

Performer's agency and the ideal of transparency: Practical contradictions and ideological tensions facing performers of classical repertoire masterworks

Victoria Tzotzkova

Praising Performers

In a 1983 Boston Globe article, established music critic Richard Dyer makes a critical comparison of the achievements of two celebrated pianists:

... [W]hen you hear those airchecks of Cortot playing Schumann and Chopin in the mid 50s, or when I recall the way I heard him play in class in 1961, there were those miraculous moments when [...] one was suddenly in the pure presence of the music itself. With Horowitz very occasionally the mists of dubious memory and wrong notes parted, and one was in the presence of, well, Horowitz...¹

To someone not familiar with ideas fundamental to current understanding of classical music, it may not be immediately apparent exactly what the critic's judgment actually is. It may be apparent from the very sentence structure that the comparison is not in favor of Horowitz, but what exactly is being said about his performance? Dubious memory and wrong notes may be easily perceived as undesirable features, but they are mentioned tangentially. The real complaint is that during the performance, the critic felt to be in the presence of the performer. How does

such an observation reflect special insight into the performance, and what does it succeed in communicating about that performance?

To someone familiar with classical music and ways of thinking about classical music performance, Dyer's comparison does communicate a great deal. It bestows high praise and lays harsh criticism respectively, but it also does that in a focused and lucid manner: to many classical music lovers and practitioners, the difference between being in the presence of the music and being in the presence of the performer refers to a tangible distinction. The difference Dyer describes in his experience of the playing of the two performers is a difference to which many among his readership are likely to be able to relate. Within the sphere of classical music, describing performances in the terms Dyer chooses is not uncommon; on the contrary, these terms of description are almost commonplace. They seem to point to experience often shared and familiar to the readership Dyer addresses.

Two related points may be striking about this way of describing performers and their performances: that such descriptions rest on highly specific conceptual formulations particular to classical music (and not self-evident outside that sphere); and also that as part of that conceptual system, they do serve as effective communication.

¹ Richard Dyer, "Horowitz Toils Then Triumphs," *Boston Globe*, April 26 1983.

Music as masterwork, music as performance

The distinction Dyer makes flows directly out of a fundamental ideal which defines the relationship between a work of music and its performer: the ideal of transparency. Lydia Goehr focuses on this ideal as part of her analysis of what she calls the work-concept.² She traces the genesis of the work-concept to Romantic thought, when music began to be conceptualized as quasi-divine revelation: Musical works came to be seen as “embodiments of the Infinite,” created by their respective composers, seen as inspired creators with “God-like existence.”³ As far as the performer was concerned, it was the ideal of transparency that gradually emerged to define his or her relationship to the musical work.⁴

A central part of Goehr’s argument is that throughout history, music was not always understood in terms of masterworks. The concept of the musical masterwork came into being as part of a larger ideology of the arts which emerged in the Romantic period.⁵ The successful articulation of the work-concept depended on what Goehr calls the “separability principle,” the idea that a work of art exists independently from any functionality, its existence justified on purely aesthetic grounds.⁶ Accordingly, music was no longer seen as accompaniment to a particular social practice or event, but – like the other arts – it came to exist for its own sake. To consider music on a par with – or

even a higher plane than – other arts, however, it needed transcendental and permanent existence. The Romantics came to think of musical masterworks as fixed and perfected entities, self-contained and fully formed by the process of composition.⁷ One important consequence of this way of thinking is that music begins to exist apart from performance. Only when a piece of music could exist independently from a particular performance could it be understood as a masterwork, for masterworks existed for posterity and could not be synonymous with fleeting events, open to the contingencies of varying circumstances.

But although the musical masterwork existed independently of performance, the work and the performance were clearly closely related. Articulating that relationship, however, was problematic.

Under Goehr’s analysis, the *Werktreue* ideal, or the ideal of being true to the work, was gradually coined to define the problematic relationship between a work and its performance. For a performer, being true to the work meant becoming transparent,

² Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³ *Ibid.*, 162-63.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 170ff.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 155ff.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 161ff.

removing him- or her-self as fully as possible from the path of communication between the work and the listener receiving the work's intimations:

A performance met the *Werktreue* ideal most satisfactorily, it was finally decided, when it achieved complete transparency. For transparency allowed the work to 'shine' through and be heard in and for itself.⁸

This idea of having the work be heard "in and for itself" meant that the presence of the performer had to be minimized. The role of the performer in the communion between work and listener came to be viewed with some degree of ambivalence. Such ambivalence could on occasion give rise to mistrust, or even disdain. As Schoenberg put it in one of his letters:

The performer [...] is totally unnecessary except as his interpretations make the music understandable to an audience unfortunate enough not to be able to read it in print.⁹

Schoenberg takes the ideal of transparency to an extreme, and in his proposed scenario, effectively removes the performer. Removing the performer, however, also removes the performance that that performer brings about. Following through on the implications of Schoenberg's scenario may provide the following picture: Without

the performer and his or her performances, an educated audience could avail itself of the music directly. Rather than relying on the precarious interventions of performers, such an audience would ideally interpret the intimations of the music directly from the score, much like a reader does in reading a novel, one would imagine. Under this scenario, performance becomes redundant, and the music is experienced in its original, undistorted form. As noted earlier, music and performance exist separately, and taken to an extreme, that separation leads Schoenberg to imagine a scenario in which music exists but performance does not. What drives such a scenario is the belief that it is in its independence from performance that music best preserves its perfection.

Pressing on with the implications of this informal remark,¹⁰ one would have to note that removing the performance also removes sound, and that the sort of music the citation imagines exists apart from sound. Whether Schoenberg is actually advocating that music should properly exist apart from sound can be debated. But that hypothetical debate aside, it remains true that most people experience musical works in performance. There is an audience for performances, and there are performers who devote themselves to the task of performing the works of the classical repertoire.

How do performers handle the tension between the ideal scenario posited by Schoenberg and their own work as

⁸ Ibid., 232.

⁹ Cited in Nicholas Cook, "Between Process and Product: Music and/ as Performance," *Music Theory Online* 7, no. 2 (2001), <http://mto.societymusictheory.org/issues/mto.01.7.2/mto.01.7.2.cook.html>.

¹⁰ I do want to stress that the remark was made in the informal setting of a personal letter, and may or may not have been meant entirely seriously. It does, however, capture a common uneasiness in regards to the relationship between works and performances.

performers? How do performers negotiate the gap between the perfected state of the music and their own human-scale activity? How does an understanding of performance as essentially a distortion of an ideal entity affect experiences of performers? How does such understanding figure into the formation of performers? How do such ideals impact performance practices? And finally, are there ways to view such ideals which make them productive in light of performance practices and experiences?

“Music” in the conservatory

In his 1988 ethnography of conservatory life, Henry Kingsbury analyzes several key concepts commonly circulated in different practical contexts at a conservatory, focusing on the direct impact of conceptual formulations on students’ actions and experiences.¹¹ Kingsbury devotes much attention to different conceptions of “the music”, noting a strikingly high degree of abstraction. For instance, what is taught in sight-singing class is “drills”, explicitly contrasted with music;¹² similarly, “diction for singers” is a class which explicitly does not deal with “musical questions;”¹³ and, as is frequently stated in masterclasses and coachings, “playing the notes” explicitly does not amount to “playing the music.”¹⁴

In the context of these classes, Kingsbury finds a wide consensus on what the music is not. What the music actually is, however, remains largely unaddressed. Kingsbury notes that in different contexts, ideas of what the music is can shift widely, and a stable definition never emerges from the resources he collects.¹⁵ Paradoxically, however, despite this absence of a stable definition, Kingsbury also notes that “conservatory musicians continually referred to “the music” as though it were a constant, concrete, and unambiguous point of reference, a cultural *terra firma*.”¹⁶ But although in discursive practice the concept of “the music” may be routinely treated as a *terra firma*, in some practical situations of conservatory life, that point of reference may also become extremely shaky and ambiguous.

Kingsbury offers a striking illustration of that discrepancy through the personal story of a student whose standing in the conservatory is severely compromised by a jury evaluation which stated that even though the student has a “wonderful singing voice” and is a “really good actor,” she is nonetheless “unmusical.”¹⁷ In addition to the difficulty of understanding the term “unmusical,” the student is further confused by the fact that during the previous year’s evaluation, comments had been that she was

¹¹ Henry Kingsbury, *Music, Talent, and Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

¹² *Ibid.*, 159.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 140ff.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 65ff.

in fact very musical. The high degree of abstraction inherent in the concept “music” transfers, through the adjective, to the evaluation of the student’s ability as a performer. The evaluation is at once unambiguous and highly ambiguous: unambiguous in the sense that it clearly discourages any further performing activity, and highly ambiguous in the sense that the student’s failings remain very abstractly described.

The inherent abstractness of the notion of “musicality” is at the root of considerable tensions facing the conservatory student. As it figures in the particular situation Kingsbury describes, such abstractness generates palpable confusion and anxiety. While “musicality” refers to nothing in particular about the student’s performance, it also refers to everything. Although the comments on the student’s musicality reflect impressions of a particular performance, they simultaneously refer to something much more definitive: The student’s own sense of identity hinges on the evaluation of her musicality.¹⁸ The comments are particularly afflicting because they identify a deficiency the student cannot hope to rectify: A judgment on a student’s musicality is a judgment on the student’s intrinsic qualities. Musicality is widely understood in the conservatory as something categorically different from any learned skill or ability. As members of the faculty explicitly explained to the student, “you either have it or you don’t, and there really isn’t anything to be done to change things.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid., 66.

¹⁹ Ibid., 67.

²⁰ Ibid., 68ff.

²¹ Piotr Sztompka, “Evolving Focus on Human Agency in Contemporary Social Theory,” in *Agency and Structure: Reorienting Social Theory*, ed. Piotr Sztompka (Amsterdam: Gordon & Breach Science Publishers, 1994), 25ff.

In his analysis of the student’s situation, Kingsbury repeatedly notes that being musical, and by extension being talented, is something attributed to a performer but assigned exclusively by an outside observer.²⁰ The student is caught in a position of utter dependence: She relies completely on outside judgment for her own – and her community’s – sense of herself as a performer. The deficiency the jury identifies is fundamental; at the same time, it cannot be concretely described, nor can it be appealed. The student’s own sense of whether or not she is musical is very strongly contingent on what her jury comments say on the subject. In the context of her conservatory experience, she in effect remains very uninvolved in establishing her position as a member of the profession or her own sense of herself as an artist.

The concept of agency

One way to describe the student’s situation is to say that she is in a position of no agency. I am borrowing the concept of agency here from sociology, where it has been described as a driving force behind events, phenomena, and processes. Agency can be vested in individuals, groups, or even supernatural forces, when these individuals, groups, or forces are seen as the authors of acts, or the impetus for interactions and change.²¹ Having strong agency means

authoring acts with strong repercussions, acts which are strongly felt in an interaction. Conversely, having little agency is a way to describe the acts or presence of entities which have very little effect on the course of a process or the development of a situation.

To return to the conservatory episode in Kingsbury's ethnography: Any action on the part of the student in effect falls outside of her situation. Comments about her musicality do not directly address anything she does: They define her on a grander scale, as a human being and artist, without direct recourse to any action she performs. If musicality is something you either have or you don't, and "there is nothing to be done to change things,"²² the implication seems to be that agency is vested nowhere. In effect, however, agency is taken away from the person who does or does not have the musicality, since that person can do nothing to change things; it is also taken away from a teacher insofar as a teacher may influence a student's acts; but in terms of social interactions at the conservatory, there is plenty of agency resting with those who determine the presence or absence of musicality. It is typically in the context of a jury examination that such determinations are made. A faculty member in the capacity of the student's studio teacher does not have similarly strong agency. But since emphasis on jury evaluations is very heavy within the conservatory, faculty comments as part of jury evaluations exercise remarkably strong influence on situations and events at the conservatory.

Seen through the notion of agency, the conservatory dynamics around determining a student's musicality may seem unfairly

stacked. It would be easy to put blame for any unfairness on the jury members who do have the agency. However, this is not the conclusion I want to draw through my use of the concept. The notion of agency does clearly point to a flawed dynamic. But while the student's position is very aptly described through the idea of an absent agency, this absence is not created by the unfair usurpation of agency by the faculty members present at a jury examination. The lopsided dynamics of the jury examination has deep roots far beyond the conservatory.

The work-concept revisited

In Kingsbury's conversations with the failing conservatory student, the discussion of her performance invariably focuses on her jury's evaluation.²³ What is discussed with teachers as well as colleagues, is almost exclusively her jurors' experience of the music. Even though the discussion is explicitly of the student's performance, the terms of discussion effectively circumvent her actions. The discussion is of "the music," still a highly abstract but unquestioned entity, as well as of her jurors' experience of the music.

Such terms of discussion are fully consistent with notions Lydia Goehr articulates in her analysis of the work-concept.²⁴ As articulated within the work-concept, the role of the performer is that of an intermediary between the music and the listener. The mediation, however, is best left unfelt. What is cherished and emphasized is the idealized musical work as well as the quasi-divine experience it affords to its listeners. Transferred to the context of the

²² Kingsbury, *Music, Talent, and Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System*, 67. Cf. above.

²³ *Ibid.*, 64-66.

²⁴ Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, Esp. the chapter entitled "After 1800: The Beethoven paradigm," 205-243.

conservatory, these same terms of discussion define a difficult situation: one in which the performer remains largely absent, caught between the demands of “the music” and the listeners.

In the course of her analysis of the work-concept, Goehr traces the development of other tightly related, “subsidiary” concepts. In regards to *Werktreue*, or the notion of faithfulness to the work, Goehr writes:

The ideal of *Werktreue* pervaded every aspect of practice in and after 1800 with full regulative force. ... Concepts and ideals having to do with notation, performance, and reception acquired their meaning as concepts subsidiary to that of the work. ...[T]hese subsidiary concepts ... served to give a highly abstract concept concrete expression.²⁵

In talking about “regulative force” Goehr directs attention to the influence a concept can exercise on an associated practice. The above citation highlights one important aspect of Goehr’s analysis: the idea that even a very abstract concept, like the work-concept, can find direct expression in practice, as it supplies particular meanings and fuels particular motivations. Ways of thinking, in other words, can be directly related to ways of doing.

Implied in Goehr’s historically grounded analysis is the possibility of rethinking conceptual formulations, even if the given formulations are widely circulated and culturally significant. In the last chapter of her discussion, entitled “*Werktreue*: Confirmation and challenge in contemporary movements,” Goehr notes:

...I hope to leave readers with the specific feeling that speaking about music in terms of works is neither an obvious nor a necessary mode of speech, despite the lack of ability we presently seem to have to speak of music in any other way.²⁶

If conceptual formulations are tied to given epochs and practices, the implication is that such formulations continually evolve. Furthermore, if conceptual formulations are closely related to practices, the evolution of conceptual formulations may be reflected in corresponding practical developments. In light of current-day attitudes and concerns like those addressed by Kingsbury, it may be productive to consider conceptual formulations for their practical utility. If conceptual formulations are not immutable, they may be opened up for discussion. They may further be amenable to change which could provide an impetus for productive practical developments.

To return to the practical context of conservatory education: As Kingsbury’s ethnography strongly suggests, an exclusive focus on the musical work may actually undermine effective communication about performance. Such a focus may thus hinder the musical development of performers. An uncritical use of the terms of discussion associated with the work-concept may be counterproductive in light of the artistic goals pursued at the conservatory.

The concept of agency calls attention to the potentially damaging impact of some extreme interpretations of the *Werktreue* ideal. In the closing remarks which follow, I hope to suggest directions for rethinking

²⁵ Ibid., 242.

²⁶ Ibid., 243.

cherished conceptual formulations with a view to making them better suited to the practices they describe. Considering the concept of agency and the ideal of transparency side by side sets the stage for a balanced thought process. To me, the notion of agency effectively highlights ways in which the inherent abstractness of the work-concept may be misapplied in practice. It also offers ways of thinking which may help articulate a more comfortable and productive understanding of the role a performer plays in bringing a musical work to an audience.

Performer's agency and the ideal of transparency

Under the overarching notion of the work-concept, the actions of a performer remain largely unaddressed. Circumventing the actions of a performer in conceptualizing music has the effect of circumventing the presence of the performer. This circumvented presence is expressed in the ideal of transparency. The ideal of transparency downplays the performer's necessary presence in the communication between the work and the listener, positing that presence as a pretend absence. Terms of speech for addressing performers reflect this idea of a pretend absence. As Richard Dyer's *Boston Globe* article reminds us,²⁷ the highest praise a performer can receive is a statement to the effect that his presence remains unnoticed.

How might the notion of agency be brought into a discussion of a performer's role in bringing a work to an audience? Could the notion of agency and the ideal of

transparency work to compliment each other? The terms of speech Dyer employs imply that agency rests chiefly with the music. The music in some sense demands its proper realization of the performer. Some agency also rests with the listener, who determines whether the performer's realization was successful or not, based on the experience of the music. The performer, however, is never addressed as an active presence with palpable agency. When Dyer does explicitly address the presence of the performer – as he does with Horowitz, – it is to describe an undesirable musical experience.²⁸

In an important sense, this conceptual formulation distorts the dynamics of agency which characterize a performance situation. It is the performer's agency that brings about a performance and potentially effects the communication between music and listener. One way to reconcile the notion of agency and the ideal of transparency is to say that during a performance, the agency of the music must be assumed by the performer. On its own terms, the ideal of transparency does not necessarily posit the absence of a performer: It posits a simulated absence. Although very indirectly, it still posits the presence of a performer who acts in ways which effectively simulate his absence. But even if the ideal of transparency does not posit an absence, it does put the performer's active presence out of view, and thus may be interpreted as an ideal of absence, as in the case of Schoenberg's statement cited earlier.²⁹ The notion of agency brings the performer's active presence into focus, suggesting an interpretation of transparency which does not equate transparency with absence.

²⁷ Dyer, "Horowitz Toils Then Triumphs." Cf. above.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Cook, "Between Process and Product: Music and/ as Performance."

A revised view of transparency, which includes an emphasis on a performer's agency, may suggest changes in attitudes in conservatory life, as well as classical music performance more generally. During a performance, if the performer is understood to temporarily assume the agency of a work on herself, then the role a performer plays becomes explicitly active. By the same token, the process of working on an interpretation may be understood as a process by which the performer discovers ways to effectively assume agency "on behalf of" the work. During such a process, the importance of the performer's own engagement is again in focus. These suggestions are decidedly abstract, but in effect they introduce a practical angle to what are already highly abstract terms of thought and speech.

To expand on the practical angle somewhat further: In the context of a conservatory education, developing a performer's own sense of agency may mean that her playing not be treated as a matter of executing directions or implementing choices made for her by teachers and coaches. Her training would not aim so much at having her learn a particular rendition of a piece, as having her develop her own ability to render a musical work convincingly. She would have to develop her own sense of what a convincing rendition is, and in the course of her training come to be able to trust that sense.

The notion of agency and the ideal of transparency may in effect be fully compatible. Reconciling these two concepts, however, puts pressure on some ways of understanding transparency. To incorporate the notion of agency, transparency must refer to an active presence. In the context of the conservatory, it may be particularly important to understand transparency in ways which are compatible with the notion of agency. To become an artist, a student must develop habits of full and critical engagement. A

student's own sense of her musical ability is central to her development as a performer.

The ideal of transparency has supplied lastingly effective terms for describing positive listener experiences, and has long and effectively served to communicate about such experiences. The notion of being faithful to the musical work is widely used by performers and listeners alike, and has remained a rich and fruitful concept. It does, however, tend to minimize the necessarily active role of the performer in effecting a listener's communication with the music. Especially in the context of conservatory training, such de-emphasis of the performer's active presence may interfere with the development of musical ability. The notion of agency may temper some extreme interpretations of the ideal of transparency and prove productive in light of both thinking about and doing performance.

References:

- Cook, Nicholas. "Between Process and Product: Music and/ as Performance." *Music Theory Online*, no. 2 (2001), <http://mto.societymusictheory.org/issues/mto.01.7.2/mto.01.7.2.cook.html>.
- Dyer, Richard. "Horowitz Toils Then Triumphs." *Boston Globe*, April 26 1983.
- Goehr, Lydia. *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Kingsbury, Henry. *Music, Talent, and Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001.
- Sztompka, Piotr. "Evolving Focus on Human Agency in Contemporary Social Theory." In *Agency and Structure: Reorienting Social Theory*, edited by Piotr Sztompka. Amsterdam: Gordon & Breach Science Publishers, 1994.

*Victoria Tzotzkova is a pianist, researcher, and teacher. She is currently completing her doctoral dissertation entitled *Toward and Enactive View of Music Performance: An Integrated Perspective on Expressive Sound Quality in Piano Playing at the Music Department of Columbia University*. In April 2009, she made her New York recital debut at Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall under the auspices of Artists International.*