

MAG UIDHIR ON PERFORMANCE

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Christy Mag Uidhir has recently argued (a) that there is no in principle aesthetic difference between a live performance and a recording of that performance, and (b) that the proper aesthetic object is a type which is instantiated by the performance and potentially repeatable when recordings are played back. This paper considers several objections to (a) and finds them lacking. I then consider improvised music, a subject that Mag Uidhir explicitly brackets in his discussion. Improvisation reveals problems with (b), because the performance-event and the performance-type are distinct but equally proper aesthetic objects.

I. MAG UIDHIR'S THESIS

CHRISTY Mag Uidhir has recently argued that there is in principle no aesthetic difference between a live performance and a recording of that performance.¹ Actual audio recordings fall short in many ways, of course: sound fidelity is imperfect, spatialization is distorted, and they leave out all visual elements. Nevertheless, Mag Uidhir argues, these are issues of technology rather than metaphysics. There is nothing in principle impossible about the aesthetic object instantiated by a live performance being repeated, either by another live performance or by a perfect three-dimensional, audiovisual representation of the performance.

If this is correct, then the thing worthy of aesthetic attention is not a token event of Willie Nelson playing 'Crazy' (for example) but instead the interpretation-type instantiated when he does so. Mag Uidhir concludes that we are left with two options. First, we might focus our aesthetic evaluation to the repeatable types but continue to think of the tokens as *performances*. Second, we might revise our account of *performances* so that they are repeatable types. The former has the advantage of retaining common usage, he suggests, but at the cost of making performances aesthetically uninteresting. On the latter view, 'performances retain their status as proper aesthetic objects but at the

¹ Christy Mag Uidhir, 'Recordings as Performances', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 47, no. 3 (2007), pp. 298–314.

cost of regarding them as types rather than singular events'.² Mag Uidhir advocates the latter option, attributing the former both to Stephen Davies and myself. He concludes the paper by listing the two options as the ones available to us.

It is important to note that Mag Uidhir's argument for the dilemma is only about metaphysical possibility: there is nothing that makes for an essential aesthetic difference between recordings and live performances. This caveat does several things for him. First, it allows him to avoid questions about the adequacy of actual recordings. As already noted, he shifts to considering a perfect holodeck recording that is perceptually indistinguishable from an actual, live performance. Second, it allows him to avoid specific counterexamples. The fact that a patriotic piece is performed on Independence Day might be aesthetically relevant to *that* performance, and so watching it a week later on the holodeck would be inadequate.³ Third, it does not apply to works that are significantly improvisational, such as jazz or baroque works with figured bass.

In the next two sections, I consider ways of drawing a distinction between performance and recording. I argue that neither succeeds as an objection to Mag Uidhir's thesis. Nevertheless, I suggest, he poses a false dilemma. The point is especially clear with respect to improvised music, for which the singular event and the repeatable event-type are both proper aesthetic objects.

II. THE TRANSCIENCE OBJECTION

Stephen Davies argues that a live performance is experienced as a singular event, whereas a recording is experienced as something that can be repeated.⁴ When I listen to a CD, for example, I know that I can relisten to the very same tracks. As such, Davies argues:

Features that may be innocuous in a live performance are liable to take on a new significance when one has a recording of it. For instance, the audience's coughs become harder to ignore when they can be anticipated—and one knows from the first hearing that they will be present in all subsequent playings at the same moment. . . . A few wrong notes and fluffed entries need not mar the listener's enjoyment of a concert but they can be baneful on a recording.⁵

Mag Uidhir anticipates the objection, but argues that this difference does not make for an in principle difference between a live performance and a

² *Ibid.*, p. 314, n. 28.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

⁴ Stephen Davies, *Musical Works and Performances: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

recording. A recording might be constructed so as to self-destruct when played; listening to such a recording would be a singular event.⁶ One need not consider such an extraordinary recording in order to make the point. Davies admits that the singular experience of listening to a live performance might be relevantly like the singular experience of listening to a live radio broadcast.⁷ It seems natural to add that if the radio broadcast is tape-delayed, but for practical reasons the listener will only be able to hear it this once, then the experience will be singular in the same way as listening to a live broadcast or a self-destructing tape.

One may object that this is beside the point. Mag Uidhir aims to show that the repeatable type is the object of legitimate aesthetic interest. It is irrelevant for this purpose to show that in some circumstances recordings might not be repeatable. The transience objection is that there is an aesthetic difference between listening to a singular event and listening to a repeatable type.

Perhaps, but Mag Uidhir might instead answer the objection in the following way. Imagine Amos, who listens to a recording for the first time. When the saxophone player hits a sour note, he flinches because he knows he will hear just that same blunder on every subsequent listening. Now imagine Barbara, who attended the live performance. She arranged for the performance to be recorded, intending to share the recording with her friend Amos. When the sax player hit the sour note, she flinched because she knew she would hear it again when she shared the recording with Amos and on each subsequent listening.

As such, the distinction Davies draws does not cut between performances and recordings but rather between two ways of experiencing events. If I experience a token of some event type without any expectation that I will in the future experience further tokens of that same type, then I respond differently to it than if I expect to experience further tokens of the type. This only makes sense if there is an in principle repeatable type—and that is just what Mag Uidhir contends.

III. THE PERCEPTION PROBLEM

One might object in the following way to Mag Uidhir. When I experience a live performance of Willie Nelson playing ‘Crazy’, I perceive a man singing and playing guitar. When I experience a recording—even an imagined perfect recording that is subjectively indistinguishable from the performance—I perceive a *representation* of a man singing and playing guitar. Thus, there is a necessary difference between a live performance and a recording.

⁶ Mag Uidhir, ‘Recordings as Performances’, p. 302.

⁷ Davies, *Musical Works and Performances*, pp. 300–301.

As Mag Uidhir notes, this is connected to the transparency of representation. Suppose, following Cohen and Meskin,⁸ that seeing a photo of the Pope is seeing a representation and not actually seeing the Pope. One may argue *mutatis mutandis* that hearing a recording is hearing a representation and not hearing a guitar.⁹

Mag Uidhir attempts to sidestep this broader issue.¹⁰ He imagines concertgoers who have a disease that makes them only able to hear sounds that originate in their own ears. They are fitted with devices that record incoming sounds and play them back after an imperceptible delay. These concertgoers have experiences which are subjectively indistinguishable from ordinary hearing, and they react just like ordinary concertgoers. It would be absurd to say that the ordinary concertgoers and disease-and-prosthetic concertgoers do not experience the same aesthetic object, Mag Uidhir argues, so the recording is not in principle different than the live performance.

There is a mismatch between Mag Uidhir's thought experiment and the issues it is meant to sidestep. Cohen and Meskin do not argue that there is an in principle difference between photographs and direct vision. Instead, they argue that photographs of the usual kind are distinct from seeing of the usual kind. When I see the Pope, I am able to situate him in my egocentric space. For example, I discern that he is a goodly distance away off to my left. Extraordinary circumstances, such as a hall of mirrors, might confound me, but even then I learn that the Pope is somewhere in my vicinity at the present time. When I see a photo of the Pope, I learn no such thing. I might apprehend the image of the Pope as off to the left, but that tells me nothing about where the Pope is. As Cohen and Meskin put it, a photograph is *spatially agnostic*; ordinary visual perception is not.¹¹ Of course, cameras might be rigged up in some odd way so as to allow me to look at photos of the Pope and infer

⁸ Jonathan Cohen and Aaron Meskin, 'On the Epistemic Value of Photographs', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 62, no. 2 (2004), pp. 197–210; Aaron Meskin and Jonathan Cohen, 'Photographs as Evidence', in Scott Walden (ed.), *Photography and Philosophy: Essays on the Pencil of Nature* (New York: Blackwell, 2008), esp. §4.

⁹ Casey O'Callaghan resists the extrapolation from vision to hearing and thus differs from Cohen and Meskin in the details. He maintains that hearing a recording can involve hearing the very same *sounds* as hearing a live performance. Since a performance is more than just a structure of sounds, this offers the materials for a version of the perception objection—that 'having more direct perceptual access to a performance makes an aesthetic difference. Hearing recorded music in this respect differs aesthetically from hearing a live performance' (Casey O'Callaghan. *Sounds: A Philosophical Theory* [Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2007], p. 162).

¹⁰ Mag Uidhir, 'Recordings as Performances', p. 308.

¹¹ Cohen and Meskin make the point in terms of objective information, rather than subjective facts about what one might learn. As such, the objection cannot be answered (as the transience objection was) by saying that these are just two ways of experiencing the same object.

his position in my egocentric space. With such a contraption, my seeing a photograph of the Pope would amount to my seeing the Pope.¹²

Now consider the parallel case of interest here. When I hear Willie Nelson, I gain information about his location in my egocentric space—at the very least, I learn that he is now playing within earshot. When I hear a recording of Willie Nelson, I do not acquire accurate information about his position. The recording is spatially agnostic.

Mag Uidhir's imagined recorder-repeater allows concertgoers to situate performers in their egocentric space. In this way, it is like the contraption that presents a photo of the Pope in front of me only when the Pope is in front of me. Just as Cohen and Meskin would say that I could see the Pope with such a camera-presenter, they are free to say that Mag Uidhir's concertgoers hear the concert. The example does not address the point of the objection: there is a difference between perceiving a live performance and perceiving a spatially agnostic recording.

This suffices to show that there is some metaphysical difference between a live performance and a (spatially agnostic) representation of that performance. Yet Mag Uidhir need not deny this. His position is not that there is no difference whatsoever between a performance and a recording—what a silly position that would be—but rather that there is no *aesthetic* difference. In the usual case, positioning the performance in egocentric space is aesthetically irrelevant. So being *unable* to do so is similarly irrelevant, and the difference between performances and recordings is not an aesthetic difference.¹³

There are exceptions, of course. Alvin Lucier's 'Vespers', for example, exploits the acoustics of the room in which it is performed. The piece is about the performance space. Recordings played back on ordinary stereos are obviously inadequate, because the sound comes from only two sources in a totally different space. Even if we imagine a perfectly spatialized holodeck recording, there is something lost. The recording would preserve the *sound* of the original concert space, but the holodeck would still not *be* the original concert space. In this case, there is an important indexical element to the performance. It is aesthetically important that the audience experience the performance space as *here* in that space. Metaphysically, this is really no different than the patriotic performance on Independence Day; in that case, it is aesthetically important that the audience experience the performance as *now* on that day.

Recall, however, that Mag Uidhir does not claim that *all* performances are repeatable types. Rather, he urges that the aesthetically interesting thing about

¹² To my knowledge, no such device has ever been constructed. It is unlikely that the Pope could be convinced to cooperate.

¹³ In posing the problem of repeatability, Davies allows that listening to a radio broadcast can be aesthetically like listening to a live concert. Yet, listening to a broadcast usually provides only spatially agnostic information.

a live performance is (in the usual case) the repeatable interpretation-type of which it is an instance. As a metaphysical matter, every performance is associated with a singular, unrepeatable event. Also, every performance is associated with a type of which the singular event is an instance. The question Mag Uidhir ends with is whether the *performance* is the event or the type. If we follow common usage and reserve performance for the singular event, then we abandon the common-sense idea that performances are the proper aesthetic objects.

The dilemma is vexing because common usage and proper aesthetics seem to be at odds. Although Mag Uidhir explicitly brackets the question of improvised music, I think that considering it may help resolve the dilemma.

IV. IMPROVISATION

Considering purely improvised music, one might be tempted to say that the aesthetic object is and must be the singular, spontaneous event. A recording can provide evidence of the improvisation, but it cannot instantiate it. The vocal improviser Chris Tonelli describes his recordings as ‘business cards’; he gives them out promotionally so that people can know roughly what to expect if they book him, but the live performance will be something new.¹⁴

If we take Mag Uidhir’s preferred horn of the dilemma and treat repeatable interpretation-types as performances, then we lose any grip on the singular event of improvisation. Yet it would be odd if ‘performance’ meant something entirely different in kind for the performance of composed music and purely improvised music. After all, there is a continuum of intermediate cases in which performers exercise lesser and greater degrees of freedom.

Moreover, it would ignore the fact that there is a repeatable type instantiated in an improvised performance. When we listen to the recording of Miles Davis playing ‘Autumn Leaves’ at the 1963 Monterey Jazz Festival, for example, we do not listen to it merely as documentation of the way Davis played. It is very different than the way he played the song on an album almost a decade before, so it is not even documentation of the way Davis tended to play ‘Autumn Leaves.’ And of course we do not listen to determine how he would sound if we booked him for a performance. We listen to appreciate the performance-type that he instantiated in Monterey in 1963, and the recording is an instance of that type.¹⁵

Even in improvised music, then, there is a legitimate aesthetic object that is instantiated in the original playing and can be repeated in a recording. In a

¹⁴ Chris Tonelli, personal communication, 2005.

¹⁵ It is a somewhat impoverished instance, but—as Mag Uidhir argues—only because of contingent features of actual recordings.

perfectly ordinary sense, that object is the performance. Indeed, it is natural to describe a jazz recording as a ‘performance’. For example, when a previously unknown recording was discovered in the Library of Congress archives, one source described it as ‘a newly found *performance* by pianist Thelonius Monk’.¹⁶ Thus, common usage is not entirely against Mag Uidhir’s suggestion of letting the recording be an instance of the performance.

Yet we should not deny that for improvised music the spontaneous event is a proper aesthetic object. The point here is simply that it is not the only proper aesthetic object. If someone were to take one of Tonelli’s ‘business card’ CDs and listen to it as something worthy of appreciation in its own right, they would not be making a category mistake. The singular event and the repeatable type are both worthy objects of aesthetic consideration, and they are each rewarding in their own way.

As Mag Uidhir admits, a performance–event can be a proper aesthetic object. He gives the example, which he attributes to Davies, of ‘Marilyn Monroe’s performance of “Happy Birthday” for John F. Kennedy. Her performance is far more aesthetically interesting than the particular interpretation–type instanced by that performance’.¹⁷ Examples like this might make it seem as if this focus on the performance–event precludes the performance–type being a proper aesthetic object. By not considering improvised music, Mag Uidhir overlooks the fact that a performance might be aesthetically significant *both* as an event and as a type.

So I suggest that Mag Uidhir has posed a false dilemma. We should not insist that the performance must either be an event or an event type. One might contend, since the label serves as an honorific, that we should apply it to the proper aesthetic object. However, neither the event nor the type is *the* unique proper object. Common usage recognizes both the event and the type as the performance. For philosophical precision, we may distinguish the performance–event and the performance–type.¹⁸

I am sympathetic with Davies, who insists,

It is important to stress the many real benefits provided by recordings and to acknowledge that, when profits are weighted against losses, the result often appears on the credit side of the ledger. . . . The two kinds of playing can and do coexist.

¹⁶ Roy Hurst, ‘New Monk, Coltrane Recording Discovered’, *NPR*, 30 September 2005 (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4930231>), my emphasis.

¹⁷ Mag Uidhir, ‘Recordings as Performances’, p. 314, n. 28

¹⁸ One might still accept one horn of Mag Uidhir’s dilemma and apply the word ‘performance’ determinately to one or the other, while acknowledging that both are proper objects. This would just be a dispute about how to use words, rather than anything of ontological or aesthetic significance.

The philosopher should concern herself with identifying their respective strengths and values, rather than dwelling on the weakness inherent in one or the other approach.¹⁹

Yet we should be careful to distinguish between the losses that result from deficiencies in actual recording technology and those that result from the nature of recording. If we are interested only in the performance-type, then any losses are of the former kind. As Mag Uidhir has shown, there is no metaphysically necessary difference between a performance (as token of a performance-type) and a recording. There is no reason in principle why the performance-type cannot be instantiated by a recording.²⁰

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¹⁹ Davies, *Musical Works and Performances*, p. 307.

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