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The Three Lacanian Registers of Musical Performance

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Abstract

Of course, music performance has a long “artisanal” history. After all, the training of musicians to perform has been the mainstay of academies and conservatoria for centuries. But the discipline of music performance as part of an academic musicology is a much more recent invention. We argue that it arises some time in the 1960s, when scholars could begin to write comparative histories of performance and think difference choices as to performance style. Against the now sterile authentic/non-authentic, modern/post-modern debates that characterise contemporary music studies, we propose that the various approaches might be classified according to the three Lacanian registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. We put forward a certain “Real” at stake in performance, although it could never be the basis of any practice, musical manifesto or even properly belong to a history of music performance.

Key Words: Classical Music, Performance, Lacan, Imaginary, Symbolic, Real

Korean-born Nam June Paik's *Concerto for TV Cello and Video Tape* (1971) occupies an important position in the history of performance art. Generalising a little, we might say that the concept or medium of performance begins with the removal of the proscenium arch of classical theatre and the bringing together of the performer and the audience. The first textbooks on the subject inevitably begin with the Dadaist Cabaret Voltaire of the First World War or the Surrealist Palais des Fêtes of the 1920s, before moving on to the Bauhaus-inspired Black Mountain College in North Carolina in the 1950s and ending with the taboo-breaking rituals of someone like Carolee Schneeman in the 1960s, in which the performers overcome their inhibitions and the recording camera does not occupy any external voyeuristic position but is invited into the action.¹ Performance, we might say, at least in this initial impulse or moment, is explicitly anti-theatrical in the sense of wanting to do away both with any role enacted by the performer and any distance between the performer and the audience. What we have before us is meant to be real, in the sense of being literal, present, unmediated and taking place just once in the world.

But in the 1970s there were important works like Dan Graham's *Intention Intentionality Sequence* (1972), in which the artist stands on stage and attempts – as in that first moment of performance – to occupy a shared time and space, describing his situation to the audience assembled before him. However, as the performance proceeds – and it is this failure that is its point – Graham becomes increasingly unable to account for what he is looking at. As he speaks of the audience, they react to what he says, and when he attempts to account for this change they transform again, in a kind of infinite regress. And this is even more the case for Graham's subsequent *Performer/Audience/Mirror* (1977), in which he stands on a stage in front of an enormous mirror in which the audience can see themselves reflected, so that as Graham describes them they can see themselves reacting to his description, thus setting off another round of changes, almost independently of Graham's words.² Here in this second moment of performance, as opposed to that first in which the performer and the audience are entirely visible to each other and the performer's identity is given by their identification with the gaze of the audience, performer and audience are precisely *not* entirely exposed to each other in the same time and place. If Graham

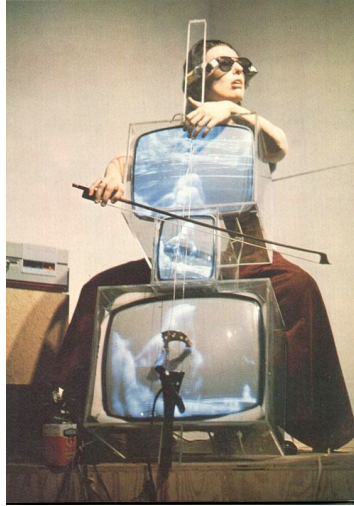
cannot see himself the way the audience sees him, the audience for their part cannot see themselves the way Graham sees them.



Dan Graham, *Performer/Audience/Mirror* (1977)

Image courtesy Dan Graham

It is in this light that we must understand Paik's *Concerto for TV Cello and Video Tape*. In the piece we have the well-known cellist Charlotte Moorman seemingly playing on strings running down a number of TV screens arranged to form the shape of a cello. On the screens are running a mixture of pre-recorded and real-time videos, shot from a video camera opposite her, showing her playing the same piece. Of course, if we can imagine this, what we see of Moorman playing the cello is never exactly what we hear, but always either momentarily delayed or in advance. Like the Graham piece – and here we might suggest it is about performance in that second sense – the two are always slightly out of synch. The performer we see is never exactly “in” their music, or at least does not appear so to us, although this is supposed to be one of the defining qualities of live performance.³ For those who are aware of how a cello is played, the music they hear from the monitors does not correspond to what Moorman is performing (different finger positions, different movements of the arm). Even Moorman's expressive face and swaying body emoting the music from atop the stack of monitors does not match what we hear. There is thus an internal dissonance that makes her performance appear inauthentic or at least mimed, as though she stands outside of the music listening to herself play.



Nam June Paik, *Concerto for TV, Cello and Video Tape* (1971)

Image courtesy Art Gallery of New South Wales

It is fascinating to make the connection – which to our knowledge has not yet been made – to another artwork involving musical performance, produced almost 40 years after Paik's. It is *k. 364: A Journey by Train* (2010) by the Scottish artist Douglas Gordon. Gordon is well known for a series of "conceptual" video pieces involving altering various of the usual parameters of the medium. In *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), he famously slowed down the projection of Alfred Hitchcock's thriller so that it now took 24 hours to complete. Or in *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (2006), Gordon and fellow artist Philippe Parreno trained some 17 cameras on the French football captain Zinedine Zidane playing, following not the ball but Zidane himself throughout the 90-minute duration of the game. By contrast, *k. 364* appears relatively conventional. It follows two Israeli musicians, the violist Avri Levitan and the violinist Roi Shiloah, as they travel by train through Poland to join the Amadeus Chamber Orchestra in Warsaw for a performance of Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante in E Flat Minor*, a piece in which viola and violin feature. After the "prologue" featuring them on the train looking out the windows at the still-haunted Polish landscape, the film is largely a recording of their performance, with their faces transformed by the music, their interplay both with each other and the conductor and the typical concert close-ups of their fingers actually making the music we hear. And all of this takes place in the uninterrupted "real" time of a concert performance with Mozart's music running continuously throughout, although it is obvious that what we are seeing has been edited after the event, with the camera positions seemingly having to be changed and set up again to get certain shots. (Towards the beginning of the musical performance, the screen splits into two halves

that are not always synchronised, and if we look carefully we can tell that the film combines footage taken from rehearsal with footage taken from the performance.)



Douglas Gordon, *k. 364: A Journey by Train* (2010)

Image courtesy Douglas Gordon

Gordon's piece is the subject of a chapter in the renowned modernist art critic Michael Fried's recent *Another Light: Jacques-Louis David to Thomas Demand*, which is a collection of essays on both historical and contemporary art. In 'Douglas Gordon's *k.364: A Journey by Train*', Fried begins by noting that – in the same complex manner as Gordon's other videos – there is a kind of literal temporality in the film, with the second half simply the recording of a live performance of Mozart's piece, which of course plays out in a way familiar to many. But, Fried argues, through the extraordinary intimacy of Gordon's depiction and the brilliant (if not quite illustrative) interplay of sound and image, the music is able to be brought alive again, performed and heard as though for the first time, with every little hesitation, improvisation and performer's instantaneous decision captured. As Fried writes:

[Gordon] had to find a piece of music that would lend itself to certain filmic operations as regards both image and sound. Moreover, precisely by doing so, he in effect reinterpreted or re-presented the *Sinfonia Concertante* in a way that aligns it, as we watch and listen, with something like an ideal of 'continuous presentness', an ideal Gordon expresses by the words 'no past – no future' (Fried 2014, 236).

However, Fried's real point here – and this is the meaning for him of the "prologue", showing the two musicians sitting on the train going through Poland – is that their immersion in the music in the second part of the film must be understood against the vast socio-historical meaning of Poland, especially for two Jewish

musicians. Undeniably, in the music they play they find a kind of forgetting – or, if this is too simple, perhaps something like a “working through” – of the pressing concerns of the world around them. And this can be expressed another way, which is only implicit in Fried’s essay (although it is a constant of his entire theoretical project), but that is brought out by the art-historically unexpected comparison with Paik’s piece, and that is the fact that what we might call the “absorptiveness” of *k. 364* – the commitment of Gordon’s piece both to show the absorption of the musicians in their music and to absorb the audience in his recording of their performance – is to be attained only against the background of such works as Paik’s, which insists on the *impossibility* of any direct connection to music, declaring that the literality of the world always enters and disrupts any relationship between the music, performer and audience.

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It is undoubtedly possible to write a history of performance art in terms of the three Lacanian registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. These categories are before all else structural, but they also appear to play out chronologically in the history of the medium, as though each were a response to (the failure of) the one before. The Imaginary register would correspond to that first “liberatory” moment of performance and to such performers as the Dadaists, the Surrealists, the Black Mountain College, Schneeman and the Happenings of figures like Allan Kaprow. Here what we have is the direct “anti-theatrical” attempt to overcome the distinction between the stage and the world and the performer and the audience. Events are simply “presented” without mediation, without costume, without script and ultimately without any performance as such. What we have is things in their literality, in the direct correspondence of what we see and its image, which of course is understood to have a “unifying” effect in the overcoming of social boundaries, as though the performers no longer had any shame or anything to hide and the audience no longer hid in the dark but acknowledged their presence to the performers. We can see all of this, for example, in the sexual exuberance of Schneeman, the communal exercises of Kaprow’s Happenings and the social and political transgressions of the Viennese Aktionists. And we might recall here words from Lacan’s ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function’ to describe this moment of performance. He speaks there of the “jubilant assumption of a specular image”, and suggests that in a kind of reciprocal relationship “this form [the image of the Other] situates the agency known as the ego... in a fictional direction that will remain forever irreducible” (Lacan 2006, 76).

This first Imaginary moment is then followed by a second Symbolic moment, which we might say is characterised by a certain “criticality”. We might even suggest that it corresponds to a period of post-modernism after that initial period of modernism. Here, as in Graham and Paik, there is not a unity of or mutual recognition between performer and audience, but more the impossibility of any such equivalence. And the dialogue in Graham’s performance and perhaps even the real presence of Moorman in Paik’s can be seen as a kind of *remarking* of this impossibility, a standing beside or outside of the situation in which they find themselves. Indeed, in a whole series of post-modern “identity” performances, the performer deliberately holds back from and comments on the expectations of the audience, understands their identity not in terms of any straightforward exposure, to be attained in breaking through social repressions or stereotypes, as in that first moment, but only in hiding from the audience’s gaze or playing on it, presenting not so much an identity as a reflection on the arbitrariness of any identity. We see an example of this in Afro-American woman artist Adrian Piper, who attempted to “pass” as a white man in a long-running series of durational performances entitled *The King of Solana Beach* (1974). (Needless to say, part of the point of the piece was not only to expose the racist expectations of her white audience, but also the fact that Afro-Americans themselves attempt to “pass” in real life, conform to and understand themselves in terms of a white gaze.) Or we might recall *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* (1992-4) by the Cuban Coco Fusco and Mexican Guillermo Gómez-Peña, in which they play the last remaining members of a recently discovered South American tribe sent on a faux-ethnographic tour in cages around the American Mid-West before an apparently credulous audience. (Here, if the piece is in part a satire on its audience’s seeming readiness to believe in such a preposterous set-up, it also evidences a certain nostalgia for a “real” ethnic identity on the part of its two post-ethnic performers, who as the tour goes on seem to spend more and more time in their roles.⁴) In the words of Lacan from his *Seminar XX* on Feminine Sexuality, what we have here are the symbols of a social structure that “envelopes the life of man in a network so total that they join together those who are going to engender him”, but at the same time there is posited an “at-least-one existence that, with regard to the [symbolic order], is inscribed in order to speak it” (Lacan 1999, 102).

However, we might point to a final stage of performance hinted at in *Two Undiscovered Amerindians*, which we would say is characterised by Fried’s word “absorption” and corresponds perhaps to a certain post-post-modernism. Here we appear to return to a certain anti-theatricality, an inability or refusal to occupy that critical meta-position in which the performer remains outside the performance and

comments on it from somewhere else. Instead, the performers – as Levitan and Shiloah in *k. 364* – are immersed in the performance, enacting it in real time without any apparent self-consciousness or critical distance. But it is more complicated than this, for Gordon’s point in prefacing their performance with such historically weighty material and Fried’s point concerning the relationship of absorption to theatricality is that this immersion is not immediate, unreflexive, unthinking, the effect of a presumed naturality, but the overcoming of a prior worldliness or even critical scepticism. (And thus in a way it must be understood to come after and not before that second moment of performance.) Part of the triumph of the performance of Mozart’s *Sinfonia Concertante* in Gordon’s film is that the performers are – and, in a way, are *only* – able to make the music they do in the light of the traumatic events of the Jewish Polish history that are recalled on the train journey. And at the same time the final triumphant “putting together” of the sound and image (and the two halves of the screen) through Gordon’s editing to produce a “continuous presentness” only has the meaning it does insofar as it is the overcoming of that separation between them that is the default position of all art music videos in the light of Paik (and as well an overcoming of the literality of the decision to film all of Mozart’s piece, like the decision to show all of the game Zidane played and the running of *Psycho* to fill up an entire day). And does this not remind us of Lacan’s final register of the Real, which precisely rejects any meta-position outside of the Symbolic? Again, from Lacan’s *On Feminine Sexuality*: “There is no Other of the Other. The Other, that is, the locus in which everything that can be articulated on the basis of the signifier comes to be inscribed, is, in its foundation, the Other in the most radical sense” (Lacan 1999, 81).

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As we suggest, it would entirely be possible to write a history of performance art through the three Lacanian registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. Indeed, certain critics have already attempted to do so with regard to such reality TV shows as *Big Brother* (Kavka 2008). But here, taking our lead from our initial comparison of Paik’s *Concerto for TV Cello* and Gordon’s *k. 364*, we would like to write a brief history of *musical* performance in terms of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. Musical performance, of course, has a long “artisanal” history of practical instruction, and performance is obviously a part of all musical scores with their instructions as to how they are to be played beyond any strict musical notation (Adagio, Allegro, Allegretto). But performance as a topic of musicology in its own right perhaps first arose some time in the mid 1960s corresponding with the rise of performance art.

The first synoptic or comparative histories arose about a decade later, around the same time as similar histories of performance art. Arguably, the foundational text of the new discipline is Edward T. Cone's *Musical Form and Musical Performance* (1968), which precisely makes the claim that there is something like a discernible subject of performance in music, which can be analysed as such and has its own history.⁵ Or, to put its claim more generally, there is never only the written score "as such", but this score is always open to performance, which is also to say interpretation. (Of course, understood in this sense, the necessity of music having to be performed and the possibility of a discipline based on this necessity, would be something like the founding of "reception theory" in literary criticism around the same time in the late '60s and early '70s.) The performance is not merely something added to the score, but is present from the beginning, as what makes the score accessible at all. This is Nicholas Cook's contention in the opening chapter of his *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance*, which not only posits the possibility of a history of performance in music, but more generally seeks to justify this by claiming that *all* music is a matter of performance: "The experience of live or recorded performance is a primary form of music's existence, not just the reflection of a notated text" (Cook 2013, 1).

But then the question is raised – in reaction against the apparent lack of criteria of the new discipline – of what exactly performance expresses, what purpose does studying performance serve, what is or should be its relationship to music. That is to say, after the initial justification of performance as a musicological discipline, there was a backlash, requiring that it be bound by a "truth" to the music. The performance of music is not merely to be wilful or arbitrary, and not all musical performances are the same. This line of thinking was very much tied up with the rise of the "early music" movement of the 1960s and its playing on "period" instruments and working from the composer's "original" hand-written score. This is Nikolaus Harnoncourt, conductor of *Concertus Musicus* of Vienna, for example, on what he understands as the task of "period" performance: "The only option open to us is to try to imagine, as precisely as possible, the way the music was made at the time, using eye-witness accounts and contemporary documentation" (Harnoncourt 1997, 8). And this attitude was carried on by such music writers as Robert Donnington, who very much made "authenticity" the criterion of good musical performance: "We can best serve early music by matching our modern interpretation as closely as possible to what we know of the original interpretation" (Donnington 1992, 37). But then, of course, there was a reaction to *this* – and this was not simply the same as that first moment because here it is not only a matter of acknowledging the necessary mediation of performance, but rather arguing

explicitly for the essential *arbitrariness* of performance, that what a history or discipline of performance reveals is that our relationship to music is always time- and context-bound without any way of stepping outside of this. This kind of argument can be seen in certain self-consciously “radical” music academics, who very much want to shake up, even do away with (while generalising to the limit), the discipline of performance studies. A well-known example of this is conductor John Butt, who writes in his aptly titled *Playing with History*: “Since the musico-historical contexts of composing individuals are invariably different, then even if their works are identical in sound structure they will differ in aesthetic and artistic attributes” (Butt 2002, 59).⁶

These two positions were first established some thirty years ago at the time of cultural post-modernism. They were set out very much as the two poles or extremes between which the theorisation of musical performance would swing. And alternately contemporary theorists of musical performance have chosen either one pole or the other. For example, in reaction to what they see as post-modern “relativism”, there are renewed calls for an “adherence” to the composer’s original intention that performance should reflect, often made by actual cultural or political conservatives or those wanting to hold to the “scepticism” of Anglo-American analytic philosophy against the “sophism” of French theory. We can see this in places as various as the entry on ‘Performing Practice’ in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* and in American music scholar Peter Kivy’s *Authenticities: Philosophical Reflections on Musical Performance*.⁷ Or, against this, there is a renewed and revitalised “post-modernism” that, even while acknowledging that the original moment of post-modernism is over, wants to retain something of its demystifying and even popularising impulse, as opposed to what it sees as the implicit elitism and exclusivity of classical music. Although classical music might aspire to the “timelessness” of eternal human values, what is revealed for these polemicists is that it is just as driven by fads and fashions as popular music and culture more widely. In the words of organist Peter Williams, writing in the self-consciously up-to-date *Routledge Companion to Contemporary Musical Thought*: “The trouble with artistic conviction... is that under such a flag would be collected a terrible army of misunderstandings, vanities, speciousnesses, irresponsibilities, all masquerading as artistic conviction” (Williams 1992, 937). Or, finally, in reaction to both of these positions and the whole necessity of taking sides, there are musicologists and others who attempt to step back from the whole debate, as though they do not have to choose or as though these were not the only available options. Instead, what they propose is a thoroughgoing *contextualisation* of musical performance, as though from somewhere outside of it, but also as through expressing a certain enervation or exhaustion of

performance theory itself – as though there were no new attitude possible and reaction and counter-reaction can only take turns endlessly. An example of this is literary scholar Peter J. Rabinowitz, writing in the collection *Music and Text* as the representative of a “new historicism” that would finally give performance studies a scholarly and value-free basis: “I do believe that there is real (if limited) value to be gained from recuperating the author’s intentions – and that historical reconstruction is therefore a valid (although not the only valid) musical aim” (Rabinowitz 1992, 54-5).

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We wish to write another history of musical performance here, one that does not oppose those previous histories but seeks to cut through this history in a different way. It would still be broadly chronological, taking up those periods and tendencies we might call modern, post-modern and post-post-modern, but hopefully without ending up in any post-historical impasse. It can perhaps be narrated as the sequence of Lacanian registers the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, as though these correspond to distinct cultural movements or even attitudes on the part of performers and their theorists. However, as we have seen, the Real is not possible as a strategy or something consciously aimed at by the performer or even the theorist. Rather, it arises as a kind of “failure” within and against any symbolic strategy. It is precisely not aimed at, which always involves an other, but on the contrary overtakes us or happens behind our back. However, it is not for all that simply a return to any Imaginary identification with music, but happens only through the Symbolic. In this sense, if we can outline a certain chronology here and even advocate for a certain “Real”, this Real is also everywhere, underlying both the Imaginary and Symbolic. Indeed, if we come to the Real only at the “end” of musical performance, it is also there at the beginning, as that which underlies all strategies of musical performance and their theorisation as the attempt to make sense of it. The Real is at once what precedes all performance and what performance attempts to come to terms with and is only to be achieved through performance, through the most rigorous mastery and thinking through of performance.

In that first, Imaginary moment of performance, there is understood to be no distance between the performer, the performance and the music. No matter what kind of music is being performed – although it is a complex question within music theory as to what kind of music best suits this approach – the music seems to be created, almost in an improvisatory fashion, as the performer plays it. We appear to be listening to the

inner thoughts of the composer/performer as they occur to them, without mediation, censorship, almost without aesthetic form. The “art” or medium disappears in the direct contact with another. It is typical, of course, of certain “Romantic” conceptions of music, which are still prevalent in descriptions of live musical performance: a shared, intimate moment that is essentially unrehearsed and unrepeatable and that takes place only in the particular circumstances of the performance, audience and venue. As an example of this, we might take the well-known music critic Charles Rosen writing on Mozart’s *Divertimento for String Trio*, paraphrased by Lawrence Kramer in his *Classical Music and Post-Modern Knowledge* in the following terms: “[Rosen speaks of the performer’s] ‘effortless, exalted immediacy’... The same immediacy, coded as ‘intimacy’, also marks the disappearance of a formerly public expressiveness” (Kramer 1995, 26). And something like this model is taken up and generalised as a paradigm for musical performance altogether by Jim Samson in his *Virtuosity and the Musical Work*, where he attempts – self-contradictorily, of course – to erect this particular feeling or experience of something unrepeatable into a standard of performance that can be generalised and even something that can be attained through practice and dedication. As he writes of early nineteenth-century pre-recital piano practice (his book is more generally a study of Liszt’s 1851 *Transcendental Études*): “The product of the pre-recital practice was not an interpretation. An interpretation mediates the separate worlds of the composer and the performer... [By contrast,] there was an immediate identification of the performance with the music performed” (Samson 2004, 25).

As might be obvious, then, performance theory has an ambivalent relationship to this first, Imaginary moment of performance: not only does it not appear to be a matter of performance but rather of the direct presentation of something, but any theorisation of it as performance would be to do away with it. That is to say, although this is the initial stage or moment of performance theory, the unquestioned evidence or experience with which it begins, it is also necessarily a “lost” moment, that which properly precedes all theories of performance or what such theories must look back to as what precedes them. It is a moment that can be presented as what performance – and all theories of performance – should aspire to (and occasionally attain), but that is also done away with by any attempt to achieve it or render it as an artistic program. Indeed, it is not so much a style or form of music (or music making) as what is *behind* the music, what the music stands in for. Again, typical of such expectations of musical performance, in which not merely is the performer not to get between the music and the audience but the music as it were is not to get between the music and its performance, is the following passage from Christopher Small’s *Musicking*, one of the

more influential texts in recent performance theory: “Music is not a thing at all but an activity. The apparent thing ‘music’ is a figment, an abstraction of the author, whose reality vanishes as soon as we examine it closely” (Small 1998, 2). And, again, whether consciously or unconsciously, Small himself appears aware of the paradoxicality of this, the fact that it could not serve as the basis of any theory or practice of performance, for soon after the claims of the passage above, he goes on to qualify or withdraw them: “[The classical repertoire] is my heritage and I cannot escape it, and I understand well the continuing urge on the part of performers, as well as of musicologists, theorists and historians, to explore those repertoires and learn their secrets” (Small 1998, 15).

Of course, there is inevitably a certain amount of “forcing” involved – with all of its pluses and minuses – to think of this in terms of the psychoanalytic category of the Imaginary. But, like the Lacanian Imaginary, what we have here is a “specular” or, better, “mirror-like” relationship between the performer and the music. For, although it might appear as though the performer is merely following the music, in truth the music is a reflection of the performer playing it. Like the child learning to move by seeing their own reflection in a mirror and thinking it another, so the performer can only play the music as though they were merely following what is already there. Recall the famous description from Lacan’s ‘The Mirror Stage’ concerning how the child produces something out of nothing from a kind of redoubled reflection, which sounds as much as anything as though they are seated at a piano stool: “I have been given pause to reflect upon the striking spectacle of a nursling in front of a mirror who has not yet mastered walking, or even standing, but who – though held tight by some prop, human or artificial (what we in France call a walker) – overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the constraints of his prop in order to adopt a slightly leaning-forward position” (Lacan 2006, 75-6). Which is also to say that what is literally inexplicable and unthinkable today in certain music performance theory is any distinction between music and performer. Or, to put this in terms of those time-honoured shots of performers’ fingers moving, bodies swaying and faces emoting, we cannot say which comes first, which expresses which: whether it is the face that reacts to what the music expresses or whether what the music expresses is only to be seen through the face.



Glenn Gould with Detroit Orchestra, 1960

The real point here is that this moment of the Imaginary is “impossible” – a recreation even by the child of that unlocatable moment when they first entered language, retrospectively posited to explain a symbolic order that has no outside. It is a moment endlessly evoked in musical analysis, that everything stands in for, and yet that all attempts to do so inevitably fall short of because the very means of doing so would do away with it. As Lacan puts it in ‘The Mirror Stage’, again in musical terms: “In man, however, this [mirror-like] relationship to nature is altered by a certain dehiscence at the very heart of the organism, a primordial Discord betrayed by the signs of malaise and motor unco-ordination of the neonatal months” (Lacan 1999, 78). And, as we suggest, this is true not only of music performance studies but of music performance itself. For not only must both necessarily exclude this “non-performative” moment, but the very style of musical performance has itself moved on from this “Imaginary” mode today. It is what we might call the *post-modern* as opposed to modern, and it is characterised by the denial of any immediate relationship to the music, the idea that there is only one way of playing it, and the attempt to indicate a distance not only between the music and the particular way the performer plays it, but between the music and *any* particular way of playing it. Or, to put this even more strongly, the aim of the musician performing the music is to indicate that theirs is only *one* interpretation of the music, and that there are other possible interpretations of it with indeed no underlying music as such. It is difficult to describe how this might be performed – and, as we will see, this position suffers a self-contradiction of its own – but commentators often resort to the language of a *rallentando* or slight hesitation in the performance, an attempt to indicate a discrepancy between the music and its performance or even the performance and itself, as though we could somehow hear this distance as a kind of internal *diminuendo* or fading away.⁸

As we suggest, this would be a difficult insight to sustain and even more to perform, but perhaps by contrast with that first, Imaginary mode of musical performance, in which the performance disappears and there is just the music, here in this second, Symbolic moment it would be as though there is just the performance and the music itself disappears. That is to say, as opposed to that first mode, in which there appears no other way than the one we are listening to to perform the music, here what the performer is trying to make clear and almost to have us hear is the range of performative possibilities, as though the one we do hear is intended to make us hear what is not played. This is not quite like Schumann's 'Grande Humoresque', in which famously there is a third vocal line not meant to be heard between the two piano lines, or the last movement of Tchaikovsky's *Symphonie Pathétique*, in which there is an implied melody between the first and second violins.⁹ Rather, what is being suggested is not a distance between one melody and another matching one, but a distance between the same piece of music *and itself*. And it is not so much a complementary as a *critical* distance, designed to suggest not another imagined harmony out there but a kind of emptiness in here, to make us hear not *some other* music but *this* music's performance.

To describe this post-modern attitude is difficult because it is obviously not a matter of playing the wrong or different notes. Nor is it even a matter of somehow playing eccentrically or not following the composer's instructions. It is not a mere incompetence or breaking of the rules (*a bene placere*). But it is to bring out – through the music – the arbitrariness or lack of necessity of the music, through performance the lack of necessity of the performance. Put simply – and this is the way it has actually been taken up in performance theory – it is an attempted refutation of the previous Imaginary relationship to music, which it condemns as “too close” to the music, “over-emotional” and not “restrained” enough. Perhaps, indeed, the word critics most often use to describe this other approach is “cerebral”, although we would suggest that this is not properly to think through what is implied by this distance between performance and the music that they are arguing for. Rather, we get a better sense of this attitude – the idea of us being outside of the music and the music as it were being outside of itself – with the recent musicological concept of “markedness”, in which it is understood that particular notes or passages of music are somehow able to remark themselves or stand out against their background. As Robert S. Hatten, one of the main proponents of the theory, writes in his *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*: “The concept of markedness as a theoretical concept can be defined quite simply as the valuation given to difference” (Hatten 2004, 34). Or, more directly, we see it in the prominent performance

theorist Eric Clarke's description of how players should think about music in the John Rink-edited collection *The Practice of Performance*, which as much as anything is a kind of "manifesto" for this new "anti-authentic" movement, with a number of contributors taking either explicit or implicit encouragement from such theorists as Roland Barthes and such methods as Russian Formalism. For Clarke, the aim of performance is to break the ideological "illusion" of performance and open it up to contingency and "mistakes" (which again, importantly, are to be understood not as mere errors or incompetencies, but the result of necessary interpretive choices, the fact that every performance of music, no matter how correct, necessarily excludes others):

Although the structure of a composition determines with greater or lesser constraint the semiotic field within which a performer can operate, the performer has the capacity within this field to manipulate the acoustical and temporal realisation of the music in order to lead (and mislead) the listener in an unlimited number of directions (Clarke 1995, 51).¹⁰

All of this, as we suggest, corresponds in some way with Lacan's Symbolic register. The Symbolic, of course, is popularly understood as the realm of language, of signification. It is where – Lacan, of course, was influenced by Saussure here – one signifier refers to another without any outside, or where any presumed outside is revealed only as an effect of the signifier. We might put this even more strongly and suggest that the system of signification *needs* the excuse of something outside or before signification. This "reality" is, after all, the reason it says it exists. As Lacan puts it in his *Seminar II*: "We imagine that there must have been a time when people on the earth began to speak... But from the moment that the specific structure of this emergence is grasped, we find it absolutely impossible to speak of what preceded it other than by symbols which were always applicable" (Lacan 1988, 5). And all of this undoubtedly underpins a particular strand of performance theory and practice. As we have seen, it specifically rejects any immediate, non-signifying, "emotional" relationship to music. Against one of the highest or at least most persistent claims for music, it insists that a certain "language" always comes between the performer and what they are playing, that the performer is always trying to mean something through it and that the way they play is always involved in a comparative history, in which their performance is always in relation to others, and that this is in fact how it communicates to us. Indeed, in a sense, it is between these different comparative possibilities that the performer *selects* in order to construct their performance. Here, for example, is the philosopher Stephen Davies on the fact that musical performance always signifies, and that the impression that a particular performance is the only possible one is only an effect brought about by signification: "We can say that a person's playing is authentic if

it flows from and reveals her character, intellect, emotions and free choices” (Davies 2001, 225).¹¹

Explicitly, this is a project of disillusionment, depersonalisation and anti-romanticism undertaken in the name of an interrogative rationality or self-reflexiveness. However, for all of its apparent disillusionment, we cannot but feel a certain air of triumphalism about this attitude, as though some scientific or performative “truth” were being revealed. It is as though we might finally introduce clarity into what has hitherto been merely instinctive or impressionistic with regard to the analysis of musical performance: that it is describable, explicable and socially and historically contextualisable. This is the kind of foundational declarativeness we see in many recent books on musical performance, which precisely seek to make the study of musical performance an academic discipline. Take, for example, musicologist Kenneth Gloag writing in *Postmodernism in Music*: “The understanding of music as being marked by its contexts needs to be fully recognised and in that moment of recognition any attempt to isolate a specific musical work, or any discrete part of it, becomes problematic” (Gloag 2012, 19). Or take philosopher Paul Thom citing philosopher and conductor Michael Krausz in *Making Sense: A Theory of Interpretation*: “Where there are no univocal and overarching standards in virtue of which one may say that one among a number of interpretation practices is conclusively better than another, there can be no single musical interpretation” (Thom 2000, 105). But what is the difficulty or limitation in all of this? It is simply the fact that, in Lacan’s words, there is no “Other to the Other” in the Symbolic. By this he could be understood to mean something like the fact that, for all of these critics asserting that there is nothing external to the symbolic order, there is in all of their analyses the assumption of a neutral point somewhere outside of it, not only in the idea that there is some unmarked space from which the performer chooses between various options (the other meaning behind that “delay” or “holding back” often spoken of as the marker of post-modern performance practice), but also for the analyst some presumably unhistorical space from which it can be seen that all performances are historically determined, as though this in itself is eternally true.¹² In other words, paradoxically, this post-modern “symbolic” position often posits itself as an exception to the rule that all is symbolic, an exception that completes the symbolic order or at least makes it something that can be thought. But, if there were a Real, it would lie in taking seriously the thought that there is only this Symbolic with *no* exceptions, just as the Symbolic for its part can be paraphrased as saying something like there is only the Imaginary.

But what might this mean for music theory? It is undoubtedly fair to say that this iconoclastic, disillusioning post-modern performance theory currently dominates the academic (if not popular) field. As we suggest, it would put music performance studies in line with such other more “respectable” disciplines as cultural studies and performance studies in general. More decisively, it would appear to take music away from those prior “false” claims that music is somehow ineffable, beyond language. In fact, it would be understood to be eminently symbolic, which is to say meaningful, describable and analysable. And what could be beyond or more than this? By definition, there is nothing outside of the Symbolic or this outside arises only as an effect of the Symbolic itself. And yet there are increasing, if tentative, signs in music performance studies of a certain dissatisfaction with the current state of things. On the one hand, this is part of a general questioning of the post-modern, post-structuralist consensus in the humanities marked by a return to politics and such figures as Žižek and Alain Badiou. On the other, it is perhaps also the result of a dissatisfaction internal to music performance studies and perhaps even performance itself. Needless to say, most of the time this is merely a conservative reaction against the “relativism” of post-modernism, a desire to go back to the way things were before – objective truth, the value of expressivity, the unspeakable power of music, the centrality of the performer. But, alongside this, or beneath it, there is something that is not so obvious or characterisable, another possibility occasionally hinted at. It would be an “excess” not so much external to music as a symbolic system as internal to it, to be attained not by retreating from post-modernism but by somehow going through it, not so much something either Imaginary or Symbolic as *Real*.

Where do we find this new attitude? Obviously, in a sense of the limitations to the prevailing post-modern position, while realising that it is unsurpassable. In the difficult acknowledgement that everything is symbolic while the symbolic is not-all. Let us say, for all of the risks associated with this, in the hesitant, almost apologetic, attempt to evoke or express what cannot be spoken of. We might take here, for example, period performer Bruce Haynes in his aptly-named *The End of Early Music* calling for a new “Rhetorical” playing style, which has as its “main aim to evoke and provoke human emotions” (Haynes 2007, 8). Importantly, we suggest, for Haynes there is a deliberate modesty or hesitancy about putting forward his proposal because, for all of his dissatisfaction with the current situation, he also knows that this Rhetorical cannot form a strictly identifiable new style like the Romantic and the Modern. Or a slightly more philosophical version of this analytical contradiction is to be found in Henri Lonitz’s introduction to Adorno’s posthumous *Towards a Theory of Musical*

Reproduction, where he writes: “Interpretation can only fail the work, yet only through it can music’s true essence be captured” (Cook 2003, 89). Finally, we might consider the special ‘Performance and Analysis’ issue of *Music Theory Online*, which comes out of a conference held in 2004 and without explicitly saying so puts itself forward as the “latest” in performance analysis, seeking to capture something of the *zeitgeist* of the noughties after the post-modernism of the 1980s and ‘90s. In her overview of the issue flautist Elizabeth McNutt writes: “There is an important difference [between performer and theorist]. Having translated the relatively concrete artefact of the score into well-ordered abstractions, letters, symbols, diagrams and graphs, the theorist can begin to examine the intricate web of connections [the work] presents... The performer cannot omit, repeat or recontextualise anything. Performance is intrinsically holistic. No detail can be ignored or glossed over, every part of the score must be dealt with at the same level of intensity” (McNutt 2005, np). And this argument is given concrete form in her and Daphne Leong’s ‘Virtuosity in Babbit’s *Lonely Flute*’, in which they point to the specific ways in which the complexity of American composer Milton Babbit’s piece for solo flute, *None but the Lonely Flute*, are such that it goes beyond any performer’s ability to remain conscious of what they are doing, although this is not at all used as an argument for any kind of improvisation or giving up of control (McNutt and Leong, 2005, np). Both authors, of course, are aware that all of this comes close to a form of musical nostalgia, and they make explicit that they do not identify with any anti-theory faction in performance studies, but at the same time they want to suggest that any analytic conception of music is necessarily not-all. And this attitude is shared by a number of the other contributors to the issue, such as William Rothstein on *rubato* or temporal variation in Chopin’s *Prelude in Ab Major* and Janet Schmalfeldt on the “interdependence” of analysis and performance in Alban Berg.¹³

There are undoubtedly a number of instances of what we are speaking about in recent practical music criticism, including in the later writings of a number of major theorists of performance (Cone, Kivey and Kramer¹⁴), but there has been as yet little attempt to generalise these.¹⁵ And, in a way, there can *only* be examples of or better put exceptions to what we are speaking of, which would merely confirm the symbolic order we would hold them against. Nevertheless there are one or two moments where we can find attempts to theorise that we are talking about (and others with broader musicological reading could undoubtedly find others). The first is an extraordinary book by J.P.E. Harper-Scott, *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism*, in which he uses Badiou’s theory of the Event to think about musical performance. Beginning by connecting Badiou’s Event to the birth of the “subject” – “The subject is linked closely to

the Event of a truth, which neither precedes nor follows the subject, but which the subject instantiates ‘locally’ within the situation” (Harper-Scott 2012, 73) – he then goes on to point out something similar in musical performance. Of English twentieth-century composer William Walton’s *First Symphony*, he writes: “This thematisation [of the horizon that his music attempts to reimpose on the floating signifiers of his own partly emancipated materiality] is the *Ereignis* in his music, and it has the effect of making us aware of the presencing of Being, of the truth-Event. The ‘little things’ of his musical technique, such as his spotlighting of important tonal arrivals, tonally grounding pedal points that make themselves audible by slow and obvious motions, the gradual development of motifs that begin in a dissonant and end in a consonant arrangement – all these things so to speak show their hand” (Harper-Scott, 223). Of course, it is a complex and much debated theoretical matter whether Žižek’s notion of the Act is the same as Badiou’s concept of the Event. Žižek, as is well known, criticises Badiou for being too Kantian, positing by contrast the Hegelian dimension of the Act (Žižek 2009, 407-11). By this, he means that the Act does not simply break with the symbolic order but also only takes place within it. And perhaps the fullest, or at least to our knowledge most realised, experience of this in musicology is Klaus Scherer’s characterisation of opera singing, in which there arises a certain “emotionality” in performance, which is not simply beyond or outside signification, but is only to be realised through performance, indeed through the very virtuosity of performance. Indeed, Scherer claims this has always been the truth of performance, and what performance has always aimed at: something that goes beyond performance that is only to be attained through the perfection of performance. Indeed – and he presents it ultimately as nothing more than a triumph of performance – the very aim of performance is to defeat performance, but crucially this is not to go back to any Imaginary identification with the music before performance, but only by surpassing performance within performance. As he writes in ‘The Singer’s Paradox, beginning by quoting theatre theorist Konstantin Stanislavski:

‘Never lose yourself on stage. Always act in your own person, as an artist. The moment you lose yourself or the stage marks the departure from truly living your part and the beginning of exaggerated false acting’... Given the nature of emotion and the cues used by observers to infer emotionality and authenticity, this method would create at least a certain degree of authenticity (Scherer 2013, 70).¹⁶

Finally, the best or at least most instructive example of what we might call the “Real” in musical performance is Gordon’s *k. 364*. If we recall, Fried’s point is that the intensity of the performance in Gordon’s video is both indicative of the “absorption”

Gordon wants in his own work and brought about by the very form of his video. However, as Fried makes clear – continuing a long line of inquiry that goes all the way back to his famous ‘Art and Objecthood’ essay of 1967 – this absorptiveness is not merely positive, immediate, to be taken for granted, but arises only as the overcoming of a “prior” theatricality. This is *k. 364*’s modernism, but we might also say its post-post-modernism. And, as we suggest, this theatrical distraction or self-awareness is, more than embodied, allegorised in Gordon’s video by featuring the two musicians performing after their train trip through Poland. Levitan and Shiloah’s performance nevertheless is more than the mere forgetting or putting to one side of these traumatic memories, but rather something like their highest expression in or as art. It is not the sublimation of this trauma – that is the function of the Symbolic – but what makes this trauma real to us. It is not the immediate coming together of the world and music, as in the Imaginary, nor the unbridgeable distance between them, as in the Symbolic, but their coming together *in their distance*, in a “Real” that is not a “reality”. (It is also this that is at stake in Fried’s noting that the action once the concert starts takes place on a seemingly non-synchronised split screen and that, if we look closely, we can tell that the footage we are looking at comes not only from the concert but also from the rehearsals before it: there is in some sense a discrepancy between music and image, as in Paik, but this is overcome in the performance, both of the music and Gordon editing the video of the music.) In Lacan’s words from *Seminar XIV*: “Human reality is the montage of the Symbolic and the Imaginary, [but] at the centre of this apparatus, of this frame... is properly speaking the Real” (Lacan 2010, np). In short, what Gordon’s video shows is an overcoming of the Symbolic precisely through the Symbolic. It is all that Fried means when he writes:

What exactly, though, is the problem? Is it not at least conceivable that a piece of music of the artistic distinction of the ‘Sinfonia Concertante’ simply evokes or achieves what I am calling presentness if it is performed adequately? ... But, remember, Gordon’s project ultimately involved making a film, not a piece of music, that would be marked by presentness ... In an important sense, the pursuit of presentness throughout *k. 364* is a matter of the relation of shot to shot, close-up to close-up, montaged bit to montaged bit, including intervals of darkness, all these in relation to the montaging and sometimes overlaying of sound, both snatches of playing and the sound of the train wheels crossing the points of the tracks (Fried 2014, 234-5, 236, 237).

Towards the end of *k. 364*, during the dying out of the very last notes of ‘Sinfonia Concertante’, both the players and the conductor (and us in the audience) are almost in tears. But what kind of tears? In the eighteenth-century French philosopher and

theoretician of the theatre Denis Diderot's 'The Paradox of the Actor', which is perhaps the most important text on performance ever written, it could be argued that there are three different kinds of tears. (It is to follow the distinction Diderot makes late in his dialogue between "Nature", "Poetry" and "Acting".) The first are Imaginary tears, in which the performer cries actual tears as though actually experiencing the emotion and what is happening on stage is real. The second, in prediction of a whole theatrical tradition to come, are Symbolic tears, in which the performer does not actually cry, but merely emits the signs of tears, by which they make clear that what is taking place is merely fictitious. But the third kind of tears and the ones Diderot ultimately advocates are Real tears, in which the actor neither directly cries nor simply acts crying but cries, as it were, at acting crying, at the very intensity of their emotions in mimicking tears. As Diderot writes:

People come not to see tears, but to hear speeches that draw tears; because this truth of nature is out of tune with the truth of convention. Let me explain myself: I mean that neither the dramatic system, nor the action, nor the poet's speeches, would fit themselves to my stilted, broken, sobbing declamation. You see that it is not allowable to imitate Nature, even at her best, or Truth too closely; there are limits within which we must restrict ourselves (Diderot 1957, 68).

It is this that is the Real of performance, as seen all the way from Diderot's actor on stage crying through the "mousetrap" in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the ending of Alfred Hitchcock's *Murder!*, the confession of the gangster Anwar Congo in Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*, the miners and policemen battling each other in Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* and on to the musicians and Gordon in *k. 364*. It is all that John Fuller-Maitland means of when he says of the nineteenth-century violinist Joseph Joachim: "In the case of public performers, where technical skill has reached its highest point of perfection, a kind of self-revelation takes place in every performance; and, beside the ideal interpretation of the music he plays, Joachim unconsciously tells every one who has ears what manner of man he is in himself".¹⁷ It is the Real of performance, which is to say when performance becomes Real.

* * *

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Notes

¹ For a general introduction to performance art, see Carson 2006.

² See the script for *Intention Intentionality Sequence* in Brouwer 2001, 142; and for *Performer/Audience/Mirror* in Simpson and Iles 2009, 263.

³ For an account of *Concerto for TV Cello and Video Tape*, see Edith Decker-Phillips 1998, 124-7.

⁴ This becomes clear in Paula Heredia's documentary of the performance, *The Couple in the Cage: A Guatinali Odyssey* (1995).

⁵ To be clear, of course, there were studies of performance before Cone. Colin Lawson and Robin Stowell offer an excellent history of the discipline of musical performance, stretching back at least to the beginning of the last century, in the first chapter of *The Historical Performance of Music*. But we are interested in *comparative* histories, and these histories need the challenge of the "early music" movement to produce the range of outcomes we consider here. In a sense, the "early music" movement arises as a reaction against comparative performance studies, and comparative performance studies for their part reject the "historical truth" claimed by "early music" proponents.

⁶ In fact, citing American aesthetic philosopher Jerrold Levinson, Butt goes on to adduce Borges' 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*', always a sign of post-modern absolute "relativism".

⁷ *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* speaks of "the amount and kind of deviation from a precisely determined ideal tolerated (or even encouraged) by the composer", 370. Cited in Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance*. Kivy for his part writes: "So we can now see that one of the defects in the playing of a Beethoven piano sonata might be 'insincerity', in the form of playing the work without believing it", 119.

⁸ We perhaps see something of this in Lawrence Kramer's description of playing Chopin's *Prelude in C Minor*, in which it is as though he can hear the music's difference from itself: "When I play *Chopin's Prelude in C Minor*, the music recedes under my hands, which nonetheless brings it closer" (Kramer 2012, 165).

⁹ See Žižek on Schumann's *Humoresque* in for, example, *Less than Nothing*, 614-5; and Marshall Brown 'Unheard Melodies: The Force of Form', 465-81.

¹⁰ The volume also features a number of essays on musical "irony" and "ambiguity", for example, Janet M Levy, 'Beginning-Ending Ambiguity: Consequences of Performance Choices', 150-69, and Ronald Woodley, 'Strategies of Irony in Prokofiev's *Violin Sonata in F Minor*, Op. 80', 160-94.

¹¹ Davies also addresses elsewhere a certain "hypotheticism" in music that, as opposed to "hypothetical emotionalism", which "imagines a persona in the work", speculates as to the existence of "a person who stands *outside* the work, as its imagined creator" (Davies 2003, 158).

¹² This was our point with regard to the notion of "markedness" in performance analysis, as seen in our earlier example of Hatten on Beethoven: that it implies a certain "unmarked" space from which this markedness can be remarked. For an example of the application of "markedness" to a non-Western musical practice, see Vijayakrishnan 2007, especially the chapter 'Issues in Modelling the Grammar: Language and Carnatic Music'.

¹³ William Rothstein, 'Like Falling Off a Log: Rubato in Chopin's *Prelude in A-Flat Major*, Op. 28, No. 17'; and Janet Schmalfeldt, 'Response to the Special Issue'.

¹⁴ To take just one example from Kivy: "The [early music] movement could perfectly well claim that it was being 'historically authentic' in *maintaining* the gap between text and sound production" (Kivy 1995, 276). Perhaps we would only add to this the twist of Lonitz on Adorno: it would be a matter of maintaining this gap precisely by trying to close it.

¹⁵ Or only by a younger generation of scholars, whose work has not yet come to wider attention: Eugene Willet, 'Music as Sinthome: Joy Riding with Lacan, Lynch and Beethoven'; Sarah Anderson, 'Be Quiet: Music Outside of Time'; and Sean Pequet, 'Music and Ontological Incompleteness'.

¹⁶ Cone raises the same indistinguishability regarding singing in opera in 'Poet's Love or Composer's Love?': "Recently, I realised that it is often unwise or even impossible to try, as I

formerly did, to ‘contrast the normal state of an operatic character with his behaviour in situations where the libretto requires him to *enact* the signing of a song” (Cone 1992, 178).

¹⁷ Cited in Karen Leistra-Jones, ‘Staging Authenticity: Joachim, Brahms and the Politics of *Werktreue* Performance’, 402. Leistra-Jones’ essay is in fact an application of Fried’s categories of “absorption” and “theatricality” to performance, making a contrast between Joachim’s absorptive and non-theatrical performance style (and that of Brahms’ music with which he was associated), as opposed to the theatricality of Franz Liszt’s (and Wagner’s) music.