

## MUSICAL WORKS AND PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

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This paper addresses the following problem: to what extent do ontological considerations about musical works affect our evaluation of performances of those works? A few words on the problem are needed, so that both it and my answer to it can be properly construed.

Let me begin by making the following points. First, the present discussion of this topic is intended as valid only within the strict boundaries of the Western classical tradition in music. Second, by ontological considerations about musical works I will mean, in particular, views about work-integrity, i.e., the problem of what properties of works of music should be thought of as essential or integral to them (e.g. tempo markings, instrumentation, musico-historical context, identity of composer). Finally, I want to distinguish two ways in which the relation between ontology and performance evaluation can be viewed, and, consequently, two ways of viewing the question that can be posed about it.

It seems obvious that a necessary condition for  $p$  to be a good, passable or bad performance of work  $w$  is that  $p$  be a performance of  $w$  *simpliciter*.<sup>1</sup> And what I said above makes clear that determining what counts as a performance of a given work will be mostly within the domain of the ontology of music, which, accordingly, does have a bearing on performance evaluation, in this somewhat trivial sense. The question I want to address, however, is the other, less trivial one: given that  $p$  has been properly recognized to be  $a$

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<sup>1</sup> But see Ridley (2004, Ch. 4, Part 2) for some serious complications on establishing the latter without any implications on the success of the performance.

*performance* of  $w$ ,<sup>2</sup> do all or at least the main criteria for further judging it to be *a good performance* consistently depend on issues of work-integrity? In this paper, I argue for the claim that at least some important grounds on which performances are evaluated are specific to them, in that these grounds are either independent from, or related but not fully determined by, the properties of the works they are of. I shall call the values appealed to when giving such grounds ‘performance-specific values’.

In the first part of this paper, I explore the relations between good-making features of works and of performances of them. The second and third parts develop two kinds of example in favour of the claim above. In the last part, I discuss the significance of those examples in relation to the ways in which performances are assessed, and explore some further ramifications of them.

## I

Peter Kivy has claimed that we evaluate musical performances in roughly the same way that we evaluate musical works.<sup>3</sup> This claim can be given at least two readings. One such interpretation says that the features we regard as good-making for performances just *happen* to be (roughly) the same that we regard to be such for works. The other interpretation holds that (roughly) each feature of a performance is regarded as good-making *because* it is a feature of the relevant work (whether good or not as a feature of works). Although the latter is the more interesting reading, I will start off with a discussion of the former.

The problem with the claim that good-making features of works and performances roughly coincide is that, for it to be true, we would have to confine ourselves to aesthetic features of the highest level of generality, that is to say, those that are generically good-making in artworks of all kinds (and also in some aesthetic objects that are not artworks), and thus also in musical

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<sup>2</sup> I should add ‘whatever that is’, given all the philosophical complications in determining what counts as a *bona fide* performance of a musical work, as related or opposed to a version, arrangement, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Kivy (1995, 156). Although Kivy’s claim is determined by the view that performances are akin to arrangements of works, and thus, works of some kind, I consider the claim abstractly, i.e., I discuss the different meanings it can have independently (but not exclusively) of the ‘authentic’ one.

performances. Regardless of whether the theory one espouses does or does not take performances to be artworks in the strictest sense, they unquestionably are part of what we evaluate in the art of music. This first reading would merely point out that there is a quite trivial coincidence regarding what kinds of very general properties one looks for in both works and performances when one seeks possible reasons to think they are aesthetically good. And such a coincidence is one that becomes no longer trivial, but false, when more specific properties are taken into account.

Consider for instance the property of having (aesthetic) unity. This seems a good-making feature of musical works and of performances for much the same reason as it is a good-making feature of paintings, novels, choreographies or theatrical premières, namely, because, all things being equal, it always counts as making artistic objects aesthetically better. But as soon as we go one step down the generality ladder, we find features whose grounds for counting as good-making for performances are no longer independent from their presence as features of the works performed. Having great intensity of expression doesn't make every performance a better one. Arguably, it would not add to, but probably subtract from the aesthetic worth of performances of some works by Satie, Glass or Pärt. Similarly, being graceful would hardly be seen as an asset in performing Bartók's *Allegro barbaro* or Prokofieff's Second Symphony. On the other hand, it would be a positive feature of a performance of a musical work containing relevant graceful features, just as an intensely expressive performance is, in that sense, good if it is a rendering of an intensely expressive work.

The same point goes for other kinds of features, such as those exemplified by the meaning of the critical terms 'light', 'massive', 'joyful', 'sombre' or 'virtuosic'. As with grace and expressiveness, the attribution of some value (positive or negative), to the properties named by these terms is also strongly determined by what the particular object under consideration is. If, as seems common, the same property (or roughly the same property) can be a good-making one of performances of  $w$ , and not be, as of itself, a good-making one of  $w$ , then we cannot say *sans phrase* that we value the same features in performances and in the works they are of.

According to the second reading, it is not a matter of coincidence that what is regarded as good-making in performances is (roughly) the same we regard as good-making in works.

Rather, the fact that a property  $x$  is regarded as good-making in a performance  $p$  of work  $w$  is thought as being *explained* by the fact that  $w$  has  $x$ . Indeed, having  $x$  need not even be something essentially good as a property of works, but the fact that  $w$  has  $x$  would be sufficient for the goodness of  $p$ , as a performance of  $w$ , having  $x$  (for instance, percussiveness is neither necessarily good nor bad *per se* in a work, whereas it would be *ipso facto* a good-making feature of a performance of that work).<sup>4</sup>

This means that the good-making character of the features of a performance stems from the latter's accuracy in conveying the features of the work. The value of performance would thus be reducible to that of fidelity to the work performed. But are all features of performance dependent, as to their value, on features of works in the sense above? While recognizing that, as realizations of works, performances are correctly evaluated in this way, I present two examples to the effect that, regarding at least some central features, performances are also typically evaluated in a way that is, as I said, either independent from or related to but not fully determined by the properties of works.

## II

Performances are frequently praised for the quality of the sound performers achieve. One of the major reasons why audiences are drawn into opera houses is the sheer beauty of a singer's timbre, and instrumentalists, ensembles and conductors are admired for the sound they produce or are capable of drawing from others. Achieved sonic beauty, if it is a good-making feature of performances, seems thus to be autonomously so, i.e., independently of what the properties of the performed works are. It is a performance-specific value.

Against this it might be said that the reason why sonic beauty is a good-making feature in performances of musical works is because it brings out relevant properties of those works. According to this view, a popular one in the musical *milieu*, the beautiful voice of the soprano

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<sup>4</sup> An interesting, although debatable, idea would be that they could even be bad-making features as far as the performed works are concerned.

singing the Countess in *The Marriage of Figaro* is valued in virtue of the fact that it brings out the beauty already inhering in the music Mozart wrote for that role.

I think this is one of those objections whose real substance is highly overblown by the way they *sound*. In fact, it just fails to distinguish between the case where a property's presence *adds specific value* to an object having other valuable properties (some of them even possibly related to the former) from the case where a property's value is *wholly* contingent on the presence of another property. The beauty of the singer's voice certainly adds to the overall aesthetic value of the performance of the role, this obviously being part of the work. But that doesn't mean it could not be valued independently of such contribution.

Consider the following hypothetical situation. At the end of the Countess' aria in the second act, 'Porgi amor', an abnormally arrogant diva decides to embark on a series of *ad hoc* vocalises displaying her control of long sustained phrases and her ability to float *pianissimi*.<sup>5</sup> Along with the technical facility, we are also offered the same high sound quality that characterized her rendition of the aria proper. So, we must conclude that, however much her ramblings distract from, and even imperil, the classical equilibrium of that most perfect of Mozartian arias and its connection with the following recitative, the value of the voice's beauty remains. In fact, we would probably say something like 'that woman's infatuation with the beauty of her own voice is unbearable', out of repulsion for so blatant a disregard for Mozart's music. All this, however, confirms the fact that sonic beauty is, as I claim, an autonomous, performance-specific value, overridden as it may be by other values.

One way to reinforce the objection would be to claim that beauty of sound is not always a good-making feature of performances by pointing out that, in some rare cases, the composer demands a sound that is not beautiful. What I have in mind is not the very frequent occasions when the author indicates a sonic effect that is contrary to the typical sound production directed at a consistently beautiful sound, but rather the much less usual requirement that a performer's overall tone be of such an alternative nature more or less throughout the piece. A classic

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that the abnormality here resides in the fact that the diva doesn't even wait for some place where an insertion by way of vocal cadenza would be stylistically understandable, if not wholly appropriate. The situation is supposed to be clearly hypothetical (fortunately for us, I would venture).

example would be the role of Lady Macbeth, for which Verdi seems *not* to have wanted a beautiful, smooth soprano voice.<sup>6</sup>

To this, two replies are possible. First, admitting that some composers have successfully tried to make sound type within voice- or instrument-type integral to some of their works, this is clearly anomalous. As Stephen Davies has argued as a general point, musical works are typically silent regarding specific voice timbre within a voice-type,<sup>7</sup> as they are regarding the particular sound-quality of individual pianos, string instruments or orchestras (Davies 2001, 67). Although one could sometimes claim that certain works are more idiomatically realized by specifically-sounding voices or instruments (e.g., the English cathedral choir sound, the American orchestral sound or the Stradivarius violin sound), there seems to be very little ground to exclude other voices and instruments of the type required by the work, if this is to be done in the name of the work itself, not of a performing tradition, which may or may not have anything to do with the composer.

As a second reply, we should note that the implicit universal rule instructing performers to look for the most beautiful sound possible under the given conditions is justified, among other things, by the fact that those who have mastered such a sound, and only they, have the choice to apply it most of the time, to shape their sound into something else, or simply to let it lapse into ugliness if needed. The fact that achieving a consistently and appropriately beautiful sound is a very hard task, a skill that distinguishes the most accomplished performing artists, makes this a choice that cannot be made, as it were, from the bottom up. And the rule that binds every performer to singing or playing at his or her maximum of tonal beauty shows this to be a work-independent value in performances.

Furthermore, it should be noted, against the objection that the value of sonic beauty in performance is dependent on there being certain features of the works performed that it

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<sup>6</sup> Without going too much into historical detail, we should at least be aware of the possibility that Verdi was only expressing a wish that the role not be performed by the pervasive light soprano that would probably be assigned to it, and his preference for a darker, more rugged and dramatic sound, rather than expressing a determinate wish that the voice be an ugly one in an unqualified sense.

<sup>7</sup> This is not to deny that in some instances it can be somewhat implied in the distribution of voices (e.g. two leading sopranos or tenors in the same work should probably contrast in timbre), or subtly derived from considerations of role characterization.

contributes to enhancing, that for it to be so, there should be a property of musical works that would be a kind of correlate to sonic beauty in performance. For example, as the gracefulness of a flutist's phrasing of a Mozart quartet depends, for its status as a good-making feature, upon the gracefulness of the quartet itself, which is thus enhanced, so should the beauty of the flute tone she achieves depend on a correlate property inhabiting the work. But there clearly is no such property, since works can only prescribe generic timbre-types, not actual (token) timbres.

Other examples supporting the same point, i.e., the existence of what I have called performance-specific values, would be, to keep within the domain of vocal music, features of a technical sort such as those regarding the projection of the text, namely, clarity of diction and adequacy of pronunciation in different languages. These are quite independent from any considerations about the quality of the text being delivered. In fact, clear diction and adequate pronunciation can only count as reasons for valuing performances highly, never against. We do not praise a singer for sparing us the experience of bad poetry by occluding the sounds of the language it is written in or delivering them with a foreign accent, nor do we chide the one who projects them to perfection. Rather than a case of the ancient dispute between *musica* and *parole*, these are examples of universal duties in the singing business, i.e., performance-specific good-making features.

### III

Until now I have argued to the effect that at least some features relevant to performance evaluation are strictly independent, as to the grounds for their value, from a specific connection to features of the musical works being performed. I will now present examples of a different, somewhat weaker kind of performance specificity, that which occurs when good-making features of performances are related to but not fully determined by the properties of works they are of. I hope to show that such a relation admits of ample room for the display of performance-specific values.

Consider the property 'being expressive of melancholy'. Suppose it is adduced as a reason to value some performance highly. Is this necessarily a reason for doing so *because* the work

performed is itself expressive of melancholy? I think not. True, expressive properties of works always limit, to different extents, the range of the expressive properties that are adequately exhibited in performances of them. And I do not in principle deny the ability of music, even in the abstract form of musical works, to express, in a more determinate way, emotions of higher specificity.<sup>8</sup> Thus, I admit that much music (again, musical works or parts thereof) can express melancholy, triumph, yearning or carefreeness,<sup>9</sup> and consequently, that praise bestowed upon performances of such music for successfully expressing those emotions is (at least partly) a function of their being features of the relevant works.

But we must not forget that there are, much less contentiously, many passages whose expressive character is appropriately described in terms of happiness, sadness and other generic emotional states.<sup>10</sup> So, let us consider a piece of music expressing sadness. This plainly excludes from the realm of good performance choices for the piece those leading to a performance expressing jollity, triumph or moderate optimism. But it certainly does not entail that the expression in performance of a particular emotion or mood is aesthetically better than that of another emotion or mood if both are taken from *within* the emotional range of sadness, broadly construed.

So, it is perfectly possible that ‘being expressive of melancholy’ is a good-making feature of performance *p* of work *w*, and that *w* be that very same sad piece mentioned above. The sadness of *w*, I argue, equally warrants the following expressive features, among others, as good-making for *p*: sadness, tragedy, bleakness, anguish, depression, melancholy. Which of them will actually turn out to be good as features of *p* will of course depend on the concrete aesthetic facts about *p*, which in turn are heavily contingent on the performer’s choices, ability and interpretation of *w*. And while it is true that *p* is constrained by the sadness of *w*, it remains a fact that if *p* is, for instance, a better performance than *q* for expressing melancholy instead of anguish, this must be a result of something other than mere conformity with the general emotion

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Levinson (1990).

<sup>9</sup> I am less sure about hope and disgust, though, for which Levinson argues in the paper noted above.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Davies is one who argues these are the only emotions music can properly express. See his (1994).

of  $w$ , since this characterizes  $q$  as well. The difference is a performance-specific one, and so is its value, albeit in a work-conditioned way.

I do not wish to imply that most, let alone all, works and parts thereof are equally open to performing choices of an expressive nature. Certainly there are works, or maybe more realistically, sections or passages in them, which are much more determinate as to the appropriate expressive character to be displayed in a competent performance, and *a fortiori* in a good one. For instance, I count myself among the many who believe the first section of the final movement of Tchaikovsky's 6<sup>th</sup> Symphony (*Pathétique*) to be determinately expressive of something like despair, not just generically sad; or many passages in the prelude to *Tristan* to definitely express yearning rather than melancholy. By this I actually mean performances of them that sounded respectively just sad and melancholy would be bad ones as far as only emotional expression is considered.

Nevertheless, important chunks in the repertoire probably fall within the domain of the less emotionally determinate. This need not be a sign of lack of expressive import or emotional sophistication. In fact, the contrary can be demonstrated by important works whose expressive content is usually described as predominantly ambiguous, as is the case of some of the works of Schubert, especially his late piano sonatas.<sup>11</sup> Ambiguity of emotional expression in works can thus be a challenge, rather than a blemish.

#### IV

Do the kinds of features I tried to show to be valuable in a work-independent way really carry practical weight in the evaluation of performances as it is done by critics, teachers and other specialists?

My answer is, as expected, affirmative. To see that, we have only to consider again the two

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<sup>11</sup> These contain many moments of a bittersweet character that sometimes extends to whole movements or works, and which, in the opinion of pianist Alfred Brendel, can put off many performers more eager to explore intensely direct feelings, but can also be a source of deep satisfaction for those like himself, more interested in a kind of emotional realism in music.

examples given above, sonic beauty and the ‘filling in’ of expressive content, although these are but two among several other performance-specific values. As to the first, the beauty of a singer’s voice, for instance, can be the extra ingredient that tips the balance towards one performance rather than another in the critic’s comparative overview of the history of an opera on record, as well as in the jurors’ decision in a voice competition or in auditioning students for admission at a music school.

Of course ultimate sonic beauty is not a necessary condition for becoming a top class performer. But then again, neither are dramatic credibility or a deep understanding of the composer’s vocal style, if taken by themselves. The fact remains that a singer’s performance can only become better if, all things being equal, the voice becomes more beautiful. Accordingly, we should not be suspicious of judging performances also for the tonal beauty displayed in the appropriate ways by singers, instrumentalists and conductors, as legitimately as we judge them for work-related features or for technical assurance.<sup>12</sup>

As to my second case, the refining of expressive character (when applicable), it too is frequently central to the evaluation of performance, since it goes straight to the area in which performers can take artistic credit for something having to do with both creativity and the expressive content of their performance. In the case of works whose character is in this regard already rather determinate, performers feel more bound by their ‘duty’ as respectful ‘vessels’ for the composer’s creation, and critics react to their performing choices correspondingly, paying much attention to the faithfulness with which performers realize the emotional content everyone agrees is expressed in the work itself.

It is where choices and interpretations are less standardized that more risks can be taken, more personal decisions can be made, the kind of things, that is, performers get credit for as performing artists. To see this we have only to take a look at critics’ writings on performance

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<sup>12</sup> Technique is, of course, also a potential performance-specific good-making feature. It is, nevertheless, not as autonomous as sonic beauty, for example, in that much technical skill is directly required by the work in order to simply produce a *bona fide* performance of it. Only the amount of it that exceeds these demands should be strictly regarded as performance specific. The exact amount is, however, usually difficult to identify in practice (although not impossible, since the best job at it is demanded from teachers and critics). One easily separable technical ability is the one previously noted, i.e. diction.

and note how often performers are praised for their fresh approach to a masterpiece, for making us see it under a new light, for giving us a bold, unexpected interpretation.

In the end, it could be said that much of the overall emotional content expressed through performance is correctly attributed to the performer him- or herself. True, the work's primary content, whether generic or more determinate, sets limits to the freedom of performers. But it seems to be the prerogative of performers to experiment with these limits, to try new interpretations that may show the primary character to admit of unexpected performative determinations. This cannot be done in direct confrontation with the work's central, recognized expressive features, but at the border, things can get quite flexible. Indeed, riding the indeterminacy in the right way can make a performer justly famous.

If I have succeeded in showing the performance-specificity of some features relevant to the evaluation of musical performances, it follows that in neither of the two readings of Kivy's claim is it true that we evaluate them in the same way we evaluate musical works, since the value of performances is not exhausted by, but clearly goes beyond the faithful realization of properties taken to be integral to the relevant works.

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