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## Response to “Spontaneous Wellsprings of Music” by Nicholas McNair

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## Response to “Spontaneous Wellsprings of Music” by Nicholas McNair

Michael Hamman, Independent Scholar; Founder, Evolvagility

It was a delight to read “The spontaneous wellsprings of music” by Nicholas McNair. In this response to the paper, I want to (very briefly) respond to the personal (subjective) experience it elicited in me; its contribution to *ontological inquiry*, to the degree that I myself am able to speak to that; and its inherent understanding of the subject matter to which it applies itself—in this case music.

It seems important to say that I myself was a conservatory and university-trained composer and music theorist (having earned a Doctorate), and was professionally active as an independent scholar and a composer, from the late 1980s to the early 2000s. In 2004, I officially ‘retired’ from composition and scholarship, moving into the field of consulting, coaching, and training which remains my current area of occupation.

So on to my reflections....

First.... As I read the article, I found myself drawn into my own ontological inquiry: who I was (and, perhaps, still am) as a composer and the fact that improvisation was such a big part of my early experiences as a composer. The paper further evoked in me a personal (subjective, phenomenological) examination of the relationship between ‘hierarchical’ ways of knowing and acting—ways of knowing which assert a world that is inherently ‘knowable’ and ‘graspable’—versus ‘emergent’ ways of knowing and acting—ways which understand the world as that which self-creates from a grounded ‘nothingness’, in which our response to things constitutes the world as much as that to which we respond. I found myself reflecting on where in my own life I tend to conflate the two; where in my life I get seduced by the ‘soundness’ of the hierarchical perspective; and where I want to shun that perspective, to avoid its domination.

As I continued to read the article, this personal experience expanded into the musical realm for me. I could see how, for much of my life as a composer and a musician, the ‘score’ was king and how classical performance was all about getting to the ‘right’ interpretation. And yet, the article also helped me to see an inherent contradiction.

On one side of the contradiction lies the sheer volume of performances and recordings of any given musical ‘text’, pointing directly to the essentially *hermeneutic* nature of musical performance. At some point, we want to hear a something different from a performance of Mahler’s Ninth; something that stretches our hearing, that challenges its all-too-familiar turns. On the other side of the contradiction lies the fact that the closer I get to a piece via the score, the more strangely distant its musical essence. Heidegger’s sentences which point to the ever-disappearing horizon of Being become a palpable experience at such moments.

The wonderful distinguishing of the different realms of performance that unfolds in the article brought this dichotomy to the foreground, in my personal reflections as both an improviser and a composer of scores. Incidentally, as I write this, I am listening to a remarkable

recording of the music of medieval composer, Guillaume Machaut, by the performing group Organum, led by Marcel Perez—performances which deviate significantly from traditional performances in its incorporation of improvisation and rhythmic fluidity. Again, the notion of a musical text as a fixed thing comes to be seriously questioned, opening a domain in which performance comes to meet composition in beautifully complex ways. I find myself coming back to Mahler, and the ways in which by following minutely the specificity of his score, one can still find a multiplicity of possible interpretations, one can arrive at something like indeterminacy by dint of apparent determinacy.

So, in dwelling in the thought spawned by this article, I find myself in this very moment present to music as, indeed, a site for the possibility of the presencing of Being. A kind of shimmering effect in which the “Classic” music which was my training ground comes to be rediscoverable again. As though I know nothing at all about music.

McNair’s profound understanding of some of the deep questions that arise within musicology and music performance practice, as reflected in this article, enrich this effect for me, turning my own relationship to those myriad musical discourses away from and back toward me.

I want to thank Nicholas for an incredibly rich experience—a new opening for me as I inquire into how I might begin to integrate my ‘previous’ life’s work with what I’m doing now.

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**Michael Hamman** is dedicated to the possibility that the workplace be a site for personal, professional and social transformation. Trained in the 1980s in ontologically oriented methods of coaching and large group facilitation, as well as music composition, computer science and philosophy, Michael went on to train in systems thinking and methods, group dynamics and facilitation, professional and executive coaching, and in human and organization development. He is a decades-long student of the nature of human transformation, both in himself and in others. His book, *Evolvagility: Growing an Agile Leadership Culture from the Inside Out* integrates this rich and varied background and experience, and provides a blueprint for what it means to lead in today’s complex world.