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Between Composition and Performance

Suppose that someone has improvised on the organ. And suppose that he then goes home and scores a work of such a sort that his improvisation, judged by the requirements for correctness specified in the score, is at all points correct. In spite of that, the composer did not compose his work *in* performing his improvisation. In all likelihood, he did not even compose it *while* improvising. For in all likelihood he did not, during his improvising, finish selecting that particular set of requirements for correctness of occurrence to be found in the score.[1]

So at what point *is* a composer finished? If a musical work does not (quite) exist while it is being improvised, what further steps are required to bring it into being and to solidify and define its being so that it may be pronounced "done?" Moreover, assuming that Wolterstorff is right in maintaining that composing is the act of *selecting* the properties that are to form the work, how does such selection take place and when does that decision process come to an end? Furthermore, what exactly is the line

[1] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) 64.

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that separates composing and performing? Is there a clear line of demarcation, or are what we call "composing" and "performing" better understood as two facets of one activity? And, if performing is to be defined in terms of following the rules of correctness that the composer has set down, what does it mean to follow those rules? In other words, what exactly counts as *essential* to a piece of music's identity (and thus necessary to a "correct" performance of it), as opposed to something that is merely open to the performer's discretion?

The question of *when* a piece of music can be rightly said to exist depends heavily upon how we construe the activities known as composing and performing. If composing is a process, we need to examine what delimits that process, at either end. Is the composer the sole creator of a musical work, in the sense of initiating and terminating the process of composition? Or is the composing process rather something that extends beyond the composer – perhaps in both directions – with the result that the composer is *also* merely a participant in a particular musical discourse or practice?

Contrary to Wolterstorff's claim that "to improvise is not to compose,"[2] I will argue that the process by which a work comes into existence is *best* described as improvisatory at its very core, not merely the act of composing but also the acts of performing and listening. On my view, improvisation is not something that *precedes* composition (*pace* Wolterstorff) or stands outside and opposed to composition. Instead, I think that the activities that we call "composing" and "performing" are essentially improvisational in nature, even though improvisation takes many different forms in each activity. As we shall see, if my claim is correct, the beginnings and endings of musical pieces may indeed be "real" (as opposed to merely "imagined"), but they are often messy.

[2] Ibid.

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Exactly where and when they begin and end may not be easy to specify.

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The claim that music is fundamentally improvisatory is hardly intuitively obvious. Rather, it may well seem simply untrue. But I think that the reason we are reluctant to accept such a characterization stems more from the way in which we happen to think about music than from actual musical practice. Briefly put, we tend to assume that music making is primarily about the creation and preservation of musical works. And the reason we think that way is because the dominant form of music – or at least the form that has been the basis for most theoretical reflection – is that of "classical music."[3] The hegemony of classical music has had significant results in shaping musical theory. One can easily argue, for instance, that its dominance has led theorists to overlook important differences between various sorts of music. Yet, such theoretical reflection has done a significant injustice even to classical music itself, for it distorts the actual practice of music making in classical music *itself*.

For the moment, though, we need to consider exactly how our thinking about music is shaped. While there are various factors that define the practice known as classical music, I think there are two basic concepts or ideals that are particularly prominent in that practice, and thus in our thinking. They are (1) the ideal of *Werktreue* and (2) the ideal of composer as "true creator." Far from being unique to my study, these two concepts have been

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[3] Unless otherwise indicated, I will use the term "classical music" to denote the sort of music performed in a concert hall (i.e., classical music in a broad sense), rather than merely music that comes after "Baroque" and before "Romantic" (Classical music with a capital "C").

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discussed by musicologists such as Carl Dahlhaus and philo-
sophers such as Lydia Goehr, who has provided not only a
description of the way in which the concept of the musical work
has shaped the practice of classical music but also an insightful
genealogy of the work concept.[4] But, whereas the purpose of
Dahlhaus and Goehr is to provide an explanation of how these
ideals have functioned in ordering the practice of classical music,
I will sketch these ideals in this chapter with the ultimate purpose
of providing an alternative.

As an illustration of what the ideal of *Werktreue* is *not*, consider
the following piece of advice, given to performers in the early
eighteenth century:

> The manner in which all *Airs* divided into three Parts [*da capo*
> arias] are to be sung. In the first they require nothing but the
> simplest Ornaments, of a good Taste and few, that the Compo-
> sition may remain simple, plain and pure; in the second they
> expect, that to this Purity some artful Graces be added, by which
> the Judicious may hear, that the Ability of the Singer is greater;
> and in repeating the *Air*, he that does not vary it for the better,
> is no master.[5]

Contemporary performers are apt to be uncomfortable follow-
ing such advice. The ritual of performance in classical music is
highly regulated and a crucial part of that ritual is that such advice
is inappropriate. Of course, it once *was* deemed appropriate, in

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[4] See particularly Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford
Robinson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press,
1989) and Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford:
Clarendon Press, 1992). The view that I sketch in this chapter is roughly
what Stan Godlovitch would term the "subordination view." See his *Musical
Performance: A Philosophical Study* (London: Routledge, 1998) 81–4.

[5] Pier Francesco Tosi, *Opinioni de'cantori antichi, e moderni* (Bologna, 1723);
Observations on the Florid Song, trans. J. E. Galliard (London, 1724)
93. Quoted in Robert Donington, *Baroque Music: Style and Performance*
(London: Faber Music, 1982) 95.

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Tosi's day; but such improvisation would be highly questionable to performers today. In contrast, our conception of the role of a classical musician is far closer to that of self-effacing servant who faithfully serves the score of the composer. Admittedly, performers are given a certain degree of leeway; but the unwritten rules of the game are such that this leeway is relatively small and must be kept in careful check.

The idea(l) of being "*treu*" – which can be translated as "true" or "faithful" – implies faithfulness to someone or something. *Werktreue*, then, is directly a kind of faithfulness to the *Werk* (work) and, indirectly, a faithfulness to the composer. Given the centrality of musical notation in the discourse of classical music, a parallel notion is that of *Texttreue*: fidelity to the written score. Indeed, we can say that *Werktreue* has normally been thought to entail *Texttreue*. Not only does the ideal of *Werktreue* say a great deal about our expectations of performers, it also implies a very particular way of thinking about music: one in which the work of music has a prominent place. The idea of the musical work clearly controls the way we (that is, those of us in Western culture) think about not only classical music but simply music in general. Jan L. Broeckx goes so far as to say that "for some centuries, western theorists of music have identified the concept of "music" with the totality of all actual and conceivable musical works – and with nothing but that."[6] It is not surprising, then, that Jerrold Levinson claims that musical works are "the center and aim of the whole enterprise" of musical activity.[7]

Assuming, for the moment, that the activity of making music can be adequately described in terms of the creation and reproduction of musical works, what exactly is a work of music? Or

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[6] Jan L. Broeckx, *Contemporary Views on Musical Style and Aesthetics* (Antwerp: Metropolis, 1979) 126.

[7] Jerrold Levinson, "What a Musical Work Is," in *Music, Art, and Metaphysics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990) 67.

perhaps we should instead ask: what exactly do we *think* we are talking about when we speak of a work of music? Goehr rightly points out that there have been various sorts of philosophical theories of musical works and they can be differentiated as Platonist, modified Platonist, Aristotelian, and so on.[8] But my concern here is less with their differences than with their fundamental commonalities: for what these views have in common is the assumption that musical works have an essentially *ideal* quality, particularly in terms of their *identity*. And these theories have not affected merely the theorists. Thus, we usually assume that pieces of music are discrete, autonomous entities that stand on their own, a view that is intimately linked with our conception of art works in general.

While there are many ways of explaining this ideal character of musical works, the schema that Husserl sets up is remarkably similar to most accounts, at least in its primary features. Key to Husserl's conception of ideal objects is that they are essentially *spiritual* entities that have an ideal rather than real existence.[9] Although this certainly could be taken in a Platonic sense, Husserl (at least in later works) does not have Platonic ideals in mind. For ideal objects of the Husserlian variety exist neither in some Platonic realm nor eternally; rather, they are part of what Husserl terms the "cultural world" and are created (rather than discovered) by human activity. However, whereas real objects have an existence in space and time, ideal objects do not. Instead, they have a timeless existence (i.e., once they are created) that can be characterized as "omnitemporal," for they are "everywhere and nowhere" and so "can appear simultaneously in many spatiotemporal positions and yet be numerically identical as the

[8] See *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* 13ff.
[9] Also see Alfred Schutz, "Fragments on the Phenomenology of Music," in *In Search of Musical Method,* ed. F. Joseph Smith (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1976) 27ff.

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same."[10] It is this ability to be endlessly repeated and still retain their identity that marks ideal objects as unique. For Husserl, plays, novels, concepts, and musical works all have this ability. Moreover, what makes them ideal in another sense is that – in virtue of having an existence disconnected from the world of real objects – they would seem to be protected from the caprices of the real world and thus the dangers that threaten the existence of real objects.

Yet, in what sense is, say, a symphony of Bruckner not a real object? What could be more real than the sounds heard or the score from which the musicians play? Husserl does not mean to imply that musical sounds or notations are not real; instead, he intends to distinguish between a particular performance (or instantiation) and the ideal entity itself. "However much [the *Kreutzer Sonata*] consists of sounds, it is an ideal unity; and its constituent sounds are no less ideal."[11] What Husserl means is that, whereas a *performance* of the *Kreutzer Sonata* consists of real sounds, a performance is merely a physical embodiment of the ideal entity. Thus, although "Goethe's *Faust* is found in any number of real books," these are simply "exemplars of *Faust*," not *Faust* itself.[12] The "real" *Faust* is not the *Faust* of the real world. Naturally, Husserl realizes that even ideal objects can have strong or relatively weak connections to the real world. What he calls *free idealities* (for example, geometric theorems) have little connection to any particular historical or cultural context. One doesn't, for instance, need to know much about the early Greeks to be able to understand the Pythagorean Theorem; one only needs to

[10] Edmund Husserl, *Experience and Judgment: Investigations in a Genealogy of Logic*, trans. James S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks, ed. Ludwig Landgrebe (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973) 260–1.

[11] Edmund Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978) 21.

[12] *Experience and Judgment* 266.

understand basic geometry. *Bound idealities*, on the other hand, are those having a particular place in cultural history, such as novels or musical works.

Something like Husserl's distinction is found in everyday language. We often speak of performing and practicing a piece of music as if that piece were distinct from the performances and practicing of them. Moreover, Husserl's theory of ideal objects is hardly unique: for the model that it employs – that of an ideal something that has material embodiments – is similar to C. S. Peirce's distinction between type and token, ideal objects being types and the material instantiations of ideal objects their tokens. Many philosophers have defined musical works in terms of the type/token model. For instance, Richard Wollheim claims that "*Ulysses* and *Der Rosenkavalier* are types, my copy of *Ulysses* and tonight's performance of *Der Rosenkavalier* are tokens of those types."[13]

There are certain basic assumptions about the work that stand behind this model, and these govern the practice of classical music. First, it is not insignificant that Wolterstorff defines composing as an activity in which "the composer selects properties of sounds *for the purpose of their serving as criteria for judging correctness of occurence.*"[14] Composers set up boundaries both to define the work *and* to restrict the activity of the performer. Accordingly, Wolterstorff considers a musical work to be a "norm-kind," in the sense of setting up a norm that the performer is to follow. Similarly, although Nelson Goodman takes a nominalistic view of the work (for he claims that there is no type, just tokens), the ideal of compliance is foremost: he maintains that "complete compliance with the score is the only requirement for a genuine instance of a

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[13] See Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers*, Vol. IV (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1939) no. 537 and Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) 65.

[14] *Works and Worlds of Art* 62 (my italics).

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work" and this compliance is "categorically required." Thus, "the most miserable performance without actual mistakes does count as such an instance, while the most brilliant performance with a single wrong note does not."[15] While Wolterstorff and Goodman place particular emphasis on the limitations that a work sets on performers, such an emphasis is not peculiar to their theories. Rather, it reflects the ideals of the practice known as classical music.

Second, a different though clearly related emphasis is on preservation. Goodman claims that "work-preservation is paramount" and this leads him to argue that "if we allow the least deviation [from the score], all assurance of work-preservation and score-preservation is lost."[16] It is hardly surprising, then, that creativity in performance not only has no importance in his theory but would be viewed as inappropriate. While Goodman's theory is somewhat extreme (both in this respect and others), he is clearly reflecting an important assumption: we tend to see both the score and the performance primarily as vehicles for *preserving* what the composer has created. We assume that musical scores provide a permanent record or embodiment in signs; in effect, a score serves to "fix" or objectify a musical work. Likewise, although we *do* expect performances to be creative in some limited sense, we see them *primarily* as part of a preservational chain.

Not only does this concept of the work define for us what music is but, more important, it provides a model for thinking about what is involved in music making. According to this model, composers create musical works and performers reproduce them. That is hardly to say that performance is exclusively reproductive in nature (for clearly the performer adds *something*

[15] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968) 186–7.

[16] Ibid. 178 and 186–7.

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in the process of performance). Yet, it seems safe to say that performance is – on this paradigm – primarily reproductive and only secondarily creative. Nothing illustrates the model of composition and performance that dominates the practice of classical music better than the title of the book on performance by Hans Pfitzner (who, incidentally, happened to be a composer): *Werk und Wiedergabe* – which can be translated as "work and reproduction."[17] Given this model, it is understandable that we make a definite distinction not only between performance and improvisation but also between works and transcriptions or arrangements. We assume that a musical work has a well-defined identity, so transcriptions (which are often revisions of the work to make it playable for another instrument) and arrangements (which tend to be more significant in their "revising" of the work, in order to make a piece more suitable for a different context or else provide a different listening experience) are usually seen as separate ontological entities.

Behind this notion of the work and faithfulness to it is our second ideal, that the composer is the true creator in the activity of music making. Levinson provides a perfect expression of this viewpoint:

> There is probably no idea more central to thought about art than . . . that it is a godlike activity in which the artist brings into being what did not exist beforehand – much as a demiurge forms a world out of inchoate matter. . . . There is a special aura that envelops composers, as well as other artists, because we think of them as true creators.[18]

Despite the fact that Bach insisted that anyone could have done what he did with enough hard work, the way we conceive of the composing process minimizes the influence of tradition (not to

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[17] Hans Pfitzner, *Werk und Wiedergabe* (Augsburg: Benno Filsner, 1929).
[18] "What a Musical Work Is" 66–7.