Musical Performance

A Guide to Understanding

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A Guide to Understanding

This accessible guide for students, teachers and performers at all levels unravels the complexities of musical performance and focuses on key aspects of learning, playing and responding to music. A survey of performance through the ages leads to a presentation of basic historical, analytical and psychological concepts. Four chapters follow on teaching, development, practice and memorisation. The next section considers the 'translation' from score to sound, physical projection, ensemble playing and performance anxiety. The final section addresses the act of listening, the legacy of recordings, music criticism and 'performers on performance'.

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Preface

Musical performance is a fundamental part of human existence, yet even the most experienced performer, teacher or scholar can fail to appreciate what lies behind it. It is well known that a performance in public usually represents untold hours – indeed many years – of learning and preparation, but how interpretations are put together, on what basis and with what effect may be less widely understood. What makes some performances come across as 'musical'? Should one try to honour the composer's intentions, and if so how can they be ascertained? What is the relation between the score, the musical work and the performances that they give rise to? How can practice sessions and rehearsals be made more effective, and how might performance anxiety best be overcome? Questions like these are often in the back of the performer's mind, not to mention the minds of their teachers, but until now it has been difficult to find compelling answers. For too long musicians have had to resort to tradition and intuition for the solutions, and important as those undeniably are, they are not always enough. The burgeoning academic literature on performance from recent years has offered little in the way of practical assistance: targeted at a highly specialised readership and generally written in somewhat impenetrable language, it has tended to neglect the concerns of performers themselves despite the need for clear and engaging writing on such topics as practice, memorisation, stage fright, analysing music for performance and the modern performer's historical 'responsibilities'. The fact that more and more universities and conservatoires now offer courses encouraging the interaction of theory and practice, rather than their traditional separation, and that professional performers increasingly present themselves as both 'doers' and 'talkers' (Joseph Kerman's terms) makes the lack of appropriate material all the more regrettable.

The sixteen essays in this volume are intended to unravel the complexities of performance and to bring to light aspects of learning, playing and responding to music relevant to performances at all levels. Broad in aim and accessible in tone, the book is intended for music teachers, students and scholars, as well as music lovers, who are keen to know more about what musical performance entails and who are not content to rely on tradition and intuition alone. It has four parts, corresponding to the stages through which a performance itself evolves: conceptions and preconceptions, learning to perform, making music and interpreting performance. Each part has four chapters, the first of which sets the compass points for the remaining three. Part I begins with a survey of performance through the ages, and this leads to a presentation of fundamental historical, analytical and psychological concepts. The next four chapters address the history of performance teaching, developing the ability to perform, practice and memorisation. Part III considers how music is made from the score, as well as issues related to physical projection, ensemble playing and performance anxiety. The final part investigates the act of listening, the legacy of recordings, music criticism and how performers themselves regard performance.

Each of the authors in this volume is a leading expert in the field, and many are performers of considerable experience and renown. Both of these factors ensure that the writing is vital and cogent, as well as challenging in the best possible ways. The book is intended to appeal widely not only by shunning unnecessary jargon and complexity, but by deliberately avoiding a concentration on one and only one instrument or performance genre. Instead, new light is shed on the principles and procedures underlying performances and the study of performances at least within the Western classical tradition, which is the predominant focus, although other musics and repertoires are addressed along the way (including jazz and rock).

There are a number of common threads running throughout the volume. First and foremost is an emphasis on the *experience* of music through performance, which transforms the score (if there is a score) into a unique musical event, all the while recognising that the score is not 'the music' and that one could never achieve total fidelity to it even if one wished to. (The book also stresses that recordings are not 'how the work goes', despite their potential to reveal a great deal about historical performance practices and of course individual readings.) A distinction thus arises in several chapters between learning 'the notes' and learning 'the music' in developing a view of the work, which, it is argued, is a vital first step – that is, building a sense of the whole. Several authors address the role of analysis in performing or learning to perform, as well as in memorising and in fighting performance anxiety. Various analytical techniques are demonstrated and the role of intuition versus deeper awareness debated. Equally, the modern performer's response to historical precedent is considered early on in the book, in particular the risks associated with 'historically *un*informed' performance.

The nature of practice – a usually solitary act in stark opposition to the highly social experience of performing – is another common theme, attracting discussion of the relation between mental images and physical representations, repetition versus inspiration, problem-solving, and 'forgetting' what one has learned as the music becomes more ingrained, to be recalled 'automatically' in the heat of performance. The way in which music is memorised concerns several authors, who offer practical advice to teachers and performers alike. Moving beyond the preparation stage, comment is offered on the manifold social factors surrounding performances in terms of the relations between performers and audiences and between members of an ensemble, as well as issues of presentation, the role of the body in performing, and the similarities (and differences) between musical performance and acting. Such remarks are addressed to a wide range of performers, including singers (for example, in chapters 9, 11 and 14), pianists (chapters 2, 3, 7 and 9), string players (chapters 8 and 14) and wind players (chapter 14). The tension between trying to find an historically 'right' instrument in order to play certain repertoire, versus the desire of some performers to 'transcribe' music for modern instruments, is confronted head-on in a number of chapters, as is the distinction between listeners' perceptions and the 'facts' about performances as revealed through empirically derived data. This is part of a larger debate about what and how listeners hear, and about the ways in which critics and performers themselves have responded to performance in writing – an act which for some has been as compelling as the need to perform is for many performers.

As these remarks suggest, practical advice is offered in abundance, and the 'Further reading' sections at the end of each chapter present a compact bibliography for those wishing to study particular topics in greater depth. It is keenly hoped that the volume will inspire readers to further investigation about performance, whether by perusing other general literature on performance studies (for instance, my book *The Practice of Performance: Studies in Musical Interpretation*, Jonathan Dunsby's *Performing Music: Shared Concerns*, or Colin Lawson and Robin Stowell's *The Historical Performance of Music: An Introduction*) or by delving into more specialist publications. If indeed appetites to know more about performance are whetted as a result of reading this book, and if answers to at least some of the questions posed above have been provided, then *Musical Performance* will surely have fulfilled its purpose.

I should like to thank Sarah Smith for compiling the index and Lucy Carolan for her careful copy-editing; Ruth Milsom and Mark Wells for preparing the illustrations in chapters 9 and 12; my graduate students at Royal Holloway, University of London for spirited feedback on the manuscript; and Penny Souster for her customary patience and sage advice.

JOHN RINK

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PART ONE

Conceptions and preconceptions

1 Performing through history

COLIN LAWSON

Performance in context

At most classical concerts today we expect the audience to remain silent in rapt attention, but this is a quite recent social phenomenon, far removed from music-making of any kind before the beginning of the twentieth century. At the premiere of his 'Paris' Symphony in July 1778, Mozart was delighted by a respectful audience which nevertheless responded actively rather than passively:[1]

> Just in the middle of the first Allegro there was a passage which I felt sure must please. The audience were quite carried away – and there was a tremendous burst of applause . . . Having observed that all last as well as first Allegros begin here with all the instruments playing together and generally unisono, I began mine with two violins only, piano for the first eight bars – followed instantly by a forte; the audience, as I expected, said 'hush' at the soft beginning, and when they heard the forte, began at once to clap their hands.[2]

More than a century later, a painting now in the archives of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden shows the inaugural concert of London's Queen's Hall in 1893; conductor and orchestra are in full flight, yet conversation is also flowing freely in the front rows of the audience.[3] Less controlled was the celebrated riotous premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in Paris in 1913, one of the last documented instances of active audience response within the Western concert tradition.

A freely responding audience is nowadays more characteristic of a pop concert, where performers display their own carefully cultivated set of behaviours. In ritual situations where there is no reason to write down the music, there is less distinction between composing, rehearsing and performing; listeners and bystanders may well contribute. While the notated score acts as a memory and enables dissemination of musical works, it also invites a more distant relationship between composer and performer. Well into the nineteenth century it was taken for granted that performers would have the ability to improvise, and indeed they often did so. Scores were routinely adapted as occasion demanded, and it was quite usual for specially composed arias to be inserted in operas to suit the singers at hand. In the early twentieth century there was no reason for Stokowski, Elgar and others to feel embarrassed about making orchestral transcriptions of Bach's keyboard music. Even when a composer's original notation was on the music stand, performers often took a liberated, creative approach. Brahms's violinist friend Joseph Joachim was described as unpredictable by a member of his quartet: 'To play with him is damned difficult. Always different tempi, different accents.'[4] Today's overwhelming authority of the score, demanding fidelity and accuracy at all costs, is not at all characteristic of the history of performance as a whole. Yet musical literature often gives the impression that true aesthetic meaning resides in the notation and that performance is at best an imperfect and approximate representation of the work itself. It is reported that Brahms once refused an invitation to a performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* on the grounds that he would sooner stay at home and read it, a response which would surely have horrified the supremely practical Mozart.

A world perspective

The study of world musics calls into question most of the basic assumptions held by Western performers, thus providing a useful sense of context. In many cultures the artificial division between performer and audience has never existed; as the player or singer improvises, the audience responds, whether by toe-tapping, finger drumming, hand-clapping, singing or dancing. Musicians are as likely to be found in streets, markets, fairs or taverns as in more formal surroundings, since music has remained intimately associated with such ritual events as weddings, funerals or the agricultural calendar, dealing with perennial subjects like the personal wounds of love. Surviving oral evidence can sometimes be supplemented by more tangible primary material; for example, there are distinguished traditions of music theory from such countries as China, Korea, India and Japan dating back as far as 5,000 years. Large collections of notated Chinese music survive from the twelfth century AD onwards, and only a little later appear the beginnings of the Turkish classical repertoire.

The invention of the phonograph in the late nineteenth century greatly assisted the investigation of oral traditions and living musical systems. Another milestone was the development of the means to measure intervals smaller than a semitone, the octave having been divided in a rich variety of ways unfamiliar in the West. Technical analysis of musical sound and performance practice has been fruitfully allied to anthropological study, so that fieldwork routinely covers the processes of both creation and performance. In India not only are the instruments, melodies and rhythms unfamiliar to a Western musician, but the ideas behind the music are intimately connected with philosophical and religious concepts which have little to do with Western approaches to time, matter or reality. In these circumstances music cannot be learned from books: a guru must be sought to provide essential secret and esoteric knowledge and to show how a musician's life must be led. From the start a disciple will be taken on stage to observe and interact with his master. In Hindu culture a musician has low-caste ranking not only because of his tradesman status but because his profession involves breaking upper-class taboos such as the handling of animal skins on drums or making lip contact with flutes and reeds which might have been touched by others. The rhythmic complexity of African music and its close integration with dance is likewise far from Western experience. Many African languages do not even have a word for music or musician, useless abstractions alongside their concrete terms for singers, dancers or drummers. In the Far East the religious ceremonies and royal court ritual of Japan have little philosophical connection with the West. The stylised high art of the noh play interweaves literature, theatre and dancing with music that associates drums with the other-worldly sound of the shakuhachi.

The sound world of non-Western music involves many instruments of unfamiliar design and status. An ancient example is the Chinese qin, characterised by its expressive slides and ethereal harmonies. The Indonesian gamelan comprises an ensemble of tuned percussion whose performers partake of a spiritual discipline bound up with the arts of dance, poetry and drama, in which the aim is to reach an ideal state of calm, emotional detachment; naturally, there are no virtuosos or soloists in this non-hierarchical, primarily oral tradition. The Indian sitar, with its characteristic gliding portamento, is an example of an instrument which (like the gamelan) has become known in the West, not least through its interaction with popular culture.

Greece and Rome

Forty thousand years ago, man was making music; Palaeolithic cave paintings discovered in Ariège in France contain the image of an animal-masked man scraping a musical bow to an audience of reindeer. By classical times music was engaging the attention of the great philosophers while also inviting widespread ritual participation. Writers such as Plato and Aristotle regarded musical training as of special educational value. Music's association with poetry demanded profound responses from performer and listener which cannot now be recreated from a mere reading of surviving source material. Choral song was particularly important, often incorporating dance and invariably accompanied by professionals playing wind and stringed instruments. Ritual lay at the heart of performance, as choirs sang in honour of the gods or in celebration of famous men or victorious athletes. Though little actual music survives, there are theoretical treatises by Aristoxenus (fourth century BC), Ptolemy (second century AD) and others. We can surmise that Greek music was primarily homophonic and that voices sang together in unison or at the octave. The Romans also had liturgical and other public music, military music and work songs, assimilating influences of the nations they conquered. Wind players attended sacrificial rites, partly to banish evil spirits and to summon up benevolent deities; they are frequently depicted in reliefs and were highly esteemed. Festivals in honour of the deities were accompanied by processional music, which in the case of Dionysus was sometimes wild and orgiastic. In military music the trumpeters gave fixed signals and played on the march and at ceremonials; in battle their sounds were designed to encourage the ranks and confuse the enemy. Folksongs provided a rhythmical accompaniment for such activities as rowing, reaping and weaving in genres such as lullabies, nursery rhymes, and birthday and wedding songs. Mime and pantomime became important in the theatre, vocal and instrumental music accompanying solo dancers who represented mythological figures.

The church

For centuries the church has been an important focus for music-making. The Romans' association of music with debauchery and immorality of all kinds made early Christian authorities realise that it could either ennoble or debase man's moral fibre. An initial answer to the dilemma was that music should be associated with devout words and instruments banished. Musical education has been an important function of the church ever since the foundation of the Schola Cantorum traditionally ascribed to Gregory the Great (590–604). Boys were trained there, received a complete education in all the principal scholastic subjects, and also took part in secular feasts and carnivals. The sheer length of this tradition is not to be underestimated; when the first modern conservatoire was founded in Paris in 1795 in the wake of the revolution, French musical education was still the responsibility of almost four hundred church-sponsored music schools, each teaching plainchant, counterpoint, some composition, a little French, much Latin and some arithmetic. Though teaching methods were antiquated and instrumental music neglected, about four thousand pupils each year proceeded to theological seminaries or to lives as singers or organists.

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