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Thomas Turino

MUSICAL PERFORMANCE AND AUDIENCES.

Musical performance is an organized presentation of musical sounds (and, arguably, controlled silences), usually for the entertainment, edification, or enrichment of listeners. The parameters of a performance are often determined by culturally understood boundaries—symphony audiences disregard the warming up and tuning of orchestral musicians, whereas listeners to Indian classical music understand the *ālāpa* (a slow, improvisatory exploration of a *rāga*, or traditional melodic pattern) to be an intrinsic part of the performance, if not comprising the entire performance itself. Audiences must be conditioned, therefore, to understand the norms of performance and their own roles as listeners. An Indian audience might quietly snap along with a *tala* (a traditional rhythmic pattern), whereas the symphony audience is expected to maintain a strict silence until the final section of a multimovement work has concluded. A jazz audience, on the other hand, might chatter and drink beverages during a jazz combo's club performance, but would also respond to individual artistry during the course of a piece by applauding after each improvised solo; an otherwise quiet opera audience would cheer a well-performed aria, and might even, in exceptional cases, demand an encore.

Despite the recognition that there are expected behaviors for performers and audiences, defining "musical performance"



Figure 1. Jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald performs for an audience that includes bandleader Duke Ellington. Photographed in 1948 by Herman Leonard. HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

is as difficult as the attempt to pinpoint the nature of music itself. The immense diversity of human musical activity has led to a host of attitudes regarding the nature and purpose of musical events. The lines of demarcation between composer and composition, composition and performer, and performer and audience are sometimes almost impossibly blurred. Moreover, no universal standard exists by which to measure “good” performance; this assessment, too, is dependent on variable cultural and aesthetic expectations. However, the ongoing attempts of historians, ethnomusicologists, and philosophers (as well as composers and performers) to articulate and isolate various parameters of musical activity help us to understand both the diversity and the similarities within musical performances.

Origins and Types of Performance

Without a doubt, performance is the oldest form of musical activity, but its origins are difficult to pinpoint. Steven J. Mithen posits a series of cultural “sparks” during the middle-upper Paleolithic transition, culminating in the first appearances of art objects in Europe some forty thousand years ago. Basing his theories on the work of cognitive scientists, Mithen argues that these sparks resulted from the coalescing of several human intelligences—technical, natural history, social, and linguistic—which in turn opened the door to the development

of artistic and religious practices. Although archaeologists have discovered instruments made from mammoth bones in 18,000 B.C.E., the oldest known forms of written music survive on Mesopotamian clay tablets dating from at least 3,000 to 2,000 years B.C.E. Other tablets of the same era make reference to instrumentalists and singers. Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, c. 2400 B.C.E., comprise the earliest surviving representations of performing musicians. The ancient Greeks also depicted music-making (and listening); one image portrays a young woman playing the aulos for a reclining male guest. Besides illustrating music as entertainment, Greek iconography also depicts other broad categories of musical performances, such as music for dance and music in support of religious beliefs.

Performance as background activity. The convention of an audience gathering specifically to listen to a scheduled musical event is a relatively modern phenomenon. Historically, much musical entertainment was presented at the convenience of its patrons, while many other forms of music-making were (and still are) almost entirely subordinate to some other foreground purpose, such as worship, dancing, military maneuvers, and other activities.

Music in religious observance. Cultures all over the world incorporate music into their sacred and ceremonial activities.



Figure 2. Young Greek woman playing an aulos. © BETTMANN/CORBIS

Jews and early Christians both made use of chant in their devotions, regarding this as a means of uplifting the mind as well as a method of worship. In the Fuke sect of Japanese Buddhism, *komuso* (beggar priests) play the flute-like *shakuhachi*, not as an instrument per se, but rather as a spiritual tool that assists its player in reaching enlightenment. In contrast, the West African Ewe people believe they are guided through life by ancestral spirits, so a musician often regards music-making as his destiny, thanks to the inherited spirit of an ancestor who has determined the course of his life. An Ewe funeral is a celebratory affair because its ritual drumming, singing, and dancing enable the soul to become an ancestral spirit. According to Charlotte J. Frisbee, the Navajo Indians make a semantic distinction between “performing,” which is the music-making during ceremonies, and “playing,” which describes all other forms of musical activity. Music is even more deeply imbedded in the intertribal Native American Church; its adherents view music itself as prayer. Music as a function of religious observance is by no means universal; for instance, music is forbidden in the Algerian Mozabite Muslim sect.

Music and dance. Music is also almost always an essential component of dance (and, indeed, dance and religion go hand in hand in many cultures). Customarily, music is subsidiary to the movements of the dancers, even though it controls (or reflects) their actions to varying degrees. In its simplest form, music for dance maintains the beat and tempo; various other aspects of the musical performance might guide more nuanced gestures. By actions such as foot stamping, whistling, clapping, or singing, the dancers themselves might produce the accompanimental music. Filipino Bontok musicians of Sadanga, Luzon, when playing *gangsá* (flat gongs) sound the gongs with sticks and dance in circles and spirals. More commonly,



Figure 3. A man dressed as a *komuso* (beggar priest) plays a flute-like *shakuhachi*. Photograph c. 1901–1920. © UNDERWOOD & UNDERWOOD/CORBIS

dancers move while stationary musicians perform, as in a processional Renaissance dance performed at a fifteenth-century Burgundian wedding. The shawm and sackbut players stand in an elevated side gallery apart from the dancers, and their status as “background” performers is reinforced visually by their plain, matching tunics.

Music in the military. Since antiquity, as armies grew too large for vocal commands to be heard, a system of musical signals was adopted by various military groups. Some of these “calls” regulated the soldiers’ daily activities, ranging from the early-morning reveille to the bedtime tattoo; other forms of music passed along orders during battle. Military musical ensembles also supported morale among the troops, and although live musicians have seldom been used during actual warfare since the early twentieth century, many military units still use bands as a public-relations bridge feature, thereby moving their musical performances to the “foreground.” In North America, in particular, the military bands influenced the development of various school ensembles; these ensembles consist of not only stationary “concert” bands of wind players and percussionists, but also marching bands. The mobile marching ensembles perform in two main contexts: street parades, in which



Figure 4. A field show presented by the marching band of the University of California, Los Angeles. ALYSON MCLAMORE

they perform music while passing in front of viewers (who therefore hear only a portion of a work before the band passes out of hearing range), and field shows, in which the band members create elaborate designs and patterns with their bodies while playing.

Music in other contexts. Musical performance has functioned as a backdrop to many other forms of human activity, ranging from lullabies sung to infants to children's games to banquet music to the elaborate vocal and orchestral performances that entertained strolling patrons in eighteenth-century Georgian pleasure gardens. The French composer Erik Satie was fascinated by the possibilities of what he called *musique d'ameublement* (furniture music), which was intended to be ignored, but found in 1920 that it was difficult to keep audiences talking and moving about while musicians were performing at a drawing exhibition. Nevertheless, modern-day shoppers seem to have little difficulty in ignoring live pianists playing in department stores, undoubtedly conditioned to this lack of response by the prevalence of recorded Muzak and other forms of "canned" environmental music.

Performance as foreground focus. Many cultures that use music for background purposes also host activities in which artistic music-making is the primary focus of the enterprise. Since the music itself commands attention, these endeavors might collectively be labeled "art music," although the term "classical music" is often used interchangeably. ("Popular music," in contrast, usually puts less emphasis on artistry and more focus on commercial qualities; in individual cases, of course, the level of artistic achievement in popular music may be extremely high.) In many instances, specialized venues (music rooms, concert halls, theaters) have been built to accommodate performances of art music (see Thomas Mace's 1676 plans for a dedicated "Musick-Room.") Nevertheless, within art music's concert and theatrical presentations, the type of musical activity can vary widely; musicians might improvise freely or provide their own interpretations of traditional repertory, or, at the opposite extreme, they may be endeavoring to recreate a pre-existing musical artwork as exactly as possible. Correspondingly,

performers are viewed varyingly as free agents, composers' interpreters or "ambassadors," and even automatons.

Improvisation as performance. Various music education methodologies, such as Émile Jaques-Dalcroze's eurythmics or the Orff-Schulwerk pioneered by Carl Orff, allow children to improvise freely on instruments or vocally, which appears to be a natural tendency of childhood exploratory development. In most cultures, however, audiences expect improvisers to be highly trained experts in their media, and thus the improvised portions of performances carry great prestige; the cadenzas in concertos, the "solos" in jazz works, and the *taqsīm* in Arabic and Turkish music are all highlights for listeners. In both Western and non-Western traditions, some performers may study with masters for many years before embarking on their first public improvisations. Performers in other cultures may adopt entirely different attitudes toward improvisation, however; through fasting and self-torture, North American Plains Indians seek visions in which new songs might appear to them, whereas Pima Indians regard improvisation as a process of "unraveling" the songs already present in the supernatural world. Of course, due to its spontaneous and unnotated nature, improvisation is one of the most difficult aspects of music to study historically.

Re-creative performance. In contrast to improvisation—or, sometimes, in partnership with it—much musical performance is the (re-)enactment of a piece according to predetermined specifications. In some traditions, the musical works are conveyed via oral transmission and rote mimicry, while other cultures have developed various forms of musical notation to guide performances. For performers, however, any score—the handwritten or printed record of a composer's intentions—is incapable of telling the "whole story." Just as in the case of skilled improvisers, musicians performing from scores usually need substantial prior training to understand the conventions of a particular style of music before they are considered ready for public performance.

Performance Considerations

There is no universal agreement as to what constitutes a musical performance, for the nature of music-making and listening varies greatly from culture to culture. Similarly, the parameters of *good* performance are equally hard to measure. Many philosophers, historians, and performers have turned their attention to this problem, exploring varied issues of musical aesthetics and historical performance practice.

The quest for perfection No matter what impetus—improvisation or score transmission—has produced a performance of art music, audiences attending these presentations carry with them a set of aesthetic criteria, ranging from specific personal preferences to broad awareness of cultural norms. Listeners evaluate a performance on the basis of their blended personal and collective attitudes, which allows for enormous variety in the perception of a single performance as good or bad. It is impossible for a performer to anticipate and respond to all the individual standards by which his performance might be judged; as Jerrold Levinson quipped, "For a listener who wears earplugs, a very loud performance is the best" (p. 382).



Figure 5. *Concert at Vauxhall Gardens* (1784) by Thomas Rowlandson. V & A IMAGES / VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

Nevertheless, in most instances in which performers bring “to sound” a notated score, their faithfulness to that score is often a leading measure of their success.

Philosophers and critics disagree as to how to measure that faithfulness. The relative imprecision of much early Western notation forces performers to make many basic choices: if a surviving work contains only vocal parts, but iconography from the same time period shows instruments playing alongside singers, should a contemporary conductor choose to double the voices with instruments, despite no written indication to do so? Is this a better—or worse—performance than a presentation limited to voices alone? There has been a growing tendency in recent years to treat the score as sacrosanct, especially in repertoires in which notation is increasingly exact. Many feel that when a musician exercises too much performance freedom, the original work’s integrity is at risk of being lost. The philosopher Nelson Goodman takes this attitude to an extreme when he argues, “Since complete compliance with the score is the only requirement for a genuine instance of a work, the most miserable performance without actual mistakes does count as such an instance, while the most brilliant performance with a single wrong note does not” (p. 186). Although most listeners would disagree with Goodman’s position, his view is in some ways at the heart of another controversial aspect of music: the goals of performance (or performing) practice.

Performance practice. The last half of the twentieth century witnessed an increasing desire among many musicians to reenact performances of historical works as closely as possible to the way (we think) they were first presented. No one objects to the notion that it is often pleasurable to hear Johann Sebastian Bach’s preludes and fugues performed on a harpsichord; the disagreements begin when we ask if it is still pleasurable (or desirable) to perform the same Bach works on a modern piano—and if we should be allowed to use the pedal while doing so. Designating the attempts at exact reenactments of the past as “authentic” or “historically informed” (or “historically aware”) has added heat to the debate. The problem, as Richard Taruskin and others have pointed out, is the invidious implication that a performer who does choose to play Bach on the piano is uninformed and that his performance is inauthentic or, worse, unaware. Moreover, as Paul Henry Lang recognizes, even the most exacting and thorough historical research will leave gaps that must be filled with “our own artistic beliefs and instincts”; he adds, “Unconditional conformity to authenticity in the interpretation of old music, in depending on archival fidelity, may fail in fidelity to the composer’s artistic intentions” (p. 179). The conductor James DePreist argues that even living composers who are able to supervise rehearsals are inevitably surprised by the sound of their works in actual performance—“surprised,” DePreist maintains, “because the gap between the musical blueprint, that is, the score,