

1 Performing through history

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Performance in context

At most classical concerts today we expect the audience to remain silent in rapt attention, but this is a quite recent social phenomenon, far removed from music-making of any kind before the beginning of the twentieth century. At the premiere of his ‘Paris’ Symphony in July 1778, Mozart was delighted by a respectful audience which nevertheless responded actively rather than passively:¹

Just in the middle of the first Allegro there was a passage which I felt sure must please. The audience were quite carried away – and there was a tremendous burst of applause . . . Having observed that all last as well as first Allegros begin here with all the instruments playing together and generally unisono, I began mine with two violins only, piano for the first eight bars – followed instantly by a forte; the audience, as I expected, said ‘hush’ at the soft beginning, and when they heard the forte, began at once to clap their hands.²

More than a century later, a painting now in the archives of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden shows the inaugural concert of London’s Queen’s Hall in 1893; conductor and orchestra are in full flight, yet conversation is also flowing freely in the front rows of the audience.³ Less controlled was the celebrated riotous premiere of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* in Paris in 1913, one of the last documented instances of active audience response within the Western concert tradition.

A freely responding audience is nowadays more characteristic of a pop concert, where performers display their own carefully cultivated set of behaviours. In ritual situations where there is no reason to write down the music, there is less distinction between composing, rehearsing and performing; listeners and bystanders may well contribute. While the notated score acts as a memory and enables dissemination of musical works, it also invites a more distant relationship between composer and performer. Well into the nineteenth century it was taken for granted that performers would have the ability to improvise, and indeed they often did so. Scores were

routinely adapted as occasion demanded, and it was quite usual for specially composed arias to be inserted in operas to suit the singers at hand. In the early twentieth century there was no reason for Stokowski, Elgar and others to feel embarrassed about making orchestral transcriptions of Bach's keyboard music. Even when a composer's original notation was on the music stand, performers often took a liberated, creative approach. Brahms's violinist friend Joseph Joachim was described as unpredictable by a member of his quartet: 'To play with him is damned difficult. Always different tempi, different accents.'⁴ Today's overwhelming authority of the score, demanding fidelity and accuracy at all costs, is not at all characteristic of the history of performance as a whole. Yet musical literature often gives the impression that true aesthetic meaning resides in the notation and that performance is at best an imperfect and approximate representation of the work itself. It is reported that Brahms once refused an invitation to a performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* on the grounds that he would sooner stay at home and read it, a response which would surely have horrified the supremely practical Mozart.

A world perspective

The study of world musics calls into question most of the basic assumptions held by Western performers, thus providing a useful sense of context. In many cultures the artificial division between performer and audience has never existed; as the player or singer improvises, the audience responds, whether by toe-tapping, finger drumming, hand-clapping, singing or dancing. Musicians are as likely to be found in streets, markets, fairs or taverns as in more formal surroundings, since music has remained intimately associated with such ritual events as weddings, funerals or the agricultural calendar, dealing with perennial subjects like the personal wounds of love. Surviving oral evidence can sometimes be supplemented by more tangible primary material; for example, there are distinguished traditions of music theory from such countries as China, Korea, India and Japan dating back as far as 5,000 years. Large collections of notated Chinese music survive from the twelfth century AD onwards, and only a little later appear the beginnings of the Turkish classical repertoire.

The invention of the phonograph in the late nineteenth century greatly assisted the investigation of oral traditions and living musical systems. Another milestone was the development of the means to measure intervals smaller than a semitone, the octave having been divided in a rich variety of ways unfamiliar in the West. Technical analysis of musical sound and performance practice has been fruitfully allied to anthropological study, so that

fieldwork routinely covers the processes of both creation and performance. In India not only are the instruments, melodies and rhythms unfamiliar to a Western musician, but the ideas behind the music are intimately connected with philosophical and religious concepts which have little to do with Western approaches to time, matter or reality. In these circumstances music cannot be learned from books: a guru must be sought to provide essential secret and esoteric knowledge and to show how a musician's life must be led. From the start a disciple will be taken on stage to observe and interact with his master. In Hindu culture a musician has low-caste ranking not only because of his tradesman status but because his profession involves breaking upper-class taboos such as the handling of animal skins on drums or making lip contact with flutes and reeds which might have been touched by others. The rhythmic complexity of African music and its close integration with dance is likewise far from Western experience. Many African languages do not even have a word for music or musician, useless abstractions alongside their concrete terms for singers, dancers or drummers. In the Far East the religious ceremonies and royal court ritual of Japan have little philosophical connection with the West. The stylised high art of the *noh* play interweaves literature, theatre and dancing with music that associates drums with the other-worldly sound of the *shakuhachi*.

The sound world of non-Western music involves many instruments of unfamiliar design and status. An ancient example is the Chinese *qin*, characterised by its expressive slides and ethereal harmonies. The Indonesian *gamelan* comprises an ensemble of tuned percussion whose performers partake of a spiritual discipline bound up with the arts of dance, poetry and drama, in which the aim is to reach an ideal state of calm, emotional detachment; naturally, there are no virtuosos or soloists in this non-hierarchical, primarily oral tradition. The Indian *sitar*, with its characteristic gliding portamento, is an example of an instrument which (like the *gamelan*) has become known in the West, not least through its interaction with popular culture.

Greece and Rome

Forty thousand years ago, man was making music; Palaeolithic cave paintings discovered in Ariège in France contain the image of an animal-masked man scraping a musical bow to an audience of reindeer. By classical times music was engaging the attention of the great philosophers while also inviting widespread ritual participation. Writers such as Plato and Aristotle regarded musical training as of special educational value. Music's association with poetry demanded profound responses from performer and listener which cannot now be recreated from a mere reading of surviving

source material. Choral song was particularly important, often incorporating dance and invariably accompanied by professionals playing wind and stringed instruments. Ritual lay at the heart of performance, as choirs sang in honour of the gods or in celebration of famous men or victorious athletes. Though little actual music survives, there are theoretical treatises by Aristoxenus (fourth century BC), Ptolemy (second century AD) and others. We can surmise that Greek music was primarily homophonic and that voices sang together in unison or at the octave. The Romans also had liturgical and other public music, military music and work songs, assimilating influences of the nations they conquered. Wind players attended sacrificial rites, partly to banish evil spirits and to summon up benevolent deities; they are frequently depicted in reliefs and were highly esteemed. Festivals in honour of the deities were accompanied by processional music, which in the case of Dionysus was sometimes wild and orgiastic. In military music the trumpeters gave fixed signals and played on the march and at ceremonials; in battle their sounds were designed to encourage the ranks and confuse the enemy. Folksongs provided a rhythmical accompaniment for such activities as rowing, reaping and weaving in genres such as lullabies, nursery rhymes, and birthday and wedding songs. Mime and pantomime became important in the theatre, vocal and instrumental music accompanying solo dancers who represented mythological figures.

The church

For centuries the church has been an important focus for music-making. The Romans' association of music with debauchery and immorality of all kinds made early Christian authorities realise that it could either enoble or debase man's moral fibre. An initial answer to the dilemma was that music should be associated with devout words and instruments banished. Musical education has been an important function of the church ever since the foundation of the Schola Cantorum traditionally ascribed to Gregory the Great (590–604). Boys were trained there, received a complete education in all the principal scholastic subjects, and also took part in secular feasts and carnivals. The sheer length of this tradition is not to be underestimated; when the first modern conservatoire was founded in Paris in 1795 in the wake of the revolution, French musical education was still the responsibility of almost four hundred church-sponsored music schools, each teaching plainchant, counterpoint, some composition, a little French, much Latin and some arithmetic. Though teaching methods were antiquated and instrumental music neglected, about four thousand pupils each year proceeded to theological seminaries or to lives as singers or organists.

No ecclesiastical melody was written down until the sixth century, and only in the twelfth century was a system devised which could indicate pitches if not exact values. One of the main difficulties in recreating medieval music is that improvisation and instrumental accompaniment are not represented in the surviving notation. Small organs and bowed, plucked, wind and percussion instruments found their way into church, but exact personnel was selected according to the occasion and available resources. During several centuries, complexity in church music drew recurrent criticism from the authorities, for example Pope John XXII in 1323. On Good Friday in 1555, Pope Marcellus II instructed the Papal Choir to perform in future with properly modulated voices and so that everything could be heard and understood. From time to time it happened that church composers utterly transcended their professional circumstances, as in the case of J. S. Bach. Lutheran Germany produced many music directors who conscientiously wrote for the greater glory of God, at the same time satisfying their superiors and edifying the congregation. Bach lived at a time when the concepts of genius and masterpiece had not yet been articulated; working from week to week with a small orchestra of eighteen to twenty-four players to accompany his singers, he would doubtless have been astonished at his veneration by later generations.

Secular music

Whereas church music was organised and coordinated, secular music was undertaken without any sense that its method or purpose should be written down. The musical centre of gravity passed from church to the royal and aristocratic courts only in the early renaissance period. Originally music was part of the duty of court entertainers, who were also jugglers, acrobats, dancers, trainers of performing animals and verbal comics. These minstrels would belong either to an aristocratic household or to a touring variety troupe. Accompanied by portable instruments, they would not only entertain but also immortalise glorious royal deeds in song, while dealing with the usual subjects of love, mourning and satire. As towns developed in the Middle Ages, guilds of waits or *Stadtpfeifer* were formed, originally as civic watchmen. They developed into local bands, playing a variety of instruments and training apprentices who worked as servants until they achieved the necessary qualifications. There was often a struggle to defend a monopoly on ceremonial and social music throughout a particular town. Remnants of this system survived into the nineteenth century, when in Leipzig the *Stadtmusiker* became *ex officio* members of the Gewandhaus Orchestra.

Renaissance court establishments followed a consistent pattern of development, with small choirs and a group of instruments for accompaniment and independent music-making. They created well-disciplined, flexible ensembles to perform works usually composed in the most striking and advanced styles of the time. The first printed book on instruments – *Musica getutscht* – was published in Basle in 1511 by Sebastian Virdung. It describes and portrays through woodcuts the clavichord, virginal, lute, viol, dulcimer, harp, shawm, flute, cornett, bagpipe, trombone, trumpet, and various percussion and organs. The printing of music itself originated at the end of the fifteenth century, committing the publisher to the notion that certain works would have a lengthy existence and creating the idea of a musical repertoire. An important aspect of Elizabethan and Jacobean middle-class society was the development of the intimate pleasure of chamber music both for voices and for instruments.

The baroque era

Performance during the baroque period showed a keen appreciation of spontaneity. The rise of instrumental music and opera in the seventeenth century created a new class of musician whose primary emphasis was on technique, demonstrating an ability to extemporise or ornament or to evoke a desired effect. Significantly, female performers won increasing acclaim during the period, not just on the operatic stage but also in Venetian conservatoires such as the Ospedale della Pietà made famous by Vivaldi.

The opera houses were important as the first independent settings for the performance of music to a paying public of all social classes; the earliest opened in Venice in 1637. They were relatively compact; the largest was similar in size to today's small cinema. Their several tiers of boxes were mostly rented by noblemen for a year (in some cases a lifetime), while temporary seating was made available elsewhere for single ticket-holders. The systematic vocabulary of musical signs and gestures developed by Monteverdi and his contemporaries came to represent relationships between the characters on stage, as singers were required to become actors. One cannot assume that similar resources were always used for the same opera; indeed, fluidity of both numbers and personnel could characterise successive performances. Pre-eminent among voice types now obsolete was the castrato, prized for its power and flexibility. There were many aspects of a good singing style which were written in one way but, to be more graceful, effected in quite another. From its beginnings opera engendered that intriguing interaction of commercial and artistic considerations that continues to this day, a prime eighteenth-century example being Handel's colourful career in London.

Like opera, chamber music was usually directed from the harpsichord, often by the composer; detailed performance instructions were therefore unnecessary. Players continued to assume a high degree of responsibility in an age when much material was sketched rather than fully notated, especially in *basso continuo* parts. Penetrating comparisons with jazz technique can be drawn here, not least in the case of *notes inégales* – successions of evenly written notes played unequally in the French style according to the tempo and character of the music. Only around 1700 did instrumental music achieve the status of vocal music, having been largely confined to opera overtures and the service of church worship. But it was significant that Lully's ensemble at the court of Louis XIV had been especially renowned for its discipline and unanimity, establishing stringed instruments as a basis for the orchestra. In Italy there soon arose a new type of virtuoso string writing, exemplified by the Roman violinist-composer Arcangelo Corelli.

The classical period

During the second half of the eighteenth century, music came to be regularly disseminated through published editions. Even a reliable text gives an incomplete idea of what was originally performed, since players and singers continued to have important individual input. But the major treatises by Quantz, Leopold Mozart and C. P. E. Bach cover many aspects of contemporary practice. They draw a close parallel between music and language, placing a premium upon the performer's ability to move an audience. Social conditions favoured the rise of the public concert, which at first flourished in relatively small venues, encouraging an articulate, intimate performing style. Written descriptions of concert standards within reviews are notoriously difficult to interpret. A famous example is Charles Burney's description of the Mannheim orchestra as an army of generals, equally fit to plan a battle as to fight it; he qualified his enthusiasm with a criticism of the wind tuning, whose sourness he reckoned to be a universal orchestral problem.⁵ A notorious account of the Lyons orchestra in 1785–6 reported that the leader had neither intelligence nor an accurate style of performance and that there were unauthorised absences among his colleagues for reasons which we should now regard as paltry. Most concerts (unlike opera) could usually count on only one rehearsal and sometimes there were none. Programmes placed a premium on variety and novelty, comprising a mixture of solo, chamber, orchestral and vocal music. For example, on 25 November 1781 the inaugural concert of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra included a symphony by Joseph Schmitt, a hymn by Reichardt, Berger's Violin Concerto, a quartet of authorship now unknown,

a symphony by J. C. Bach, an aria by Sacchini and a symphony by E. W. Wolf.

Burney identifies his century's thirst for new music in his *General History*:

So changeable is taste in Music, and so transient the favour of any particular style, that its history is like that of a ploughed field: such a year it produced wheat, such a year barley, peas, or clover: and such a year it lay fallow. But none of its productions remain, except perhaps a small part of last year's crop, and the corn and weeds that now cover its surface.⁶

An important exception to this general rule is of course Handel's continuing popularity in England long after his death. By the end of the century, impresarios such as Salomon, who attracted Haydn to London after his lengthy service at the Esterházy court, increasingly caused success to be judged in commercial terms as well as by aesthetic approval. Mozart represented a new breed of freelance musician, astutely presenting himself to the Viennese audience of the 1780s in his piano concertos in the role of both composer and performer. He also wrote operatic roles and solo works explicitly tailored to the individual abilities of his performing colleagues. A generation later, Beethoven was to raise fierce challenges to the orchestral player because he made unfamiliar and difficult technical and stylistic demands on individuals at a time when conditions for rehearsal and performance were unfavourable as a result of social and political as well as musical factors.

We are fortunate to have a snapshot of eighteenth-century Austrian training in the form of a 'Musick Plan', a system of education drawn up by Mozart's clarinettist Anton Stadler in 1799 in response to an invitation from the Hungarian Count Georg Festetics. Stadler advocated a six-year course in which all students would learn aspects of theory, performance and composition, including piano, organ or figured bass, violin and wind instruments, to complement their principal study. All music students were to learn the art of singing, whatever the quality of their individual voices. Emphasising the importance of a good general education, he observed that anyone wanting to understand music must know the whole of worldly wisdom and mathematics, poetry, elocution, art and many languages.⁷

The nineteenth century

The industrial age brought sweeping changes, notably transport possibilities which enabled virtuoso careers to flourish and also affected the lives of orchestral musicians. As scores travelled more widely, performance indications tended to become ever more precise. The complexity of German accompaniments gradually rendered singers' freedom

to ornament less appropriate; one author warned that ‘compositions by Mozart, Haydn, Cherubini and Winter will bear fewer embellishments than those of Salieri, Cimarosa, Martin and Paisiello’.⁸ The establishment of conservatoires throughout Europe was bound to encourage technical virtuosity, especially since this is an aspect of performance which can be readily assessed. Not surprisingly, the musical amateur began to disappear from public concert life. The piano maintained a central position both in the domestic environment (almost all orchestral music being arranged for piano duet) and on the concert platform, where Liszt was representative of the new breed of touring virtuosos. Liszt’s technical innovations enabled a remarkable transcription of orchestral idioms to the piano, his virtuoso prowess having been inspired by the violinist Niccolò Paganini, one of the most hypnotic of all nineteenth-century figures.

The development of symphony orchestras brought public concert series supported by subscription, while also establishing the role of the conductor. Beethoven was one of the first musicians in Vienna to direct without an instrument, operating from a separate music desk; he is said to have been especially concerned to convey the music’s expression, rather than a regular beat. Orchestras varied greatly in size; in the later nineteenth century Brahms’s experience ranged from his favourite Meiningen ensemble, with forty-eight players, to the ninety-eight-strong Leipzig Gewandhaus. By his time, detached, contemplative listening had become the very purpose of performance; literary journals and newspapers give a good idea of how concerts were received, as professional criticism became established at the hands of such writers as Eduard Hanslick and George Bernard Shaw. Choral societies in England tended to associate good music with religion rather than musical quality, and were furnished with vast quantities of cheap vocal scores by the publisher Vincent Novello; they continue to supply a now rare opportunity for amateur musicians to appear on the public stage. The brass-band movement was also part of an appetite for self-help and for moral and material improvement.

The revival of earlier music began in earnest, important examples being Mendelssohn’s 1829 performance of Bach’s *St Matthew Passion* and Brahms’s choral repertoire of Morley, Schütz, Palestrina, Bach and Handel. Meanwhile, the publishing of collected editions of the works of Bach, Handel, Mozart and others established the notion of the definitive text. But there was still a widespread belief that old music needed to be updated in performance; in the first edition of *Grove’s Dictionary*, Ebenezer Prout’s article on ‘additional accompaniments’ argues that literal performance of music by Bach and Handel fails to realise the intentions of the composer.⁹ Conversely, increasing numbers of musicians came to appreciate that contemporary

performing styles did not necessarily suit music from earlier times. Individuals such as Arnold Dolmetsch pioneered developments in historical awareness which were to win widespread acceptance during the twentieth century. His activities were timely because Wagner's highly influential conducting had tended to make the music of previous generations sound more like his own, replacing verbal elements of interpretation with pictorial ones.

The twentieth century

The development of communications in the twentieth century enabled musicians to sample and digest interpretations world-wide. The possibilities of recording fundamentally changed the character of music-making, the studio gradually bringing a new reverence for technical accuracy which in turn found its way into the concert hall. The marketing of various kinds of musician has been greatly influenced by the recording industry, both in popular and in classical fields.

In the nineteenth century, popular music still overlapped with concert, theatre and domestic activity. Following the Industrial Revolution the public increasingly sought out music in parks, pleasure gardens, dance halls and music halls, while the latest tunes would also be heard via the street barrel organs. Gradually, serious music was taken out of the reach of the general public, as operetta and music hall filled the accessibility gap created by Verdi and Wagner. From America soon appeared barn dances and Sousa marches, a real breakthrough coming with ragtime and the foxtrot. Jazz initially combined diverse musical elements from Africa, Europe and America, finding an early place on riverboats and advertising wagons and at parades, funerals, dance halls and cabarets. Extempore playing was always a central feature, combining individual and collective skills and drawing on various musical styles, including march, rag, hymn and blues. Jazz performers have increasingly thought of themselves not merely as entertainers but as professional proponents of a subtle and complex art form.

In the interwar period Paul Whiteman provided a highly accessible jazz image, and major American comedies by Kern, Gershwin, Rodgers and Cole Porter achieved enormous popularity. National barriers tended to break down after about 1940, when music could be readily transported and recorded and thus become part of a complex business and financial world. Important individual styles included swing, with its new instrumentation, vibrant sound and powerful rhythmic drive; then in the mid 1950s rock and roll, with a basic difference in sound, instrumentation and expressive intent; then rock in the 1960s and 1970s, with its formal and tonal variety and freedom linked strongly to political sentiments and social radicalism.