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Arnold Berleant

## NOTES FOR A PHENOMENOLOGY OF MUSICAL PERFORMANCE

In recognizing the wide range of sensuous perception and at the same time the originary capacity of aesthetic experience, Mikel Dufrenne has shown us the rich capabilities of phenomenology. It is in that spirit that this essay explores musical performance.

Music is a multiple art. Its many traditions, forms, genres, and styles, its large variety of instruments and sounds, and its diverse uses and occasions make it difficult to speak of music as a single art form. There are, nonetheless, certain common characteristics that all musics share in the ordering of successive sounds and silences in movement, pattern, and studied length. And, of course, these sounds and silences must be devised and generated, usually by a person but increasingly by other means, especially electronic. Finally, music has its contexts, the particular occasions when it is produced and heard. Perhaps there is indeed a generic musical art, a common ground where all these disparities come together.

Yet the ontology of an art is, I think, a secondary concern. Whether there is one art of music or many matters more for the philosopher of art than it does for the practitioner. Yet this question has a wider interest because aesthetic theory and musical practice do not inhabit entirely different worlds. While theory properly derives from practice in the effort to grasp cognitively what music activity is about, practice is itself often affected by theory, even if in ways that are subtle and indirect. This happens not just in those obvious cases in which theoretical analysis, say of scale forms, tonality, or organizational principles, affects the practice of composers. It occurs, too, in the way we come to listen to music and to appreciate it. Inseparable from appreciation is the manner in which music is generated, usually at some point by live musicians, although electronic technology has begun to claim that function, as well. Here, too, theoretical

analysis may influence subsequent practice, as I hope this discussion will show.

The production of musical sound in performance may not seem quite at the heart of the musical art, perhaps because it appears to be a circumstantial condition of music and not an essential feature. Yet this, I think, is only apparent. For music to take place, sound must be produced or deliberately shaped. Although this may be done by mechanical and electronic means--the player piano or synthesizer can generate music--performance requires human agency. Yet a human catalyst must be involved at some point in these cases, too, and it may merge with the act of composition. The matter of performance is still more complex, however, for we are inclined to overlook the role of the listener in this process. Not only does the ear contribute materially to our auditory perception, but our attention and knowledge deeply affect what and how we hear. And what the audience offers to musical occasions ranges from its aura of attention to exclamations, clapping, singing, and applause, affecting musician and listener alike. Performance, then, is a central function in music, and in some sense necessary for music to take place. Pursuing the practice of performance can tell us a good deal about the musical art as a whole, including the composition and appreciation of music.

A better understanding of performance can not only increase our theoretical understanding of music. It reveals something of the character and condition of human experience most generally. For performance evokes a condition that affects the most fundamental aspects of experience: the perception of time and space, of the body, of sensation, and of personal and social experience. Moreover, such a transformation of ordinary experience affects both performer and listener in similar ways. Whether and how all this may be, we shall have to see. Whatever may be the case, I should like to develop a phenomenological analysis of performance in the varied domain of the musical art from the standpoint of a human performer. Because of its collaborative nature, an excursus into one element in the process of musical performance can contribute to our understanding of others. The instance I have chosen is relatively uncomplicated and straightforward--the performance of classical Western music by a solo pianist. Even though a phenomenological description of one such occasion cannot be taken

as an account of all, perhaps it can serve as a model for others.

## II

Such an event is familiar to the musical public of this genre, and it is not difficult to give an objective description of what takes place. A person walks on stage, sits down in front of the piano, adjusts to the instrument, and begins to play a well-rehearsed musical work. The performance takes on a highly ritualistic form, not only in its style--that is, the way a particular work is rendered--but in the movements, gestures, pauses, applause, bows, exits, and returns for more bows or encores, all those peripheral goings on that constitute the theatrical aspect of the situation.

This account describes the situation from an observer's point of view. It is relatively impersonal and uninvolved, and meets the criteria for objectivity that we associate with factual or scientific knowledge. There is no reference in the account to private experience, either of the performer or the audience; no reference to qualities, awareness, feelings, or other such intangibles. Understanding the event on this descriptive level doesn't even require being present, since one could gain such information about a particular performance by questioning those who were there or by setting up some sort of recording device, such as a video camera. Any experiential factors one might think of including are unqualified for consideration by this "objective" method and dismissed as subjective. Is everything accounted for here or is something missing?

Such an account is partial, at best. Taken as complete, this procedure and the objective description it yields are unexciting and misleading. They turn performance into a formal ritual with a predetermined sequence of behavior. Worse, they mislead the prospective performer about the actual situation he or she will experience. On this account performance assumes the proportions of an intimidating object that, in its very impersonality and objectivity, stands over and apart from the human participant. The performer who is part of this formalized object inhabits an alien place, is literally out of place. She does not feel like herself, she does not

recognize herself; indeed, she has lost herself.<sup>1</sup> The discussion in this essay, however, is not about personal experiences, of which there is a wide range. Nor is it concerned with the psychology of performance, although the analysis I shall pursue has implications here. My interest is rather philosophical, more particularly, metaphysical.

But what if we abandon the observer's point of view and explore the experience of performance from within? A phenomenological description would follow this approach, and one could develop this from the perspective of the performer or the audience. Although I shall mainly pursue the first, the two begin to merge in interesting ways, as we shall see.<sup>2</sup>

### III

Early in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, a remarkably musical essay both in its structure and its perceptions, Henri Bergson notes that there is a profound difference between knowledge and intuition. Knowledge, he claims, grasps things by means of concepts, freezing them in

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<sup>1</sup> Under such circumstances it is not surprising when a person becomes fearful. This, I suspect, is a central factor in performance anxiety. For not only is the performance objectified; the performer becomes an object in an impersonal ritual. He or she is the object of the audience's attention, the defenseless point at which all the vectors of psychic force converge. And as the focus of critical discernment, the performer as object is exposed in all his inadequacy. Few situations could be more intimidating.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to make clear that the descriptive analysis that follows is not intended either as a proof or as a record of common experience. Obviously personal experiences vary widely, and exceptions can be found to any claim. What I claim, however, is that this account is meaningful and that the analysis of time, space, and motion that follows describes a metaphysical order, not an experience of which the performer must be aware. It is a metaphysics of experience, not a psychology of experience.

place and objectifying them, so that they can be formulated into concepts and grasped by the intellect. This, he acknowledges, is a powerful method, one used with extraordinary effectiveness by the sciences. Intuition, on the other hand, steps into the flux of the world, knowing it from the inside by an intimate acquaintance with its workings. Knowledge, works by distancing oneself; intuition by entering into and joining with them object, and this, Bergson holds, provides metaphysical understanding. Bergson pursues this insight through many forms, for it has broad application and many uses in philosophy.

Although there was no connection between Bergson and Edmund Husserl, who originated phenomenology (apart from the curious coincidence that both were born in 1859), Bergson's account of intuition bears a striking resemblance to the kind of perception through which phenomenologists attempt descriptive analyses. Moreover, it suggests that there is a kind of knowing that takes place in the directness of perceptual engagement. It is such an encounter that I want to explore here, hoping to discover in the experience of performance a kind of knowledge, yet one that retains the living touch of the occasion that precipitated it.

The performer necessarily comes at the music from within. Although a listener may escape the compelling force of the situation by inattention, daydreaming, or sheer irrelevance, it is difficult for a performer to assume such a degree of remoteness from the music he or she is playing. Of course, it is possible to do so by abandoning oneself entirely to motor habit or by drug-induced dissociation. Yet such events are uncommon, and the playing is likely to reflect this by a mechanical and lifeless quality. Most often the performance situation catapults a musician into a rare and unusual condition, one that reveals the basic features of experience with eloquent directness, free, at least to some extent, from the usual overlay of cultural and philosophical presuppositions that nearly always obstruct our awareness. What is this perceptual condition like?

The most striking thing about the experience of performing, regarded from the inside, as it were, is that the constitutive perceptual domains of experience are transformed from their ordinary state. As one moves toward the piano, the time-space continuum widens enormously.

It is as if one were entering an immensely extended space, a space that is both fluid and temporal. This is not the neutral, objective, empty medium by which science defines the dimensionless realm within whose coordinates extended objects can be located precisely. Phenomenal space is connected to the perceiver. It is lived, not objective; personal, not formal. And it is experienced not only as spatial but equally as dynamic and temporal. It may or may not appear intimidating, depending on one's experience, expectations, and psychophysical state, and these affect its perceived dimensions. Unlike the physical definition of space as empty, space in performance is thick, fluid, almost palpable. It is not just the area in which the musical activity takes place but it becomes a participant in that activity. The position of the performer in musical space resembles a rock in Japan that is taken to represent the *mononoke* that suffuses the area. Such a rock does not oppose the space that surrounds it but rather acquires the quality of that space and condenses it. In a similar way, the performer is the spatial focal point, energizing that space as the nucleus in which it is concentrated. Furthermore, the space of performance is energized by the musician. The manner in which the pianist walks to the instrument conveys a distinctive charge to the space, a temporal as well as a dynamic charge. The medium thus is not purely spatial but a continuity and interpenetration of space, time, and movement, the basic constituents of experiential reality. This medium becomes the condition of the singularly creative act of performance.

This dynamic spatio-temporal medium is concentrated in the performer and diffused in the audience and throughout the hall, yet it is nevertheless homogeneous. We can grasp one aspect of this in acoustical terms, for as the pianist begins to play, the hall becomes a great resonating chamber, as much a part of the occasion as the space that surrounds a sculpture or the volume that a building encloses. This points up the curious connection between the dynamic spatio-temporal medium of performance and the auditory space that the sounds create, for there are other aspects of music's multi-dimensional spatiality. The sounds, themselves, have a spatial quality, ranging from broad to narrow, thin to dense, tangible to elusive. We speak of the volume of musical sound, a spatial metaphor, to denote the scale of soft to loud: a

booming passage looms larger than a quiet one. A real sense of spatial volume appears in the shape and range of a musical line as it moves through time; in the texture of a passage, which could be characterized as thin, dense, or wide; in the timbre of the instrument, as hard or rounded; and in the vertical distribution of musical sound, such as being full, open, broad, or narrow. Some composers dwell on these qualities more than others do, and although an emphasis on such qualitative dimensions are a hallmark of impressionism, we find them in many other musical styles. Composers of different periods develop their medium of sound in their own distinctive manner--the translucency of Mozart, Beethoven's thick and sometimes massive chords, the poetic resonance of Chopin, Bartók's percussiveness. And of course the distinctive timbre of the piano contributes its own properties as a medium, with its hard, sharp attack, rapid decay, and fusion of individual notes when they are sounded simultaneously. At times the instrument becomes melismatic as a coloratura, at others ponderous as a Russian bass. As the music begins, the sounds in performance become tangible in the space of performance, given shape by the fingers as they play, much as a potter molds her clay. Thus the sounds join with the pianist and the audience to become the medium of performance, fusing space, time, and movement into fluid continuity.

#### IV

We find ourselves, then, in a multi-dimensional continuum, where the manifestations of time are spatial, the activation of space is temporal, and the movement of sound the generator of auditory space-time. A fragmenting analysis of this situation into space, time, and motion may serve logistical or managerial purposes, but it is misleading as a means of grasping the experience of performance. From the standpoint of the pianist, these factors coalesce and intensify in the perceptual acuity of performance.

Musical sound is thus intimately bound to the experience of time, space, and movement. Before the pianist begins playing, the hush of silence resembles a great void within which the performer can easily feel like a tiny figure in an enormous abyss. The experience resembles that of the painter confronting a blank canvas or the writer an empty sheet of paper. Silence,

soundlessness itself, thus assumes a spatial aspect, just as the music does when the pianist begins to play. For the performer the experience is one of shaping auditory space, of the silences as well as the sounds that are indicated in the score. The indeterminacy of time-space that is apparent before the playing begins, the inchoate emptiness before the musical sounds emerge, progressively acquire definition in the ongoing course of performance. The performer re-enacts the genesis of a determinate world out of formlessness and void.

The creation metaphor is apposite in still another way, for part of the perceptual experience is a sense of the sacredness of this time-space. As in a cathedral when a service is about to start, the reverential hush of anticipation as a performance is to begin inspires a sense of deference, vulnerability, and humility before a larger power. Religious experiences vary, of course, but at their most uplifting and affirming they share something of wonder at our capacity for continual reaffirmation and of the possibility of transcending the narrow boundaries of the separate self. Many things tempt us to violate such reverence in the performance situation, such as the distractions of the social setting and the objectifying demands of the self-gratifying ego. These are devilish temptations for performer and audience alike. Yet when they are overcome and replaced by an awareness of the sacred powers at work, a sense of wonder arises in the marvel taking place as the pianist brings sounds into being and shapes them in the act of playing. To employ another religious metaphor, as the performer plays, the emerging sounds create a real presence. Does not music here become holy?

A profound feeling of respect, even awe, infuses the mood and enjoins us against violating that charmed state of dwelling in the musical medium. Inseparable from this sense of respect is wonder at the miraculous event we are participating in, this act of bringing sounds into being out of the indeterminate emptiness of silence and of shaping them in the act of playing. The use of still another theological term here, 'miracle,' is rhetorical, but it is not casual rhetoric. For this act of creation *ex nihilo*, so to speak, partakes of that religious mystery, and the wonder of it never quite disappears if the performer retains a fresh and sensitive awareness of what is



happening.

This account, however, is not meant to suggest that musical performance is a "spiritual" exercise. Far from it. The years of training hands, arms, ears, and the entire body in the development of pianistic technique involve hard physical work. Joseph Hofmann, the early twentieth-century virtuoso pianist, measured in foot-pounds the energy expended in playing the instrument and found it to be equivalent to more overt forms of great physical exertion. The somatic aspect an aspect of the pianist's perceptual engagement in the music; indeed, it is the locus of performance anxiety. Pounding heart, trembling fingers, profuse perspiration, shaking knees--the list of physical symptoms is painfully long. At the same time, when anxiety is reinterpreted, the somatic experience of performing is exhilarating. The pianist experiences a wondrous lightening of the limbs; the body feels charged with an intense, limitless, yet focused energy; the fingers become marvelously supple. The entire body is transmuted into a powerful yet sensitive instrument, actually part of an instrument, for it unites with the complex mechanism of the piano--that construction of wood, metal, felt, and leather--to become a single performing instrument. It is easier to visualize this union in the case of a violinist or other string player, or perhaps even more with a woodwind performer, where breath and body generate the sound directly and the human form envelopes the instrument. For the pianist, the greater drama of the instrument and the inherent theatricality of a piano performance compensate for bodily distance.

Central to somatic involvement in music is the enhancement of sensory awareness. This lies at the heart of the intensity of the performer's experience. Hearing becomes more acute, the sense of touch more sensitive and delicate, overall perceptual awareness swells. This heightening of perception runs its own dynamic course; ideally it parallel in its shape and nuances the processual unfolding of the music. Such an isomorphism leads to a fusion of music and player:

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,

How can we know the dancer from the dance?<sup>3</sup>

Each factor in the musical field contributes to the performance. Just as the audience responds to the presence of the pianist, the pianist senses the receptivity of the listeners, and when a performance is most effective, a powerful bond joins them together. The same reciprocity that fuses the musician with the instrument and the performer with the audience develops with the physical space. Pianists play differently in different halls, for their size and resonance, together with design and decor, affect the degree of intimacy, subtlety, and power of the playing. So, too, do audiences respond to the setting. Acoustics obviously plays a major part in this, for dead spots or muffled sound in a particular location cannot help but diminish the effectiveness of a performance. Even obscured vision has an influence, for as with the interdependence of smell and taste, hearing and vision are intimately bound together in musical perception. Music is not only an auditory art but, like the other arts, is synaesthetic. Further, in a live and responsive auditorium, the listener easily becomes enveloped in the sonorous space. At its most fulfilled, the entire situation is bound up in the process of the music: player, instrument, sound, audience, hall, all fuse into a complex union. In a sense there is not one performer but many, for whatever activates the occasion--pianist, audience, even the composer--contributes to the event. History is involved, as well, as the knowledge, experience, and influence of past performances affect both the pianist and the audience, and join with the origins of the work in the composer's perceptual experience. Even though the vantage point differs, a phenomenology of musical

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<sup>3</sup> William Butler Yeats, "Among School Children."

performance is thus at the same time a phenomenology of musical listening and a phenomenology of musical creation.

Performance, moreover, has some of the qualities of a ceremony: A musical performance is also a musical ceremony. There is theater, there is ritual, there is the deliberate entering into sacred space. At its most successful, the musical event becomes a vital ritual, rich with a content that infuses life into its formal features and renders its substance vibrant with the dynamic actuality of a living presence.

## V

Does this descriptive account of musical performance tell us anything about the kind of intuitive, metaphysical knowing that Bergson identified? Surely it is not amiss to consider experience that transforms space, time, and motion--the basic components of the human structuring of reality--as having profound metaphysical significance. Whether this says something about the order of reality or only about the order of human experience, as Kant held, and whether we can go somehow from such experience to Being itself, as Heidegger endeavored to do, are questions we can only raise here. At the very least, the kind of experience in which performance engages us may be said to embody intuitive knowledge of such matters, much as Bergson suggested. Neither argument or proof, musical experience carries its own credibility in itself. Perhaps this has something to do with the power of music and the other arts to affect us in deep and enduring ways. Sufficient in itself, music nonetheless speaks to us in a strange and distant tongue.

This account has further philosophical implications. If its description of the the experience of musical performance is accurate, it

raises important questions about the customary explanation of aesthetic experience which, guided by Kantian theory, attempts to integrate it into a larger, consistent framework that also includes science and morality. In these, the demand for objectivity and universality has traditionally been paramount, and aesthetic experience, while individual and subjective, is still held to be bound by these same constraints. For Kant this took the form of a subjective judgment that can only impute universal agreement to everyone.<sup>4</sup> Yet irrespective of the question of whether such a goal can be achieved in these other domains, and, in fact, whether and in what respects such a goal is even desirable in ethics and science, it is certainly not supported in this instance of the musical arts nor, I suspect, would it be in others. While certain general transformative conditions may regularly occur in the reconfiguration of time, space, and motion, how and to what degree these are altered depends on particular conditions, such as the individual performer, the hall, the audience, and the many circumstances peculiar to the specific occasion. Music, nonetheless, remains broad in its appeal, powerful in its force, and striking in its implications. Even if, as this description suggests, it does not conform to the assimilationist convention that regards music as a "universal language," it has lost none of its strength as an occasion of profound experience. Indeed, these final comments indicate how music, in a full reversal of cognitive priorities, may in fact serve as a model for reconsidering other conventional philosophical presuppositions in morality and science.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §8, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951), pp. 48-51.

<sup>5</sup> I have discussed various versions of this essay with Robert

## NOTES

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