Hierarchies in New Music: Composers, Performers, and 'Works'

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Several years ago, I played a contemporary chamber work with two very different groups of players. The groups approached the music in quite distinct ways: one was intense, impassioned, driven, the other more relaxed, elegant, easily flowing (in both cases these are of course crude generalisations). I happened to mention what I had been playing to a few festival and concert directors I was meeting around that time, who immediately asked me 'which did I prefer?' If either of these groups had been performing this or another work with two different pianists, group members would doubtless have been asked the same question. I could not honestly say I had a clear preference for either: both brought out different possibilities from the notated score, both involved quite individual creative responses to that score (note that at this point I am avoiding saying 'both brought out different aspects of the music', because I believe 'the music', independently of performance, is a problematic concept). New music would be the poorer, in my opinion, without either approach, and probably many others as well.

But the questions about preferences seemed loaded in a different way: with a performance of new music (at least that which is by and large 'fully notated' and does not involve any high degree of performance indeterminacy or improvisation[1]), if two performers or groups of performers take different approaches, then one of these must be more 'right' and the other more 'wrong'. Of course it is also possible, by these terms, that both could be quite 'wrong', and the 'right' performance remains elusive. This touches upon some fundamental assumptions concerning a lot of new music, which remain remarkably unquestioned by many of those involved in that field, whether as composers, performers, artistic directors, critics, or even in many cases musicologists writing on that area (despite the fact that other musicologists have unpacked many of these elsewhere).

These assumptions derive from certain strains of thought which came to fruition during the nineteenth-century, which broadly maintain that the ultimate source of

[1] A different situation obviously applies with, for example, the graphic scores of Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, Sylvano Bussotti or Cornelius Cardew, or the text works of Dieter Schnebel, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Christian Wolff, which should be considered apart from the considerations here, though I believe my alternative model of notation can encompass these.

authority lies with the composer, who creates a musical 'work'; something which exists as an abstract ideal, independently of specific realisations in performance. In its strongest form, this conception says that the task of the performer(s) is not to add anything extraneous to the work, but somehow to illuminate aspects of this idealised conception to the best of their ability. There are various established schools of thought on how this might be done, involving different attitudes towards the role and status of the text. One view (which I would label 'literalist'[2]) maintains that the performer (or multiple performers) should try to execute the text as 'exactly' as possible, and that will provide most of what is necessary. Another (which I call 'scholarly') says that such execution must also be informed by intense investigation of the exact notational conventions employed and all other information pertaining to the composer's intentions (gleaned from known verbal remarks or writings on the matter, or more general information about their performance preferences in general). Another (which I call 'analytic/aesthetic') would say that the performer must penetrate those aspects of the music which lie beneath the surface and might be accessed by analysis, deeper knowledge of the composer's aesthetic, philosophical and other concerns, and so on. Yet another (which I call 'mainstream') holds that on top of the 'exact' approach, the task of the performer is to make the work sound 'musical' or 'like a real piece of music'; a quality usually presented in a vague and nebulous fashion, but which upon interrogation, is said to consist of making 'musical' aspects of phrasing, rhythm, voicing, continuity of line, and other such things. How exactly this is to be done is rarely specified in any more detailed fashion.[3]

Each of these positions concur to varying degrees with the concept which came to fruition in music and theatre in the mid- to late-19th century (though its origins were earlier) of *Werktreue*, literally 'faithfulness to the work'. This was especially associated with performers such as Joseph Joachim or Clara Schumann.[4] The pianist Alfred Brendel has suggested[5] that the term *Texttreue* might be more appropriate for what I term 'literalist', and perhaps also 'scholarly' approaches, but this is primarily a question of where and how the 'work' is to be found (as in a letter from Liszt to Richard Pohl in the 1850s insisting upon the primacy of the 'spirit' rather than 'letter'

[2] All these terms are imperfect approximations for attitudes which can be more nuanced than in the archetypal form I present them here.
[3] This latter position can be found in many of the essays and interviews in two collections on contemporary performance, Marilyn Nonken (ed), *Performers on Performing*, in *Contemporary Music Review*, Vol. 21 Part 1 (2002), and Barrie Webb (ed), *Contemporary Performance*, in *Contemporary Music Review*, Vol. 28 Part 2 (2007).
[4] See Angelika App, 'Die „Werktreue" bei Clara Schumann', in Peter Ackermann and Herbert Schneider (eds), *Clara Schumann: Komponistin, Interpretin, Unternehmerin, Ikone* (Hildesheim, Zürch & New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1999), pp. 9-18. On Joachim's aesthetics of performance, the most comprehensive guide is Beatrix Borchard, *Stimme und Geige. Amalie und Joseph Joachim* (Vienna, Cologne & Weimar: Böhlau, 2005); but see also Karen Leistra-Jones, 'Staging Authenticity: Joachim, Brahms and the Politics of *Werktreue* Performance', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Summer 2013), pp. 397-436.
[5] Alfred Brendel, *Musical Thoughts and Afterthoughts* (London: Robson Books, 1976), p. 26.

of the text[6]). Neither concept really brings into question the nature or even existence of such a 'work', let alone the performer's relationship to it. What all such positions more or less accept is a subservient role for the performer in the face of both 'work' and compositional intent, and mostly that the 'work' exists as an abstract ideal. This 'work-concept' has been extensively analysed and critiqued by a succession of musicologists,[7] but to the best of my knowledge very little of this debate has filtered through to those regularly involved with the production of new music. The 'mainstream' approach perhaps allows for a little creative input on the part of the performer, usually in the form of decoration, but mostly this consists of the appropriation the text in terms of various mainstream stylistic conventions, such as might commonly be applied to standard repertoire.

I find all of these positions to be limited and limiting, and believe in particular that they are predicated not only on unmediated acceptance of the work-concept, but also a rather narrow view of notation. As I argued in an article published four years ago[8], the role of the performer can be conceived differently by an alternative model of notation. Instead of a common model by which notation prescribes a singular result, to which 'interpretation' is essentially a supplement, notation instead delineates a field of possible practices through the creation of boundaries. The score sets limits, so that some possibilities are clearly excluded, and thus channels the performer's creative input in certain ways, thus circumscribing a range of creative possibilities, rather than a 'work' which is 'interpreted'. Other information can be brought to bear upon that text (stylistic conventions, other conceptual knowledge, etc), which can nuance the

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[6] Liszt to Richard Pohl, November 5, 1853, in La Mara (ed), *Letters of Franz Liszt. Volume 1: From Paris to Rome: Years of Travel as Virtuoso*, translated Constance Bache (London: H. Greyel & Co, 1894), pp. 175-176. This dichotomy is taken up further by Richard Taruskin, in essays in his *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) pp. 75-76, 99-100.

[7] Especially Lydia Goehr in her important 1992 book *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), and a succession of subsequent writings informed by this – see for example Harry White, ''If It's Baroque, Don't Fix It': Reflections on Lydia Goehr's 'Work-Concept' and the Historical Integrity of Musical Composition', in *Acta Musicologica*, Vol. 69, Fasc. 1 (Jan. – Jun. 1997), pp. 94-104, Jim Samson, 'The Practice of Early-Nineteenth-Century Pianism', in Michael Talbot (ed), *The Musical Work: Reality or Invention?*(Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), pp. 110-127, Reinhard Strohm, 'Looking Back at Ourselves: The Problem with the Musical Work Concept', in Talbot, *The Musical Work*, pp. 128-152, Stephen Davies, *Musical Works & Performances: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), pp. 91-98, and Michael Spitzer, *Metaphor and Musical Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 127-136. Julian Hellaby, *Reading Musical Interpretation: Case Studies in Solo Piano Performance* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 4-11 deals with some of the same types of attitudes to performance which I outline here, whilst some of the most important work on the relationship between analysis and performance, in a series of essays by Nicholas Cook, draws upon the critique of the work-concept: see for example Nicholas Cook, 'Analysing Performance and Performing Analysis', in Cook and Mark Everist (eds), *Rethinking Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 239-261, and the longer and partially overlapping essay 'Words about Music or Analysis versus Performance', in *Theory into Practice: Composition, Performance and the Listening Experience* , edited Peter Dejans (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1999), pp. 9-52.

[8] Ian Pace, 'Notation, Time and the Performer's Relationship to the Score in Contemporary Music', in *Unfolding Time: Studies in Temporality in Twentieth-Century Music*, edited Darla Crispin (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009), pp. 151-192.

range of performance possibilities. Instead of having to navigate between the false dichotomy of complete subservience by the performer on one hand, and an attitude of 'anything goes' on the other, this model allows that a wide range of different performance possibilities might all lay equal claims to legitimacy. At the same time, not just any performance is equally legitimate, especially not one which explicitly oversteps the boundaries* of the text to any palpable degree (this should not be taken to delegitimise adaptations, transcriptions or other modifications, just that they should be seen in a different category). Instead of sacrosanct 'works', we have *scores* and a range of potential performances made possible by those scores.

New music events remain heavily dominated by a culture of world or regional premieres and celebrations of particular composers and their works. Performers of new music, in order to make a living, must endlessly master new scores, frequently in extremely short periods of time and often in order to perform them once or at most just a few times, before moving onto the next batch of works. This is not in itself so new; prior to the mid-nineteenth century and in some cases later a great many performers of all types had little time for rehearsal or absorption of repertoire, and frequently played very large amounts of music (one only needs to look at the concert programmes of Liszt, Anton Rubinstein or Hans von Bülow to see this, or consider the Leipzig musicians who would perform new Bach cantatas every week). By around 1870 (as traced in William Weber's excellent book *The Great Transformation of Musical Taste*)[9] concert repertoire had become predominantly historical rather than contemporary. This consolidated the work-concept and created different expectations, often quite reverential in nature, so that it would seem bizarre for, say, a string quartet to learn a late Beethoven quartet in a week, having never seen the score before that week, then play the work in concert just once or twice.

Performers of new music today must deal with two types of historically-inherited circumstances. On one hand they have to learn complex new scores to a professional standard in a short period, whilst respecting a culture still dominated by the figure of the 'great composer' (at least where the composer in question is well-established, arguably less so for younger or less-hyped ones). The performers must then treat their music with the degree of reverence this calls for, and their performances will be judged to succeed or fail depending upon how much they are thought to penetrate the 'essence' of the 'work' and also to honour the composer's intentions. Performers are then drawn into a rather vicious spiral of competition in this respect, each trying to demonstrate (to composers, festival directors, critics and others) how they outdo each other in terms of selflessness and submission in order to be the one soloist, chamber group or ensemble who comes closest to the true ideal. In the process they avoid taking personal responsibility for their approach, displacing judgment away from its own individual merits.

[9] William Weber, *The Great Transformation of Musical Taste: Concert Programming from Haydn to Brahms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

I believe there is a real need to look much more sceptically at this culture and the deification of composers and works in new music, and become more accepting of the performer as a creative animal, to move away from an unhappy world in which performers' creative energies are spent more on new approaches to image and marketing than on the musical performances they produce. There have been some valiant attempts to do this, for example at the 2010 *Donaueschinger Musiktage*, where three different string quartets were all employed and each performed the same quartet of James Dillon.[10] However, assumptions of linear competitiveness (so that different interpretations continue to be viewed hierarchically) mitigate against such efforts. Only if new music culture involved many more performers and many more different performances of the same scores would there likely be some wider consciousness of the available possibilities. This would require either a drastic reduction of the number of scores performed (not a desirable outcome, as it would deeply limit opportunities for less well-established composers) or a considerably greater number of concerts and events, which would in turn require a much greater amount of public funding. The case for the latter has yet to be made in terms which might convince a wider public (and is practically unthinkable in musical cultures like the USA where public funding is minimal), but one should try. In the meantime, a compromise may be possible, with a reduced focus upon premieres, and with performers treated by festivals and concert series as of equal importance to composers and their scores. This would alter the balance of power in new music, and some of the hierarchies between composer and performer, or for that matter between performers, and begin to enable an enriched and broadened new music culture.

Addendum: The philosopher Michael Morris drew my attention to how much my concept of 'violation' of a text seemed extremely prescriptive, so I have modified it to the idea of overstepping boundaries. The bracketing out of transcriptions, adaptations, etc, from this discussion is simply for the sake of preserving a degree of brevity, and should not be read to imply that these are somehow lesser forms of musical endeavour – just that they constitute a modification of a score rather than simply a response to it/dialogue with it.

[10] For one interesting reflection on this event, which touches upon some of the same questions as I do above, see Max Nyffeler, 'Richtig und falsch oder anders: Der „Arditti-Standard" und der Publikumsgeschmack', at **http://www.beckmesser.de/themen/streichquartette.html**. Nyffeler does not however really question the concepts of 'work' or 'interpretation'.