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0521810930 - The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music

Bruce Ellis Benson

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THE IMPROVISATION OF MUSICAL DIALOGUE

A Phenomenology of Music

What takes place when a composer creates a piece of music? To what extent is a performer part of the creative process? Although the dominant paradigm for music making in our era has been that of creation and reproduction – in which composers are the true “creators” and performers primarily carry out their wishes – does that way of thinking reflect actual musical practice?

By way of a phenomenology of music making, Bruce Ellis Benson argues for the innovative thesis that composers, performers, and even listeners are more properly seen as “improvisers.” Working between the disciplines of philosophy and musicology, as well as the traditions of analytic and continental philosophy, Benson offers a rich tapestry of theoretical discussion interwoven with a wide range of musical examples from classical music, jazz, and other genres. He demonstrates how improvisation (defined in a broad rather than narrow sense) is essential to the entire phenomenon of music making. From the perspective of this improvisatory view, he suggests that music making is actually the continual creation and recreation of music – a constant improvisation.

Succinct and lucid, not only will this important book be a provocative read for philosophers of art and musicologists, it should also appeal to general readers, especially those who compose and perform music.

Bruce Ellis Benson is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Wheaton College (Illinois).

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BRUCE ELLIS BENSON

Wheaton College



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In memoriam

Hans-Georg Gadamer

(1900–2002)

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I write pieces that are like drawings in a crayon book and the musicians color them themselves.

– Carla Bley

Interpreting language means: understanding language; interpreting music means: making music.

– Theodor Adorno

[Music] needs to be constantly changed and cannot bear many repetitions without making us weary.

– Immanuel Kant

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Preface

ON LEARNING THAT I WAS WORKING ON A PHENOMENOLOGY of music making, one philosopher commented to me that, although he was also a musician, he had never wanted to think philosophically about music. He was worried that it might diminish the pleasure he derived from playing and listening to music. Somehow it was impossible to miss the hint of a suggestion that I follow his example.

No doubt there *are* ways of thinking and writing about music that could have that effect. Sometimes it seems that philosophers have lost sight of the musical experience itself, so that music ends up being treated as an ontological puzzle. For instance, although Roman Ingarden in many ways comes close to capturing the musical experience, toward the end of his life he made the astonishing admission that the primary focus of his phenomenology of music had not really been that of understanding music at all. Or in his own words: “The specifically aesthetic questions were to me at that time of secondary importance.”¹ Ingarden’s real concern was instead with the issue of realism versus idealism – and the

¹ Quoted in Max Rieger, “Roman Ingarden and His Time,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 29 (1971) 443.

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work of art was just a particularly useful test case. Precisely this focus may help explain why, even though Ingarden's *Ontology of the Work of Art* purports to be a *phenomenology* of art works (including not merely musical works but also paintings, architecture, and film) and thus presumably guided by what Edmund Husserl termed the "things themselves" [*die Sachen selbst*], his real concern is to show that musical works remain "untouched" by performances.

Given that the actual phenomenon of making music has sometimes played second fiddle in philosophical reflections on music, it is not surprising that musicians have often wondered how those reflections relate to music making. In contrast, my concern is explicitly with what composers, performers, and listeners *do*. I have been continually goaded by the question that a fellow musician often asked when I was improvising at the piano: "What are you *doing*?" While he was primarily referring to the harmonic and structural changes that I was making, his question left me wondering what musicians really do. I still do not have a complete answer to that question. And perhaps that is all for the best: for music making is a wonderfully complex activity that resists precise definition.

What *is* clear to me, though, is that the binary schema of "composing" and "performing," which goes along with the construal of music making as being primarily about the production and reproduction of musical works, doesn't describe very well what musicians actually do. In its place, I wish to suggest an improvisational model of music, one that depicts composers, performers, and listeners as partners in dialogue. From this perspective, music is a conversation in which no one partner has exclusive control. Of course, the binary schema of composition/performance always *has* allowed for a kind of dialogue – and astute composers, performers, and listeners would be quick to point that out. Yet, I think the dialogical character of music making is not particularly

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well described by that binary schema and, furthermore, that the binary schema has significantly inhibited genuine dialogue.

To make that case, though, I first need to provide a phenomenology of musical experience. Briefly put, phenomenology is the attempt to bring the phenomena to light and, on the basis of the phenomena themselves, to develop a *logos* – a structure or theory. Thus, the point of considering the activities of composition and performance in depth is to see how they actually function and – on that basis – to construct a theory. On Husserl's view, philosophers are all too often guilty of constructing their theories and then attempting to “bend” the phenomena to fit those theories. Of course, there is no ultimate escape from this problem. One can merely seek to minimize it, and starting from the phenomena at least helps.

In Chapter 1, I sketch the way in which we usually *think* about music making, in effect providing a phenomenology of music theory. Then, in Chapters 2 and 3, I turn to the practices of composing and performing. Whereas Chapter 2 focuses on the ways in which composing involves improvisation, Chapter 3 shows how that improvisation is continued by performers. What we call “classical music” undoubtedly best exemplifies the composition/performance schema. Thus, my strategy will be to show where – even in classical music – that schema proves inadequate. And, if it proves inadequate in classical music, the implication is that it will likely fare even worse in describing other sorts of music. In Chapter 4, I provide a kind of improvisatory conception of music, with reference to classical music, jazz, and other genres. Those who long for neatly tied theories will likely be disappointed with my view of music in which the lines between composition and performance are hardly “neat.” But I think that “messiness” simply reflects actual musical practice. Finally, in Chapter 5, I turn to the question of responsibilities of those who take part in the musical dialogue. What does it mean to respect the musical

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other? And how can there be room for both respect for the other and creativity?

Although the goal of this text is to provide a phenomenology of musical activity, there are at least two issues that underlie much of the discussion. One is ontology, specifically the ontological status of musical works. Such is the primary concern, naturally, of Ingarden's *Ontology of the Work of Art*, although much of his discussion on music touches (by necessity) on aspects of performance. In the same way, conversely, much of what follows will necessarily concern the ontology of the musical work. A second issue is that of hermeneutics, usually defined as the interpretation of texts. As such, it would seem to be primarily – or even solely – a matter of musical performance. But, since I hope to make clear that music making is *fundamentally* improvisational (in the broad sense that I describe in Chapter 1), then hermeneutical issues will be central to the entire discussion. While the “hermeneutics of music” certainly includes questions of composers’ intentions, I argue that it goes far beyond them.² As should become evident, even though I think the intentions of composers can be known (at least to some extent) and should be respected, composers are not the only participants in the musical dialogue who have intentions, nor do their intentions necessarily trump the intentions of all other participants. Moreover, there may be different ways of respecting those intentions.³

² An excellent discussion of “authorial intention” – representing various sides of the issue – can be found in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

³ There is, of course, a further issue that naturally arises in a phenomenology of music: what “content” does music communicate? Given the wealth of resources on the subject, I have chosen not to focus on what music conveys. Of course, because I assume that composers (as well as performers and listeners) have intentions that go beyond simply the mechanics of sound production, I will at points make reference to the musical content of particular pieces.

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Both the ontological and hermeneutical aspects are central to Gadamer's thought. On Gadamer's account, musical performance has the same basic interpretational structure characteristic of reading a text or seeing a piece of visual art.⁴ In other words, reading a text is in effect a "performance," *for only in reading does the text truly exist*. And I think Gadamer is right in insisting on this performance character of interpretation. Yet, although that structure is similar in crucial ways, there is an important difference. For, while reading a text or encountering a piece of visual art is something that can be done silently, the result of a performance must be that of *sound*. There can be no silent musical performance. As Adorno puts it, "interpreting language means: understanding language; interpreting music means: making music."⁵

Making music is what this book is all about. While writing on music could have the effect of spoiling the musical experience, my hope is to do precisely the opposite.

It goes without saying that my work would not be possible were it not for the work of many others. Yet, since my way of thinking about music making heavily emphasizes the role of the other, acknowledging that dependence is particularly appropriate, and I do so gladly. My thanks to Elizabeth A. Behnke, Rudolf Bernet, Hermann Danuser, William Desmond, Garry Hagberg, Otto Pöggeler, Gunther Scholz, F. Joseph Smith, Bernhard Waldenfels, and Merold Westphal, all of whom not only provided insight but encouragement. Thanks also to Carla Bley, who allowed me to include her words in the epigraph. And thanks to Wilfried Joris for asking.

⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., rev. trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989) xxxi.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, "Fragment über Musik und Sprache," in *Sprache, Dichtung, Musik*, ed. Jakob Knaus (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1973) 73.

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I am grateful to Hans-Georg Gadamer, who graciously encouraged me at the beginning of the project and subsequently was willing to read and critique an early part of it. Those familiar with his thought will no doubt see how much I am indebted to him. Gadamer had long hoped to see his hermeneutics applied to music. I am only sorry that he did not live to see this book's completion.

My research would have been impossible without the generous financial assistance of the Belgian-American Education Foundation, the Fulbright Commission, the *Onderzoeksfonds* of the University of Leuven, and the Wheaton College Alumni Association.

Finally, I would be greatly amiss were I not to recognize the support that I have received for this project – all along the way – from my mother and late father and a cadre of friends and musicians too numerous to mention here. To Jackie, thanks for appreciating my own music making, and everything else.