

THE IMPROVISATION OF MUSICAL
DIALOGUE

A Phenomenology of Music

BRUCE ELLIS BENSON

Wheaton College



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Bruce Ellis Benson 2003

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface ITC New Baskerville 10/14 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Benson, Bruce Ellis, 1960–
The improvisation of musical dialogue : a phenomenology of music /
Bruce Ellis Benson.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

Contents: Between composition and performance – Composing: from Ursprung to
Fassung letzter Hand – Performing: the improvisation of preservation – The Ergon
with Energeia – The ethics of musical dialogue.

ISBN 0-521-81093-0 – ISBN 0-521-00932-4 (pb.)

1. Music – Philosophy and aesthetics. 2. Improvisation (Music) I. Title.

ML3845 .B358 2003
781.4'3117-dc21 2002067419

ISBN 0 521 81093 0 hardback
ISBN 0 521 00932 4 paperback

Contents

Preface • ix

ONE. Between Composition and Performance • 1

TWO. Composing: From *Ursprung* to *Fassung*
letzter Hand • 33

THREE. Performing: The Improvisation of
Preservation • 77

FOUR. The *Ergon* within *Energieia* • 125

FIVE. Being Musical with the Other • 163

Index • 193

ONE

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.

The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue

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.

Between Composition and Performance

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

Composition, Works, and Performance

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

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”).

The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue

discussed by musicologists such as Carl Dahlhaus and philosophers 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 Composition 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 following 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

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.

Between Composition and Performance

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(1) 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

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.

The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue

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.

Between Composition and Performance

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.

The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue

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 occurrence.*"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

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).

Between Composition and Performance

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.

The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue

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

¹⁷ Hans Pfitzner, *Werk und Wiedergabe* (Augsburg: Benno Filsner, 1929).

¹⁸ “What a Musical Work Is” 66–7.

Between Composition and Performance

mention the role of effort) and instead emphasizes the special “powers” of the individual composer. Given this conception of composer as demiurge, it is not surprising that composition tends to be seen as a mysterious process. And the assumption that the composer is a true creator has proven decisive in regulating the practice of classical music. Perhaps the single most important influence has to do with the composer’s intentions and how we are to handle them. The musicologist Donald Jay Grout begins an essay on performance by, as he puts it, “setting down some truisms,” the first of which is that “an ideal performance is one that perfectly realizes the composer’s intentions.”¹⁹ A great deal of the importance that we ascribe to performers is actually a kind of derivative importance: in effect, they are like priests whose prestige comes primarily from being mediators between listeners and the great composers.

While this characterization might be criticized as somewhat extreme, it reflects the thinking of at least *many* composers and performers in the past two centuries. Whereas Haydn claimed that “the free arts and the so beautiful science of composition tolerate no shackling” (an understandable sentiment from someone forced to wear the livery while in the service of Prince Esterházy), Carl Maria von Weber went so far as to demand that the composer become “free as a god.”²⁰ In light of this conception of the composer as god or demiurge, E. T. A. Hoffmann (writing in a review of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony) provides the following guideline for the performer: “The true

¹⁹ Donald Jay Grout, “On Historical Authenticity in the Performance of Old Music,” in *Essays in Honor of Archibald Thompson Davison* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957) 341.

²⁰ Friedrich Blume, *Classic and Romantic Music: A Comprehensive Survey*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1970) 91 and Walter Salmen, “Social Obligations of the Emancipated Musician in the 19th Century,” in *The Social Status of the Professional Musician from the Middle Ages to the 19th Century*, ed. Walter Salmen (New York: Pendragon, 1983) 270.

The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue

artist lives only in the work that he conceives and then performs as the composer intended it. He disdains to let his own personality intervene in any way.”²¹

By the twentieth century, this way of thinking about the respective roles of composer and performer had become more or less the norm. For example, Paul Hindemith speaks of the performer as “the intermediate transformer station,” whose role is to “duplicate the preestablished values of the composer’s creation.”²² Aaron Copland likewise characterizes the performer as “a kind of middleman” who “exists to serve the composer.”²³ An even more striking example of the view that performers ought to know their place (and stay there) is that of Igor Stravinsky, who sees the role of the performer as “the strict putting into effect of an explicit will [i.e., the composer’s will] that contains nothing beyond what it specifically commands.”²⁴ Stravinsky attempts to beat performers back into cowering “submission” (to use his term). He rails vehemently against “sins” against either the “letter” or “spirit” of a composition, “criminal assaults” against the composer’s text, and “betraying” the composer (who, in turn, becomes a “victim”). What he demands is “the conformity

²¹ E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *Musical Writings: Kreisleriana, The Poet and the Composer*, *Music Criticism*, ed. David Charlton, trans. Martyn Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 103.

²² Paul Hindemith, *A Composer’s World: Horizons and Limitations* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1961) 153.

²³ Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1957) 258. Elsewhere, Copland does recognize that “every performance that has been logically conceived represents a reading in some sense.” See *Music and Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952) 53.

²⁴ Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music*, trans. Arthur Knoedel and Ingolf Dahl (New York: Vintage, 1947) 127. It was Richard Taruskin’s account of Stravinsky that first made me aware of Stravinsky’s “quasi-religious fundamentalism” (as Taruskin so aptly puts it). See his “The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past” in Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 129.

Between Composition and Performance

of that presentation to the composer's will." It is clear who is supposed to be in charge.²⁵

Given the kinds of expectations of composers such as Hindemith, Copland, and Stravinsky, it is not surprising that Ingarden – in giving what he takes to be merely a phenomenological description of the musical work – speaks of the notes of the score as “*imperative symbols*.”²⁶ In effect, they have a *moral* force, in the sense that the performer is supposed to *obey* them. Similarly, I take it that Wolterstorff and Goodman are simply expressing the dominant view of the “moral” force that scores carry.

It is no mere coincidence that the views expressed by Hindemith, Copland, and Stravinsky sound so remarkably similar: twentieth-century composers have been among the most ardent proponents of the view of performer as “mouthpiece” of the composer rather than as “co-creator.” This is not to say that performers are superfluous, since, at least in most cases, composers need performers to present their works to their listeners. To at least that extent, then, performers are vital. Moreover, whether composers like it or not, listeners often expect performances to exhibit a certain level of creativity. Of course, that expectation doesn't always fit very well with the expectation of fidelity. But, as with many things, our expectations are often contradictory. Still, it seems fair to say that we (and that “we” includes composers, performers, and listeners alike) tend to view the role of the performer more as middleman than as co-creator.

The idea that the performer is almost a “necessary evil” has sometimes even been carried over to the listener. Regarding what he terms “consideration for the listener,” Schoenberg writes in a letter: “I have as little of this as he has for me. I only know

²⁵ *Poetics of Music* 129–30 and 139.

²⁶ Roman Ingarden, *Ontology of the Work of Art: The Musical Work – The Picture – The Architectural Work – The Film*, trans. Raymond Meyer with John T. Goldthwait (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989) 25 (my italics).

The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue

that he exists, and as long as he is not indispensable on acoustic grounds (since music does not sound right in an empty hall), he annoys me.”²⁷ For Schoenberg, then, listeners become merely an acoustic necessity – and an annoying one at that.

The ideal of *Werktreue* has proven so hegemonic that it has even spilled over from classical music into other genres. For instance, in the last decade, both Wynton Marsalis (with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra) and William Russo (with the Chicago Jazz Ensemble) have provided us with painstakingly historically accurate performances of Duke Ellington compositions – along with Ellingtonian performance practice. One can easily argue that Ellington’s compositions are as worthy of preservation as those composing the classical canon. But Marsalis’s performance practice seems to go against his earlier stated views on the difference between classical music and jazz. As he puts it: “Concert musicians are artisans – Jazz musicians are artists.” Parsing out that distinction, jazz musicians have in effect the role of creator similar to that of classical composers. Thus, with this distinction in mind, Marsalis insists that – in performing classical music (and Marsalis certainly speaks as an accomplished performer of classical music) – “the best thing you can do is not mess it up.”²⁸ Yet, in seeking an historically accurate performance of jazz, Marsalis’s goal is no longer that of “improvisation” but simply “not messing it up.” Understandably, Marsalis has been criticized by some as promoting a conception of jazz that turns it into a “museum.”

Clearly, any musical practice that has the notions of *Werktreue* and the composer as “true” creator as its ideals – whether that be classical music or jazz or any other genre – cannot help but end up tending in the direction of a kind of monologue in which

²⁷ Arnold Schoenberg, *Ausgewählte Briefe*, ed. Erwin Stein (Mainz: B. Schott’s Soehne, 1958) 52.

²⁸ See Marsalis’s remarks in Bruce Buschel, “Angry Young Man with a Horn,” *Gentlemen’s Quarterly* (February 1987) 195.

Between Composition and Performance

the principal voice is that of the composer. But such a model represents only *one* way of thinking about music. What other possibilities might there be?

Beethoven or Rossini?

Gadamer claims that an ideal dialogue has what he calls the “*logical structure of openness*.” I think there are at least two aspects to this “openness.” First, the conversation often brings something into the open: it sheds new light on what is being discussed and allows us to think about it (or, in this case, *hear* it) in a new way. Second, the dialogue is itself open, since it (to quote Gadamer) is in a “state of indeterminacy.”²⁹ In order for a genuine dialogue to take place, the outcome cannot be settled in advance. Without at least some “loose-play” or uncertainty, true conversation is impossible. But, of course, this is an ideal for conversations, not necessarily a reflection of how they always operate. Moreover, Gadamer recognizes that those participating in a dialogue usually have certain expectations of how it should function. In saying that genuine dialogues are characterized by “openness,” Gadamer hardly means to suggest that dialogues ought to have no rules. Precisely the rules are what allow the conversation to take place at all. In effect, they open up a kind of space in which dialogue can be conducted.³⁰ Yet, even though rules are clearly necessary for a dialogue even to exist, those rules can be restrictive or comparatively open. Open dialogues are governed by rules that are flexible – and are themselves open to continuing modification.

It hardly needs to be said that, viewed as a dialogue, the practice of classical music is not particularly open. Historically, though, our current way of thinking about music has hardly been the

²⁹ *Truth and Method* 362–3.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 107.

The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue

only option. Indeed, it is a way of thinking that is – at least to a great extent – remarkably *recent*. So what are the alternatives? Are we faced with a choice between *Werktreue* and no guidelines at all (so that “anything goes”)? It is far too simplistic merely to give up the ideal of *Werktreue*: we need something in its place. Instead of looking forward for a different model to guide our music making, I suggest that we look back. For, although the ideals of the discourse of classical music have so dominated our thought for the past two centuries that it seems difficult even to imagine another way of thinking about music, note that in the early 1800s this way of thinking represented merely *a* model of music rather than *the* model. What characterized that age were two very different ways of thinking about music making – that of Beethoven and that of Rossini. And it was clearly Beethoven who was the innovator.

Although we might be tempted to think of Beethoven and Rossini as merely representing two different musical styles, that difference is clearly *philosophical* in nature: for at stake are two different ways of *conceiving* not only the nature of musical works and the role of the performance in presenting them but also the connection between the artist and the community. On the one hand, Beethoven saw his symphonies as “inviolable musical ‘texts’ whose meaning is to be deciphered with ‘exegetical’ interpretations; a Rossini score, on the other hand, is a mere recipe for a performance.”³¹ What accounts for this difference is that Rossini thought of his music not as a “work” but as something that came into existence only in the moment of performance. In practice, this meant that a piece of music had no fixed identity and so could be adapted for a given performance. Thus, the performer had an important role in the creation of musical works. Even more important, it was not the *work* that was given

³¹ *Nineteenth-Century Music* 9.

Between Composition and Performance

precedence; rather, the work (and thus the composer) was in effect a partner in dialogue with performers and listeners.

Interestingly enough, in his lectures on aesthetics, Hegel makes a distinction between two kinds of performers that clearly reflects the influence of these two different musical models. On the one hand, the first sort of performer “does not wish to render anything beyond what the work in hand already contains.” Indeed “the executant artist not only need not, but must not, add anything of his own, or otherwise he will spoil the effect. He must submit himself entirely to the character of the work and intend to be only an obedient instrument.” Here we have a statement of the ideal of *Werktreue* that is as forceful and as uncompromising as any. On the other hand, Hegel’s second version of the performer (and he explicitly mentions Rossini in this regard) is of one who “composes in his interpretation, fills in what is missing, deepens what is superficial, ensouls what is soulless and in this way appears as plainly independent and productive. So, for example, in Italian opera much is always left to the singer: particularly in embellishment he is left room for free play.” As a result, “*we have present before us not merely a work of art but the actual production of one.*”³² In music making of this sort, the performer and the composer work together as co-creators, thus blurring the line between the composer and the performer.

Of course, one might be tempted to counter at this point that Beethoven’s texts just *are* such that they call for an “executant artist,” whereas Rossini’s scores call for what we might term an “embellishing artist.” Such an argument might take the form: “If we examine a Beethoven score, we realize that it has

³² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. II, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) 955–7 (my italics; translation modified).