His music is nevertheless obsolete, if the aesthetic calling of music requires a move beyond serialised chromaticism towards a sonic continuum. Deleuze and Guattari are often read as advocates for an aesthetic in which traditionally notated pitches must give way for post-serial, graphic, electronic or improvisational methods.²⁵ However, as the remaining sections of this article indicate, there are other strands in Deleuze's aesthetics that reconnect with further traits in Messiaen's compositional practices.

Making durations audible

The central notion of continuous variation has also shaped readings of Deleuze's and Guattari's work on music. Van Maas questions how Bogue participates in a broader tendency 'to view Messiaen from the perspective of the continuous' (2013, p. 177). This can indeed be problematic, at least if Boulezian implications are accepted uncritically. The continuous is a multi-faceted and

²⁴ Deleuze's own experience of synthesizers involved hands-on experiments. Richard Pinhas explored their use in rock music throughout the 1970s and introduced the technology to his philosophical mentor. They also experimented with their novel sound flux in the recording studio (Dosse, 2010, p. 444). This background is lacking in Scherzinger's outline (2008, pp. 136-137) of Boulez's writings as source for Deleuze's understanding of synthesizers.

²⁵ Speaking of Cage and rhizomatic music, Edward Campbell infers: 'It would seem that for Deleuze and Guattari, only music allowing continuous variation on every parametric level can aspire to the condition of generalized chromaticism, whether this be, for example, in Cage's indeterminate works, all kinds of serial and post-serial compositional approaches, graphic score works, free improvisation or electronic music' (2013, p. 38).

complex notion, not least because it involves both spatial and temporal aspects.²⁶ This article will discuss these two dimensions in turn, beginning with questions of musical time.

Messiaen, no less than Boulez, described himself as an heir to Wagner's motivic work. In fact, Boulez's approach stands in a manifest continuity with characteristic analyses of the German titan in Messiaen's teaching.²⁷ In 1972, Messiaen expressed his affinity with Wagner's quest for enhanced expression, highlighting how the latter's *leitmotifs* can 'depict the past, present and future, all at the same time.' (Rößler, 1986, p. 54). Reading Boulez perhaps first made Deleuze and Guattari note similarities between the malleability of Wagner's motifs and Messiaen's arsenal of techniques for modifying rhythmic cells.²⁸ One of their most noteworthy elucidations of the pivotal term 'the refrain' cites these methods.²⁹ A refrain facilitates interactions between previously non-connected elements and thereby contains a catalytic power to create new forms. As they put it in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the seed or internal structure of such a force has two essential aspects: augmentations and diminutions, additions and withdrawals, amplification and eliminations by unequal values, but also the presence of a retrograde motion running in both directions. (p. 405; see p. 648 n. 58 for references to Messiaen 1994a)

This elaboration is in its entirety built upon Messiaen's most famous techniques for the construction of a new rhythmic language. Deleuze and Guattari couple these devices with a self-organising force in the rhythmic material, especially a power in palindromic structures to expand and contract from a centre of their own. Furthermore, they grasp how Messiaen's techniques embody what has been called 'a clear metaphysical aspiration to overcome the unidirectional nature of the flow of time' (Fabbi, 2012, p. 60).

From Boulez's writings, the two authors could learn how Wagner worked with augmentations and diminutions of themes, just like Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. A crucial novelty is, however, that the Romantic visionary emancipated his themes from a dependence upon pre-existing chronological time. Their fluidity rather instil free-floating temporal experiences that arise from nothing else than their

²⁶ For a helpful survey of temporal continuity in Boulez, see Hayes, 2021, pp. 41–59.

²⁷ On Wagner in Messiaen's teaching, including Boulez's response, see Bovin, 1995, pp. 260–269, and more broadly on the impact of Messiaen's teaching, Boulez, 1986, pp. 404–406.

²⁸ Boulez had readily granted his debt to these techniques: 'From my contact with Messiaen, then, I had taken only what could be of service to me – namely his work on rhythmic cells and their modification, interpolation, partial augmentation, diminution, and so on' (Boulez, 1976, p. 14; cf. Messiaen, 1994a, p. 82).

²⁹ The French term is *la ritournelle* but Brian Massumi's English translation of *A Thousand Plateaus* renders it as the *refrain*. Its musical connotations would have been far more readily understandable as *ritornello*.

own expressive potential.³⁰ *A Thousand Plateaus* elevate such tendencies as emblematic of all post-Wagnerian music, in the act alluding to Messiaen's techniques of augmentation and diminutions.³¹

A conceptual polarity between pulsed and non-pulsed time lay at the heart of Deleuze's path to music. Boulez provided him with these concepts and possibly inspired a previous use of the analogous Stoic notions *Chronos* and *Aion* (Deleuze, 2015, pp. 167–173; Buydens, 1990, p. 155).³² Deleuze's IRCAM speech highlighted how Messiaen's *Mode de valeurs* 'developed or showed different aspect of this non-pulsed time' (2006, p. 157). *A Thousand Plateaus* would later invoke Boulez's contrast between the

'pulsed time' of a formal and functional music based on values versus the 'nonpulsed time' of a floating music, both floating *and* machinic, which has nothing but speeds or differences in dynamic. (p. 305)

In *Boulez, Proust and Time*, Deleuze treats the distinction as two opposite ways of coupling time and music together, citing Boulez on a choice of strategies to 'count to occupy space-time, or occupy without counting' (1998b, p. 70; cf. Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, p. 555; Boulez, 1971, p. 94).

An understanding that post-Wagnerian modernism decodes pre-existing note values and forms and establishes new temporal modes is central to Deleuze's and Guattari's conviction that music is relevant well beyond demarcated aesthetic ambitions. As Edward Campbell puts it, perceptions of music informed by the distinction between pulsed and non-pulsed time 'no longer make music audible in time, but rather make time audible in music' (2013, p. 105). Deleuze and Guattari may or may not have seen a similar dichotomy by Messiaen in a French biography of the composer:

The rhythmician [...] has the advantage of moving at will in the past and the future, and of chopping up time by retrograding and permuting it. 'Music is not in time, but time is in music'. (Mari, 1965, p. 59, my translation)

³⁰ 'Neither Wagner nor Berlioz saw any need for this codification, which seemed to them absurd, archaic and totally contrary to the fluidity at which they aimed in their own music, which demanded its own musical time. It was precisely this that formed the novelty of Wagner's motifs, which are not only unattached to any definite or definitive tempo but obey no pre-existing formal hierarchy in their transformations' (Boulez, 1986, p. 267).

³¹ 'Music has always submitted its forms and motifs to temporal transformations, augmentations or diminutions, slowdowns or accelerations, which do not occur solely according to laws of organization or even of development' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, p. 315).

³² In Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, p. 305, *Chronos* is 'the time of measure that situates things and person, develops a form, and determines a subject', whereas *Aeon* is 'the indefinite time of the event, the floating line that knows only speeds and continually divides that which transpires'.

Messiaen made further similar statements and added a stress on musicians' precedence over philosophers in their grasp of time.³³ Deleuze and Guattari heeded the basic idea that a reversal of agency between music and time turned composers into explorers that make aspects of time itself audible. This theme is central in *A Thousand Plateaus*, where it underpins a conviction that music both mirrors prevalent and realises novel structures in the fabric of being. The possibility of small musical motifs to constitute their own temporal fabric stands connected to what Deleuze and Guattari call a 'plane of immanence' or 'the plane of consistency or composition'. In this space, concepts resonate with each other in an undivided whole, remaining in flux and not submitted to the division that comes with a transfer to a determinate state. In brief, this link suggests a music that remains at one with movement, in an absolute and yet undivided sense, rather than to assume contradictions between substance and form. Such immanence is contrasted with a 'transcendent plan(e) of organization' at work when the development of form and subjects correspond to non-audible principles external to the sound or themes themselves.³⁴

Messiaen is not a central reference when Deleuze and Guattari invoke music to elucidate these notions. Nevertheless, notable traces of his thought surface at key junctions. The IRCAM speech elucidates how 'the most immediate feature of such a so-called non-pulsed time is duration, time freed from measure, be it a regular or irregular, simple or complex measure'. The Bergsonian notion of duration is central for both Messiaen and Deleuze, together with the idea that a non-pulsed time stretches beyond common strategies in the apperception of rhythm 'to appose a common measure or a metric cadence to all vital durations' (Deleuze, 2006, p. 157). *A Thousand Plateaus* elaborates further on how a liberated sense for rhythm eschews coded temporalities and fixed metre:

It is well known that rhythm is not meter or cadence, even irregular meter or cadence: there is nothing less rhythmic than a military march. [...] Meter, whether regular or not, assumes a coded form whose unity of measure may vary, [...] whereas rhythm is the Unequal or the Incommensurable that is always undergoing transcoding. Meter is dogmatic, but rhythm is critical; it ties together critical moments. (p. 365)

In contrast to their understanding that such an antithesis between rhythm and metre is commonly recognised, Messiaen had previously said that

³³ 'As a rhythmist, I've endeavored to divide this time up and to understand it better by dividing it. Without musicians, time would be much less understood. Philosophers are less advanced in this field. But as composers, we have the great power to chop up and alter time' (Messiaen, 2004a, p. 34). This statement was, however, a later addition to the version read by Deleuze and Guattari.

³⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, pp. 309–312, 314–316. The translator writes 'plan(e)' to indicate the presence of dual connotations at work, amalgamating geometrical 'planes' with 'plan' in the sense of conscious intention and organisation.

most people think that rhythm and the steady beat of a military march are one and the same. Whereas rhythm is in fact an unequal element given to fluctuations, like the waves in the sea, the sound of the wind, or the shape of tree branches. (1994a, p. 249)³⁵

Deleuze and Guattari provide no reference to Messiaen, in spite of their verbatim citation on military marches and their adoption of his general gist. However, they couple his own ideal of true rhythm with a precedence of temporal aspects in continuous variation (which itself entails a link to Messiaen, as discussed above):

The smooth is the continuous variation, continuous development of form; it is the fusion of harmony and melody in favor of the production of properly rhythmic [sic] values. (2013, p. 556)

The authors possibly appreciated further affinities between their own work and Messiaen's outlook. There is a distant but noteworthy propinquity between their political aspiration to break away from the strictures of 'state philosophy' and Messiaen's strive throughout the 1930s to liberate rhythm from any militaristic regularity. In both cases, an undulating expressivity, inspired by human breath and movements in nature, signifies and heralds a new social order.³⁶

Messiaen's most lucid elucidation of the two main temporal modes thematised by Boulez and Deleuze appeared in his posthumous and massive *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie*. The first volume thereby, unintentionally, summarises several noteworthy concurrences between Deleuze and the two composers. The text itself was, however, printed too late (1994) to influence the philosopher. A table in the *Traité* summarises Messiaen's readings of Bergson on the contrast between what here is called pure duration and structured time:

True duration

Duration is concrete -

evaluated by its relation to us

Duration is heterogeneous -

always changing

Duration is qualitative - immeasurable

Duration is subjective - within us

Structured time

Time is abstract -

an empty, static container

Time is homogeneous -

all parts are identical

Time is quantitative - measurable

Time is objective - outside of us

(Messiaen, 1994b, p. 12, cited after Baggech, 1998, pp. 21-22)

³⁵ Cf. p. 68: 'I'll take another very striking example of nonrhythmic music that is considered rhythmic: military marches. The march with its cadential gait, with its uninterrupted succession of absolutely equal note values, is anti-natural', and p. 67: 'rhythmic music is music that scorns repetition, squareness, and equal divisions, and that is inspired by the movements of nature, movements of free and unequal durations'.

³⁶ See further Messiaen, 1994b, p. 58: 'Laissons de côté le "pas cadencé" des soldats, affreusement anti-naturel! La marche libre - la vraie - ne comporte jamais deux groupes de pas de durée absolument identique', and Messiaen, 2012, p. 61: 'No more rhythms made monotonous by their squareness. We want to breathe freely!' On the political aspects, see Fulcher, 2002, and Schloesser, 2014, pp. 241-243.

The basic antithesis between non-pulsed and chronological time is easily recognisable. Messiaen's distinction between subjective and objective dimensions is freely at odds with Deleuze and Guattari, who turn their focus away from a focal point in subjectivity towards qualities inherent in the artistic material itself.

However, Deleuze's reception of Messiaen displays an eclectic style of reading, which shrewdly perceives useful ideas and unexpected connections, but silently ignores points of difference. A conspicuous case is Messiaen's theological contrast between time and eternity, based on an ontological duality that the progressive atheist Deleuze programmatically sought to overcome.

Beyond the binary approach to time sketched so far, a characteristic trait in Messiaen's thinking is to regard rhythm as constituted by multiple superimposed layers. His outlook followed musicologist and composer André Souris, who in his turn built on philosopher Gaston Bachelard's reversal of an ontological monism in Bergson's conception of duration. The result was, in musical terms, a modification of the idea of non-pulsed time through concepts of rhythmic superimposition or polyphony (Benitez, 2009, pp. 272, 281–283, Hayes, 2021, pp. 14–18). The heterogeneity of rhythm is thus not only a matter of constant change but also stems from creative interaction between different strata. Deleuze highlighted time as 'heterochronous, heterogeneous, multiple and non-coincident' already in the IRCAM speech (2006, p. 157). On the same subject, *A Thousand Plateaus* makes use of Messiaen's positive vision of musical time, including ecological implications.³⁷

Characteristic of Messiaen's reception of Souris is a spatial and natural situation of the possibly rather abstract idea of superimposed rhythms. The composer's elaboration on proper rhythm, cited above, highlighted fluctuations in nature as a basis for musical realisations of rhythm. At a key junction in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari invoke Messiaen's cosmological conviction that the whole universe is replete with a multiplicity of rhythms. They introduce his concomitant view that 'music is not the privilege of human beings' and goes on to state how it is 'permeating nature, animals, the elements, and deserts as much as human beings' (p. 360). The authors further note how Messiaen's experiments with a chromatic ordering of durations have implications well beyond the emancipation of temporality from fixed measures. These techniques offered a path to make audible a synchronic interplay between the different life rhythms of human beings, animals and even purely geological objects. Deleuze and Guattari write:

Messiaen presents multiple chromatic durations in coalescence, 'alternating between the longest and the shortest, in order to suggest the idea of the relations between the infinitely long durations of the stars and mountains and the infinitely short ones of the insects and atoms: a cosmic, elementary power that ... derives above all from the labor of rhythm.' (pp. 359–360, citing Brelet, 1977, p. 1166).

³⁷ For an example of thematic concurrence, see p. 7: 'We do not have units (*unités*) of measure, only multiplicities or varieties of measurement.'

The multiplicity of superimposed temporal modes thus provides a conceptual bridge from a free-floating timeframe to an ecological setting. This transition also demonstrates how Deleuze's reception of Messiaen moved beyond Boulez's connections between thematic development, non-pulsed time and rhizomatic principles. The vision of synchronic interplay between different life rhythms itself conjoins temporal and spatial dimensions. As such, it serves as a natural gateway to considering Messiaen's impact on spatial and ecological aspects of Deleuze's and Guattari's musical thought.

Birdsong and music as becoming

The chapter 'Of the Refrain' in *A Thousand Plateaus* has become a key text in musical thought and creativity during the late twentieth and into the twenty-first century. The text makes significant use of spatial and ecological aspects in music, with explicit recourse to Messiaen's ideas.³⁸ Deleuze and Guattari explore rhythm as a broad biological and anthropological concept, with a distinct affinity to Messiaen's vision of superimposed rhythms throughout the universe. His particular articulation of the contrast between fixed metre and rhythm (discussed above) informs their outlook on rhythm as a virtual passage or progression in-between disparate points, elements and species (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, p. 364). Messiaen's preoccupation with unequal durations is transformed into a characterisation of rhythm as a constant process of transcoding, in contrast to closed forms within a particular metre.

Meter, whether regular or not, assumes a coded form whose unit of measure may vary, but in a noncommunicating milieu, whereas rhythm is the Unequal or the Incommensurable that is always undergoing transcoding. (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, p. 365)

Deleuze and Guattari continue and invoke Bachelard on a point no less central to Messiaen: The understanding that rhythm is a link, a passing and the energy which ties together distinct points or durations in a movement:

Meter is dogmatic, but rhythm is critical; it ties together critical moments, or ties itself together in passing from one milieu to another [...] Bachelard is right to say that 'the link between truly active moments (rhythm) is always effected on a different plane from the one upon which the action is carried out.' (2013, p. 365)

The concepts of rhythm and milieu are intertwined, as this excerpt indicates. Both notions conjoin ecological and anthropological dimensions with artistic dimensions. The notion of milieu is connected to a multi-layered and organic ontology of interiority and exteriority, substance and form. All living things are posited to harness four milieus: A milieu of materials *exterior* to the more basic

³⁸ Commenting on this chapter, Bogue has argued that 'Chief among those who inspire in this enterprise is Olivier Messiaen, whose remarks on rhythm and birdsong provide several of the key concepts in *De la ritournelle*' (1991, p. 85).

and unformed elements, an *interior* milieu that regulates the complexity and differentiation within organisms, an *intermediary* milieu of membranes and limits, as well as an *annexed* or *associated* milieu that captures energy sources and relates to outer reality, through activities such as breathing, perception and reaction (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, pp. 56–60, 364). This outlook provides a ground for further reflection on how rhythm and music reconfigure fluid connections between living creatures and their habitat.

Milieus are regarded as arising from the relative stability of a code, or the periodic repetition of a constitutive element. Alluding to a Boulez-inspired transformation of punctual elements into integrated blocks of sound, Deleuze and Guattari say that every milieu forms ‘a block of spacetime constituted by the periodic repetition of the component’ (2013, p. 364). At the same time, their creative force hinge upon constant change, adaptation and co-operation.

Every milieu is coded, a code being defined by periodic repetition; but each code is in a perpetual state of transcoding or transduction. Transcoding or transduction is the manner in which one milieu serves as the basis for another, or conversely is established atop another milieu, dissipate in it or is constituted in it. (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, p. 364)

This theory is more complex than previous preferences for non-pulsed time and a championing of musical motifs that break free of fixed structures. Deleuze and Guattari here recognise the need for codes and their degree of stability to establish milieus. Rather than opting for one of the contrasting aspects, they theorise a constitutive synchronicity of the tendencies to establish temporal codes and the unceasing reconfiguration of such structures. This ecological vision implicitly calls for another aesthetic than a one-sided preference for constant change. True rhythm may be smooth, but it is a continuous *development* of form rather than the *abandoning* of form all together (cf. Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, p. 556, cited above).

In this context, Deleuze and Guattari credit Jakob von Uexküll’s vision of nature as music, more precisely, of biological components as melodies in a counterpoint of reciprocal influence and creative force. His work provides a link to understand how the authors came to regard the sketched outlook on rhythm as encompassing the entire realm of living beings, from organisms to animal behaviour and human social existence.³⁹ The concept of territory provides a notable bridge from the overarching theoretical level to birdsong. Deleuze and Guattari allude to Messiaen’s employment of Greek and Hindu rhythms and invoke further examples from music history to establish that a refrain ‘always carries earth with it; it has a land (sometimes a spiritual land) as its concomitant’

³⁹ Deleuze and Guattari studied the French translation of Uexküll’s *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans* (originally *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen*). Their theory of interiority and exteriority draws upon his exploration of a biological ground for signification and communication, in animals and human beings, considered a pivotal point of departure for modern ethology, biosemiotics and biocybernetics. On their reception, as it pertains to music, see Amrine, 2015.

(2013, p. 363). They heed ties between ancient metrical systems and distinct geographical regions, in the act taking odds with Boulez's criticism of Messiaen that a rhythmic language should be constructed *ex nihilo*. At the same time, Deleuze and Guattari point out that 'the bird sings to mark its territory' (2013, p. 363; cf. Boulez, 1976, p. 15).

Birds are central in explaining how milieus evolve into territories. For Deleuze and Guattari, such territorialisation occurs when constitutive components in a milieu cease to fulfil merely functional values and rather take on expressive qualities. The difference concerns modes of signification and the potential in certain marks to become qualitative, or matters of expression. The colours of birds or fishes remain purely biological functions related to actions such as mating, protection or aggression, until they attain a permanence and become characteristic marks of a species and its place within a habitat. Such a transformation is regarded as a rhythm and a process of territorialisation. For Deleuze and Guattari, it is vital that changes in signification are primary in relation to the organisation of new biological and social functions entailed in a territory (2013, pp. 366–367).

Acts of signification inherently border on artistic processes. Having suggested that territorialisation rests on 'the becoming-expressive of rhythm or melody', Deleuze and Guattari move on to highlight artistic dimensions in the delineation of territories and of having property:

Property is fundamentally artistic because art is fundamentally *poster, placard...* The expressive is primary in relation to the possessive; expressive qualities, or matters of expression, are necessarily appropriative and constitute a having more profound than being. (2013, p. 368)

As indicated here, expressive qualities are neither external signs of a preceding essence or identity nor purely subjective or emotional. Rather, Deleuze and Guattari call them 'auto-objective' and stress how identity and characteristic properties develop and attain objectivity in the expression of territorial limits towards others. Messiaen stresses a similar objectivity and holds that the common song of a species constitute 'a veritable musical language', precise enough for communication in courtship, feeding or warning (1994a, p. 86). He can also be used to reinforce the view that birdsong originates from negotiations of territorial ascendancy and that a bird's artistic proficiency is a powerful tool to set it above others within the avian hierarchy. Deleuze and Guattari adopt Messiaen's understanding that such an artistic manner of establishing a pecking order is preferable to ordinary human methods.⁴⁰ They claim that his ornithological

⁴⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, p. 366, cite Messiaen, 1994a, p. 85 (rendered here in the translation of the latter): 'Strange though it may seem, a bird's song first has a territorial aspect: the bird sings to defend its branch, its field of pasture, and to affirm its ownership of a female, a nest, a branch, or a region in which it feeds. This is so true that territorial possession is often regulated by song contests, and if an intruder wishes to occupy a spot that doesn't belong to it, the real owner sings and sings so well that the intruder leaves... if the intruder sings better than the proprietor, the proprietor yields his place. Many differences

findings corroborate ethological observations that the advantage of human beings over animals concerns ‘means of overcoding, of making punctual systems’ (2013, p. 360). However, such an upper edge reinforces chronological and stratified thinking and thus constitutes an impediment to properly musical and natural qualities. A similar preference for nature as a site of authentic music informs a common disregard for the traditional distinction between noise and sound (Messiaen, 1994a, p. 35, Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, p. 351). *A Thousand Plateaus* develops this approach to comprehensive ecocritical vision, in which nature opposes industrial manufacturing and human violence through the non-pulsed power of music. To overcome such detrimental forces, it is necessary for the non-musical sound of the human being to form a block with the becoming-music of sound. (p. 360)

Birdsong in Messiaen plays a central role in the explication of what such a becoming entails. Essential to the argument in *A Thousand Plateaus* is a perspicacious view of birdsong as emblematic of a *becoming* that constitutes the truly musical aspect in music, rather than as a musical language that *is*. This theoretical approach rests on territorial aspects and birds’ irrevocable situation within a wider ecological web. Drawing upon Messiaen’s superimposed rhythms, Deleuze and Guattari claim that a properly musical grasp of birdsong establishes a diagonal block with fluid transformations on a molecular level. This vision requires a relinquishing of the idea that a musician would even try to imitate birdsong. Music is not at all concerned with representation or figuration of a particular event. It is nevertheless certainly not devoid of content. To the contrary, the molecular level is posited to stand in reciprocal interplay with a wider gaze on the entire cosmos.

A Thousand Plateaus explicates on musical expression in music as inseparable from how living creatures reconfigure their identity, emotions, and situation in the world. For Deleuze and Guattari, anthropological rites de passage as birth and death are exemplary of rhythm, in the sense of transformation and transition between different states. They note how actual uses of music can guide and enable life rhythms, among them a child’s desire to comfort itself through singing or birds’ aspiration to stave off others from their own territory. On a conceptual level, regardless of actual music-making, Deleuze and Guattari posit ‘that the *refrain* is properly musical content, the block of content proper to music’ (2013, p. 349).

As noted above, Messiaen informs the view that a refrain carries a geographical hold on a territory. *A Thousand Plateaus* adds a threefold vision of an existential hold on reality: Music establishes a point of stability within chaos, provides a safe space around that point, but also opens these circles for future co-operation with cosmic forces (pp. 362–363). Territorialisation is thus central to the activity

between human beings should be regulated in this charming manner’. The last sentence is omitted in *A Thousand Plateaus* but fits readily with its rejection, on pp. 367–369, of the German ethologist Konrad Lorenz’s *On Aggression*.

inherent in the rhythmic work of refrains. Music is itself dependent on refrains for its existence, but music also entails a constant deterritorialisation, including both a possibility for change and an uprooting threat to life:

We are not at all saying that the refrain is the origin of music, or that music begins with it. It is not really known when music begins. The refrain is rather a means of preventing music, warding it off, or forgoing it. But music exists because the refrain exists also, because music takes up the refrain, lays hold of it as a content in a form of expression, because it forms a block with it in order to take it somewhere else. (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, p. 300)

This comprehensive theory of music and becoming goes far beyond Messiaen's interest and use of birdsong, at least on first sight. However, Deleuze and Guattari are true adherents to a modernist aesthetic in their conviction that both philosophical ideas and musical structures must be 'de-territorialised' from their original context, in order to give voice to otherwise imperceptible states in nature. Music, including birdsong, must first attain a distance from nature. Its power to seize territorial motifs and melodies and to set free their potential for transformation establishes new blocks or self-standing structures of rhythm and sound. Deleuze and Guattari regard birdsong as sonic blocks that have taken up a certain existential hold on a territory and now form a medium of encounter with other avian singers, ecological conditions and with being as such. This view relinquishes the identity often assumed in an aesthetics of expression. A stress on becoming in and through sound also questions Messiaen's understanding that a species has a common stable language of communication. As put in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

If the sound block has a becoming-animal as its content, then the animal simultaneously becomes, in sonority, something else, something absolute. (p. 354)

The theoretical nexus established between music, nature and becoming in this book provides an idiosyncratic vantage point to consider encounters between avian and human creativity. Deleuze and Guattari eschewed getting bogged down in debates surrounding Messiaen's own claim that he provided 'perfectly authentic' renderings of birdsong in his music.⁴¹ Beyond this rather infelicitous remark, the composer also pointed out the necessity for a different range of pitch and tempo in reworkings of birdsong, due to biological differences in the apperception of sound (Messiaen, 1994a, p. 95). In contrast to this technical discussion, *A Thousand Plateaus* stresses the impossibility of simple transcriptions, emphasising that singing is irreducibly interconnected with a bird's particular life and territory. On a level of principle, even intimations of imitation or representation of nature in music must be discarded. Rather, in the act of incorporating birdsong,

⁴¹ 'Tous ont été entendus en forêt et sont parfaitement authentiques. Les instruments essaieront donc de reproduire, autant que possible, les attaques et les timbres des oiseaux'. Olivier Messiaen, *Réveil des oiseaux* (pour Piano Solo et Orchestre), Partition d'Orchestre. Paris: Durand, 1953: 'Note' [unpaginated].

[t]he human musician is deterritorialized in the bird, but it is a bird that is itself deterritorialized, ‘transfigured’, a celestial bird that has just as much of a becoming as that which becomes with it. (p. 354)

Messiaen was himself transfigured by birdsong throughout the 1950s to some extent. A decisive turn towards nature opened a path to reconfigure his musical syntax, as an alternative to the negation of tonality in the most uncompromising phase of Boulezian modernism. Recent analyses reveal how the distinct *style oiseaux* that Messiaen developed throughout this decade entailed a possibility to conjoin serial techniques with prime numbers, rhythmic and melodic motifs from Greek metrics and plainchant (Cheong, 2007). Aspirations to recapture birds’ timbre also necessitated a more refined use of harmony as a sonic ‘colouring’ of melodies. Deleuze’s and Guattari’s philosophical framework illuminated essential aspects in Messiaen’s modus operandi before they were unravelled in musicological studies. The public release of sketchbooks of birdsong and findings in them how Messiaen partly worked from commercial recordings of American, Swiss and Swedish birds (*Radions fågelskivor*) have resulted in reconstructions of how original birdcalls were gradually transfigured into distinct passage in his works (Hill, 2013; Chadwick and Hill, 2018).

In a detailed study of the use of American recordings, Robert Fallon reveals how Messiaen often stayed close to pitches and to characteristic small-scale motifs in the song of a species. At the same time, he allowed them to establish new larger-scale sonic patterns:

The *style oiseau*, therefore, accurately conforms to its model at the level of the syllable and strophe, but not at the level of the song’s structure as a whole. (Fallon, 2007, p. 123)

Messiaen’s own procedures in composing birdsong echoes Boulez’s portrayal of a ‘Wagnerian’ modernism in that motifs are liberated from their original context and thereby form new musical structures. In retrospect, Deleuze’s and Guattari’s more conceptual than technical grasp of the encounter between avian and human music stands as a lasting testimony to their perceptive abilities. As a deterritorialized language, birdsong is regarded as ‘celestial’ and as a realm of autocreative rhythmic encounters between territories, birds and human musicians. *A Thousand Plateaus* shares a notable affinity with Messiaen’s own ‘surrealist’ approach to the representation of birdsong. Empirical exactitude is certainly important in this aesthetics, but as reconfigured by a theological conviction of birds as angelic creatures, situated on a fluid borderline between this world and a ‘virtual’ higher reality (Fallon, 2007; van Maas, 2013). Leaving theological aspects aside, such a virtual dimension exerts a notable influence when Deleuze and Guattari make use of other ideas from Messiaen to situate birdsong and its mode of becoming within a distinct theory of colour and landscapes.

Rhythmic characters in landscapes of colour

Building on the previous distinction between metre and rhythm, Deleuze and Guattari outline how different expressive qualities together form ‘territorial motifs’ and ‘territorial counterpoints’. The first aspect entails a freedom from pulsed temporalities. The latter establishes virtual points in a habitat and indicate a power of living creatures to influence their own geographical setting, as well as other agents and events within it (2013, p. 369).

At this stage in the argument, Deleuze and Guattari have managed to naturalise their theory of rhythm as a creative force that moves in between fixed parameters. Their next step adds the further notion of a melodic landscape, in a passage that builds on Boulez’s ‘Wagnerian’ modernism but also establishes new connections to Messiaen:

We should say, rather, that territorial motifs form rhythmic faces or characters, and that territorial counterpoints form melodic landscapes. There is a rhythmic character when we find that we no longer have the simple situation of a rhythm associated with a character, subject, or impulse. The rhythm itself is now the character in its entirety; as such, it may remain constant, or it may be augmented or diminished by the addition or subtraction of sounds or always increasing or decreasing durations, and by an amplification or elimination bringing death or resuscitation, appearance or disappearance. Similarly, the melodic landscape is no longer a melody associated with a landscape; the melody itself is a sonorous landscape in counterpoint to a virtual landscape. (2013, p. 370)

Once more, Deleuze and Guattari allude to Messiaen’s techniques of augmentation, additional note values and serial ordering of durations. The further notion of rhythmic characters brings in another conceptual link that plays a central role in Deleuze’s theory of painting. Already the IRCAM speech claimed that the individuation of a landscape, an event or a life cannot be reduced to a single subject matter or a certain form. Deleuze rather posited that a non-pulsed time attains musical individuation through three particular aspects: ‘*sound landscapes, audible colors and rhythmic character*’. In his writings on Wagner, Boulez had used the notion of landscape in a metaphorical way, but Deleuze went further and suggested that music ‘envelops a distinct sound landscape inside it’ (Deleuze, 2006, p. 159). The IRCAM talk also heeded Boulez’s description of how characters in Wagner operas are associated with certain motifs, which themselves become characters inside the music (Boulez, 1986, pp. 261, 264–265). The further connection to Messiaen’s ecological landscapes came later, together with an unequivocal recognition that Messiaen had coined the notion of rhythmic characters (*personnages*).

The work *Chronochromie*, through which Deleuze apparently became acquainted with Messiaen’s music, plays a central role in coupling the notions of landscapes and rhythmic characters. Speaking of interactions between landscapes and characters in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write:

An example is Messiaen's *Chronochromie*, with its eighteen bird songs forming autonomous rhythmic characters and simultaneously realizing an extraordinary landscape in complex counterpoint, with invented or implicit chords. (2013, p. 373)

The chords mentioned here are in fact a prime example of Messiaen's colouristic approach to harmony. Traditional tensions and harmonic functions here give way to a conscious painting in sound, building upon synaesthetic links between individual chords and experiences of different colours. The complex *Chronochromie* is arguably the most emblematic of Messiaen's endeavours to conjoin systematic rhythmic permutations, colour and use of birdsong, in order to create a sonic landscape in non-pulsed time and replete with counterpoint (Bauer, 2007).

Deleuze continued to elaborate on the triadic nexus of landscapes, colour and rhythmic characters in his *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (first published in 1981). At this time, Deleuze was under a manifest influence from Messiaen's exposition of rhythmic characters. Messiaen highlights how a rhythmic theme in music can undergo a gradual subtraction or addition of notes, causing it seemingly to die away or to gain force. Having found such techniques in Beethoven and in Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, Messiaen came to regard such processes anthropomorphically, as if the rhythms were characters in a drama. He associates expanding themes with aggressive forces and regards decreasing themes as passively subjected to the former, whereas a rhythmic group of constant note values functions as a neutral or attendant force.⁴²

The analogy between such rhythmic events and human characters is an imaginative invention by Messiaen, which Deleuze readily employed. Focusing on human figures in Bacon's painted triptychs, he theorises a circular movement, or a resonance of reciprocal sway, within their three parts. Deleuze witnesses what he calls a rhythmic interplay between the three paintings, situated on a higher level than melodic lines, points and counterpoints on the canvases. No less than in the ecological setting elucidated so far, he finds an emerging autonomy of expressive rhythm, in this case from the pictorial or representative dimension and its sensorial colouristic figurations. In Deleuze's own opinion, his analysis of what happens in Bacon's painting is 'exactly' what Messiaen articulated in relation to music:

Rhythm would cease to be attached to and dependent of a Figure: it is the rhythm itself that would become the Figure, that would constitute the Figure. (2005, p. 51)

Another articulation of the same point explicitly ties this transformation to the composer and his notion of rhythmic characters:

⁴² Deleuze duly notes Messiaen's analysis of such dramatic settings in Beethoven and Stravinsky and cites the composer at some length on the interplay within such an imagined play (Deleuze, 2005, pp. 51–52; cf. Messiaen, 1994a, pp. 70–71). Referring to Samuel's and Goléa's interviews with Messiaen, Deleuze deems rhythmic characters an 'essential notion', p. 132, n. 9. On Messiaen's concept of characters, see Healey, 2004.

But from the point of view of the Figure themselves, these are rhythms and nothing else, rhythms as in a piece of music, as in the music of Messiaen, which makes you hear 'rhythmic characters'. (2005, xiv)⁴³

As indicated in a conjoined reading of these excerpts and their place in the broader argument, Messiaen's concept of rhythmic characters exerted a significant influence on Deleuze's theory of painting. Indeed, a whole chapter in his book on Francis Bacon continues to elucidate on spatiality and the activity of figures with recourse to the composer's rhythmic techniques of augmentation and diminution, retrogradable rhythm, added note values and rhythmic characters (2005, pp. 53–60; cf. p. 132, n. 1). Deleuze saw a broader artistic potential in Messiaen's articulation of distinctively musical phenomena of rhythm and applied them in creative analyses of another medium of art.

Conclusion: Musical concepts beyond music

Deleuze's use of Messiaen ranges across a number of distinct and yet interrelated topics, as discussed throughout this article. A closer comparison than in previous studies reveals several texts on or by Messiaen that Deleuze (and Guattari) definitely had studied. A determinate impact from Messiaen's musical works is much more difficult to ascertain, apart from *Chronochronie*, which extended a lasting and constructive influence throughout Deleuze's writings. Messiaen obviously came to play diverse roles in relation to different topics. Deleuze's and Guattari's expositions on music in a rhizomatic model of thought recurrently cite his rhythmic techniques, but Messiaen remains a secondary figure, used to reinforce artistic ideals more readily applicable to Boulez and Cage. The authors' estimation of Messiaen in this area follows Boulez's evaluation of his teacher's serial techniques as a crucial but surpassed stage in the evolution of modernist music.

Deleuze's preference for non-pulsed time over fixed rhythmic patterns is fully in line with Messiaen's rhythmic endeavours. However, both of them work within a common and broader post-Bergsonian paradigm that extends to many other artists, including Boulez. The present analysis nevertheless shows *A Thousand Plateaus* to build directly on Messiaen in some political applications of this temporal polarity. A more significant theoretical influence from Messiaen begins with his cosmological vision of superimposed rhythms, used by Deleuze and Guattari in their elaboration of rhythms in nature. The two authors side with Messiaen against Boulez on a cultural geographic origin of rhythm that ties human and animal life alike to a territorial ground. In a transfer from ethology to social philosophy based on theories from von Uexküll, *A Thousand Plateaus* elaborates on the function of and expressivity in birdsong as an ecocritical vision of coexistence.

⁴³ This excerpt is drawn from Deleuze's preface to the first English edition, a text that draws heavily on Messiaen.

Messiaen's ornithology was instrumental in the evolution of the Deleuzian theory of signification that evolves out of discussions of birdsong. In spite of this initial concurrence, Deleuze and Guattari diverge from Messiaen's less perspicacious comments on authenticity in his creation of a distinct *style oiseau* in works from the 1950s. *A Thousand Plateaus* makes birdsong paradigmatic of a general deconstruction and reconstruction of artistic material. In doing so, Deleuze and Guattari shrewdly spotlighted central elements in Messiaen's techniques of transferring birdsong into a novel musical language before musicological analyses arrived at similar conclusions. Their primary intention was hardly to comment on Messiaen's works in themselves, but a keen philosophical sense for this artistic dynamic nevertheless illuminated his musical techniques in a surprisingly perceptive manner. A similar unexpected novel application is Deleuze's late transferral of Messiaen's notion of rhythmic characters to colour and figures in Bacon's paintings.

Enhanced insight into Deleuze's creative use of Messiaen call for discrimination of how Boulez's writings both determined this reception and facilitated openings for Deleuze's original appreciation of links between topics first articulated in Boulez's depiction of Wagner as a champion of musical modernism. An aspiration to observe how Deleuze actually appropriated traits and concepts from music comes to spotlight the centrality of Boulez's and Messiaen's writings to determine the reception of their artistic projects and to make them readily available for philosophical use. Indeed, Deleuze apparently relied so heavily on writings on music that the lack of references to sonic experiences of music prompts critical questions regarding to what degree his writings at all employ 'music' as food for philosophical thought. Awareness of this decisive conceptual element in the modernist canon that served as material for so many key musical concepts in Deleuze's writings itself rules out all too rigid contrasts between philosophical and artistic insights in further employments of his thought.

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Abstract

Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's celebrated work *A Thousand Plateaus* contains one of the most noteworthy philosophical employments of music from the twentieth century. Previous research has reconstructed how Deleuze imported musical concepts from Pierre Boulez into his thought, but analogous influences from Olivier Messiaen have been affirmed rather than investigated in detail. This article reconstructs the philosopher's reception of Messiaen's ideas on rhythm, a natural basis for music, birdsong and a colouristic dimension to sound. Working on the premise that a Boulezian modernism shaped Deleuze's general appreciation of music, the study takes off from the composer's portrayal of how themes in Wagner overturn prevalent structures and establish new modes of expression. Messiaen's role in *A Thousand Plateaus* and other Deleuzian writings confirms the centrality of this outlook, connected to rhizomatic ideals of continuous transition in all musical parameters. At the same time, Deleuze's reading of texts by and about the composer highlights ecological dimensions beyond Boulez's historiography of modernism. Despite scant attention to Messiaen's actual compositions, the philosopher's theoretical framework offers original perspectives on a virtual creativity at the heart of musical renderings of birdsong. The composer left a noteworthy imprint on Deleuze's affirmation of a certain artistic autonomy as a precondition for the power of music to render time and spaces audible.

Keywords: Gilles Deleuze, Olivier Messiaen, aesthetics, modernist music, musical time, rhythm, music and philosophy, Pierre Boulez, birdsong, ecology, colour, painting

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