6 Towards a Practice of Musical Performance Creativity

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Western classical music has changed less, since Adorno’s time, than most of white western culture’s artistic practices. Perhaps that is why, for most westerners, classical music has fallen entirely off the cultural map. Symptomatically, it is now rare to encounter a critic of theatre or the visual or media arts who knows or cares much about it. It has lost the ability it once had to speak of the current concerns of the cultural commentariat for whom it used to be – certainly in Adorno’s Frankfurt and Vienna – a matter of regular, informed debate (Jäger 2004). This may be partly a problem of composition, which for the first half of the past century discouraged many amateurs of classical music. But composition has become more user-friendly over the last half century and yet there is little sign of classical music regaining its public role. The problem, I think, is with more than composition; it is also a problem of ideology and (they belong together) of performance. Performances are now so similar, save to experts, that no one imagines that a performance could have any function other than to reaffirm the identity of the score, the sanctity of the dead composer, and, as Christopher Small put it, to say for those (predominantly the white, middle-class, educated, elderly) who still attend concerts, ‘this is who we are’ (Small 1998: 43, 134). Relatively few seem still to think, with Adorno, that ‘art’ music can and should do more than that.

When it came to performance, though, Adorno’s position was also quite narrow. I think it is clear, in so far as anything is clear from his incomplete theory of reproduction (Adorno 2001), that emotionally he preferred what Richard Taruskin (1995: 108–111) has called ‘vitalist’ and Nicholas Cook (2011: 302) has called ‘rhetorical’ performance, essentially the norm with which he grew up in the first decades of the twentieth century. I have suggested previously that this preference was a factor in his inability to complete the book (Leech-Wilkinson 2012: § 4.4). This vitalist or rhetorical style focuses attention on the musical surface, not on whatever you believe is the musical structure. This is not to say that it pays no attention to structure, but its performance of that is much less obvious than ours. Christopher Terepin, for example, has

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1 Adorno was making a slightly different though related point, in his critique of Toscanini, that, in its technical perfection and discipline, ‘The performance sounds like its own phonograph record’ (Adorno 2002a: 301).
2 Adorno’s preference, repeatedly evident, is encapsulated in his observation (from 1956 or 1957) that ‘the nuance determines the entire sense’ (2006: 139).
3 Drawing on work from music psychology. From music philosophy see Levinson 1997.
recently shown how variable synchronisation of parts in early recorded string quartet playing, which used to be dismissed as messy ensemble, is in fact sounding different levels of compositional structure (Terepin 2022); although much of its affect comes from its highly sensitive response to the changing musical surface (hence the ‘rhetorical’ and ‘vitalist’ labels). The highly-subtle sounding of structure going on beneath the surface – possibly even without the performers being aware of it – was much harder to recognise intellectually, let alone to theorise, than it became once formal analysis became part of musical training and once a performance style in which phrases were delineated by tempo with loudness – what Cook (after Neil Todd; Cook 2009) has called ‘phrase-arching’ – became the norm. Once theory and phrase-arching were components of a new lingua franca (universally from after the Second World War, though it had been coming on gradually for most of the first half of the century) Adorno’s (and indeed Schenker’s) ideas about the necessity of sounding structure became generally shared by a younger generation. Adorno’s tastes in performance, however (like Schenker’s; Cook 2011), belonged to that earlier, pre-structural, vitalist age. Although he believed in musical structure, and in the performance of structure, he did not want to hear it as the only content of performance – which is what it more nearly became, as the twentieth century developed, in the streamlined playing that he associated with Toscanini and hated so much. Much of the interplay he desires between the mensural, the neumic, and the idiomatic, and between analysis and mimesis, reflects an attempt to do justice to the complexity of these idealised interrelationships while taking account of both his conceptual and subjective understandings of how music must be. These remained irreconcilable, I suggest.

Adorno believed in something essential that constituted the nature of a musical work, its essence: ‘the work’s essence is in direct agreement with this necessity [the necessity of its correct presentation in performance]’ (Adorno 2006: 54). And he saw it as the performer’s job to sound that essence and to sound it ideally, correctly indeed. For it is clear from the notes Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction that he believed in the concept of an ideal performance; yet at the same time believed that no performance could ever sound it: ‘there is an absolutely correct interpretation, or at least a limited selection of correct interpretations, but it is an idea: it cannot even be recognized in its pure state, let alone realized. … something is always wrong’ (Adorno 2006: 92).

The notion that to perform is always to fail is a long-standing trope in classical music teaching and criticism, one that ensures that the critic always has power over the performer; because whatever the performer does, the critic can and must be able to show how they have failed to realise some aspect of what the critic believes to be essential to the imagined work. That a work
should be impossible to realise in performance, indeed, is an essential feature of its mystique and of the view of the composer as genius. Adorno writes about this again and again, directly or indirectly. The beauty of vitalist performances – like the Klingler Quartet’s, or the Kolisch’s or the Czech Quartet’s, as discussed by Terepin (in progress) – is that in their variety of colours and *tempi* and *rubato* and *portamento* and ensemble, in that constantly shifting surface, it is easy to feel that some intangible essence is being brought to life in sound: there is an adaptive character arising out of the moment-to-moment changes in the score that feels as if it ought to be a true evocation of something that defines the essential nature of a work. Whereas in a straight in-tempo performance, with perfect ensemble and no *portamento*, of the sort we now take for granted, all you can get is what is visibly printed in the score, elegantly phrased, plus some large-scale structural demarcation, elegantly marked. Performance in the later twentieth century, while beautifully presented, becomes more nearly (when so beautifully presented it seems harsh to say ‘merely’) a text and a formal analysis. So one can see how Adorno’s preference for rhetorical performance style, and his belief in musical essence defining the nature of a work, supported one another.

Title of the study: True Interpretation (??)


What Adorno aimed to do (though one hopes only momentarily) was to formulate a set of rules for ‘True Interpretation’ that would systematise the way in which performers should ideally use the expressive performance style he loved, so as to ensure the reliable evocation of at least some of the essence that he felt was there in an underlying work, thereby elevating what he imagined as the identity of the piece into something more valuable than any possible experience of it.

Clearly, then, for Adorno there is a work, defined by an essence that somehow lies behind a score; and music for him – ‘the music’ – is more than an experience of the now moment in a performance plus some memory of what led to it and some anticipation of what might follow, experienced within a cultural and personal context; which is what a phenomenological view might realistically suggest. There is a belief, for Adorno and indeed in current classical music ideology, that that essence was put there by the composer who perceived it in his composition; that it is more than something performers produce in making sound from scores; and that sounding the composer’s experience of that essence would constitute an ideal performance; that something of it *can* be recreated in sound; and that no performance that generated a
different essence could be as powerful, or certainly as valid. There’s the assumption that a sufficiently sensitive musician and thinker (Adorno, for example) can define it sufficiently fully and yet generally that it can be expressed in rules (see especially Adorno 2001: 92ff; 2006: 70ff); and an assumption – although he is conflicted about this – that those rules will always be valid, whatever the musical and cultural environment in which a performance is made. Almost all of these assumptions are still shared by most classical music professionals in practice and in academia.  

But they are shared with damaging consequences – damaging for performance creativity and freedom of expression, for musicians’ wellbeing, for the economics of the music business, and for the social use to which classical music is put. To accept this work-centred ideology, even to draw on the concept, is to be unable to accept – and this was part of Adorno’s problem – just how enormously varied are the ways in which a performance can seem to communicate a wholly persuasive sense of meaning. It fails to recognise and to take account of the extent to which music – ‘the music’ – changes over time. ‘The music’ is not fixed and therefore it is not ‘essential’. Adorno was not oblivious to this:

Main evidence in Wagner of the historical character of interpretation …

(Adorno 2006: 30)

Joachim’s quartet, which established the style of Beethoven interpretation, would today probably seem like a German provincial ensemble, and Liszt like the parody of a virtuoso.

(Adorno 2006: 6)

Not only do characters escape from works; new ones also develop.

(Adorno 2006: 6)

Adorno knew perfectly well that performance style changed over time. He quotes Wagner making the same point; he remembers how differently the Joachim Quartet, Sarasate and Paderewski had made music. He was aware that compositions changed as performance changed. In these respects he was a remarkably acute listener given how little recorded evidence had accumulated then. Perhaps it is only now, after a century of recorded examples, that we can all hear how greatly performance changes. And that is why we can see, as Adorno’s generation could not, that as well as the hugely different performance styles of the past century,
there must be very many other possible styles in which these scores could be made to sound differently meaningful and true. In all these styles the music sounds so differently that it cannot plausibly be said to have a fixed identity beyond the notes in the scores. The essence dissolves in those differences. And it becomes clear that whatever character a piece seems to have is very substantially constructed in particular performances, and changes not just slightly between them, which we’ve always accepted, but greatly over time. The identity of composers changes with it.

What is stable, then, apart from the score? There are scores, and there are performances, and there are experiences of performances; and those experiences are ‘the music’, which is made in the minds of performers and listeners as they participate in performances. What is permanent about the experience arising from a particular score remains to be seen, though not anytime soon. We shall only be able to acquire a sense of the extent of the possibilities in the light of many centuries of recorded performances (supplying the evidence) made by performers trained into different (constantly changing) expressive habits and made in different social and cultural contexts. Until then it might be wise to claim rather less about the essential nature of any composer’s music.

Let us now switch perspectives and ask how classical music ideology, which in many ways Adorno encapsulates, works as a political system. Because this should also have been part of his argument in his theory of musical reproduction; his more than anyone’s.

Let us start again from the belief that performance must always fail ‘the work’. It is not hard to imagine how it feels from the performer’s perspective if every performance one gives is a failure: it is not exactly conducive to mental health. But giving critics power over performers is fundamental to normative thinking about classical music. In this model the performer is always subservient: she is the faithful, obedient servant of the dead composer, enacting the dead man’s wishes, over and over for ever and, because this is a quasi-religious practice, worshipping Him, hoping still to please Him. At the same time, for the living, she is the employee; the artisan or craftsperson offering a reproduction for critical inspection, while the expert checks, on behalf of the employer, its authenticity and the accuracy of its copying. The performer is trained to believe in the sanctity of the composer’s text, in the notion that her role

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5 Max Paddison’s definition of ideology applies exactly here: ‘vested socio-cultural interests masquerading as objective or disinterested attitudes … Ideology … serves to legitimate as natural, universal and unchanging something which is … cultural and historical in origin, and thus subject to change’ (Paddison 1993: 53).

6 I have examined this in more depth, drawing on the psychologies of infant and religious attachment, in Leech-Wilkinson 2021.
is to reproduce what is authorized, and to train subsequent generations to do the same, just as they were trained by their predecessors, in the same way, with the same faithful obedience. (Style change is again completely overlooked in this institutional fantasy.) Recording forces performers to compete, each striving to be more faithful, more perfectly accurate, and yet more persuasive in the performance of that faithfulness. The values of the musical state (which the state manipulates to ensure its continuing authority) get themselves performed ever more perfectly; leading to less and less variation, less freedom of expression, less creativity. And so this notion that performance must always fail ‘the music’ usefully encapsulates the whole perverted ideology that surrounds and bedevils classical music as a practice.

Is this what Adorno wanted? I think musically it probably is – the perfect performance of the music eliding with the perfect musical performance – but it is surely not what he believed in politically. At any rate, it is not what most of us believe politically, which is now far more to the point. For this whole political structure, in which gatekeepers make a living policing performers who make a living obeying gatekeepers in order that everyone can claim to be sounding dead composers’ works that never existed in the first place, this whole fantasy built around power and subservience is absolutely opposed to everything liberals claim to believe about artistic expression.

What does this regime do to performers? It is no coincidence that classical musicians suffer more illness, psychological and physical, than performers in other musical genres. We can hardly be surprised, given the pressures. Notice how impossible it is to reconcile what is required of them. They believe their role is to serve the composer’s wishes, but no one knows or (for the centuries before recording) will ever know what those were. At the same time performers are led to believe they bring their own interpretation to a score. And yet they are supposed to perform a normative reading, the reading that is accepted as normative by the industry at the moment. When, as there often is from old recordings, there is overwhelming evidence that the composer’s reading is quite unlike the industry norm, the composer’s recording is simply ignored. So much for the genius-composer’s wishes. Obedience to current gatekeepers, and the stability of the profession and the business it serves are the only absolute requirements. No wonder performers are conflicted as to who they are or what they are

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7 Cf. Bruno Nettl, studying behaviour in conservatoire: ‘What is it about Western culture that makes this great music so representative of aspects of our cultural system with which many denizens of the music school would not wish to be identified?’ (Nettl 1995: 144–5)


9 On these see, for example, Patston 2014, and Perkins et al. 2017.
supposed to be doing. No wonder that after years getting up on stage and playing essentially
the same performance to similar audiences they no longer know if they are making music or if
they are simply sounding the system. No wonder so many suffer muscular dysfunction and
mental breakdown.\textsuperscript{10}

Only the gatekeepers (through status and power) and the business (through minimal rehearsal
costs) benefit from this intolerant and repressive political system. Critics do well, adjudicators,
managers, record companies, Google, Spotify: they all benefit. For the performer and listener
the advantages are knowing what is expected; for performers, knowing how to conform safely;
and for listeners, knowing that all is well in their world. This is not the only sense in which
classical music is neoliberalism in sound. It is there in the very language of performance
criticism which is riddled with patriarchy, misogyny, homophobia, classism and racism, the
essential structural prejudices of white, male, western, capitalist imperialism. If this sounds like
an exaggeration one need only look at the metaphors used in record reviews (in recent just as
much as in older reviews), where these prejudices are regularly to be found, at best barely
concealed beneath the metaphorical surface.\textsuperscript{11}

\begin{quote}
\ldots Steuerman’s way of spreading the notes of his chords, like a doorstep salesman
laying out his wares, is mannered and irritating.

\textit{(Gramophone}, May 1988: 1578)
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\ldots she is as tempestuous and temperamental as the music demands: some might even
say more than it demands. But she never loses her head \ldots

\textit{(Dec. 2018: 94)}
\end{quote}

Faultless in matters of intonation and blessedly free of mannerism \ldots she can come
across as something of a ‘Stepford wife’\ldots

\textit{(April 2013: 105)}

\begin{quote}
\ldots emasculated within a haze of pastel-shaded rumination. No other recording makes
it sound so alluring \ldots
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10} For more on this see \textbf{Leech-Wilkinson 2021}: section 4, ‘The Musical State and Mental Health’; and \textbf{Leech-Wilkinson 2020a}: chapter 14, \url{https://challengingperformance.com/the-book-14/}.

\textsuperscript{11} These examples are taken from \textbf{Leech-Wilkinson 2020a}: chapter 9.2, ‘The Metaphorical Language of Record Reviews’. Names of authors are deliberately withheld, as explained there. For a fuller and more formal study, using different examples (though without examples of racism) see \textbf{Leech-Wilkinson 2020b}. 
… his mincing, droopy and impossibly vulgar reading of *Für Elise* makes Liberace look like Artur Schnabel …

(Awards issue 2018: 128)

… abounded with mannered *rubatos* and coy phrasings

(March 2015: 65)

As a heartless fingerfest and note-perfect delineation of the score, Sunwoo’s account is hard to beat and he joins the now long list of brilliant Asian-born American-trained pianists undistinguishable one from another in character and sound.

(Dec. 2017: 93)

I’ve never heard the insistent left-hand chords … more perfectly equal … or quite so devoid of meaning. … Suzuki remains imperturbable throughout. … Even the tiniest hint of personality would no doubt do wonders.

(May 2018: 73)

My colleagues and I are always impressed at how quickly Chinese students respond to the styles and fashions thrown at them when they come to a sophisticated European city, and how quickly their personalities emerge.

(April 2019: 21)

Musical tastes are markers of belonging: sharing them helps one feel and show that one belongs to a group.\(^{12}\) On the more specialised level considered here, the same applies to beliefs about performance. One belongs to classical music culture, and feels it represents one, by believing, and when necessary (to bring or keep others within the fold) asserting beliefs which make very little sense outside a quasi-religious, patriarchal and imperialist culture. For example: composers are godlike in their genius; their instructions must be faithfully followed; performers are the composer’s loyal servants; the composer’s intended performance is the ideal model for all and for ever; those who fully know and understand the tradition will be able to glean this ideal performance from the instructions in the composer’s score; and so on. Performers and performances that differ from these principles are Other, they do not belong; they are out of

\(^{12}\) For two very different angles on this see [DeNora 2000](#) and [Waltham-Smith 2017](#).
place, unwelcome, intrusive, self-indulgent, unhealthy, unnatural, degenerate (all these metaphors taken from recent record reviews, Leech-Wilkinson 2020b). They can only appeal to listeners who lack knowledge and understanding of the tradition. People who play or sing differently are unsuitable to be employed as performers, they cannot be respected members of the professional community. True understanding requires upbringing within western culture, whose particularly virtuous ability to feel deeply yet privately, without public display, is most perfectly expressed by and within its classical music practice. You would be hard pressed, I think, to find a closer analogue among the creative arts to the conceptual world of white supremacy and colonialism.

Needless to say, one has to learn all these beliefs. Growing up within the system one acquires them so fully that they come to seem natural. The norm is thus the natural: everything else goes against the very nature of music and musicality. Yet the intensity with which challenges to these beliefs are opposed points to insecurity, to a lack of confidence in their artistic necessity, to anxiety about the ease with which the norm may be contaminated by the other. Together with this goes anxiety about the minor place of classical music within contemporary western culture, as against the belief that it should be celebrated as one of its highest manifestations. The superiority and exclusivity of its norms becomes another defence against external others, which in turn increases classical music’s irrelevance to everyone else.

Western classical music is thus a culture in which the stereotypical dead, white, high-class, protestant, male really does encapsulate the values promoted as ideal. The sanctified composer, the authoritative master-teacher and master-performer, the adjudicator, the manager, the programmer and the critic are all in the business of constraining, forbidding or excluding the other, of keeping classical music pure. It is at this level, I am sorry to say, that music, in Adorno’s formulation, understands us better than we do ourselves.13

Are there solutions through which we can escape this still deeply prejudiced culture? Of course, there are. It follows inevitably from the extent to which performance style has already changed, over the short period documented by recordings (which are assumed, I think correctly, to have promoted standardisation, implying that style may have been still more variable before the twentieth century), that there are innumerable other ways of making these scores into engaging musical experiences. But they depend on throwing off the ideology; and when the whole music business has been trained to a set of beliefs from childhood instrumental lessons onward, beliefs

13 For Adorno’s view of this as a property of composition, see Adorno 2002b. Adorno here has plenty to say there about freedom in reproduction (esp. 412–7), some of it pertinent here.
reinforced every time a performer or a gatekeeper acts, then throwing off the ideology is hard. The solutions are solutions Adorno would have hated, because, as well as deep scepticism about essences, they involve refusing policing, refusing worship of the dead, and refusing the authoritarianism that seeks to define the wishes of the dead for its own ends, political, social and financial. Instead, we have to ask of scores, ‘what else can these notes do, unpolicied, measured only by the extent to which they engage us as musical rather than predominantly ideological experiences?’

Ideology, needless to say, is never missing. I do not for a moment suggest that we can experience music innocent of preconceptions about how it might sound or without bringing ourselves and our other beliefs to the way we think about and make music. But I do suggest that if we can set aside the ways in which we damn performers for playing or singing at all differently, if we can resist coming to a performance as listeners having decided in advance how a piece ought to go, then we are making space to focus instead on the dynamics of musical sound and the ways in which – in relation to musical syntax and to any kinds of associations we (as consciously as we can) choose to bring to the table – the changing dynamics of sound generate musico-dramatic experiences. These are the experiences we go to concerts for, experiences made as – in relation to processes such as entrainment and empathy\(^\text{14}\) – we map sequences of feelings onto sequences of sounds.\(^\text{15}\) It is at this level, I suggest, where shapes of speech, of gesture and of feeling are modelled in sound, a level concerned more with performance than with composition,\(^\text{16}\) that art and society speak of one another in the ways Adorno hoped to illuminate.

This introduces a very different set of considerations for judging musical performance and a different set of assumptions about what classical music is there to do and for whom. For modern gatekeepers, the questions to be asked in assessing the worth of a performance are essentially these: is it normative (does this performer belong?), is it correct (do they agree with us about appropriate style?), and is it persuasive (does it strengthen our conviction about what is normative and correct?) in the use it makes of the composition? These are essentially Adorno’s

\(^{14}\) A useful overview is Cox 2016. For more on this mapping, and the cross-modality that enables it, see Leech-Wilkinson 2018. For discussion of earlier thinking along such lines see Dogantan-Dack 2013 and Kim 2013. For related views from another perspective see the discussion of Berger 1999 in Taruskin 2020a. And, emphasising again the frequent resurfacing of these ideas, now much in need of a new synthesis, see (on William James and John Dewey) Shusterman 2011.

\(^{15}\) Here I respond particularly to the valuable discussion of Adorno’s composition-focused perspective in DeNora 2003, esp. p. 10ff. Much of the discussion of feeling shapes in her chapter 3 is germane.
questions differently arranged. Adorno’s analysis, despite the interactivity it admirably affords between its different components, overlooks the role of performance style in determining the nature of what is believed to be the neumic and the idiomatic, as do the questions gatekeepers ask today. Performance style is now more explicitly discussed, albeit in terms of historical correctness, and it of course has a role to play for Adorno too in relation to the idiomatic and the neumic in that what he hears performers do is assessed in relation to his preconceptions about normativity in their realisation. My suggestion, however, is that we simply strike out the first two questions (is it normative, is it correct?) and that the third (is it persuasive?) becomes a question focused around the dynamic qualities of the performance in relation to the score, rather than a question about the performance’s normativity, particularly the normativity of the relationship it makes between compositional and performance style, which has been the obsession of so much performance criticism and teaching over the past half century.

I see it as essential that a performance responds to the composition, particularly at its moment-to-moment (surface) level. (I am at best agnostic about the perceptual reality of large-scale structure.) But while combinations and sequences of notes may engage a sense of forward-motion and expectation – for reasons elucidated by music psychology as persuasively as music theory – that is not to say that the composition has particular needs. The piece is not a person. It needs nothing from us and suffers in no way from our interaction with it. This is arguably the greatest of the many sins of the work concept, that it elevates an imagined state of the piece into something more valuable than anyone’s experience of it. There is nothing there to value or to damage. A score is simply materials for interpretation, a starting point for making art to generate experiences.

Composition style, of course, changes; but – as Adorno noted, and much against the assumptions of historically informed performance – it is far from clear that a composition style requires a particular performance style for its persuasive realisation in sound. Performance style also changes, noticeably over decades, and presumably it changes with some kind of relation to composition style-change in that both reflect broad cultural-stylistic trends. Both presumably have a relationship through a shared cultural context (which could in principle be demonstrated) when a score is new. But I am not convinced that there is any advantage in keeping them together indefinitely. Highly persuasive performances of the same score across

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For reasons set out in Leech-Wilkinson 2012.
See, for example, Huron 2006.
different performance-stylistic periods are evidently commonly achieved. I have written about a number of examples in which one may reasonably say that while the notes may be the same the music is different; yet all are persuasive (Leech-Wilkinson 2007, 2009, 2013). Now I would go further, and argue – drawing on the evidence of recent developments in what one might loosely call post-historical performance where elements of past performance styles have been extended (an example is discussed below) – that it is also possible to make productive new styles. Historically Informed Performance is the outstanding example: a manner of performance that is constantly changing, and that while it purports to be recovered from the past is in fact quite new. It follows that one may use current performance style, a past style, or make a new one, and still make fresh and engaging sense of a score from any place and time. It is the ‘fresh and engaging’ that matters.

What does that mean? I suggested above that we ‘focus instead on the dynamics of musical sound’. The sense that a performance is expressive and engaging – the test for which is perhaps that more than anything else one might be doing one wishes to continue to listen, to hear what happens next – is generated above all, I suggest, through fluctuating intensities in sonic fields such as density, texture, harmonicity, tessitura, range, inter-onset length, loudness, all changing individually but interrelatedly at the microsecond level and interacting with harmony, line and counterpoint in ways that seem to give those parameters dynamics of their own and that seem inherent to them as ‘purely musical’, although in fact all are brought to the score by performers and in ways that must reflect the dynamics of other kinds of social communication. All this sonic interactivity (musical and not) may be contained in and summarised by the concept of musical dynamics, using the word not in the sense of loudness only but rather in the broader sense of forces producing (a sense of) movement: the motion that music simulates. A persuasive performance should be not a normatively ‘proper’ performance but one whose dynamics are so engaging that one wishes only to continue to listen. Dynamics in this sense have a more fundamental truth to them than ideologies of the musically proper; and they gain that truth through the powerful use they make of bodily feeling responses.

Rather than ask whether a performance is correct, then, we need to try to ask whether it constructs for us (individually) an enthralling sequence of feeling-experiences, their sense determined at least to a degree by their familiarity from other kinds of psychological and social experience, bearing in mind that music happens in real time and in the minds of listeners who

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20 Richard Taruskin, of course, has been arguing this powerfully for decades. See especially the essays collected in Taruskin 1995.

21 On this, using the common metaphor of shape, see Leech-Wilkinson 2018.
make their own sense of it. The job of the critic then is not to comment on the historical correctness or faithfulness of a performance but rather on the effectiveness with which it engages the critic-as-frequent-listener in its dynamic processes. This is, in any case, an important part of what listeners and critics already do all the time: the difference comes in being aware of it more consciously, addressing it more explicitly, and in valuing it most highly. Over and above the engagingness of its dynamic properties, a performer may very well in her singing or playing seek to persuade her listeners of an ideological position. But let that position be considered, designed in sound, and discussed, explicitly part of the performance, not blindly adopted from normative convention or from the manipulation by the culture industry against which Adorno rightly warned, \(^{22}\) nor enforced by gatekeepers on penalty of losing work.

To summarise, what I have outlined are some (I think necessary) ingredients in a changed theory and practice of classical music performance, which would no longer be a theory or a practice of reproduction. It needs first a view of what is wrong with current beliefs, practices and policing, and of the failures of insight, and the prejudices, on which beliefs, practices and policing depend. Secondly, it needs a view of performers’ rights in relation to those of composers (particularly dead composers) and (living) listeners. Thirdly, it needs a view of what is required for a persuasive performance. (These requirements I have attempted to meet informally in my recent online book for performers, \(\text{Leech-Wilkinson 2020a}\).) And fourthly, it needs a view of what we want music to do for us emotionally, socially, and perhaps (though if so, then within a very strong ethical framework and more explicitly than at the moment) what we want it to do for us politically. On classical music’s emotional and social affordances a great deal of fine work has been done recently by music psychologists and sociologists; but much less, far too little, has been done on the politics, largely because of the ideology’s resistance to admitting that it is a factor (the resistance, of course, reflecting how illiberal its political work is at the moment).

Such a theory, in my view, has no purpose other than to encourage a practice; therefore there must also be examples. \(^{23}\) From that I should like to single out here a few performances illustrating different uses of performance style.

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\(^{22}\) As Richard \(\text{Taruskin 2020b}\) : 143 (citing \(\text{Adorno 1973}\)) points out, this was one factor encouraging Adorno to privilege the ‘structural’ over the ‘emotional’ listener, as if the expert was any less in thrall to industry normativity.

\(^{23}\) I have provided some of these, in order to stimulate discussion and further experimentation, at the website which also hosts my recent book on some of these issues, https://challengingperformance.com.
Ji Liu’s performance of the notes of Beethoven’s piano sonata op. 27, no. 2, the *Moonlight* sonata, adopts characters for each movement as nearly opposite as possible to those of a normative performance. Some listeners will loathe this, some it may make quite angry; but if it does then I respectfully suggest that it is beliefs that are creating that anger, beliefs about what is ‘proper’ to this score and what is owed to the long-dead composer. It is not the sounds themselves that are the problem, because as a sequence of musical shapes I suspect that this performance can be every bit as plausible as a conventional one, perhaps even more so given the tedium of so many at the glacial speeds we have learned to expect. At the very least it reveals just how different can be the alternatives that normative ideology suppresses.

Ji Liu uses a completely normative performance style here. It is only the character (created by changed dynamic profiles through changing speeds, loudness, timings, and timbres) that is different, or transgressive if you prefer. In Anna Scott’s reading of Brahms’s *Intermezzo* op. 119, no. 1, however, there is a substantially non-normative performance style, one based closely on that of pupils of Clara Schumann whose playing was known to Brahms and his to them. Scott, however, takes aspects of their practice and extends them beyond their late-nineteenth century limits. She uses more radical rubato and hand-separation, rushing through phrases and, as a result, concatenating the score further than her models already do, to the extent of losing some notes in order to get the hands back together at key expressive moments. And yet the performance still makes good dynamic sense, albeit a rather different sense than usual. Overall it seems no less beautiful and persuasive than a normative modern performance, perhaps more so for its ability to succeed so improperly. Taking a different route, Diana Gilchrist’s performances of Schubert’s *Erlkönig* and *Ave Maria* subvert current performance style by incorporating a much wider range of vocal expression than is currently acceptable in polite recitals. But in doing so she opens up the possibility of these scores speaking of contemporary concerns in ways that classical concerts normally, and deliberately, seek to exclude.

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24 Whether or not this is a performance of Beethoven’s sonata seems beside the point, depending on obsolete notions of works and their identity. The performance is what it is, the product of a collaboration between Beethoven’s notes, myself whose ideas it sounds, Andrew Hallifax who engineered and edited the recording, and above all Ji Liu, the pianist. What it becomes for the listener is (and must be) up to her. Adorno comments on the relative freedom of Beethoven’s performances in *Adorno 2002b*: 415.
25 https://challengingperformance.com/interviews-recordings/anna-scott/
In a healthy musical culture, when we judge that a performance ‘works’ it is not because it has a specific end result; but rather because, during the experience of the performance, its dynamics seem well-formed (not correctly, or ideally, or ultimately formed but well-formed in relation to current or known or persuasively new performance styles). It is not a requirement that sees a performance as the end product of a chain of correct translations originating in the composer’s intentions, or in tradition, or in respect, or obedience. Well-formed musical dynamics are a requirement for an enriching experience, obedience to a particular model is not. Possible workable performances may be numberless, but they are not infinite. They are limited by the range of responses of brains to sounds in cultural contexts: only certain readings may be workable at a particular place and time. How and why they work may reveal much about contemporary behaviour and experience. Nonetheless, performers, like actors, can, and perhaps should, be constantly pushing at the edges of what seems workable in order to find out what else, and how else, a score can mean. We may discover much about our own culture by discovering what such performances reveal.

As to validation by the community, Clare Birchall has some useful comments on Lyotard’s challenge to the Habermasian notion of “community consensus” as a check upon interpretation’ (Birchall 2004: 81 ff). For Lyotard ‘consensus “is only a particular state of discussion, not its end” (The Postmodern Condition, 65)’ (Birchall 2004: 82). Lyotard observes how the system manipulates consensus to maintain its power (The Postmodern Condition, 60–61) and argues that the exclusion of new approaches that threaten the system is terrorist, ‘The decision makers’ arrogance … consists in the exercise of terror. It says, ‘Adapt your aspirations to our ends – or else’ (Lyotard 1984: 64). How much of an accommodation with a repressive, intolerant system do we want? Do we opt for true anarchy, in which each musician decides freely for themselves (in discussion) how to read a score? Or some kind of compromise in which a greater variety of readings is accepted as worth approving and supporting within a more liberal but still constrained system? On the face of it we may prefer the idea of staying within a system circling around norms. But we have to ask ourselves how benevolent in relation to norms the music business has been, or is likely to be, or can be. Does it make musicians happy? Does it welcome creativity or difference? Or are the boundaries set by commerce ruthlessly minimising its costs by minimising paid rehearsal? By contrast, rather as Adorno viewed the development of atonality, I am looking for a performance practice that disturbs the

28 For an informal discussion of what it means to say that a performance works, see Leech-Wilkinson 2020a, chapter 22.1: https://challengingperformance.com/the-book-22-1/
comfortable certainties of commodified artistic life and that allows scores from the past to shed fresh light on current concerns, perhaps thereby bringing classical music back into the cultural mainstream.

Lyotard, at the end of *The Postmodern Condition*, seeks ‘a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown’ (Lyotard 1984: 67), which is reasonable in this case too: justice for performers first of all, allowing them to make artistic decisions over a much wider field of possibilities. We need a practice in which debate is continuous and never completed, resisting the notion that there is an interpretation of a score on which we can mostly agree, and sustaining an environment in which musicians can continue to read texts, or change texts, or ignore them, in creative and challenging ways.

**References**


