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# Deconstructing voice

## Dekonstruirajoči glas

**Ključne besede:** glas, pisanje, dekonstrukcija, pharmakon, logos, Platon, Sveti Avguštin, cerkvena glasba

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### POVZETEK

Prispevek izhaja iz Derridajevega znamenitega spisa 'La pharmacie de Platon', enega rojstnih besedil dekonstrukcije. Po kratkem orisu Derridajevega izvajanja o fonocentrizmu in pharmakonu kot strupu in zdravilu obenem, avtor zavzema drugačno stališče glede odnosa med glasom in pisanjem. Če si natančneje pogledamo Platonovo pojmovanje glasbe, je mogoče razbrati, da Platon ne vidi nevarnosti samo v suplementarnosti pisanja, temveč tudi samega glasu. Glas, če se izogne primežu besede – če se izogne logosu –, ima skrajno nevarno lastnost, namreč da predstavlja čisto površinski užitek: grozi, da bo ublažil duha s svojo čutnostjo in mehkužnostjo, spodkopavajoč pri tem celotne družbene in npravne temelje. Tako se zdi, da analiza pharmakona v enaki, če ne celo večji meri velja za glas kakor za pisanje. Platonovim stopinjam je sledila dolga tradicija. V članku je obravnavan Sveti Avguštin, problematika glasu v cerkveni glasbi in predpisovanje glasbenih zadev po Platonovem receptu med francosko revolucijo.

### ABSTRACT

The paper takes its starting point in Derrida's famous essay 'Plato's Pharmacy', one of the birthplaces of deconstruction. After briefly delineating Derrida's argument about phonocentrism and the pharmakon as both the poison and the cure, it tries to argue for a different view about the relationship of voice and writing. If one takes a closer look at Plato's conception of music, one can see that Plato sees the danger not only in the supplementarity of writing, but also in the voice itself. The voice, if it strays away from the firm footing in the word, in logos, has the perilous property of presenting the pure frivolous enjoyment, it threatens to mollify the spirit by its sensuality and effemination and thus to undermine the very bases of social and moral structures. Thus it appears that the analysis of pharmakon can apply equally, or even more appropriately, to the voice as to writing. A long tradition followed in Plato's footsteps and the paper briefly examines St. Augustine, the problems that the voice presented for church music and finally the French

Tako so v tradiciji metafizike razumeli glas ne le kot jamstvo fonocentrizma in 'metafiziko navzočnosti', marveč so v njem videli tudi nevarno nižišče spodmikanja navzočnosti, ki logos sicer podpira, a ga obenem tudi ruši. Zgodovina glasbe izčrpno priča o inherentni nejasnosti samega glasu. Tako problem ni le dekonstruiranje glasu kot jamstva fonocentrizma, temveč tudi glas, ki dekonstruira navzočnost. Odtod izhaja dvoumnost naslova.

revolution, which tried to legislate in musical matters unwittingly following Plato's recipes. So throughout the metaphysical tradition the voice was not merely seen as the safeguard of phonocentrism and the 'metaphysics of presence', but presented also the perilous underside of dislocating the presence, not merely supporting the logos, but also dismantling it. The history of music massively testifies to the inherent ambiguity of the voice itself. So the problem is not just deconstructing the voice as the pledge of phonocentrism, but also of the voice being itself deconstructive of the presence. Hence the ambiguity of the title.

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The best place to start considering the problem of 'music and deconstruction' is perhaps one of the birthplaces of deconstruction, Derrida's famous essay "Plato's Pharmacy", first published in *Tel Quel* in 1968 and then reprinted in a modified version in his *Dissemination* in 1972. The essay, a close reading of Plato's *Phaedrus*, but also taking up larger issues of the Platonic enterprise as such, appeared a year after Derrida's grand *coup*, when in 1967 he published three books (among them the canonic *Of Grammatology*) and became overnight one of the greatest intellectual stars. It seemed that a new era was inaugurated, a new philosophical movement was launched, bearing the somewhat mysterious name of deconstruction, and looking back, after almost four decades, one can see that this was no mirage, not some vogue of the moment: what ensued was a vigorous intellectual movement which irreversibly changed our intellectual landscape, for better or worse, its consequences and effects, far from being confined to philosophy, quickly spread to a vast number of areas, including music, and so many years later no one, whether friend or foe, can ignore its import and its results.

The essay on Plato presented a crucial step in initiating this movement. The three books of 1967 offered a vast array of subjects and themes, ranging from the extensive analyses of Husserl and Rousseau to disparate topics of Saussure, Artaud, Lévinas, Descartes, Bataille, Lévi-Strauss, Freud etc., introducing a new view of what is rather massively called 'the metaphysical tradition'. Yet, it was only with the essay on Plato that the theme of metaphysics was taken head on, its later off-springs were related to its origin, the force and validity of the new theory were to be tested on the most paradigmatic metaphysical author who inaugurated it all. The birthplace of deconstruction had to overlap with the birthplace of metaphysics. What was called, in *Grammatology*, 'the era of Rousseau' now became extended into 'from Plato to Rousseau', the new reading of metaphysics could only become compelling if it could encompass both ends, and one can already recall that both authors delimiting the era had an intense and privileged relation to music, to the voice – hence the problem of 'music and deconstruction' was already encapsulated in this initial move.

This relation was no side-show and no coincidence, for the most striking and the most surprising feature of Derrida's new theory consisted in the extraordinary and rather baffling claim that metaphysics coincided with phonocentrism, that being phonocentric defined the core of its metaphysical nature. Phonocentric, centered on the voice, privileging the voice, and consequently demoting the writing, relegating it to a status of a secondary addition. This attitude, stemming first of all from a certain understanding of language, appears to be based on the most self-evident assumption: that the voice is the basic element of speech, its natural embodiment and consubstantial with it, whereas writing presents its derivative, auxiliary and parasitic supplement, being at the same time both secondary and dangerous – for the dead letter, derivative as it is, threatens to kill the spirit and to mortify the living voice.

If the entire metaphysical tradition 'spontaneously' and consistently espoused the priority of the voice over the letter, the reason for this was that it has seen an evident advantage of the voice: the voice always presented the hold in the living presence, the privileged point of auto-affectation and of self-transparency, as opposed to the externality and elusiveness of writing. The voice offered the illusion that one could get immediate access to an unalloyed present, an origin not tarnished by the exterior, a firm rock against the elusive interplay of signs which are anyway surrogates by their very nature and always point to an absence. Phonocentrism is 'the metaphysics of presence' – another Derridean term – since the writing and the trace threaten to truncate the presence and hence have to be conjured away. The dead letter disrupts the living voice, the supplement usurps its subsidiary place and can lure its way to the lead role. Writing is tele-communication, it addresses absent addressees and circulates in the absence of its author, whereas the voice is coextensive with presence, both the presence of interlocutors and the self-presence of the speaker. But the writing as a mere tool has the nasty tendency to affect the live presence of the voice for which it is but a stand-in, the mere supplement endangers the origin that it supplements. Ultimately, it is not just the writing in its positive and empirical appearance that is at stake, but more fundamentally the trace, the trace of alterity which has 'always already' sneaked into the purity of the origin and dislocated it. The secondary undermines the primary, and this is what metaphysics tries to avoid, or to disavow, at all costs. If metaphysics, in this rather massive view, is carried by the propensity to repudiate the part of alterity, the trace of the other, in order to hold on to some ultimate Meaning against the disruptive play of differences, to maintain the purity of the origin against supplementarity, then it can only do so by clinging to the privilege of the voice as a source of an originary self-presence. The divide between the interior and the exterior, the model of all other metaphysical divides, derives from there:

The voice is *heard* (understood) – that undoubtedly is what is called consciousness<sup>1</sup> – closest to the self as the absolute effacement of the signifier: pure auto-affectation that necessarily has the form of time which doesn't borrow from outside of itself, in the world or in 'reality', any accessory signifier, any substance of expression foreign to its own spontaneity. It is the unique experience of the signified producing itself spontaneously from within the self [...] (Derrida 1976: 20; 1967: 33)

This illusion – the illusion *par excellence* – is thus constitutive of interiority, of consciousness, of the self and of autonomy. The double sense of the French *entendre*, which means 'to hear' as well as 'to understand', points to the direct link between hearing the voice and the ori-

<sup>1</sup> The French *la conscience* can mean both 'consciousness' and 'conscience'. I think it is quite obvious that what is meant in this context is 'consciousness', not 'conscience', as the English translation has it.

gin of conceptuality, between vocality and ideality. *S'entendre parler* – to hear oneself speak – would thus be the minimal definition of consciousness, and the voice would thus be intimately and intrinsically linked to the whole panoply of metaphysical concepts – being, time, subjectivity, interiority to start with.

This is the gist of Derrida's initial argument in a very compressed form. What better showcase for this argument could one wish for than Plato's own treatment of writing in *Phaedrus*, at the dawn of metaphysics? One can find there, put into the mouth of Socrates – of the man who never wrote a single line – the myth of the origin of writing which in Plato's hands turns into a trial against writing. Writing, so the story goes, was presented by the Egyptian divinity Theuth to the king Thamus, as a *pharmakon* – a remedy, “a potion for memory and for wisdom” (*Phaedrus* 274e). But the king, in this inaugural scene, turns down this gift:

[Writing] will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which is external and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own. You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. (275a)

Everything is already there: the externality of writing, its opposition to the real memory, the living memory of the soul, its introduction of appearance and of false knowledge, its connection with sophistry, its incompatibility with truth, its mechanical repetition, its artificiality opposed to the true internal nature. The moment one enters its realm one is surrounded by simulacra, copies, semblances, doubles, it is a prosthesis which denatures the nature, a mnemotechnical device which doesn't help memory, but dismembers it, a mere gadget, but which has dire consequences for the purity of origin. So the remedy turns out to be the poison, and the semantics of *pharmakon* is the oscillation between the two. Writing has no essence, it is a mere externality and artificiality, but which has the vicious property of perturbing the true order of things and reversing the natural hierarchy. *Pharmakon* is anti-eidos. Yet, the true knowledge of ideas, of eidos, has to rely, crucially, on the possibility of their ideal iterativity, the possibility of their repetition as the same, they can only be transmitted as repeatable, and this is the basis of both *anamnesis* and *maieutics*, the two quintessential Platonic operations: the true remembrance as opposed to its fake. Indeed, the bad writing has to be opposed to the good one:

Now tell me, can we discern another kind of discourse, a legitimate brother of this one? Can we say how it comes about, and how it is by nature better and more capable? / Which one is that? How do you think it comes about? / It is a discourse that is written down, with knowledge, in the soul of the listener; it can defend itself, and it knows for whom it should speak and for whom it should remain silent. (276a)

So there is the bad writing, which spoils the ideality and taints the interior, but there is a good writing on which the ideality and the interior depend – the writing in the soul, the writing on which eidos depends and which makes it possible at all. So Plato's problem would ultimately be how to distinguish between the good and the bad writing, and how to retain the good part without the pernicious effects of the bad part. Impossible endeavour, in Derrida's view: one cannot keep the one and get rid of the other, they are the same, the same *pharmakon* which shows itself alternately as the remedy and the poison, but in itself

it has no consistence, it is precisely what makes the one turn over into the other. One cannot eat the metaphysical cake and have it.

Let us say that we provisionally grant this point to Derrida. Various objections could be raised also on this level, it is true, but this is not what I wish to argue about. My concern is the opposite end: the place, the role and the value of the voice and music in this story. For it follows from Derrida's account that the role of *pharmakon* is reserved to writing, the impossibility of getting rid of its pernicious side – but the best way of doing this, the best method of metaphysical disavowal, is phonocentrism. Writing is the danger, and voice is the defence: this is how metaphysics perceives things, and this is what makes it phonocentric, prey to the constitutive illusion.

But this is not how things happen at all in Plato. There is another story to be told, both concerning Plato and the metaphysical tradition. There exists a different metaphysical history of voice, where the voice itself, far from being the safeguard of presence, was considered as something dangerous, threatening and possibly ruinous. There is a history of the voice receiving a metaphysical vote of no confidence. Not just writing, but also the voice can appear as a formidable menace to metaphysical consistency and can be seen as disruptive of presence and sense. This is not the story of the voice sustaining the logos, but rather the story of the dichotomy of voice and logos. The particular place where one can look for that is precisely in the philosophical treatments of music. This is displayed at the most poignant in relation to the voice.

Let us consider this passage from Plato's *Republic*:

A change to a new type of music is something to beware of as a hazard of all our fortunes. For the modes of music are never disturbed without unsettling of the most fundamental political and social conventions [...]. It is here, then, I said, that our guardians must build their guardhouse and post of watch. / It is certain, he said, that this is the kind of lawlessness that easily insinuates itself unobserved. / Yes, said I, because it is supposed to be only a form of play and to work no harm. / Nor does it work any, he said, except that by gradual infiltration it softly overflows upon the characters and pursuits of men and from these issues forth grown greater to attack their business dealings, and from these relations it proceeds against the laws and the constitution with wanton license, Socrates, till finally it overthrows all things public and private. (*Republic* IV, 424c-e)

To say the least, music is no laughing matter. It cannot be taken lightly, but has to be treated with the greatest philosophical concern and utmost vigilance. It is a texture so fundamental that any license inevitably produces general decadence, it undermines the social fabric, its laws and mores, and threatens the very ontological order. For one must assign an ontological status to music: it holds the key to a harmony between 'nature' and 'culture', the natural and the man-made law.<sup>2</sup> Should one interfere with that sphere, everything is put into question and the foundations are truncated. Decadence starts with musical decadence: in the beginning, in the great times of origin, music was regulated by law and was one with it, but soon things got out of hand:

Afterward, in course of time, an unmusical license set in with the appearance of poets who were men of native genius, but ignorant of what is right and legitimate in the realm of the-

<sup>2</sup> This is also why music is treated in a very different way from painting, which poses interminable problems of imitation, copies, mimesis etc. The best guide in this matter is still Moutsopoulos (1959), to my knowledge unsurpassed in almost half a century since its first publication.

Muses. Possessed by a frantic and unhallowed lust for pleasure, they [...] created a universal confusion of forms. Thus their folly led them unintentionally to slander their profession by the assumption that in music there is no such thing as a right and a wrong, the right standard of judgment being the pleasure given to the hearer, be he high or low. (*Laws* III, 700d-e)

Once one blasphemously gives way to pleasure as the standard (“It is commonly said that the standard of rightness in music is its pleasure-giving effect. That, however, is an intolerable sentiment; in fact, ‘tis a piece of flat blasphemy.” (*Laws* II, 655d), once one has refused to comply with the law in music, there is no end to insidious consequences – impudence, moral disintegration, the collapse of all social bonds.

So the next stage of the journey toward liberty will be refusal to submit to the magistrates, and on this will follow emancipation from the authority and correction of parents and elders; then, as the goal of the race is approached, comes the effort to escape obedience to the law, and, when that goal is all but reached, contempt for oaths, for the plighted word, and all religion. The spectacle of the Titanic nature of which our old legends speak is re-enacted; man returns to the old condition of a hell of unending misery. (*Laws* III, 701b-c)

In order to prevent this truly apocalyptic vision – the end of civilization, a return to chaos initiated by innocuous looking changes in musical forms – one has to impose a firm regimentation of musical matters. The first rule, the prime antidote for combating the monster, is this: “The music and the rhythm must follow the speech” (*Republic* III, 398d; and again 400d). Music, and in particular the voice, shouldn’t stray away from words which endow it with sense; as soon as it departs from its discursive anchorage, the voice becomes senseless and threatening, all the more so because of its seductive and intoxicating powers. For the core of the danger is a voice that sets itself loose from the word, the voice beyond logos, the lawless voice.

Other prescriptions follow. One must proscribe the modes that mollify the soul or induce laxity – the “dirgelike” mixed Lydian, the higher Lydian (“for they are useless even to women who are to make the best of themselves, let alone to men”, *Republic* 398e) as well as the Ionian. One must retain those fit for men, both for warriors and for manly modesty and moderation – the Dorian and the Phrygian.<sup>3</sup> The sexual division seems to run through music (and this will continue to our day with the sexual connotations of major and minor tonalities, *durus* and *molli*s).<sup>4</sup> Even more: music, as the voice beyond sense, is self-evidently equated with femininity, whereas the word, the instance of signification, is in this simple paradigmatic opposition on the side of masculinity.<sup>5</sup>

In a further consequence, one must also ban the polyharmonic instruments that permit the free transitions among the modes, the ‘modulations’, and in particular the flute, “the most many-stringed of instruments” (399d). There is in fact another, simpler and more compelling reason for that: one cannot utter the words while playing the flute. The wind instruments have the vicious property: they emancipate themselves from the text, they act as substitutes for the voice, they isolate the voice beyond words. No wonder that Dionysus has chosen the flute

<sup>3</sup> For Aristotle’s analogous views on the modes cf. *Politics* VIII, 1340b. Yet, a bit further (1342b 2-7) he takes issue with that particular passage in the *Republic* concerning the Phrygian mode.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. also: “It will further be necessary to make a rough general distinction between two types of songs, those suited for females and those suited for males, and so we shall have to provide both with their appropriate scales and rhythms; it would be a dreadful thing that the whole tune or rhythm of a composition should be out of place, as it will be if our various songs are inappropriately treated in these respects.” (*Laws* VII, 802e)

<sup>5</sup> Some four thousand years later, Wagner will write in a famous letter to Liszt: “*Die Musik ist ein Weib*”, music is a woman.

as his preferred instrument (cf. also Pan's pipes, not to mention the mythical connections of the flute with Gorgon, while Apollo has decided on the lyre. "We are not innovating, my friend, in preferring Apollo and the instruments of Apollo to Marsyas and his instruments." (399e) (This is an instance which fits the English phrase 'the masterpiece of understatement', for as the story goes Apollo actually flayed the satyr Marsyas alive after he lost the musical contest with the god; the precedence of lyre over flute was a very bloody affair.)<sup>6</sup>

And no wonder that the flute is fit for women:

I would like to make a further motion: let us dispense with the flute-girl who just made her entrance; let her play for herself or, if she prefers, for the women in the house. Let us instead spend our evening in conversation. (*Symposium*, 176e)

The flute is played by a girl and her proper audience are women (and it seems there is but a quick slide which leads from flute to questionable virtue), while men will engage in philosophy.

This view of the flute will also be endorsed by Aristotle:

And there is a further objection [to the flute]: the impediment which the flute presents to the use of the voice detracts from its educational value. The ancients therefore were right in forbidding the flute to youths and freemen, although they had once allowed it. (*Politics* VIII, 1341a 23-7) [...] Bacchic frenzy and all similar emotions are most suitably expressed by the flute [...] (1342b 5-6)

But back to Plato. It seems that both lie in music – the best remedy and the ultimate danger, the cure and the poison. Sounds familiar? This is the point where it seems that the whole of Derrida's analysis of *pharmakon* can be curiously applied to the voice just as much as to writing. Even more so, for the voice is endowed with the sensual fatal attraction, with femininity and enjoyment, whereas writing lacks the immediate imaginary appeal and is rather met with suspicion. Wouldn't the voice be thus the ultimate *pharmakon*? Apart from its ruinous effects it is also presented as the best cure and antidote:

Education in music is most sovereign, because more than anything else rhythm and harmony find their way to the inmost soul and take strongest hold upon it, bringing with them and imparting grace, if one is rightly trained, and otherwise the contrary [...] (*Republic* III, 401d-e)

So the crucial question is how to strike a balance between its beneficial and dangerous effects, where to draw a line between redemption and catastrophe:

Now when a man abandons himself to music, to play upon him and pour into his soul as it were through the funnel of his ears those sweet, soft, and dirgelike airs [...] and gives his entire time to the warblings and blandishments of song, the first result is that the principle of high spirit, if he had it, is softened like iron and is made useful instead of useless and brittle. But when he continues the practice without remission and is spellbound, the effect begins to be that he melts and liquefies till he completely dissolves away his spirit, cuts out

<sup>6</sup> According to one version of the myth the contest was at first undecided, the Muses, who acted as referees, were equally charmed by Apollo's lyre and by Marsyas' flute. This is when the god challenged his opponent to both play and sing at the same time, which Marsyas couldn't do, and which literally cost him his skin.

as it were the very sinews of his soul and makes of himself a 'feeble warrior'. (*Republic* III, 411a-b)<sup>7</sup>

So how can one hope to achieve the right measure with this dangerous sort of enjoyment? Up to a point, music is sublime and elevates the spirit; from a certain limit, however, it brings about decay, the decline of all spiritual faculties, their disintegration in enjoyment. Where shall one stop? Can the philosopher set a limit to this unbounded, limitless enjoyment? Can he keep the cure without introducing the fatal poison?

This ambiguity is by no means confined to Plato, it is not his specific concern. It may well be that it originates at this birthplace of metaphysics – one is tempted to say 'the birth of metaphysics out of the spirit of music' – but it has very much defined the whole era. Let us jump a millennium, or almost, and open Augustine's *Confessions*, book X, 33. There we read the following striking meditation about "sinning by the ear":

Now, in those melodies [*sonis*] which Thy words breathe soul into, when sung with a sweet and attuned voice, I do a little repose. [...] But with the words which are their life and whereby they find admission into me, themselves [sc. melodies, *soni*] seek in my affections a place of some estimation, and I can scarcely assign them one suitable. For at one time I seem to myself to give them more honor than is seemly [*deceŕ*], feeling our minds to be more holily and fervently raised unto a flame of devotion, by the holy words themselves when thus sung, than when not; and that the several affections of our spirit, by a sweet variety, have their own proper measures in the voice and singing, by some hidden correspondence wherewith they are stirred up. But this contentment of the flesh, to which the soul must not be given over to be enervated, doth oft beguile me, the sense not so waiting upon reason, as patiently to follow her; but having been admitted merely for her sake, it strives even to run before her, and lead her.

We can't be surprised by now to find again the voice as the paramount source of danger and decay. Also the remedy is familiar: stick to the Word, the word of God, make sure the word maintains the upper hand and thus be rid of the voice beyond the word, the unbounded voice. So Athanasius acted most wisely when prescribing that the psalms should be sung "with so slight inflection of voice that it was nearer speaking than singing." Shouldn't singing be rather banned to avoid the ambiguity?

When I remember the tears I shed at the Psalmody of Thy Church, in the beginning of my recovered faith; and how at this time, I am moved, not with the singing, but with the things sung, when they are sung with a clear voice and modulation most suitable [*cum liquida voce et convenientissima modulatione*], I acknowledge the great use of this institution. Thus I fluctuate between peril of pleasure, and approved wholesomeness; [...] by the delight of the ears, the weaker minds may rise to the feeling of devotion. Yet when it befalls me to be more moved with the voice than the words sung, I confess to have sinned penally, and then had rather not hear music.

Again, it is a question of the limit, the impossible good measure, for music is both what elevates the soul to divinity, and a sin, *delectatio carnis*. It presents carnality at its most insid-

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle will have to deal with the same problem. The liberal studies, with music in the highest place of honor, are quintessential to education, they are "proper for a freeman to acquire, but only in a certain degree, and if he attend to them too closely, in order to attain perfection in them, the evil effects will follow." (*Politics* VIII, 1337b 15-7) Curiously, most of the Book VIII of *Politics* is devoted to music as a means of education.



ious since in music it seems liberated from materiality; the voice is the subtlest and the most perfidious form of the flesh.

The oscillation of St. Augustine defines very well the bulk of what was to happen in the next thousand years and more in the troubled and intricate relationship of the Church to music.<sup>8</sup> The main problem that kept emerging with an uncanny perseverance was that of regimentation and codification of sacral music which ultimately always took the form of confining the voice to the letter, the Holy Scripture. But whatever the attempted regulations, there was always a crack, a loop-hole, a rest that kept recurring, a remnant of a highly ambiguous enjoyment. It could take e. g. the form of *iubilus*, the space allotted to Alleluia, where the general principle of one syllable to one note was omitted and where the mere voice could take over in its own jubilation, the melisma without a support. In a curious development, the notes without words were later underpinned with new words and whole sequences, thus threatening with heretical intrusions into the Text. But isn't *iubilus*, although perilous, at the same time also the most appropriate way to praise God? Augustine himself says so: the jubilation expresses what cannot be expressed by words, the singers are so overwhelmed with joy that they abandon words and give way to their heart. "*Et quem decet ista iubilatio, nisi ineffabilem deum?*" ("And to whom does this jubilation pertain, if not to the ineffable God?") Quoted in O'Donnell's commentary of *Confessions*, 1992, vol. III, pp. 218-9). So it is only the pure voice beyond words that matches the ineffability of God. But then, can we ever be sure that it is really God that we are praising?

One can follow the same predicament with the enormous problems posed by the introduction of polyphony, since when several voices sing at the same time and follow their own melodic lines, the text becomes unintelligible. We see it again in the battle against chromatics, since the semi-tones threaten to undermine the harmonic structure and introduce the mollification of the spirit, the proscribed enjoyment. Each new musical invention had devastating effects and was immediately seen, in a very Platonic manner, as a way to moral ruin. Pope John XXII had to issue a curious decree concerning music, *Docta sanctorum Patrum*, in 1324, trying to put things in order, but to no avail. The Trent Council, in the sixteenth century, had to toil with the same problem and commended the same antidote of intelligibility vs. voice: *in tono intelligibili, intelligibili voce, voce clara, cantu intelligibili ...* (cf. Poizat 1991: 144-5). All the documents seem to have been written by the same hand and guided by the same single obsession: to pin down the voice to the letter, to limit its disruptive force, to dissipate its inherent ambiguity. And once the new musical devices, such as chromatics and polyphony, were espoused, once it was accepted that they can have beneficial spiritual effects and can be put to use, there were already new monsters lurking behind the corner, new wars had to be launched against each new invention.

Not everything fitted within this monotonous picture. Some mystical currents proposed an astonishing reversal of this massive paradigm: music is the only appropriate way to God since it is aiming precisely at the God beyond the word. It is a way to a limitless and ineffable being, a quality that Augustine was already aware of. But if God is the musical principle *par excellence* and the divine word attains its true dimension only in the singing voice, then the radical consequence could follow that the mere word belongs to the devil. This extreme conclusion was indeed drawn by Hildegard of Bingen, the famous twelfth century abbess, who – beside her philosophical preoccupations and conferring with some of the most illustrious men of her time – largely devoted her time to composing, which secured her place as a great figure in the

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed account of that cf. Poizat's remarkable book on sacral music, *La Voix du diable* (1991). I draw a lot of information in this section from this source.

history of music, and a woman at that, a highly rare occurrence in musical history (which has lately turned her into a rather fashionable figure). In *Ordo virtutum*, a musical morality play, we have the story of a soul being tempted by the devil and rescued by the virtues – virtues personified, and of course singing. In a most curious *tour de force*, the devil is the only masculine and the only speaking role, being confined just to words, to mere ‘logos’. An inherently non-musical creature, the devil is the devil because he cannot sing. (One might add: no wonder that his temptations couldn’t amount to much.) Of course the Church was bound to be doubtful and worried – the synod in Trier, in 1147, almost condemned her as heretic, wondering whether her visions were to be assigned to the devil rather than to God. Is the voice that she hears and writes down really the voice of God? Is there a way to tell? It took the authority of Bernard of Clairvaux to rescue Hildegard.

The question that was raised finally boiled down to this: does music come from God or from the devil? For what is beyond the word announces both the supreme elevation and the vilest damnation. What raises our souls to God makes God ambiguous; beyond the word one cannot tell apart God from the devil. Music may well be the element of spiritual elevation beyond worldliness and representation, but it also introduces, for that very reason, the indomitable and senseless enjoyment beyond the more tractable sensual pleasures. There is no assurance or transparency to be found in the voice, quite the contrary, the voice undermines any certainty and any establishment of a firm sense. The voice is boundless, warrantless, and – no coincidence – on the side of woman. But if it introduces this fatal ambivalence, then the only consistent course would be to ban church music altogether – and indeed, this radical conclusion in the opposite extreme was drawn by the Puritans: for fifteen years, from 1645 to 1660, the time of Cromwell, music was banned from the Anglican Church, music books and sheets were burned and organs demolished as “the devil’s pipes” (cf. Poizat 1991: 44). God was restored to the Word, and to silence.

Let me finish this ‘brief history of metaphysics’ with the French revolution, although many more detours should be taken into account and many more authors examined – in particular I am leaving aside the case of Rousseau whose complexity would demand a much more extensive treatment. At the height of the victorious Revolution, somebody had the brilliant idea to create, in 1793, the *Institut national de la musique*, an institution through which the State would now take care of music in the best interest of the people. François-Joseph Gossec, who was in charge of the project, has duly written in a programmatic text that its goal should be to promote music “which would support and animate the energy of the defenders of equality and to prohibit music which mollifies the French soul by its effeminate sounds in the salons and in the temples consecrated to imposture” (quoted by Attali 1977: 111). Music has to be drawn out of the courts, churches and concert halls, it has to be performed in the open air, accessible to everyone; the melodies should be such that the people can sing along, not the pompous and pretentious artifices which only serve the degenerate. Gossec himself entered music history as the initiator of the mass choir singing and one of the first composers for brass orchestras. Musicians should become state employees, not dependent on the generosity of the rich, and the whole musical enterprise should be well planned and organized from above.<sup>9</sup>

So the tables could be reversed and the same weapons could be turned against the Church, now seen as the major agent of the voice against the sense. But the defenders of reason were

<sup>9</sup> François-Joseph Gossec (1734-1829) acquired his musical knowledge and some glory as a court composer. In 1766 he became *intendant de la musique* of prince Condé and in 1774 *maître de musique* at the Royal Academy, then the founder and the first director of *École royale de chant*. After the revolution he was the music inspector and one of the principal holders of musical authority in France for a quarter of a century. In 1816, after the downfall of Napoleon and the restoration, he was summarily sacked for his allegiance to revolutionary ideas, so he died in great poverty and entirely forgotten. Among his numerous works one can find e. g. *Hymne a Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, *Hymne a l'Être Suprême*, *Hymne a la liberté*, *Chant du 14 juillet*, etc. His *Requiem* is still sometimes performed, and is actually not bad at all.

for once unwittingly in perfect accord with their enemies, the senseless and effeminate voice was equally dangerous to both. It is highly indicative that one of the first decrees of the Revolution was the prohibition of public singing of castrati, who became the emblematic and monstrous figure-heads of the perversity and corruption of the *ancien régime*, the embodiments of its degenerate enjoyment epitomized by the voice.<sup>10</sup> They were not only the heroes of the baroque and classical opera (up to and including Mozart), but also the figure-heads of the Catholic music, their cradle and sanctuary was the Sistine Chapel, the core of perversity at the very heart of the Church.

One can draw, from this brief and necessarily schematic survey, the tentative conclusion that the history of 'logocentrism' doesn't go hand in hand with 'phonocentrism' at all, that there is a dimension of the voice which runs counter to self-transparency, sense and presence: the voice against the logos, the voice as the other of logos, its radical alterity. Metaphysics has always been very well aware of that, as we have seen, compulsively clinging to a simple exorcising formula, repeating it over and over again, compelled by the same invisible hand throughout millennia. Maybe what defined it as metaphysics was not just the demotion of writing, but in the same gesture the banishment of the voice. The phonocentric voice was just one part of the story, presenting the illusory pledge of the presence, reduction of its inherent ambivalence and its part of alterity. But the voice renders the presence doubtful the moment the anchorage in sense is eluded, and it is not only writing, but even more the voice which makes logos utterly ambiguous.

The victory of the Enlightenment brought about also the end of the great metaphysical tradition, which breathed its last sigh with Hegel. But when the nineteenth century brought about the theme of finding the way out of metaphysics, of the critique of metaphysics, this was done, in some of its philosophical ramifications, precisely and most tellingly under the banner of music. Think of Schopenhauer, think of Nietzsche, who both relied on music as the alterity of logos in their search for other ways of thinking.

Music and deconstruction: curiously, as we have seen, music is most intimately linked with the very possibility of deconstruction. Derrida's view was oddly biased, when he set the basic opposition between phonocentrism and *différance*, between the voice and the writing, the presence and the trace, where the first was always seen as the disavowal of the second. But the voice, as it turns out, is no less dangerous than the writing, if anything it is more insidious, for its hold in presence and in interiority makes it disruptive from within, while the external danger of writing threatens to invade the pure interiority from the outside. There is a moment of deconstructive dislocation already in the voice itself precisely when it strays away from the word. It doesn't need the letter, or the trace of otherhood, to stray away, it does so as if by its own immanent pull. The voice is more of a *pharmakon* than writing, by Derrida's own standards. It is not the interplay of signs which dismantles the illusion of the voice/presence, since the voice is threatening precisely where it is not a sign, where it presents itself as a non-signifying voice. Or put another way: voice is not a supplement, the two logics are not symmetrical, the voice is rather something menacing to be perverted in itself and by itself, if it doesn't get a footing in logos, i. e. in a scripture, a word, a letter, a sign. The danger of the voice doesn't stem from some supplementary, auxiliary, derivative entity which would then invade that to which it was supposed to be a mere supplement; it is rather that the voice needs the supple

<sup>10</sup> I cannot venture here into the fascinating realm of the history of castrati, their rise within the Catholic church in the sixteenth century, their quasi angel-like demeanour which seemingly dissociates the enjoyment of the voice from sex, their massive presence in the opera, their incredible vogue that lasted some three centuries, their gradual decline until they were confined to the Sistine Chapel, finally their banishment, only in 1903, by the Pope Leo XIII. They illustrate the ambiguous deconstructive nature of the voice in the most immediate way – angle-like, divine, denatured, perverse, all in one. The best accounts of their history so far are probably Patrick Barbier, *Histoire des castrats* (Paris 1989: Grasset), and Hubert Ortkemper, *Engel wider Willen* (Berlin 1993: Henschel).

ment of the letter so as not to get perverted on its own. It is as if the voice was its own deconstruction, it detains both the key to the presence and to its impossibility. So isn't phonocentrism then centered on something that is endowed with a deconstructive force greater than writing? (Hence the ambiguity of the title, where the voice can be read as either the object or the subject of deconstruction: Derrida's endeavour is to deconstruct the phonocentric voice, while it appears that the voice itself is deconstructing.)

But one shouldn't fall prey to the illusion that the voice pertains to nature (pure sensuality, linked to femininity etc.), some indomitable precultural force that would need to be tamed by logos. The trouble is rather that the voice is itself the product of culture from the very outset, coextensive with logos, the result of the signifying cut, not some natural substance or propensity; it is the voice pertaining to logos itself.<sup>11</sup> Its intoxicating and seductive magic is the cure and the poison inherent to culture itself. It seems that the safeguard against the double danger of writing on the one hand, and the voice on the other, was the metaphysical endeavour to match them, to hold on to the area of their overlapping which would secure a firm footing of sense, a vocal logos, a structured voice. But can they ever match? Can they overlap? Isn't their missed encounter the source of all trouble? And isn't their impossible match the stuff that music is made of, appearing as it did both as the pledge of highest sense, the sense beyond all words, and as the meaningless and dangerous enjoyment?

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<sup>11</sup> "Music exists only for a speaking being", as Baas (1998: 196) has very well put it.