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978-0-521-89611-5 - The Cambridge History of Musical Performance

Colin Lawson and Robin Stowell

Excerpt

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• PART I • PERFORMANCE THROUGH  
HISTORY

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• 1 •

## Performance today

NICHOLAS KENYON

Once upon a time, before Music television, before remote controls, before books on tape and Internet streaming media, a possible method of enjoying a basic art form was this: a person would sit down and listen to an entire symphony, for however long that took. It is not so easy anymore ... Halfway through the adagio they feel a tickle somewhere between the temporal and occipital lobes and realise they are fighting an impulse to reach for a magazine ... With all the arts making their small sacrifices to hurriedness, music lovers can hardly expect to be immune. There is a special kind of pain, though. Music is the art form most clearly about time.

*James Gleick, Faster*<sup>1</sup>

## Please play

I am in the middle of the Roundhouse, North London. The only thing in the centre of the bare circular space, once used for reversing trains, is an old harmonium. On the floor in front, it says PLEASE PLAY. It looks like a normal harmonium, except that out of the back of the instrument, an array of wires and leads stretches away, up and around the building. So I sit down. I press the keys, but instead of familiar sounds from the instrument, the whole circular building comes alive. Some keys produce metallic clanks on the pillars, some produce motor noises far away in the ceiling, some produce wheezing notes of indeterminate pitch ... There is no skill required, no score of instructions: whatever you do is the performance. During the time I am there children, backpackers, a virtuoso with a self-timing camera to record the incident all try. The sounds are varied, random, striking. This is David Byrne's *Playing the Building*.<sup>2</sup>

As I leave, I notice an advert for another event, *Longplayer Live*: 'Lasting 1000 years, Jem Finer's *Longplayer* is the longest non-repeating piece of music ever

<sup>1</sup> J. Gleick, *Faster*, New York, Random House, 1999, pp. 191–3.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.davidbyrne.com/art/art\\_projects/playing\\_the\\_building](http://www.davidbyrne.com/art/art_projects/playing_the_building).

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composed. For its live debut, a 1000 minute section will be performed by 25 musicians on a 20 metre wide instrument, made up of six concentric circles of Tibetan singing bowls. Alongside the unfolding music, there will be a 12-hour series of one-to-one conversations between 24 speakers.<sup>3</sup> In the *Daily Telegraph*, art critic Richard Dormant writes about a Heiner Goebbels installation under the heading ‘Who cares what it is, it’s terrific’: ‘*Stifter’s Dinge* is a performance with no performers and a concert with no musicians. As you take your seat in the windowless vault (once used to test concrete for the Channel Tunnel by dropping it from great heights), you are confronted with a formal sculptural arrangement consisting of five pianos and a few bare branches. On the floor below are three shallow rectangular pools and three fibreglass cubes. Of the five pianos, two are uprights, played in the traditional way by hammers hitting strings – except that the keys are struck by invisible fingers, like player pianos. The rest are played by robotic “arms” sliding either across or up and down the strings. Other sounds include shivers, shakes, rattles, scrapes, thumps and booms made – as far as I could figure out – with tin sheets, a tennis ball, concrete blocks, and blasts of air forced down a long drainpipe.’<sup>4</sup>

This is performance today. You feel that all bets are off, and no rules apply.

However, in another great circular building in London, the BBC Proms in the Royal Albert Hall are presenting a wealth of newly written work alongside the central classics of the repertoire, played by supremely accomplished examples of that most traditional of Western cultural inventions, the symphony orchestra. So while the outer reaches of performance are explored, equally prominent is the regular recreation of the great achievements of Western music. The repertoire changes and expands constantly: in the 2010 Proms season, the music of Stephen Sondheim, which first slipped into a Prom in a late-night concert in 1996, had a whole high-profile, televised evening of its own, as did the partnership of Rodgers and Hammerstein. It is not so long since Gershwin and Bernstein would have had a battle to make it into the Proms canon.<sup>5</sup> In the 2011 season, the net widens again to include Havergal Brian’s massive ‘Gothic’ Symphony, music by film composer Ennio Morricone, rock musician Jonny Greenwood of Radiohead, and Hungarian folk music. The developments can be traced in a complete online database of Proms performances since 1895, which has taken some years to assemble and publish,<sup>6</sup> whose bald but fascinating statistics conceal the traditional controversies

3 See [Longplayer.org/live](http://Longplayer.org/live).

4 R. Dormant, ‘Who cares what it is, it’s terrific’, *Daily Telegraph*, 16 April 2008.

5 *BBC Proms Guide 2010*, London, BBC Books, 2010; *BBC Proms Guide 2011*, London, BBC Books, 2011.

6 [www.bbc.co.uk/proms/archive](http://www.bbc.co.uk/proms/archive).

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around the season's repertoire, often fought out in the correspondence columns of the press: too little English music? Too much contemporary music? Too few central classics? What about women composers? Why so much jazz, and non-Western music? These debates expose the whole issue of the changing canon, the formulation of the repertoire that determines performance today.

Repertoire is also shifting fascinatingly in our opera houses. A Purcell semi-opera, *The Fairy Queen*, joined the Glyndebourne repertoire for the first time with huge success in 2009. Until quite recently Handel opera was unknown in our major houses, yet now it is a regular part of their seasons. In British opera houses, the core of great popular operas from *Figaro* to *Bohème*, *Traviata* to *Rosenkavalier* are now complemented by a huge range of ancient and modern pieces, from Monteverdi and Cavalli to Kurt Weill and Thomas Adès. The 2010–11 season at the Royal Opera House started not only with the staples of *Così fan tutte* and *Don Pasquale*, but also with the totally unknown *Niobe, Regina de Tebe*, by Agostino Steffani. At English National Opera, directors new to the art-form stimulate new perspectives about music drama: Terry Gilliam in Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust*, Mike Figgis in Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*. The art-form, previously the preserve of the few, has in recent decades become increasingly available and professionalised as new companies have become established in Leeds, Wales and Scotland; many small-scale groups from the Classical Opera Company to Music Theatre Wales have established themselves. Each summer from June onwards, 'garden opera' is a newly popular experience, weather permitting, from the well-protected Grange Park Opera (in a distinctive theatre set within a dilapidated Hampshire mansion) to Garsington Opera (now in a temporary auditorium on a private estate near High Wycombe) and Opera Holland Park in London.

Meanwhile in churches and cathedrals, a variety of choral groups continue to provide the music for Sunday and other services, with a repertoire stretching all the way from Tye, Tallis, Byrd and Tomkins, to the church composers of today. The annual Service of Nine Lessons and Carols from King's College Cambridge, in many respects a perfect example of an invented tradition, has admirably commissioned a carol each year from composers including Arvo Pärt, Judith Weir, James Macmillan and Gabriel Jackson.<sup>7</sup> In April 2011, millions watched a royal wedding in Westminster Abbey, whose traditional musical values were articulated through the dominance of the music of Hubert Parry, a commission from John Rutter and a work by Welsh composer Paul Mealer. Choral music from across the centuries continues to be heard in the

<sup>7</sup> *On Christmas Day: New Carols for King's*. King's College Cambridge Choir/Stephen Cleobury. EMI 107243 5 5807021.

context of numerous liturgies, from Anglican Evensong or the Roman Catholic Mass to those services which celebrate the rich wealth of other devotions that have become part of our diverse country over recent decades. Pentecostalism and inspirational religious gatherings have brought new musics into worship; elsewhere it tends to be the predominately unchanging nature of religious celebration and its use of a musical repertoire from the distant past, leavened with new work, that maintains its function and its appeal. New generations of children will receive the specialised training offered by choir schools and cathedrals, and be drawn into a historical repertoire of music that has helped to define our culture over centuries. Specialist institutions such as the Purcell School and Chetham's School of Music offer an increasingly broad educational and musical experience. The future of music in the curriculum of state schools, however, is currently under question and the subject of extensive review.<sup>8</sup> How many young people of diverse backgrounds will continue to be drawn to music if it is not at the core of school activities throughout the country?

Still, in educational institutions from schools to conservatoires, aided by teachers, animateurs and creative leaders of many kinds, students gradually discover a repertoire through which they can develop their own personal skills of interpretation and understanding. They are developing skill and craft: as *The New Grove* sternly reminds us, 'the requirements of musical performance in Western culture are stringent'.<sup>9</sup> Richard Sennett has recently suggested a reason why young people would undertake this laborious and difficult work: 'the motivation is lodged in an experience fundamental to all human development: the primal event of separation can teach the young human to become curious'.<sup>10</sup> In learning and practising, they are discovering their own identities. But the structures within which they learn, and the principles on which they are taught, are shifting rapidly.

This too, then, is performance today: it is based on a wealth of varying traditions which are rapidly being challenged by a multiplicity of new forms of listening, creation and reception. For not all of these performances depend on fidelity to a score, a skill acquired over years, and the active participation of a listening, concentrating audience. Many are much more open in their conception, and much freer in their reception. They can be posted on the web without the mediation of agents, producers or record companies. Around the world, there are radically different situations in both performance and education, in

8 D. Henley, *Music Education in England*, London, Department for Education and the Department for Culture, Media, Olympics and Sport, 2011.

9 J. Dunsby, in S. Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 29 vols., London, Macmillan, 2001, vol. 19, p. 348, art. 'Performance'.

10 R. Sennett, *The Craftsman*, London, Allen Lane, 2008, p. 158.

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America, in Africa, in the Far East, particularly in the emergingly powerful and influential musical world of China. That is beyond the scope of this chapter – such is the range of experience today that what is touched on here can only be a personal, partial picture. It attempts to provide a necessarily limited snapshot of current trends, from the perspective of the classical music scene, surveying its radically changing delivery and context. It glances into a world in which classical music takes its place among a huge range of musics, and no longer necessarily enjoys its habitual prominence or status.

### The availability of everything

Tastes change all the time ... You do your research, of course, but all musical performance is to do with feeling, and the ways of feeling music tend to change through the generations.<sup>11</sup>

Sir Charles Mackerras 1925–2010

Sensibility alters from generation to generation in everybody, whether we will or no; but expression is only altered by a man of genius.<sup>12</sup>

T.S. Eliot

What is instantly available to us today is fascinating, disorientating and disturbing. You can click on YouTube to search for conductors and find archive clips of Thomas Beecham, Henry Wood, Toscanini or Karajan, endless snippets of rare performances, a cornucopia of research possibilities. Enter 'Furtwängler + Beethoven 9' and you can find several newsreel versions of the dreadful sight of him conducting that symphony on 19 April 1942 with Nazi banners draping the stage; Beethoven's utopian vision of brotherhood is followed by Goebbels approaching the stage to shake the conductor's hand. (Does Furtwängler somehow move his handkerchief to clean his hand afterwards? The film is not quite clear ...) The images of wounded German soldiers, intently listening in the audience, have a strange resonance: they are not so different from those on the other side of the conflict. In Humphrey Jennings's pioneering documentary *Listen to Britain* (also 1942), the famous National Gallery concerts in London are used to characterise the war, with empty picture frames as a reminder of the conflict, listened to by a British wounded soldier, with listeners placed by iconic pictures from the collection, as Myra Hess plays Mozart to the delight of Queen Elizabeth and Kenneth Clark.<sup>13</sup>

11 A. Clark, 'Open to interpretation', *Financial Times*, 25 July 2009.

12 T. S. Eliot, 'Poetry in the eighteenth century', in B. Ford (ed.), *Pelican Guide to English Literature*, vol. 4: *From Dryden to Johnson*, London, Penguin, 1957, p. 271. This seminal essay was written in 1930.

13 Included in the British Film Institute compilation *Land of Promise: The British Documentary Movement 1930–50*, BFI DVD 756.

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To such uses has performance been put across the ages: to glorify power and to give hope to nations, to heighten the vanity of monarchs and prop up the power of potentates, to propagate a cultural view or to celebrate a dynastic marriage.<sup>14</sup> It has marked key moments in political change: when musicians rushed to celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall, Leonard Bernstein went so far as to rewrite the text of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony for the occasion, turning it into an Ode to Freedom.<sup>15</sup> The power of performance – in both its musical and iconographical aspects – is deployed on major occasions, such as the opening of the Olympic Games in Beijing, and the inauguration of the American President in Washington (both these occasions, ironically, having been shown to involve pre-recording and lip-synching, making their claims to be live performances at all somewhat dubious). Performance – its nature, purpose and reception – is a rich subject for debate and analysis. Yet this has not always been recognised by musicologists and music historians, focused as they have been on composers and their work.

In the twenty-first century, thanks to cheap and easily available technology, performance is more than ever totally democratic. Since the 1920s you have been able to listen to the radio broadcasts of music for absolutely nothing (in the UK, listening to the radio now does not even require the purchase of a TV licence); but what you listened to was selected – you heard what the BBC felt it right for you to listen to. Now, at a modest price, you can download any music you need onto your iPod, or listen to it online via Spotify. Some conventional means of dissemination, like radio, still flourish, and since 1992 in the UK, Classic FM has offered a commercial classical music station within the context of an advertising-funded, pop-music format, offering a much more limited repertoire than BBC Radio 3, but attracting a wider audience. (This mirrors the relationship in the post-war years between highbrow culture on the BBC Third Programme, and light classics on the BBC Light Programme.) The BBC runs orchestras, invests in new commissions and promotes the Proms; that reflects its public service role. Classic FM helps live music by marketing and on-air promotion, but in the end is judged by making money for its owners' shareholders. Both are now active in offering online services, streamed content, and (where permitted) downloads.<sup>16</sup>

14 See T. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture*, Oxford University Press, 2002.

15 The powerful live recording with an international orchestra is available on CD. Deutsche Grammophon DG 429861-2.

16 The internationally successful Radio 3 free downloads of the nine Beethoven symphonies, offered to complement its complete on-air Beethoven survey, proved controversial with the record companies, and the BBC Trust prevented a repeat of this offer, though individual programmes including music can now be downloaded as podcasts.



Reissues of historic recordings are now a staple of the recording business, on labels such as BBC Legends and ICA Classics, and increasingly on video as well. Robert Philip has pointed out that as late as the 1970s, orchestral recordings of the past were ‘virtually ignored’,<sup>17</sup> but now they are reissued with fervour and greeted with fascination (they are certainly cheaper than originating new orchestral recordings in the studio). The whole century and more of recorded music is out there, somewhere.

But where? In this new world of availability and interactivity, do you know what music you want, and if not how do you find out? If you do know, can you find what you need? This is not so easy, given the present chaotic nature of classical music cataloguing on downloading sites (an interesting example of how material can be endlessly available, but informed access is still limited).<sup>18</sup> There is a previously unimaginable variety of music available to all, but the traditional routes by which a teacher, critic, commentator or broadcaster selected it and recommended it for you are challenged. You are more likely to be listening to what your friends recommend to you one night, or, trying a web link someone somewhere sends you, or randomly searching YouTube.

Serendipity and instant access rules. Is there too much dizzying choice in performance today?

## Defining performance

When we recently moved out of our house, I was struck by the variety of musical elements in the front room. We had a harmonium, a piano, a cello, several recorders and a bassoon. Then there was a bookcase full of orchestral scores on one wall, and another wall full of books about composers, performance and the history of music. There was a sound system, and piles of CDs. Instruments, scores, books, discs. What are they? Are they all ways of making music? Aids to performance? Help in listening to music? Which of them actually is ‘music’?

The CDs certainly sound like music when you put them in the machine; you only need to know how to switch it on. The instruments make some sort of music if you know how to play them. The books explain music, or help you listen to it, if you can read. But the scores? Would anybody say, if casually asked

<sup>17</sup> R. Philip, ‘Historical recordings of orchestras’, in C. Lawson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Orchestra*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 203.

<sup>18</sup> In an early encounter with iTunes, doubtless due to my own incompetence, I downloaded a complete performance of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* which played not in numerical track order, but in alphabetical track order, a truly bizarre experience.

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in that room, that it is the scores that *are* music while the rest are not? (What you can do with a score on its own is extremely limited, unless you have the very specialised ability to read it and hear in your mind what it suggests.) Yet for generations musicologists have behaved as if scores were the only real thing about music. The original focus of musicology on the establishing of authoritative texts was derived from philology, and helped give the emerging discipline in the nineteenth century a positivist sense of scientific authority. The consequence has been that the text has come first: the lines of collected editions on library shelves have somehow acquired a primary status in discussions about music. A distinguished scholar wrote not so long ago of the ‘notated essentials’ of music, to which is applied its ‘performative clothing’.<sup>19</sup> But the vast majority of us – the audience, and indeed performers – experience music exactly the other way round. The performance is the primary experience, while the notes, along with many other things, account for how it came to sound that way. The notes are indeed critical to determining how the music sounds, but it is surely the sound which ‘is’ the music.

Some different key elements affecting performance can be highlighted by a few recordings of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony.<sup>20</sup> There is one which actually changes Beethoven’s notes: Herbert von Karajan’s first recording of 1941 with the Berlin Staatskapelle,<sup>21</sup> where the horn parts in the first movement have been rewritten (it must be deliberate as they do it twice) to play in thirds the way people think horns play, instead of playing with the harmony. (So they play a written D in bar 90 instead of the written C.) No doubt this was some old edition or corrupt tradition which was subsequently corrected: I have never found an origin for this tradition. In contrast, one of Furtwängler’s recordings, recorded a decade later than Karajan’s, in 1953,<sup>22</sup> changes Beethoven’s metronome marks – a much more common practice this, indeed at one time almost universal. The Trio of the Scherzo sounds the battle hymn of some distant republic at dotted minim equals 42 (as against Beethoven’s mark of 84). Toscanini, on the other hand, performed it at Beethoven’s speed as early as 1935 with the BBC Symphony Orchestra.<sup>23</sup> There would be many who would argue that the metronome marks are not part of ‘the piece’ at all, but just an aid to interpretation to be followed or ignored at will. In the second movement of the symphony there is an issue about the articulation at the end of the movement. This is the question of which notes are *arco* or *pizzicato* in the

19 N. Cook, ‘Music as performance’, in M. Clayton, T. Herbert and R. Middleton (eds.), *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, New York and London, Routledge, 2003.

20 See my Royal Philharmonic Society lecture ‘Tradition isn’t what it used to be’, 24 February 2001.

21 Berlin Staatskapelle/Herbert von Karajan, DG 423 526–2.

22 Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Wilhelm Furtwängler, DG 427 401.

23 BBC Symphony Orchestra/Arturo Toscanini, BBC Legends BBCL4016–2.