

Program note from DVD *Thomas DeLio: space / image / word / sound II* (Neuma 450-202, 2016).

on **Thomas DeLio**

from *Traffic/Light: Post-Cage Discourses on Silence*

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John Cage, in a 1991 interview:

When I hear what we call "music," it seems to me that someone is talking: talking about his feelings or about his ideas, of relationships. But when I hear the sound of traffic here on 6th Avenue [in Manhattan], I don't have the feeling that anyone is talking. I have the feeling that sound is acting, and I love the activity of sound...I don't need sound to talk to me. (Cage 1991)

Thomas DeLio, in an interview with Tracy Wiggins:

For Cage, silence is the space in which all unintended sound comes into play... However, my sense of silence is different. Silence is like a location for the experience of sound. For me, it defines place with respect to sound. My silence frames sound, isolates it and creates an opportunity to hear sound both as an object—an entity unto itself divorced from its role as a mere unit of linguistic baggage—as well as part of a process of evolution. (Wiggins 2008, 212)

It is indisputable that John Cage's work has forced many musicians to address their relationship to silence; what might be more interesting is an examination of the function and importance of silence in the work of composers who ultimately use Cage as a landmark to define, in large part, where their work does not reside. Specifically, the work of Thomas DeLio makes up a significant part of this rich web of philosophy, influence, difference, and dialectic on the uses of silence in music, the effect of silence on memory, the use of musical silence as a means of control, and the responsibilities of listeners confronted with silence.

DeLio's work invites immediate comparison to Cage's late music (especially the time-bracket works) in its generous proportion of silence to sound, and in the terms in which DeLio discusses it. In his seminal essay "The Complexity of Experience," DeLio states that he "would like to be rid of gesture and process and get sound back 'clean'"; regarding his 1991 piece *between* for flute and percussion, DeLio lists his aesthetic objectives, which include "replac[ing] development and evolution with presentation," and

“rid[ding] sound of gesture” (DeLio 1993, 65-66). So far, so Cagean, but DeLio soon elucidates the differences between his approach and Cage’s, to wit: “I continue, of course, to use long silences and so place each sound event on a trajectory moving toward isolation.” (DeLio1993, 66) And furthermore:

Typically, my compositions are constructed from discrete segments of music which, though they coexist as a group, never become fixed with respect to one another through hierarchical relationships; in this respect my pieces are never organic. I strive for this condition in order to avoid as much as possible the expression of subjective priorities from which such hierarchies are engendered. In addition, I always try to avoid constructing transitions linking individual events. I avoid anything which might convey a sense of continuity and connection. I desire everything to be segmented, halted, separated. I have no interest in memory, which seems to me an illusion. Only the direct perception of the moment seems important to me. (DeLio 1993, 65-66)

This line of thought thoroughly pervades DeLio’s work. The third page of his 1992 piece *not* (for percussion and piano) illustrates these ideas as well as any other. The page provides notation for 21 seconds of the work. 16 of those seconds (the first system) contain sound: piano, vibraphone, and one chime note, all marked *ppp*. DeLio indicates that the initial group of instrumental attacks should be completed before five seconds pass; the next two attacks in the piano follow after approximately seven seconds of unpunctuated decay. The last five seconds of the page are silent; DeLio asks that all resonating instruments be dampened simultaneously at the end of the first system. Feldman’s influence is readily apparent in the choice of instruments and dynamic, as well as the generous time allowed for the enjoyment of the instruments’ decay—though it should be noted that while DeLio does acknowledge the deep influence that Feldman has had on his music, his music regularly uses the full conventional dynamic spectrum, as well as percussion instruments not normally associated with Feldman (such as claves, tom-toms, etc.).

What is most striking about this passage is the way that DeLio seems committed to actively managing the listener’s relationship to silence. As a post-Webern, post-Cage, post-Feldman composer, DeLio surely understands the conventionality of the first five seconds of this passage—its chromaticism, its texture, etc.—but it becomes something uniquely his only at the end of the first system, where the two piano attacks punctuate—nay, puncture!—that sonic decay, right before the whole is smothered. This is a passage written by a composer who is intently interested in demonstrating the gradations of near-silence that approach and meet silence, and who is willing to do so in near-finger-pointing fashion.

DeLio’s use of silence extends beyond microscopic textural moments such as this; he also uses carefully measured periods of silence as an element of structure, and this idea represents one of his most direct borrowings from Cage. A large number of Cage’s early works have structures governed by patterns of duration, and Cage notably observed that the primacy of duration as a musico-structural element is due to duration being the only parameter that silence shares with sound. DeLio’s works often have

structures governed by intersecting fields of sound and silence whose durations expand, contract, or remain constant with respect to each other, and he feels that the macroscopic actions of these fields growing, shrinking, interfering with and impinging upon one another is in large part what gives his compositions their internal energy.

An illuminating example of this is found in DeLio's recent work *et avant / image*, for nine percussionists and flute, premiered in February 2012 at the University of Akron (DeLio 2011). *et avant / image* is typical of DeLio's work in several ways: players are spatially located throughout the hall in and around the audience according to a specific scheme, the percussionists speak and whisper phonemes as well as fragments of text (in this case, Mallarmé, a common choice for DeLio), and percussion instruments are chosen to offer the composer sonic options along several spectra, including frequency, pitch-perceptibility, and bandwidth (narrow- to wide-band). The following three tables give the durations (in seconds) of alternating periods of sound and silence which have borders that are relatively easy to define; parentheses mark instances where it's hard to determine the precise starting moment of the silence in question. The flute plays only in Section II.

### Section I

Sound	3		5		4		4	
Silence		17		5		16		21

### Section II (with flute)

Sound	18		28		41	
Silence		7		7		7

### Section III

Sound	15		13		5		(9)		13		36		29
Silence		10		17		23		(24)		30		9	

It is easy to discern the general sound/silence character of each major section: Section I consists of four relatively short episodes of sound, alternating with periods of silence which, comparatively, are generally much longer; Section II inverts this relationship, alternating three significantly (and increasingly) longer periods of sound with brief periods of silence, each precisely the same length; Section III contains the most complex durational interplay between sound and silence. The methodology of

this formal scheme shares little with Cage's methodologies, but one is hard pressed to find a composer giving the same kind of hard thought to silence and durational structure as DeLio.

It would be simplistic, however, to describe any Cage-DeLio relationship as being purely oppositional: DeLio is an American who studied in America, teaches in America, and openly acknowledges his debt to Cage for just these things. In fact, Chris Shultis drafts DeLio onto Team Cage, as it were, in his excellent essay "The Dialectics of Experimentalism" (2008), which extends the 1950s Cage-Boulez binary opposition to the present day in the persons of DeLio and Brian Ferneyhough. For me, DeLio's music inhabits a space where modernist-postmodernist modes of thinking don't operate clearly: DeLio carefully crafts minutely detailed sound events, treating sound and silence as binary opposing forces, making ownership claims ("My silence frames sound"), using acoustic instruments to re-create the effects of electronic music a la Xenakis or Serocki, and otherwise doing just about everything I'd expect a European-trained modernist to do, but when he talks about where his music comes from, he stands pretty firmly in line with Cage. His is a rich musical landscape indeed.

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