

Authentic Performances of Musical Works

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RESUMEN

Idealmente, las realizaciones auténticas de las obras musicales ejecutan las prescripciones que constituyen la identidad de la obra que ha dado a conocer el autor, usualmente en la partitura. El ejecutante tiene que entender las convenciones para recuperar las instrucciones a partir de la notación, y ser capaz de ejecutarlas en los instrumentos apropiados. Rechazo una alternativa que ve la autenticidad como la aspiración a recrear bajo condiciones modernas los efectos estéticos que, originalmente, intentaba lograr el compositor. La autenticidad es un valor de la ejecución, puesto que es importante producir la obra que se tiene como objetivo, pero su valor no es incondicionado. Alguna parte puede sacrificarse por razones prácticas, pero sólo algunas veces está justificada la inautenticidad deliberada por mor de la variedad interpretacional.

Palabras clave: *obra musical, autenticidad, ejecución, partitura, interpretación.*

ABSTRACT

Ideally authentic performances of musical works execute the work-identifying prescriptions issued by the composer, usually in scores. The performer must understand the conventions for recovering the instructions from the notation and be able to perform on appropriate instruments. I reject an alternative that sees authenticity as aiming to recreate under modern conditions aesthetic effects originally intended by the composer. Authenticity is a performance value because is important to delivering the target work, but its value is not overriding. Some authenticity can be sacrificed for practical reasons, but only rarely is deliberate inauthenticity justified for the sake of interpretational variety.

KEYWORDS: *Musical Work, Authenticity, Performance, Score, Interpretation*

In the sense of the term I will discuss, “authentic” means “faithful”, “accurate”, or “genuine”. It expresses the relationship in which one thing stands to another. “His action was an authentic expression of his character”. “This painting is an authentic Picasso”. In this discussion, my concern is to

analyze what is involved in the authentic performance of (pre-composed) musical works and the value associated with such performances.

For clarity, it should be noted both that not all musical performances are of works – for example, a performance might be freely improvised – and that not all musical works are for performance – for instance, an electronic composition is issued on disk or as a computer file and is for playback rather than for performance. But many works are composed for performance and may be performed on multiple occasions and at multiple sites.

For such works, the composer issues some kind of instruction addressed to potential performers about what they are to do and this instruction has the illocutionary force of “if you would perform my work, do/make/achieve this”. It could be that the composer specifies his work through an exemplary performance. Others then are invited to emulate the work-identifying features of the work in their performances. To do so, they must understand the composer’s work-defining intentions or the nature of such works as established, say, within a genre or tradition. This is because they must sort the work-identifying features of the exemplary performance from those of its aspects that are open to variable interpretation. Alternatively, the composer might teach each musician his part in a direct, hands-on fashion, and those who have learned the work perpetuate it by teaching others in a similar way. This is how Balinese musical compositions are taught and transmitted, for example, and the procedure is common among non-literate performers of popular Western music. In the classical Western tradition, a more familiar case is that in which the composer writes a musical score and authorizes it for distribution to performers. It is such notationally recorded musical works on which I focus in the following.

I. THE AUTHENTIC PERFORMANCE OF PRE-COMPOSED, NOTATIONALLY SPECIFIED MUSICAL WORKS

The notation supplied by the composer does not instruct the musician on how to construct her instrument or on how to play it, unless something out of the ordinary is asked for (as in John Cage’s pieces for modified piano). The composer presumes that the musician has an instrument of the specified type and that she can play it. Typically, the composer’s instructions indicate what is to be achieved, rather than the specific method for doing this.

The default assumption is that the composer accurately records his intentions via the notation and that subsequent editors, copyist, and printers do not obscure or distort these. Of course, error could be introduced at any stage in the process between composition and delivery of the score to the musician, and there are many instances of slips of the pen, misprints, and other sole-

cisms, but in general musicians are entitled to trust to the accuracy of the scores or printed parts from which they read.

This is not to say, however, that an accurate score is thereby transparent to the musical content it designates. There are conventions for writing/reading musical notations and the musician must share knowledge of these with the composer if she is to recover his instructions from the written music. For instance, she must know that the sharps and flats of the key signature apply throughout unless the key changes or they are cancelled and she must be aware that an accidental applies to all notes of the same pitch within a measure, though it is written only for the first note. She must know that a dot above or below a note means that its length is to be shortened. Of course, these conventions alter from time to time and place to place, so the musician needs to be aware of the score's provenance.

To complicate matters further, sometimes what is to be played is not notated at all. For example, the place for a cadenza might be marked by a pause, or perhaps it is understood that a melody is to be decorated when it is repeated. Sometimes what is notated is not what is to be sounded. For instance, the parts of "transposing instruments", such as the *cor anglais*, clarinet, and many brass instruments, indicate the note that is to be fingered rather than the pitch that sounds. And sometimes what is notated, rather than being work-specifying and thereby required, has the status merely of a recommendation about what should be done. This is the case with suggested fingerings and notated cadenzas.

Note that ambiguity in the notation concerning matters that should be work-constitutive is problematic. In order to have something to play, the ambiguity must be resolved by some kind of editorial decision. But observe also that indeterminacy in the notation is not at all problematic where it specifies indeterminacy in the work itself. For example, in Baroque music with a figured bass, the bass line is indicated along with the chord sequence, but the player fills out the middle parts. A work indicated in this fashion does have middle parts consistent with the chordal framework, but any stylistically appropriate realization of those middle parts counts as an accurate rendition of the piece. Similarly, it may be required that the melody be decorated, but with no specific decoration notated. Again, the performer makes up the decoration and, provided the decorations are stylistically appropriate, the adoption of different sets of decorations in different performances will be consistent with the work's accurate rendition.

As this indicates, notations taken in conjunction with assumed performance practices can specify more or less detail as work-constitutive. One work might call for a specific instrumentation where another does not. A faithful realization of the first work requires the use of instruments of the kinds indicated, whereas for the second, the choice of instrumentation is left to the performer and counts toward her interpretation of the work. The fewer of a

performance's details that belong to the work, the *thinner* the work; the more that the performance's details are attributable to the work and not (or not only) to the performer's interpretation, the *thicker* the work. To generalize, musical works in the Western classical tradition have tended to become thicker over time. Baroque music, for example, often leaves dynamics, phrasing, decoration, and instrumentation to the performer's discretion, whereas in a score by Mahler, these and many other features will be indicated and are to be treated as work-determinative. Performances are always much richer in properties than the works they instance, even in the case of thick works, which is to say that many differences in interpretation remain open even where all the work-determinative instructions are respected and met. In other words, accuracy in the rendition of any work is consistent with a variety of interpretations of that work.

In my account, an ideally authentic performance is one that faithfully realizes all the composer's work-specifying instructions. Potentially, there are many ideally authentic performances of any work. To the extent that a performance deviates from the composer's work-identifying instructions, it is less than ideally authentic. For example, a performance in which a definitively specified note is played wrongly is less than ideally authentic. Obviously, authenticity admits of degrees. A work may remain recognizable in a performance that is far from ideally authentic, and such a performance is minimally authentic to the extent that it succeeds in indicating the work it is of. Where the point of a performance is to instance a pre-composed work (and especially where the performance is represented to a public as doing this), the performer should attempt to achieve a high degree of authenticity. That is, she should attempt to present the work accurately, which involves aiming at something well above minimal authenticity. To the extent that we are interested in performances for the works they instance (as well as for their virtuosity, interpretative interest, etc.), the pursuit of authenticity is a requirement, not merely an interpretative option. This is why I prefer to talk of authentic performance rather than to adopt terminologies such as "historically informed performance", which imply that authenticity is one among many different options open to the performer. It follows that, other things being equal, high authenticity will be a value in a performance. But there are other performance values and it remains to consider whether authenticity trumps these, as I discuss in the final section.

This account also makes clear what faithfulness in performance depends on and thereby presupposes: a musician with an appropriate instrument, with practical knowledge of how it is to be played, who can recover the composer's instructions from his score, who is familiar with all the performance practices and conventions presumed by the composer as known to the performer, and who is capable of idiomatically realizing the composer's instructions and of interpreting the piece in a stylistically appropriate fashion.

Because notations, instruments, the manner of playing them, and musical styles and conventions all have changed over time, the authentic performer must adjust her choice of instrument, her manner of playing, etc.. Her authentic performance ought to be one that the composer's musically experienced original audience would have recognized as such.

II OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

As is now clear, I am a literalist about authenticity in work performance. Not a literalist in the sense that I think scores are to be read naively as transparent to the works they specify, but a literalist in that I think authenticity is realized by locating and executing the composer's work-identifying performance instructions.

It might be objected that my account mistakenly focuses on the practical means adopted by the composer, when it should target the aesthetic ends he wanted those means to serve. The point is that, over time, these two might come apart and that, where this occurs, it is the ends rather than the means that should be the more important for the performer. Here are some examples. In the mid-eighteenth century, a composer might have written for the newly invented clarinet because he wished his music to sound exotic and strange, and he might have desired to make the music sound daring and provocative by leaving unresolved a major chord with an added sixth. Nowadays the clarinet is all too familiar and discords need to be much more extreme to be shocking. If the performer, wants the music to be experienced as the composer intended, it looks as if it would be a mistake blindly to follow his original instructions. Authenticity apparently requires something different.

I allow that, if we really could discover what the composer would want for the performance of his work now, that might be extremely interesting and worthwhile. But I reject the view that this provides a plausible account of what usually is meant by the phrase "authentic performance". Consider this actual case. Bruckner rewrote his early symphonies after their first publication and performance. For instance, in 1891 he recomposed his First Symphony of 1866. So, in 1891 we knew what he then wished for the performance of the 1866 symphony. On Kivy's account, a performance in 1891 of the 1891 version would result in an authentic performance of the 1866 composition, whereas an accurate performance in 1891 of the 1866 score would not result in an authentic performance of the 1866 work. This strikes me as an absurd result. Rather than accepting Kivy's account of authenticity, we should rather say that the symphony exists in two versions and that either might be played authentically by following the score that specifies it. Indeed, playing both versions side by side in 1891 would have brought out their differences, provided each performance was authentic in my terms, that

is, an accurate musical account of what Bruckner instructed in the scores of the two versions of his First Symphony.

In addition, there are difficulties in working out what composers would prefer. Occasionally this is possible. For example, if a composer continues a sequential passage at the octave and this is plainly because of the limited range of the instrument available to him, it might be reasonable to avoid the jump and continue the sequence on a modern instrument with a wider pitch compass. But in general, it is hard to know how to answer the question about what the composer would want now without begging the question about what authenticity requires. It is almost always as plausible to think the composer would answer "I still want what I wrote when I composed the piece" than to assume he would want something different. Moreover, if the composer were to prefer the piece to be updated, it is not at all plain how or if one could do this. What sense would it make to add tone clusters to ramp up the dissonances if the melody is to be kept intact?

Finally, I would question the assumption that motivates the analysis, which is that today's audience cannot appreciate the intended aesthetic effect if the performer follows the original instructions. It seems to me that many listeners are at home with a variety of styles of music and that this is because they adjust their understanding of what is likely to happen and of its significance within the context of the work by relativizing their response to the conventions and practices of the appropriate genres. When I listen to jazz, I listen in terms of jazz-relevant conventions and practices for jazz-relevant effects; when I listen to rhythm and blues I adjust my expectations accordingly, as I do also when I listen to ragtime. And I do the same when hearing different periods and genres of classical music. I do not listen to Handel oratorios as I would listen to Verdi operas; I do not bring the expectations appropriate to the expressivism of early Schoenberg to bear on Medieval chant. If I am sufficiently immersed in the idiom, I will not only know that major thirds can function as discords in early chant, I will experience their dissonance.

This answer to the objection assumes that the listening of a modern audience to music from earlier times should be informed by familiarity with the conventions and practices of those prior eras, yet in fact many listeners may lack this expertise. In my view, this should not alter our analysis of authentic performance. If true, this explains, instead, why many listeners are not appropriately placed to judge the authenticity of performances of music from earlier periods and also why their appreciation of such music is likely to be absent or distorted. Nevertheless, many listeners can and do acquire the relevant knowledge and listening habits, not as a result of academic study but rather through exposure to satisfactory performances of the music in question. Indeed, this fact provides a further reason for the pursuit of authenticity in performance as I have described it: the modern audience may form inappro-

priate expectations of music from earlier times if the performances they most often hear are warped by their lack of authenticity.

III. THE VALUE OF AUTHENTICITY

I have argued that, all being equal, a performance is better for being more authentic. Things often are not all equal, however. For instance, the work might call for a serpent and ophicleide where none are now available or there is no one to play them. Or, if all the notated repeats are played, the performance might become too tiresome for today's audience. Or it might be difficult to obtain catgut for the strings. And so on. And surely it is better that early eighteenth century operas are performed with women singing some of the roles than never to play them for the want of a good castrato.

There often are good practical reasons for sacrificing some authenticity in order to make performance possible at all or in order to attain a sufficiently high standard of performance. Indeed, authenticity might reasonably be compromised merely for the sake of convenience: using a modern pianoforte for Beethoven sonatas or valved horns in Schubert symphonies, for instance. As long as we are clear what is being done and why, I see no reason to complain about such practices. What is objectionable, though, is trying to represent such alterations as genuinely authentic or as somehow respecting the spirit, if not the letter, of authenticity. All that is necessary in justifying such approaches is to note that authenticity is not the only performance virtue and that it is not an overriding performance virtue.

I would be more concerned, however, if it were suggested that departures from authenticity could be justified for the sake of interpretational novelty or variety. As I have already noted, the pursuit of authenticity is not at all opposed to the pursuit of interpretational variety. Admittedly, the performer should aim to produce an interesting interpretation and if the audience is already likely to be very familiar with many interpretations of a given piece, this licenses her to seek a more unusual or eccentric account of it. But what is unusual or eccentric need not thereby be unauthentic. Besides, any interpretation that advertises itself as an interpretation of a given work should be committed to delivering that work as it is. I do not interpret Beethoven's Hammerklavier if my playing systematically ignores many of that work's defining features. So, where the interpretation is supposed to be interesting as an interpretation of the specified work, deliberate and extended departures from authenticity under conditions in which authentic playing is within the musician's scope must be self-undermining.

This is not to say that musical works can never be appropriated and altered. This happens regularly in movies and commercials. But in them, the aim is not to deliver the composer's work for contemplation, of course. Nor

would I deny that, even in the concert setting, works may be treated with great freedom, perhaps to the point of being transformed almost out of recognition. This is done frequently enough with Shakespeare's plays and some well-known operas. But two points are relevant to this kind of case. What is done should be advertised as such. The work is "updated", "seen through a modern lens", "recontextualized", or whatever. It would be misleading to represent the goal as the faithful presentation of the work as conceived by its creator. Second, the activity can make its points only because it builds on and presumes an established, more conservative tradition of performing the work in question. This radical approach to work performance presupposes a valuing of authentic renditions even as it attempts to transcend them.

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