It's Not Just Music: The Ethics of Musical Interpretation

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Abstract

The article examines the ethics of musical interpretation, focusing on the performer's responsibility in faithfully recreating a work from the score. Drawing inspiration from conductor Daniel Barenboim's reflections (2016), it analyzes the delicate balance between personal expression and fidelity to the work, highlighting how interpretation involves not only technical skill but also moral responsibility. This notion develops through the importance attributed to history, authenticity, and the present in interpretation. These concepts are explored in the relationship between the score and the performer, addressing the ethical challenges involved in balancing fidelity and creativity. The study of Historically Informed Performance (HIP) demonstrates how it serves as the foundation of the ethics of musical interpretation, due to its attempt to recreate the original conditions of performances. However, it is also noted that HIP embodies an overly rigid fidelity, thus requiring a more balanced approach that views musical practice as an ongoing dialogue between past and present. Finally, since the rules of musical practice are not enough for performers to interpret ethically, as they need to be internalized, the role of Aristotelian phronesis is explored as an internal guide for performers in interpretative practice. Phronesis aids the performer in mediating between past and present and in making interpretative decisions that are both ethically and musically appropriate.

Keywords: Responsibility, Interpretation, Authenticity, Fidelity, Phronesis.

Every composer has had occasion to think about what he might say or do to reawaken these musicians to a sense of responsibility to the art they serve, to reanimate their interest in the whole corpus of musical literature, old and new. What, after all, is the responsibility of the performer to the art of music? Isn't it to keep music fully alive, renewed, refreshed? And how is that to be accomplished if the interpreter fails us?

Aaron Copland

1. Introduction: Interpreting the Musical Work Responsibly

In his book *Music Is Everything: Ethics and Aesthetics* (2016), the renowned conductor Daniel Barenboim asserts that performing masterpieces is a lifelong endeavor, one that entails not only great responsibility but also a moral obligation of total

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dedication to the work. What Barenboim refers to is the ethics of musical interpretation. It may seem unusual to associate this term with music, yet Barenboim emphasizes that performers have a clear moral duty toward the works they perform.

The importance of an artist possessing a strong musical personality is often discussed, but according to Barenboim, the primary duty of a performer is to recreate the work with authenticity and devotion, rather than focusing on expressing their individuality. While personality is indeed important for a performer, it is crucial to strike a balance: there is a fine line between total dedication to the work and the effacement of the self, which can result from overly rigid or dogmatic adherence to the score. Nevertheless, understanding how to achieve this balance is far from simple; it requires that the performer addresses fundamental questions such as: What does the work demand? What is inappropriate to do? How much freedom can I take while ensuring that the interpretation remains faithful or authentic? These ethical questions, which must guide every musical interpretation, involve ethical sensitivity, the capacity for compromise, and a form of wisdom on the part of the interpreter.

This article explores how these inquiries influence the interpretative choices of ethically responsible musicians and the extent to which they affect the balance between respecting tradition and adapting to contemporary contexts. Through an analysis of interpretative challenges, including those highlighted by the Historically Informed Performance (HIP) movement, it will be shown how such issues involve complex decisions, not only of a musical but also an ethical nature. In this sense, the HIP movement appears as the forerunner of musicians' professional ethics, having recognized the weight of tradition in music performance while challenging notions of fidelity and expressive freedom. However, the contribution of HIP is only partially acceptable, as it places undue emphasis on an overly inflexible notion of fidelity, necessitating a reassessment that views musical tradition as a conduit between the past and present, rather than an undue adherence to the past. From this vantage point, the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* will be examined as an internal tool that frames tradition as a guide that does not hinder creativity but rather directs it toward the golden mean in Aristotelian terms.

The article is structured into seven parts: Section 2 discusses the transition from text to performance, focusing on how performers interpret the musical score with fidelity while navigating the ambiguities inherent in musical notation. Section 3 examines the HIP movement, exploring its emphasis on historical fidelity and the ethical implications of adhering strictly to the performance practices of the past. Section 4 critiques HIP's pursuit of authenticity, addressing concerns about how an overemphasis on fidelity can limit performers' expressive freedom and creative interpretation. Section 5 discusses the problematic aspects of both HIP and opposing positions, highlighting the need for greater balance between past and present. Section 6 introduces the concept of *phronesis* as an internal ethical guide and reflects on its implications for contemporary performers. Section 7 argues that tradition and creativity can be harmonized through a nuanced understanding of both ethical and aesthetic values, enabling performers to navigate both musical and ethical challenges of interpretation.

2. From Text to Performance

In the context of classical music interpretation, where performances are based on written texts, often centuries old, one of the fundamental tenets that performers

are expected to uphold is respect for or fidelity to the score. Fidelity to the score represents thus a normative constraint that musicians must adhere to in order to perform a work authentically. Faithfully following the score is a prerequisite for performers, and implies a comprehensive understanding of every written instruction set by the composer, including notes, rhythm, dynamics, and articulations. An accomplished performer is one who rigorously follow the notational indications and reconstruct the implicit information within the score with a sense of respect to the past that the work represents. In this sense, fidelity to the score is an ultimate, (Dodd 2020: 45), non-negotiable value (Davies 2003: 241) in classical music performance, unlike other aesthetic values such as originality, brilliance, or creativity (Dodd 2020: 45; Rohrbaugh 2020: 86). However, the task of attaining fidelity in performance is complicated by the intrinsic ambiguity of the musical text.

The score is merely a collection of symbols on paper. Music only comes to life when it is performed, and the performer plays a crucial role in this process, as they bring to life what would otherwise remain an abstract concept or mere notes on a page. To emerge, the effects of music require nuanced interpretations of tonal properties and accents, which, guided by both the composer's score and performance practices, culminate in the performer's imagined interpretation.

Indeed, every notation and source used by the composer presupposes a series of interpretive acts, many of which are not explicitly delineated in the score. The most obvious examples are performance conventions that modify the sonic effect of the notation, such as double dotting and portamento in string playing. These elements were often implicit in the performance practices of their time, so composers often had no need to write them down. Moreover, even when scores provide clear indications, as is the case with many twentieth-century composers,[1] there remains no exact correspondence between notation and sound. Many aspects of notation offer only vague guidance; for instance, dynamic markings like tempo and staccato are often open to interpretation. Thus, musical scores are no more than drafts of what the works will become in performance, as musical notation can only specify a portion of what is actually performed. It is the performer's responsibility to concretely realize, with sensitivity to the cultural context in which a work was created, what is only generically indicated in the score (O'Dea 2000: 31).

This serves to illustrate why there remains considerable debate as to what exactly is meant by fidelity to the original musical score and what implications it may have, as well as how it may be achieved.

One of the most authoritative contemporary philosophers of music, Stephen Davies, argues that fidelity in interpretation is not merely a matter of technical precision—otherwise, robots and artificial intelligence would have surpassed human musicians long ago. Instead, it requires a more complex form of contextualization of the musical text.

In the first place, being faithful to the score, Davies claims, implies the ability to interpret the composer's intentions or will (Davies 2003: 81-82). A performance is accurate when it conforms to the instructions or intentions of the composer, which—unlike desires and suggestions—carry a prescriptive value. A performer

[1] Consider Mahler's instructions for string usage, Schönberg's signs for Hauptstimme and Nebenstimme, Webern's instructions for accelerations or slow-downs, Boulez's notation of pauses in *Le Marteau sans maître* (Boorman 2010: 407), or Stockhausen's precise entry points for percussion.

might follow the score meticulously but still betray the spirit or style of the composer, thereby rendering the performance inauthentic. Instead, according to Davies, the performance of a particular musical piece is considered authentic as it remains faithful to the composer's explicitly expressed intentions within the score (when these are not mere suggestions) (Davies 2003: 81-82). Therefore, Davies' definition of authenticity is grounded in the concept of compositional intentions, emphasizing their role as a fundamental criterion that must be respected in order to achieve authentic performances of musical works. However, since the score only partially determines the interpretative possibilities of a piece, the authenticity of each individual performance is judged in relation to a set of *ideally* faithful performances. Thus, Davies (2003: 81) argues that the sound to which an authentic performance aspires is that of a possible performance rather than an actual one. In this sense, authenticity is for Davies a regulative ideal that does not coincide with any particular performance but serves instead as a model of accuracy to which performers should aspire.

A second way to look at fidelity, according to Davies, is to consider it as adherence to the conventions and rules established within a specific musical style. In particular, there are well-defined notational conventions (which depend on the period and repertoire of the work being performed) that composers followed to ensure that their compositions communicated effectively with both performers and listeners. Performers must consider these conventions if they wish to render the work faithfully. While it is impossible to replicate the musical past exactly as it was, performers—at least when well-prepared with an understanding of music history and musicology—should possess the tools necessary to reconcile faithful performance practices with their interpretative creativity and judgment, in order to execute the work with precision.

Understanding what was taken for granted at the time of the composition of a particular work helps to fill in some of the gaps in the score (consider, for example, the widespread conventions during the Baroque era, such as the rare use of vibrato). However, this task is not without difficulty, especially when dealing with early music repertoires, where scores often provide incomplete information. Performers must form their own 'conclusions' on the appropriate actions to take in order to convey the deepest meaning and understanding of the work to the audience, performers must then form their own conclusions on the appropriate actions to take (Dodd 2020: 113; O'Dea 2000: 6).

Davies' view that musical interpretation involves more than technical accuracy and extends to the contextualization of the musical text clearly demonstrates that fidelity in performance not only pertains to the accurate execution of the notes but also to an understanding of the historical and cultural circumstances in which a work was conceived. In order to establish an adequate approach to the interpretation of a musical score, performers are required to thoroughly study the entire composition and the cultural context in which it was written.

This concept is central to the notion of Historically Informed Performance (HIP), an influential approach that has transformed performance practices in the twentieth century by striving to reinstate the performance practices, instruments, and stylistic nuances of the historical period in which a composition was originally created. The following section will examine how HIP aligns itself with a broader but more rigid notion of fidelity that includes historical context, providing modern listeners with an experience that aims to approximate the original sound world of the composer.

3. The Historically Informed Performance Movement: The Ethical Foundation of Musical Practice

In the 1960s, the performance of early music emerged as a distinct movement and a marketable entity in the classical music world, eventually securing a place within the music industry and exerting a lasting influence on traditional performance practices. The movement, known by various names such as Early Music, Historical Performance, and more recently, Historically Informed Performance (HIP), was based on the belief that each repertoire can only be played effectively, convincingly, and relevantly if performed according to the original conditions at the time of its composition. Thus, the movement's primary goal was to reconstruct original performance practices as faithfully as possible, from instruments to conventions, to the spirit in which the works were performed. Only in this way, it was believed, could the music reveal itself to performers and audiences as it was conceived and originally performed. These ideas served as the foundation for the concept of historical authenticity, which, together with score fidelity, represented the central conceptual pillars of HIP.

Historically, the HIP movement began with the rediscovery of Renaissance works and later extended to the performance of pre-Romantic and Romantic works on "original instruments", following, as far as historical musicological research reveals, the performance practices of the era in which they were composed (Keen 2002: 34). The importance of the early music movement for twentieth-century musical practice has been remarkable. Supported by significant figures such as Mayer Brown, Gustav Leonhardt, Nicholas Harnoncourt, Paul Hindemith, Frans Brüggen, and others, the movement has permeated contemporary musical creation in many European countries (O'Dea 2000: 67; Kenyon 2013: 91). The quest for original musical practices, authentic styles, and instruments has indeed revolutionized not only how we perform and listen to works, but also highlighted the value of history and tradition in musical practice as criteria for authentically interpreting musical works, based on the repertoire and the historical period of their creation.

This concept is evident in the work of early pioneers of the Early Music Revival, such as Arnold Dolmetsch and Wanda Landowska. Dolmetsch was determined to recreate the past not only in music but also in costumes and settings, while Landowska, a renowned harpsichordist, is famous for her provocative statement: "You play Bach your way, and I'll play it his way" (quoted in Edidin 1998: 1). While Dolmetsch manifested a desire for recreation that went beyond sound, Landowska expressed confidence in being able to faithfully interpret the intention of a deceased composer. Early Music is thus characterized by a relationship between practice and scholarship, and when attempting to recreate music for which no sound recordings exist, historical documents take on a fundamental importance (Bowan 2020: 109).

The pursuit of fidelity and authenticity has fueled discussions on multiple aspects of music historiography and performance practice, such as the composer's intentions, the "concept of work", and *Werktreue* (fidelity to the score as an intermediary between composer and performer). These discussions have raised questions about the relationship between notation and interpretation (Butt 2002: 54; Bowan 2020: 107), as effectively argued in the book *Playing with History* (2002) by the prominent HIP musician and scholar John Butt (Butt 2002: 54; Bowan 2020: 107).

Among the various theoretical approaches that shape the HIP movement, the position of renowned composer and conductor Igor Stravinsky merits particular attention as an exemplar of the movement's spirit. Both as a performer and a cultural figure, Stravinsky was a staunch advocate of a philosophy of pure and objective music, emphasizing the obligations and training of the performer. For Stravinsky, there is only one way to perfectly perform early music: by duplicating the methods and means of its first public performance. According to Stravinsky, interpretation must adhere to the constraints imposed by the musical practices of the era in which the work was created, in order to achieve music "with purity". He remarked, "The conflict between [...] two principles—performance and interpretation—is at the root of all errors, all sins, all misunderstandings that come between the musical work and the listener and prevent a faithful transmission of its message" (Stravinksy 1947: 122).

Stravinsky insists that performers must abandon the practice of music as an "interpretation" of a work and instead adopt a musical practice understood as simple "performance", where interpreting and performing are viewed as opposites. Interpretation involves the subjective viewpoint of the performer, whereas performance is an impersonal and objective act, requiring only the reproduction of what is written in the score. In strictly moral terms, Stravinsky argues that the performer is fundamentally distinct from the composer. The performer must be guided by an ideal of literal fidelity to the score, so as not to betray the composer's intentions or deceive the audience.

For Stravinsky, the duty to render a work as written by the composer is rooted in an ethical rather than aesthetic rationale. Performing works historically, adhering to the sonorities envisioned by the composer, constitutes a moral obligation, and the historical interpretive method is elevated to the level of a moral imperative—a respect for composers, a view also supported by conductor Arturo Toscanini (O'Dea 2000: 73). In other words, for Stravinsky, performers must know their place. For him, the duty of the performer is "the strict execution of an explicit will [that of the composer] which contains nothing beyond what is specifically commanded" (Stravinsky 1947: 127). Stravinsky seeks to compel performers into "submission", as he himself describes it. He deplores their "sins" against the "letter" or "spirit" of a composition, their "criminal assaults" on the composer's text, and their "betrayal" of the composer. He insists on nothing less than "the conformity of the performance to the will of the composer". Otherwise, the composer becomes a "victim" of the performers (Stravinsky 1947: 129).

Stravinsky, however, is not the sole composer in espousing this radical perspective. Similarly, Paul Hindemith relegates the performer to the role of a mere "intermediate station of transformation", whose task is to "duplicate the pre-established values of the composer's creation" (Hindemith 1961: 153). Aaron Copland's version of the performer is "a kind of intermediary" who "exists to serve the composer" (Copland 1957: 258).

4. Critiques to the HIP Movement's Quest for Authenticity

HIP proponents' stances on fidelity, historical authenticity, and the subsidiary function of the music interpreter have given rise to several concerns and objections. In general, the most controversial aspect of the HIP movement concerns the excessive emphasis placed on the notion of score fidelity and historical authenticity.

Among the critics of HIP are famous musicians and music scholars. Conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler highlighted for example the unbridgeable gap between past and present, which makes performing 'faithfully' impossible. Even basic performance instructions, such as piano and mezzo-forte, have a different meaning for the German musician than they do today. No matter how 'faithful' a rendition may be, it is inevitably altered by the contemporary performer. Thus, absolute historical fidelity is simply impossible: for example, we would need to have boys sing all the soprano and alto parts, rather than women (Furtwängler 1977: 52). Our sense of hearing has also changed compared to the past, and we cannot expect to listen in the same way as people did in earlier times (Furtwängler 1977: 53).

In line with Furtwängler's thinking, many other musicologists and philosophers throughout the late twentieth century have criticized HIP for its absolute and overly simplistic assumption that performance practice should be based on a principle of absolute historical fidelity.

In the realm of critical musicology, music scholar and musician Laurence Dreyfus (1983) questioned why historically accurate performances of early music should still be considered an urgent matter in the second half of the twentieth century (Butt 2002: 7–14). The notion that HIP represents the "progress" of musicology is, for Dreyfus, simply inadequate, especially given the growing divide between HIP and musicology that emerged after World War II (Dreyfus 1983: 311).

In a similar vein, prominent musicologist Richard Taruskin proposed that the HIP movement is not truly concerned with a faithful revival the past, but is rather shaped by the present and exhibits all the hallmarks of 20th-century modernism. Taruskin's argument, fully laid out in his fourth essay in *Text and Act* (Taruskin 1995: 90), makes it clear that very few performances are truly historical or even can be, as much of them must be invented. Taruskin asserted that performance should be regarded as an act, not reduced to the status of a text, which is reflected in the title of his book. For Taruskin, musical performance is significant due to its human element, not for its objective authenticity.

According to Taruskin, HIP artists err when they treat their practice as "history" to be passed down to future generations; instead, they should be engaging in an imaginative recreation of the past, not an objective one. Much of Taruskin's critique focused on the issue of compositional intent, that is, what the composers truly intended to communicate as the essential goal of performing their works. For HIP advocates, adhering to the composer's intentions is considered a moral duty of performers and the key to achieving authentic performances. However, from Taruskin's perspective, the desire to secure the composer's approval by following their intentions "betrays a lack of courage, an infantile dependence" (Taruskin 1995: 98; Butt 2002: 16). This argument is supported by numerous examples in which composers themselves did not expect their intentions to be followed precisely, as adaptations and cuts were part of the compositional practice.

But if authority comes neither from the work itself nor exclusively from the composer, to whom should we turn? According to Taruskin, we must turn to ourselves. Authenticity, in this sense, is more than simply stating what one intends. That is merely sincerity, which Stravinsky referred to as "a sine qua non condition that at the same time guarantees nothing". Sincerity, in fact, carries little or no moral weight. Acknowledging someone's sincerity is often a condescending prelude to dismissing their arguments. Authenticity, on the other hand, involves knowing what one means and understanding where that knowledge originates. More than this, authenticity means knowing who one is and acting in accordance

with that awareness (Taruskin 1995: 67). For Taruskin, human practice is "cumulative, multi-authored, open, accommodating, above all messy, and therefore human" (Taruskin 1995: 192). For example, the meaning of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* has been shaped for us by everything that has been thought and said about it since its premiere, making it incomparably richer today than it was in 1787.

Music philosopher Peter Kivy also criticized the division of roles between performer and composer in his book *Authenticities* (1995). As Kivy noted, for much of music history, the relationship between composer and performer was far more intertwined and interconnected than it appears today. One only needs to consider the role improvisation or virtuosity played in the compositional practices of great composers like Frescobaldi, Bach, Mozart, or Beethoven, who were celebrated both as performers and composers "on the spot". Performers themselves would sometimes alter the work, which was not conceived as something absolutely unchangeable. According to Kivy, the long history of cooperation between composer and performer demonstrates that instrumental practice, far from being a paramilitary discipline, closely resembles *commedia dell'arte* (Kivy 1995: 165). The best possible performance can sometimes be achieved by following the composer's intentions, and at other times by violating them. It cannot be predetermined as a form of "moral duty", but only through empirical practice. The relationship between the composer's intentions and aesthetic value must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

In line with Kivy, philosopher Roger Scruton also argued that "authentic performance arises from a consciousness of the past that is available only to those who feel irredeemably separated from it" (Scruton 1997: 450). For Scruton, authentic [i.e., accurate] performance does not, in itself, provide a standard nor does it grant access to the true musical identity of the performed work (Scruton 1997: 446), as performers are still bound by the obligation of "musical understanding" (Scruton 1997: 441). Furthermore, within HIP, spontaneity and the art of improvisation do not exist (Scruton 1997: 454-455), nor can they, as HIP seeks to limit or direct the performer's expressive freedom. But for Scruton and other critics of the movement, performers must be granted unlimited freedom.

On the same note, musicologist Robert Morgan noted that in the contemporary cultural landscape, multiculturalism has prevailed precisely because there is no longer a clearly defined sense of the "musical present" (1998: 66). According to Morgan, the ability to draw from many different eras and cultures implies the absence of a single, coherent culture. If all cultures are equally possible, then there is no longer any singular, true culture. The desire to explore cultures older than our own, in this sense, is merely a sign of greed, and the pursuit of historical authenticity reflects the very absence of a culture that we can still call "ours". The HIP movement is thus perceived by Morgan as a threat to the present and contemporary culture, which should serve as the foundation for future traditions. By recovering the past, Morgan argued, the present is obscured, an idea that mirrors in many respects Taruskin's concern about the loss of the present that HIP seems to imply.

5. Black or White: Is It That Simple?

The arguments against HIP can be summarized in three main critiques: (1) HIP's focus on replicating past performances risks turning musical interpretation into a mechanical, anti-artistic process that stifles the performer's creative freedom,

reducing them to mere servants of the composer; (2) HIP presumes that musical works have only one 'true' past, linked exclusively to the time of their creation—an unjustified reduction of a work's evolving history; (3) HIP's pursuit of historical authenticity can lead to cold, emotionless performances that lack spontaneity and expressive depth (Dodd 2020: 51). Although these criticisms hold some validity, the question remains whether all aspects of HIP should be dismissed outright. In truth, both extremes—uncompromising fidelity as prescribed by HIP and its complete rejection—are problematic. HIP advocates for a level of fidelity that is neither fully attainable nor always desirable, while its critics often promote interpretative liberties that risk severing the music from both the composer's intentions and the historical context in which the work was composed. Despite the validity of many of these critiques, the question remains whether all aspects of HIP can be entirely dismissed.

For example, the argument that HIP's authenticity is excessively rigid is valid, especially in its implications for the performer's role. Contrary to HIP's stricter interpretations, composers and performers have distinct but complementary roles: the composer creates the work, and the performer brings it to life in performance. They should be viewed as co-creators, contributing at different stages. Historically, this dynamic has evolved with the development of musical practice. Music, in fact, can be divided into two broad eras: an "age of improvisation" and a "post-improvisation" period (Jamason 2012: 177). During the former, which lasted until around 1850, composers and performers collaborated closely, with improvisation and interpretative freedom central to the practice. However, as the role of the composer grew more dominant due to social and artistic changes, improvisation diminished, and the modern separation between creator and interpreter solidified.

Still, this division between the roles of composer and performer does not mean that performers can be considered autonomous artists, free to follow only their own expressive instincts, as some critics of HIP (Kivy 1995; Taruskin 1995) suggest. Performers must remain anchored to the work and its context, even while exercising creative judgment.

More generally, though HIP has sometimes been exaggerated, resulting in overly rigid constraints tied to musical notation, it has been essential in emphasizing the need for rigor in interpreting historical masterpieces. HIP can thus be seen as the first serious attempt to establish a foundation for classical musicianship, underscoring the ethical implications of performing works from the past. Although HIP did not explicitly frame these issues within ethical theory, its emphasis on historical accuracy and fidelity to the composer's intentions laid the groundwork for a future professional ethics of musical interpretation—a framework that remains to be fully articulated today.

In outlining a professional ethics of musical interpretation, it is thus crucial to build on the significant contributions of HIP—musically, intellectually, and ethically—while refining its more extreme positions. The movement's rigid adherence to authenticity, much like Stravinsky's approach, should evolve to incorporate a thoughtful balance between the value of the past and its relevance to the present.

An approach that preserves the strengths of historically informed performance (HIP) while moderating its extreme claims is exemplified by Nikolaus Harnoncourt, a pioneer in the field. Harnoncourt consistently distanced himself from the notion of "authenticity", viewing claims of historical correctness as misleading

(Butt 2002: 25). As Butt observes, "Harnoncourt's case is symptomatic of HIP's association with a particular strand of modernism" (2002: 4).

Crucially, Harnoncourt did not advocate for blind fidelity to the score. Instead, he promoted a flexible fidelity that adapts to contemporary conditions, taking into account the limitations and resources available today. He argued that a performer must first and foremost be a musician, not a scientist, prioritizing the quality of interpretation over the mere use of original instruments (Butt 2002: 32). Responsible musicians should strive to play or listen to authentic instruments crafted by skilled builders and compare modern replicas to these originals. A trained ear can distinguish genuine sounds from imitations, and audiences should not be misled into accepting inferior replicas as authentic Baroque instruments (Harnoncourt 1988: 76).

Harnoncourt also recognized that the criteria for a correct performance, while rooted in the historical and cultural context of a composition, evolve over time as musical traditions develop. Changing tastes and the resolution of technical challenges drive ongoing evolution in performance practices, including alterations in tuning, technological advancements, and innovations in instrument production (Dodd 2020: 71). As Boorman (2010: 406) notes, "A musician from 1890 played Beethoven very differently than one from 1980, and both differently from a performer determined to recapture the 'original' style of Beethoven's contemporary period". All three interpreters engage with the notation but do so within a spectrum that ranges from strict adherence to the score to greater freedom. Thus, fidelity to the score is not absolute but varies in degree.

Accepting this flexibility in fidelity allows us to understand that while adherence to the score remains a core value in performance, musicians can interpret it in two ways: historically, by employing the notational conventions and performance practices of the composer, or traditionally, according to norms that, although rooted in tradition, have been adapted over time by professionals (Dodd 2020: 65). Practically, this means that a historically informed performance of a Baroque piece can be executed using modern instruments and tuning while still remaining faithful to the score. This idea rests on the understanding that historical and contemporary performance styles are not in competition but rather complementary: a historically accurate performance brings the past into the present, while a more traditional interpretation allows us to hear the present in the past (Dodd 2020: 65). Thus, the concept of tradition serves as a middle ground between historicism and presentism, with the musical text at its center.

But how can performers strike this delicate balance between the demands of the past and the present? How can they honor tradition without merely reiterating or musealizing it, while keeping it alive and relevant? This is a challenging task, laden with ethical implications, especially when we recognize that performing music is not solely about sensory pleasure or entertainment. It involves engaging with something that has cultural and intellectual value, and performers have an ethical duty to convey this value accurately to the community in which they operate.

A useful lens through which to approach this issue is Aristotelian ethics. In this framework, *phronesis* (practical wisdom) plays a crucial role due to the shared characteristics between the functioning of Aristotelian praxis and musical interpretation. External guidelines, such as those prescribed by HIP, are not sufficient by themselves to ensure responsible interpretation of a score. Instead, an internalization of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, is required—guiding the performer in

making the right choices for this practice. The next section will explore how *phronesis* can serve as a guiding principle for performers, enabling them to navigate the balance between historical fidelity and interpretative freedom.

6. The Golden Mean

Within Aristotelian virtue ethics, the virtue of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) is crucial, as possessing all other virtues requires being *phronetic*. This concept, known as the unity or reciprocity of the virtues, holds that possessing one virtue implies the possession of others (Annas 1995; 2011). For example, courage cannot be fully expressed without *phronesis*, as it requires knowing when it is appropriate to face danger and when it is better to avoid it. Without practical wisdom, courage might manifest as recklessness (an excess) or cowardice (a deficiency), rather than as a balanced response to risk. But what exactly is a virtue?

A virtue is a stable characteristic of an individual, a predisposition to exhibit certain behaviors or "a disposition of the person to be a certain way" (Annas 2011: 9). However, it is not merely a static trait; virtue is dynamic. Possessing a virtue implies a propensity to act in specific ways (Annas 2011: 8). These character traits or excellences help us live well and treat both ourselves and others appropriately. According to Aristotle, virtue occupies an intermediate position, more commonly referred to as the "golden mean", between two extremes: one of excess and the other of deficiency (1106a30-34). In this sense, Aristotle compares virtues to technical skills, where an experienced practitioner navigates between these extremes, avoiding both excess and deficiency. A courageous person, for instance, assesses which dangers are worth confronting and which are not, feeling fear in an appropriate measure according to the situation. This places the courageous person between the coward, who excessively fears and avoids all dangers, and the rash individual, who approaches all dangers without proper caution or fear.

Aristotle extends this model to all ethical virtues, asserting that they too fall between extremes of excess and deficiency. However, he stresses that determining the appropriate mean depends on the specific circumstances of the individual (1106b-5-7). Unlike arithmetic, where the mean between 10 and 2 is always 6, finding the ethical mean is more variable and context-dependent, much like an expert craftsperson adjusting their actions to suit different situations. For instance, no universal rule dictates the correct amount of food for an athlete; it would be unreasonable to assume that a midpoint of 6 lbs. is always appropriate simply because 10 lbs. is too much and 2 lbs. too little. Achieving the mean, therefore, is not a mechanical process but one that requires nuanced understanding of the circumstances at hand. Thus, determining this balance relies on *phronesis*, which helps individuals act virtuously across diverse situations. Importantly, this process does not follow fixed rules but requires careful judgment, especially when different virtues seem to point in opposing directions (Palazzolo & Giombini: 2024). As a form of practical reasoning, *phronesis* guides *praxis*, particularly in moral actions. It addresses what is morally right in a specific context, allowing individuals to respond with appropriate emotions, set meaningful goals, and make sound decisions (Russell 2009: 13). The goal of *phronesis*, then, is the action itself: "well-doing (*eupraxia*) is the end" (Russell 2009: 17).

Aristotle further emphasizes that *phronesis* is essential for translating good intentions into correct actions, playing a vital role in achieving human flourishing (Russell 2009: 17). Through *phronesis*, individuals make ethically sound decisions

that promote both personal and collective well-being. Moreover, *phronesis* serves as ethical competence, useful in addressing specific, often unique situations (De Caro et al., 2021: 30-31). The *phronimos*—the individual who embodies this virtue—must assess each case to discern what is morally relevant. Acting wisely, therefore, means being guided by the appropriate goals of practice. As Aristotle defines it, *telos* is the purpose or end of each activity (Schwartz & Sharpe 2010). For example, the *telos* of teaching is to educate, in medicine it is to promote health, and in law, to pursue justice.

Every profession has a *telos*, and those who excel are able to identify and pursue it. A good professional acts not for rewards but because it reflects their essence. However, good intentions alone are insufficient: competence and skill are necessary to transform goals into concrete actions. Often, determining "what should be done?" depends on the specific details of the situation (Schwartz & Sharpe 2010). Different roles—such as friends, doctors, or teachers—require the ability to understand others' thoughts and feelings, anticipate the consequences of actions, and distinguish between what is possible and what is ideal.

7. The Musician's Practical Wisdom

What is crucial for our discussion is that phronesis, as practical wisdom, is not limited to moral decision-making but extends to other areas of human action, including the arts. In particular, in the realm of classical music performance, *phronesis* plays a crucial role in guiding performers through the interpretative process. Just as in ethical situations, musicians must balance various factors—fidelity to the score, personal creativity, and the cultural context—in order to make sound judgments. In classical music, the deliberative process is closely tied to interpretation, which involves making decisions about sound, phrasing, and instrumentation. Interpretation is always situational and guided by *phronesis*, as each performance is influenced by contingent factors, such as the acoustics of the theater. Even when following the score, an "improvised" element often emerges due to the inherent vagueness of musical notation. Performers may introduce rubato, alter dynamics, or use the pedal (Boorman 2010: 406). These adjustments must be made with sensitivity to the context and repertoire, employing *phronetic* musical judgment, which balances both ethical and aesthetic considerations.

How does one acquire this wisdom in musical performance? Recognizing what is required in a given situation is an ethical stance, involving the ability to "recognize, respond, and choose" the ethically relevant elements in specific contexts (Nussbaum 1986). Through practice and repetition in real-life situations, performers develop the skill to assess and determine what is necessary in a particular context. According to Aristotelian naturalism, such principles become a "second nature" through habit, shaped by virtues and moral education (O'Dea 1993: 236; De Caro 2021: 72). *Phronesis* evolves progressively, refined through experience and practice, until it becomes a fully matured competence.

The performer must approach the practical situation with the aim of "interpreting" the work, which means understanding it and facilitating its auditory perception. This requires extensive musical knowledge, including proficiency with the instrument, the ability to read the score, and a clear grasp of style and performance practice, all exercised with *phronetic* judgment rather than subjective preferences. In interpretation, there may be a temptation to highlight one's artistic personality or to prioritize creativity over fidelity to the work. However, as

Barenboim stresses, the performance's primary focus must be the work itself, not the performer or creativity for its own sake; every interpretation should center on the piece (Dodd 2020: 3).

Perfection is achieved through attentive listening: by carefully listening to each sound, the performer evaluates and chooses the most effective interpretative solution. "True listening requires concentration, curiosity, and total dedication to what is being heard" (Barenboim 2016: 25). This involves exercising critical judgment, weighing interpretive possibilities, and reflecting on which are the most fitting (O'Dea 1993: 239). Performers are generally trained to develop their musical thinking through practice, gaining experience in a structured *modus operandi* that includes techniques and knowledge. This approach helps them avoid confusion and unnecessary effort, enabling them to produce accurate and meaningful interpretations.

In general, performers acquire these methods through practice and self-monitoring as they deeply engage in the interpretive process. As Barenboim (2016) notes, "great artists must have the gift of meticulous introspection, to arm themselves with new knowledge, refine their intuition, identify and correct their weaknesses" (15). This self-awareness drives performers to direct their thinking in a specific way, taking into account all available interpretative information: from the composer's score, to performance traditions, to critics' suggestions, tonal possibilities, and their own creative ideas. By discerningly using this information, performers bring musical compositions to life, making their structures intelligible and coherent. The interpretations we consider excellent or original are often the result of this persistent interpretative pursuit, a "creative" yet faithful development of skills, reasoning, and judgment, influenced by the history of musical interpretation. A performer excels by crafting "original" exemplifications of excellence, transforming past achievements with new creative insights (O'Dea 1993: 240).

Clearly defined rules may offer guidance in managing multiple objectives, but they will never be precise enough to fit every situation. Aristotle recognized that balancing such objectives requires wisdom, and that purely theoretical wisdom is inadequate. Wisdom must be practical because the challenges we encounter arise from daily work. As a result, the interpretative process demands moral deliberation: much like ethics in the Aristotelian view, the reasoning behind musical interpretation cannot be reduced to a fixed set of rules or principles (O'Dea 1993: 240-241). While the score and classical music traditions provide general guidelines, they do not prescribe exactly how these should be applied in practice.

In this framework, phronesis helps to address the issues that arise in the interpretative process, such as the balance between fidelity and creativity, and the role of musical tradition in contemporary performances. In other words, *phronesis* grants the performer the sensitive flexibility to respond to each particular context, allowing them to grasp the relevant characteristics of the situation.

A *phronetic* performer can recognize the ethical significance of new details and interpretative nuances. When exercised wisely, practical musical intuition allows for the absorption and application of past wisdom in evolving contexts, developing the skills and judgment needed for artistic excellence. Moral imagination, the ability to foresee and evaluate the consequences of choices, is crucial. A wise person understands their goals and acts with the intent of meeting the needs of others, going beyond theoretical knowledge and committing to the well-being of those they serve. A wise individual balances conflicting objectives and adapts principles to specific contexts.

To the same extent, a wise performer understands when to be adaptable and when to remain steadfast, acting with empathy and taking into account the needs of others. Only in this way can a musician be not only technically competent but also musically perceptive and ethically sapient.

8. Conclusions

Creating music often presents an ethical challenge, as performers must navigate the delicate balance between innovation and tradition, and between their expressive personality and the requirements prescribed by the composer's intentions and historical conventions, as outlined in the score. While audiences may applaud creative interpretations, musicians are also ethically responsible for upholding the integrity of the musical works and the values of the practice.

This article examined the ethical dimensions of musical interpretation, focusing on the tension between personal expression and fidelity to the work. It argued that performers have a moral obligation to remain true to the musical score, emphasizing that interpretation cannot simply be a technical exercise, but requires deep engagement with the cultural context in which the work was created.

Focusing on the Historically Informed Performance (HIP) movement, we demonstrated that despite its sometimes overly rigid focus on authenticity, HIP has been pivotal in advocating for historical fidelity in performance and can be seen as laying the groundwork for a professional ethics of musicians. Finally, we introduced a more flexible notion of fidelity, as embodied by Harnoncourt, and identified Aristotelian *phronesis* as a conceptual tool to guide musicians in navigating the balance between fidelity and creativity within the boundaries of tradition.

Through practical wisdom, musicians can mediate between the past and present, crafting interpretations that are both historically informed and artistically vibrant. In conclusion, musical interpretation is an inherently ethical endeavor, requiring performers to balance fidelity to the score with the creative demands of the present. By embracing *phronesis* as a guiding virtue, musicians can ensure that their interpretations are not only faithful but also adaptable, allowing tradition and creativity to coexist in a dynamic and meaningful way.[2]

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