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The Spontaneous Wellsprings of Music

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Abstract: Western Classical Music has traditionally been described in terms of fixed structures, carefully built up by the composer and presented to the performer in the form of a score. This has crystallised over the centuries into an ideological position which, in the last analysis, gives absolute authority to the composer over the performer, severely limiting the freedom of expression of the latter. In this article I seek to reverse this position by pointing to the essential spontaneity, represented by improvisation, that lies at the heart of all music-making, albeit fiercely opposed by the fundamentalism of an endless number of structural theories.

Keywords: Improvisation, spontaneity, notation, ideology, Heidegger, scientism

In this article I use ontological inquiry¹ to observe the practice of spontaneous improvisation in the field of music. Spontaneous improvisation could be defined as that aspect of a musical process that does not proceed from consciously predetermined decisions. Because of its “non-formalistic and non-objectivist” nature, “improvisation has been neglected in musicology as well as in philosophy of music” (Bertinetto 2013, 83). I explore the hypothesis that research into practice of spontaneous improvisation can amount to a form of ontological research into classical music itself – with possible implications for teaching – as well as leading to a different understanding of the relationship between the role of the composer and that of the performer, as reflected by the musical score.

The relationship between the role of the composer and that of the performer has, at least since around 1800, generally been described in hierarchical terms, with the composer as the dominant figure or “genius” – the paradigmatic example being Beethoven – and with the score as his “bible.” This account was developed especially as a form of German cultural propaganda,² and involved retelling the history of music in terms of composers (usually German), along with a critical analysis of their scores, to the detriment of the performing traditions that had formed the backbone of musical life throughout Europe. This brought a growing tension between the status of the composer and that of the performer, which was bound to lead to the demise of improvisation as a practice. A renewed look at the ontology of improvisation may suggest that it is, perhaps, only with the creation of a space or “clearing”³ for conscious free play between composers, performers and listeners, not to mention teachers, that improvisation would again be able to reach its creative potential in the classical context and provide a bridge between the different perspectives of music.

¹ I am most grateful to Margarida Garcia for her creative support in introducing me to this project, and to her fellow editors Drew Kopp and Carolyne White. In this journey I acknowledge the influence of Lydia Goehr’s penetrating book *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (1992) along with that of a number of scholars who have engaged critically with her, such as Benson (2003), Backstrom (2013), and Bertinetto (2013). I have in the meantime engaged with the philosophy of A.N. Whitehead, as well as Karen Barad’s ‘Agential Realism’ (see Barad 2007).

² See for example Taruskin (1996) Introduction, p. 8f

³ A reference to Heidegger. Compare also “The Concept of Play” in Gadamer (2004, 102f).

Two perspectives: the relationship between Composition and Performance

A story from Plato's *Theaetetus*, quoted by Heidegger, describes how the philosopher Thales, while looking up to study the stars, fell into a well. A pretty maid laughed at him, saying that while he might want to know all things in the universe, he was blind to the things in front of his nose. Heidegger uses the story to point out that there is a form of knowledge which is not within the remit of science, and that "the knowledge for which our question strives is neither better nor worse but totally different" (Heidegger 1967, 3).

I would like to show how this dual nature of knowledge manifests in classical music in a very instructive way, but one which has tended to be concealed by the separation of the roles of the composer and the performer. Arguing from either side (composition or performance), the other can too easily be seen as belonging to the same single chain of cause and effect. I will suggest that neither side is reducible to the terms of the other, and that it is precisely this irreducibility which reflects the human reality of both "being a body and having a body" (see Wehrle 2019). This simultaneity of two different perceptions is obscured in daily life by our use of the same vocabulary for both; the same happens in the musical context, where a word like "rhythm" can refer equally to a notated rhythm or a performed rhythm, and these are far from being identical.

The curious phenomenon in classical music of a highly abstract form of musical notation, allied to a thoroughly concrete activity of physical performance, has given birth to endless forms of speculation about the "meaning" of music (see e.g. Chua 1999) and its relation to other more explicit aspects of culture. Music has also been a conscious tool over the centuries for various forms of indoctrination,⁴ as well as many kinds of intellectual warfare,⁵ and all too frequently there has been a failure to distinguish between what belongs to the written phenomenon and what belongs to the performance. Of course, like all cultural playgrounds, musical performance reflects a multitude of different motivations; thus, any attempt to decide on the nature of classical music will have to open itself to the contradictions inherent in a combination of hierarchical (top-down) and communal (bottom-up) approaches. The problem is that in the practice of Western classical music performers have traditionally been taught to identify with the aims of the composer, and discipline themselves and their bodies in order to deliver a "correct" account of the composer's wishes according to the written score.

We can observe this situation as a typical example of top-down accounts of identity formation, as described by Maren Wehrle. In her discussion of Judith Butler's theory of performativity (Wehrle 2020) she seeks to compare what she sees as top-down (Butler's) and bottom-up (phenomenological) accounts of identity formation,⁶ the latter aiming to describe how identity can be formed through bodily practices. She asserts that "this comparison could

⁴ An obvious example would be the French Revolutionary hymns by composers such as Cherubini, which also provided a model for the finale of Beethoven's ninth symphony.

⁵ Here one could mention the 'Querelle des Bouffons' between adherents of Rousseau and Rameau in the 1750s, or the many polemics around the music of Richard Wagner a century later.

⁶ Wehrle (2020) writes "with regard to Butler, one can speak of identity as identification with something (an already existing category of identity), thus in the sense of a group identity. This corresponds to the top-down approaches in the way I define them. In the second part, I refer to identity as a kind of individualisation (or typification). Here 'identity' means a stable and recognisable form, unity or constancy of behaviour, that is, a certain style of being in the world, which is formed through bodily practices and repetition. This corresponds to the bottom-up approach and the notion of the operative/living body" (1).

throw light on pre-linguistic forms of identity formation, and on how they might relate to and even found explicit forms of identification” (2). It is exactly those pre-linguistic forms which come into play in the context of improvisation, but which are in essence present in all forms of musical interpretation and performance. These accounts of identity formation are “directed at potentially constraining aspects of identity (i.e. forced identification with a pre-established identity category) and possibilities of resistance against it” (3). Such resistance might, indeed, be seen as an essential element in the variations introduced at any moment into a composition through the performer’s interpretation.

A different picture emerges in the purview of the bottom-up approach, which seeks to shed light on the bodily formation of identity: from this perspective “processes of incorporation, habitualization and typification enable an unanimous and meaningful experience, grant possibilities of action in the sense of a bodily ‘I-can’ and facilitate intersubjective interactions.” Wehrle continues:

It is crucial to understand that the body is more than “mere matter” or some “known concept,” but also is experienced as something material – the lived body. The moving, experiencing, and perceiving body or embodied subject is what is in constant interaction with the environment and others. In this relation, it develops a more or less flexible or persistent perceptual style and typical ways of inhabiting and comporting, what can be called, a habitual identity. (3)

But it is in the very nature of spontaneity that it cannot be grasped through a concept – and grasping is the prime function of a concept, as is suggested by the German equivalent *Begriff*, from *begreifen* = to grasp.⁷ Spontaneity implies movement, while the grasping nature of the concept implies fixity. Improvisation as I practise it is based on the simultaneous emergence of the thought process and its embodiment – indeed, it is impossible to separate them. These two ways of identifying with music, either spontaneously or through a composer’s score, can co-exist in the same performer, as I discovered for myself.

My Personal Discovery of the Spontaneous Wellsprings of Music

I began to play the piano at the age of four, when my father bought an old piano. I only started to receive lessons and read music two years later, by which time I had already created a personal relation to the physical reality of making sounds that pleased me, without any external interference. This kind of relation is more typical of other areas of music-making, ones that are less defined by the kind of authoritarianism associated with the teaching of classical music. At all events, in parallel with the demands and suggestions of my later teachers, from that time on I never ceased to search for and develop my own understanding of music by the use of free improvisation.

I had a very active musical life as a chorister at Canterbury Cathedral, and later as a music scholar at the neighbouring King’s School. My colleagues of that period remember me

⁷ See e.g. Bergamo, M. (1999). *Musik als Gestalt der begrifflosen Erkenntnis*; for Heidegger and concepts, see Dahlstrom, D. (1994). *Heidegger’s Method: Philosophical Concepts as Formal Indications*.

especially for my improvisations, but it took twenty years for me to discover and take seriously the different sound quality of my improvising (which was, perhaps, closer to what my piano teachers had always been aiming for). There existed in me a disharmonious separation between what the body does of its own accord, and what the mind has been educated to consider as the correct way. This points to a possible reason why most pure improvisers cannot handle the pressures of the classical musical world, with its overriding obsession for “correctness,” as against spontaneity.

In the meantime I had studied at Cambridge in preparation for a career as a composer, and was intensely occupied with basic questions of how music relates to life, and how composition can be seen to contribute in an ethical sense. For me every question was a personal one: it made no sense to be taking in information that did not directly relate to my experience. In the summer of 1972, while I was working in London on a Hölderlin setting for choir and orchestra, I was confronted by a revelation which changed the course of my life. Standing on an abandoned hockey pitch in Hornsey, I experienced a fundamental sense of connection with Nature around me, by which I understood all barriers to be man-made; and this put me on a collision course with a society predicated on the patriarchal domination of nature.⁸ Some years later, on deciding to head for Southern Europe, I switched from composition to improvisation as my principal path of research, as I was forced to question both the efficacy of the written score as a tool, and its regimenting effect on the imagination.

A period in the 1990s, working with Sir John Eliot Gardiner on Mozart and Beethoven operas, gave me a chance to research Schiller, Hölderlin and Schelling; but it is only in the last five years, with the help of in-depth readings of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Whitehead, that as a PhD student I have felt comfortable in re-joining the academic world. Part of the difficulty subsists in the separation between musicology, as studied in university, and music as taught in the conservatory (my immediate context). Indeed, as I see it, the area of greatest difficulty for musicology has been precisely that of the lived body. All this is not helped by the fact that most classical performers, while fully aware of the role of the body, still tend to consider it as subordinate to the thinking of the composer. Why? What is it about classical music that lends itself to this authoritarian attitude?

Correctness and “Unconcealment” in Music

Heidegger has written at length about two different conceptions of truth: truth as “correctness,” and truth as “unconcealment.”⁹ The first implies a rational exercise of judgment, and will tend to limit the area of concern to external factors. “Correctness,” in fact, implies measurement. In musical terms the concept of correctness can be seen to lead automatically in the direction of notation, as the preferred form of arriving at a “definite” conclusion. That which is written then becomes the locus of the “truth,” even when something in our musical experience hints to us that this is not a totally acceptable state of affairs. Truth as “unconcealment,” on the other hand, suggests a very different kind of judgement, one that is never definitive, but which operates on the interface of the known and the intimated or felt “unknown.” This is the natural area in which improvisation can operate, as a process which blends thinking-in-activity with bodily receptivity and release from

⁸ Such an encounter beyond the Cartesian subject/object paradigm may, indeed, be crucial for all of us if we are to survive the ongoing destruction of the planet.

⁹ See for example Heidegger (1994), *Basic Questions of Philosophy*. Compare Whitehead (1941): “the final outlook of Philosophic thought cannot be based upon the exact statements which form the basis of special sciences. The exactness is a fake” (700).

control (I associate this process with Heidegger's term *Ereignis*, usually translated as "event" or "appropriation"¹⁰). Beginning with this distinction between truth as correctness and truth as unconcealment, one can start also, in the context of written compositions, to identify essential differences between the merely "correct" reproduction of a musical score and genuine interpretation, not as an intellectual question but as a physical one. All of this implies that we can have access to a kind of "knowledge" which is not accessible by the same door as our logical thought processes, but which is, nevertheless, a permanent part of our experience. Spontaneous improvisation highlights the necessities of the known and the abyss of the unknown, and offers "the particularity of a given situation" (Merleau-Ponty)¹¹ for them to be simultaneously confronted and articulated.

In his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), Schiller discusses this question of the known and the unknown. His concern is to identify a psychological process midway between thought and sensation:

Man cannot pass directly from sensation to thought; he must take a step backward,... he must in a certain fashion return to that negative condition of sheer indeterminacy in which he existed before anything at all made an impression upon his senses. But that condition was completely devoid of content, and it is now a question of reconciling an equal indeterminacy and an equally unlimited determinability with the greatest possible degree of content, since something positive is to result directly from this condition. The determination which he received by means of sensation must therefore be preserved, because he must not lose hold of reality; but at the same time it must, in so far as it is a limitation, be removed, because an unlimited determinability is to make its appearance. (Quoted in Jung *Psychological Types* 116)

Indeterminacy and unlimited determinability would be a very suitable way to describe the basic operations of spontaneous improvisation, which is the necessarily irrational play between the previously undetermined or unconscious musical material and the process of determination. A related idea was expressed at the time by Friedrich Schlegel: "It's equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two" (Schlegel 1991, 24). So what can this teach us, not just about improvisation, but also about musical relations in general? The underlying question in all of this, that needs to be reflected in the teaching of music, is that of relationship: do teachers keep their pupils constrained within the imperative of 'correctness,' or do they release them into a space of 'unconcealment'? Are composers capable of releasing 'their' performers and listeners in this same sense? Is the score the closing or the opening of a space? These questions will be explored in the sections that follow.

Authoritarianism and Spontaneity in Teaching Music

The two factors of authoritarianism and spontaneity may be correlated to two ways of thinking: a "scientific" way, based on measurement and prediction, on the one hand, and on the other an alternative understanding of reality which recognizes a space outside the

¹⁰ Hyde & Kopp (2019) refer to this idea of appropriation as "addressing the central paradox of the being-Being relationship: that human beings can attain ontological freedom only by recognizing and allowing their fundamental subservience to the play of Being" (531).

¹¹ Quoted in Daly, A. (2016) *Merleau-Ponty and The Ethics of Intersubjectivity* (293).

measurable and the predictable. The “positivist” paradigm has always tended to relegate genuine artistic practice to a lower level of importance, as redolent of a spontaneity that is irreconcilable with its terms. In fact, all scientific thinking, insofar as it proceeds from the point of view of control based on measurement, rather than simply observation, is likely to reinforce the top-down, authoritarian position, whether consciously or not, and in this sense can easily slip into the role of a substitute religion (that erstwhile area of ethical authority). But one could also argue that if positivistic science assumed the mantle of objective authority through its capacity to explain physical phenomena, then it was in the arts, and specifically music, that a parallel role was sought in subjective terms. This is surely the context in which the twin claims to “religious” authority, whether implicit or explicit, of Beethovenian absolute music and Wagnerian music drama, must be considered – claims which continue to form the background to much musicological discussion,¹² and to many questions about teaching practice as well. It is surely this sense of “religious” authority which has characterised so much teaching of classical music over the last two hundred years.

In previous centuries, before the founding of the Paris Conservatoire in 1795, there had simply not been the urgency either to educate on a large scale or to produce large numbers of musicians in a short space of time, as was the case in Revolutionary France. As Mollie Sands writes on the subject of teaching singing in the eighteenth century:

Much, then, was expected of an eighteenth century singing-master, but to compensate he had one advantage which a modern teacher might well envy him – Time. Quick results were neither expected nor desired. Pupils settled down to their training or their apprenticeship with no sense of hurry, no cramming. There was leisure to develop the voice slowly. (Sands 1943, 15)

This description is reflective of an entirely different tradition of education than the blanket application of propositional rules using the score as a final authority, which came to be the norm for a certain breed of piano teacher, for example. In this last scenario, whatever the motivation, all thought of spontaneity was banished in conformity with a kind of positivistic and scientific fundamentalism, in which the piano pupil had to be subjected to humiliation, if only in order to maintain the teacher’s self-status.¹³ In the eighteenth century, by contrast, there was a greater possibility of absorption through practical apprenticeship.

Authoritarianism and Spontaneity in Music-making

It seems clear that spontaneous improvisation, issuing, as I argue, from the lived body, represents a bottom-up, anti-authoritarian approach to music-making, but what may not be so clear is its intimate connection with its opposite – the authoritative musical score. Likewise the phenomenon of the score is necessarily bound up, however unconsciously, with the possibility of spontaneous *interpretation*, no matter how much the music teacher or prospective composer may wish to exert an absolute authority. The problem is one of consciousness and motivation, and, insofar as music continues to be viewed through the authoritarian lens of the teacher or the composer, the practice of spontaneous improvisation will probably have no organic part to play, except as the faint echo of a forgotten possibility.

¹² See Bowie, A. (2003) *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, and Chua D. (1999) *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning*.

¹³ See Chmurzynska, M. (2012) “How (not) to Discourage Youngsters from Playing the Piano.” *On Bad and Good Piano Teaching*.

Along with this has been the misreading of scores as intellectual products, only tangentially connected to physical questions. The title of Nicholas Cook's fascinating book *Beyond The Score* (2013) is an excellent example in that it implies already, as a point of departure, that the score comes *by definition* before anything else. The declared desire to go beyond the score is wholly laudable, but the musicological assumption of the *a priori* nature of the score *in all cases*, while both understandable and practical, betrays immediately a deep bias against the role of the body on the part of traditional musicology.¹⁴ The search, on the other hand, by contemporary composers for a given "sound universe" might appear to be a decisive move on their part away from the priority of the score in favour of the performance, but this is just as likely in reality to call into question the fundamental nature of the composer's relation to the performer. Is the performer simply standing in for the composer, or are they being invited to participate as an autonomous member of a group of free co-creators? All this should help any composer or performer who needs reminding that scores stand for processes that go far beyond them in multiple ways, and that all the real processes in music may more fruitfully be recognised in terms of the entangled 'agential' relationships implicit in performance, rather than in the terms of the fixed score-object.

The practice of a bottom-up approach of being-in-the-world so as to rediscover a deep and unbroken continuity between each other and the environment would allow musical creation to take on a very different meaning of its own accord, as a part of the natural flow of life. In this latter context improvisation could occur spontaneously, out of a different relation to the area loosely referred to as "the body." The problem, though, is that we do not (yet) have an adequate language to delineate this area between the "mind" and the "body."

This is probably why musicians have so much difficulty describing, even to themselves, what is actually going on in their moments of performance. The tendency in the past has been to accept the separation of the composer from the performer, and consequently the need for two different languages to describe what is going on. This is precisely where spontaneous improvisation can provide a field of research, as it is based on the simultaneous emergence of the thought process and its embodiment. Any explanation of the musical process that does not take this into account is incomplete – and that has been the problem until now with most descriptions of improvisation. It is in the light of these two simultaneous perspectives on music, then, that the question of improvisation can take on a different form.

An Ontology of Musical Performance?

Reflecting on the nature of spontaneous improvisation can give us important clues about performance which are not entirely clear when it comes to the traditional composer/performer relation. Ultimately, the demand for absolute loyalty to the indications of the score is the result of that attitude to truth as "correctness" discussed earlier. It is extremely easy for a composer, performer, or teacher, faced with all the technical requirements of the score, to become over-obsessed with "correctness," and thus to lose sight of the much deeper truth of "unconcealment" that they may very well be aiming for in their heart of hearts. This is where a "surgical" attitude to musical questions can be hopelessly misleading. The composer may very naturally hope that their music will be performed with 100% accuracy, given the extreme care with which they may choose their notes and rhythms and dynamic indications, for example. But an audience will very likely be looking for a revelation of a kind that

¹⁴ I consider this bias to be the inevitable result of the Cartesian/Newtonian world-view, which imposes a mechanical approach on our mapping of time and space. See Barad (2007).

“unconcealment,” rather than only what “correctness,” only can bring. This is where critics, too, can easily find themselves misjudging the situation, if they are intent on applying too analytical an approach, rather than letting the performance speak to them as it unfolds.

The performer’s point of view is, and should be, entirely different from that of the composer: their task is not to reproduce but to make active sense of the music as far as they can; and this will involve adjustments or refinements to what has been written. The idea that performers are duty bound under all circumstances to “obey” the instructions of the composer is simply not tenable. A performance is a negotiation, a form of “homeostasis” that involves all the “particularity of a given situation,” as Merleau-Ponty writes.¹⁵ The performer, just as much as the improviser, must arrive at their own conclusions at any given moment as to what is needed. Each of these decisions may be infinitesimally small, but they must be made by the performer, and of their own free will, otherwise they cannot serve the purpose of the music. All of this requires of the performer a certain kind of integrity which is more than blind obedience to the wishes of the composer, and this may very well be something that the composer can find hard to accept, even when it is in their own interest. The performer is, or should be, involved in an even more rigorous sense of time than that of the composer, however attentive to detail the latter may be in their score; this sense of time, which is different not only for each person but also for each instrument, will be ignored in “reproduction” mode, but forms the basis of all real interpretation. The problem is that the writing and learning of scores in isolation has permitted the maintenance of an illusion, arising from the international style of musical writing of the classical period, that music is a universal language, equal for every instrument; whereas the truth is that this was the pursuit of a certain ideal rather than a reality. Music is, in practice, and always has been, very far from its written form.

In conclusion, to admit the possibility of spontaneous improvisation as a fully legitimate form of artistic practice as research, in the context of classical music studies, would be a step in the direction of creating the aforementioned creative space for free play, and allowing for a cross-fertilization between various specialist areas. This could liberate both student composers and performers, breaking down walls between the study of early music, contemporary music, and all that lies between, and if it were taken seriously enough could also breed new kinds of critical listeners and encourage new directions in musicology. By assuming the roles of composer and of performer simultaneously, the practice of improvisation can uncover the need for a different understanding of the constitution of classical music, one that can eventually also shift the ground between the university and the conservatory. The power of music could lie in its capacity to release our consciousness from a historical ‘imprisonment’ of individual identification, by deconstructing the division between the most personal and intimate, and the communal. By doing so it may inspire us to engage more deeply with our lives and life around us, as a totality.

An ontological approach to music education and practice could, then, constitute a provocative invitation to think about music in a much larger creative context, that would engage with our primary conceptual assumptions about dualities such as time/space and mind/body, and demand of us a more radical commitment to our experience.

¹⁵ See note 9 above.

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Nicholas McNair was head chorister at Canterbury Cathedral at the age of 13, later studying composition and piano at Cambridge University and then at the Royal College of Music. He gave his first recital of improvisation in 1979, and in 1987 joined the Escola Superior de Música de Lisboa in Portugal, from which he has recently retired. He worked in the 1990s as an editor for Sir John Eliot Gardiner, collaborating also in contemporary opera productions, music for silent films, and as organist and pianist with the Gulbenkian Choir and Orchestra. He is presently preparing to defend his doctoral thesis on improvisation.

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