

Notional Improvisation: Intellect, Intuition And Instinct

This is a slightly different title to that listed in the conference details ('Improvisation in the Performance of Notated Music') which, on reflection, more appropriately anticipates my paper's thesis. Being in the company of a large gathering of (reasonably) like minded people has a mysterious effect on the way that you think, like it or not – and this influence can operate even before you've heard anyone's presentation. So that in the real time of reading my paper, in the first set of parallel sessions, I had parallel thoughts, realising that my ideas needed a degree of requalification. The small audience in Lecture Room 2 that evening, possibly out of good nature and maybe tiredness from the remembered noise and stress of their recent journeying to the place, questioned me only briefly. One person challenged me about a reference to Blake and another paid me the compliment (I think) of saying that my performance of Denisov's Clarinet Sonata seemed to last for three minutes rather than the nine minutes of actual time. (Another said: 'Yes, it really was nine minutes'.) That was it, fortunately. But I have two questions for myself that I will now ask and endeavour to answer.

(i) Question: 'What, if anything, was instinctual about your performance?'

Answer: 'I didn't expect the hum of the air conditioning and I didn't anticipate the effect of its coolness and dryness; and I didn't bargain for an acoustic that wasn't entirely sympathetic. The hum, though, was strangely welcome; it was a backcloth to my particular interruption of this place's soundscape and partly made up for the lack of acoustic warmth. The lack of actual warmth, though, was a problem. A unifying characteristic of the first movement is the way the melodic line is coloured by trills and tremolandi. In rehearsal I had settled on a particular speed for these ornaments. When the first one came along my fingers were so cold that I couldn't achieve this speed. In response I slowed all of them. A reflex action, almost, that enabled me at least partly to preserve the movement's integrity in the way that I'd originally conceived.'

(ii) Question: 'You seem to argue that performance in general is significantly instinctive, but surely you can't mean that? What about the early stages of learning a piece? What about those performers who intellectually analyse the music, or who analyse its recorded history as a prelude or parallel activity to learning it? What about so called 'deliberate practice'?'

Answer: 'In this case the act of performance is largely, though not of course entirely, instinctual. I learnt to play this piece about twenty years ago and since then have performed it on half a dozen or so occasions, each separated by a number of years. I can't remember any of the details of learning it, though I suspect that some form of 'deliberate practice' went on. But however the means to perform it got there in the first place, knowledge of the piece is now principally embodied. It has now transcended – or more prosaically escaped – the intellect, thank goodness. At this stage, practising it involves private performance in which I start at the beginning and play through to the end – as if the act was witnessed by an imaginary audience as complete performance. In this ritualistic enactment it is the body, and not the mind, that is principally identified with the performance. To summarise, then, intellect, intuition and instinct operate simultaneously in the performer's developing conception of a piece but as this knowledge substantiates, instinctual actions and responses dominate.'

The ideas that I present here, about the relationship between improvisation and the performance of notated music, were inspired by the philosophy and performances of the 'The Bricoleurs' – a collaborative improvising group of four performance-makers whose solo performances are enacted on a bare stage, unscripted, without props, without instruments, using only invented movement and narrative. For the observer of these performances it seems that any instant balances precariously on a spur-of-the-moment conceived complex of words and gestures. To me the experience revealed something about performance in general that is at the same time obvious and covert – that is, whatever the constraints, performers inhabit continually a temporal and physical space of multiple possibilities.

The usual sense of improvisation, at least in Western civilisation, pertains to jazz and other musics in which notation has no fundamental part to play in its dissemination. But as Derek Bailey tells us, '[t]he word improvisation is actually very little used by improvising musicians. Idiomatic improvisers, in describing what they do, use the name of the idiom. They 'play flamenco' or 'play jazz'; some refer to what they do as just playing' (Bailey, p5). In some ways it is peculiar that we use the verb 'to play', resonant of childhood and ordinarily implying that which is free of fear, for something that is so often strongly associated with anxiety. This, at least, is a view of musical performance taken by Jonathan Dunsby in his book 'Performing Music, Shared Concerns'. Anxiety is a state recognised by most of us who perform 'notated' music or who observe closely those who do. Dunsby's ineluctable idea that 'you can't please all the people all the time' – if indeed there are people there at all – is accompanied by the fear that once you've started playing a piece of music in the usual context of public performance, you can't really stop. Or worse, the fear that you'll have forgotten how to do it at all. And if you do remember how to do it you find that the first note sounds different because the audience affect the room's resonance; you become aware that the audience is attentive or not attentive. That which we might have conceived of as fixed and stable is in reality closer to the action of a games competitor where there is continual adaptation and response to that which is constantly changing. In this sense performance is improvised in a collective way. It combines the effect of the performance space, the complex of moods communicated consciously and unconsciously between and within performers and audience members: timings are stretched, contracted; dynamics are adjusted; even pitch – the single apparent constant in the transition from score to sound – is subject to alteration. There is a shared, undeclared manipulation of musical detail.

If we accept that there is a significant component of uncertainty and its psychological correlate – anxiety – bound up with the act of performance, then we might turn for enlightenment to the growing body of literature on musical performance. Unfortunately this doesn't always help, even though many who've written in this domain ritualistically disassociate themselves from the austere disembodied approach taken by Wallace Berry in his work of 1989 'Musical Structure and Performance'. Berry's analysis of Berg's Op5 – paradigmatic of his approach – has little to offer the budding clarinettist and is more likely to scare them off rather than tantalise with exciting possibilities.

So it's comforting that analysts tend to view Berry's language of imperatives as emphatically striking the wrong chord, and accept – indeed celebrate – that musicians who bypass intellectual scrutiny of their music may produce performances of real and substantial authority. A far more subtle obstacle

to spontaneous musical performance, though, can be found in a paper dating from 1989 by Schaffer and Todd. This is a fascinating piece and one of many written in the slipstream of Lerdahl and Jackendoff's 'Generative Theory of Tonal Music', a Chomsky- inspired system that mapped tonal forms onto syntactical hierarchical structures. Their theory is based on an analogy with the innateness of sentential construction and this is one of its principal attractions: we would all agree, I think, that we are moved by music long before we start talking about it.

In performance this hierarchical structure is mistily conveyed – consciously and unconsciously – by the performer's use of expressive timing. This idea led to a number of studies – including Schaffer and Todd's – that underline the remarkable facility of expert musicians to replicate the temporal profiles of their performances, even when these might be years apart. When I first read and understood this I was so enthralled by its mystery that I set out to demonstrate, with some success, that this embodied characteristic of memory transferred to non-tonal music.

While Schaffer and Todd's research has undoubted psychological significance, it also diverts attention from the essentially musical property that successive performances of a piece, whether or not given by the same musicians, mutate and transform. The unfortunate corollary of expert performance characterised by consistent temporal profiles is that if it doesn't exhibit this property then it's not up to scratch. The one thing a performer desires, I think, is for each performance to be different and for that performance to be uniquely associated with the performer. Joel Lester, writing in the seminal 1995 work 'The Practice of Performance' compares two performances of the minuet of Mozart's Sonata K.331 given by Lili Kraus and Vladimir Horowitz. The essential and fundamental difference in their performances rests on the way in which each negotiates a particular instant in the music's flow: while this fleeting complex of dynamics and articulation enacted on a temporal pinhead is musically perceptual, it would require an atomic clock to measure it. The performer's individualising of a piece in this way is quite properly an act of improvisation.

And this brings me back to Wallace Berry. Oddly perhaps, if we were to change a word or two, Berry's exigent stance comes very close to fundamentally visceral realities of musical performance. He writes, almost as a *cri de coeur*, that '[t]he purely spontaneous, unknowing and unquestioned impulse is not enough to inspire convincing performance' (p217-8). It may not be enough, but it's very nearly enough – at least in my view. That is, however much performers intellectualise about what they do, performance emanates dominantly from something that is partly intuitive but dominantly instinctual.

For I would argue that our response to music, in the broadest sense, is affected by a complex of experiences that, quite decidedly, are 'unknown'; and that in performance (and I include rehearsal as prototypical performance) we make musical decisions in the evanescent flow of time 'impulsively'; and that vital musical performance is above all else characterised by apparent spontaneity. For these purposes 'impulse' has a particularly useful meaning in the context of Freudian psychoanalysis. Charles Rycroft wrote that: 'instinctual impulses are ... conceived to pass from some point in the id along channels leading into the ego, where they are ... discharged in action' (p78-9). In other words the root cause of our physical response to music, either as listeners or producers, exists in the invisible space of our imagination, that psychic realm of primary process that characterises the dream world.

Edison Denisov, whose Sonate for unaccompanied clarinet I will play soon as conclusion to this talk, said something similar to this when articulating his own experience of composition: 'During the compositional process, different layers of human consciousness are at work simultaneously and the function of subconscious processes is immensely increased. Something which seems to us not to be participating in the present work of our conscious mind – indeed, to be completely removed from it – exists in the unconscious and follows its own proper course of evolution, being transmuted from a misty shapelessness to a precise form' Tempo (1973) no 105, p5. And Blake gives us the apotheosis: 'Energy is the only life and is from the body; and reason is the bound and outward circumference of energy' (quoted in Rycroft Dictionary p47)

I turn now to Denisov's Sonate. This is about nine minutes long and in two movements; the first is slow and the second fast. This is the transition between movements.

Play the last line of the first movement and first line of the second.

I have a purely physical metaphor for this piece. If you compress a spring you give to it a form of energy – correctly it's called elastic potential energy. When the spring is released this potential energy changes into something else – kinetic energy, the energy of movement. One action puts the system into a state of potential which becomes the cause of movement. I think of the narrative content of the first movement as compressive: its sustained, slowly unfolding phrases and deployment of quarter tones suggest a forcing action. This compression is explosively released in the sudden rapid action of the second movement.

The image isn't hard and fast and characteristics of the two movements are juxtaposed. For instance the fast movement is punctuated by a driving, irregular collection of phrases. Like this:

Play second movement line 7

It is as if the movement is re-charging itself.

And the first movement's climax is articulated by a relatively quick upward phrase.

Play first movement second page lines 3 and 4.

It is as if some transformation of energy is necessary as prelude to the movement's highest and loudest note.

I don't think about these images and ideas when playing the piece. Instead such conceptions belong to that time of silent, non-active contemplation; an enactment of a soundless imagined performance that, because usual constraints are absent, is freed from the set of preoccupations that weigh on you when in physical contact with the instrument. The energy metaphor that I've used – like an overarching and unifying symbol – drives this artefact.

If the potential energy/kinetic energy metaphor tries to say something about the overall form of the music, other musings dealt with issues at a more immediate level. For instance I was unsure how to negotiate the initial two sub-phrases. The first is an arch-shaped motive, followed after a rest by the second – similarly shaped but with a quarter-tone interval within its descent. This second sub-phrase

is completed by an adjoined hook-like motive, paradoxically at once continuous and discontinuous. This description translates into sound as follows:

Play the first line of the first movement.

These characteristics – semitone motives transformed into quarter –tone intervals, and contrasting natures within a single phrase – set the scene for this piece. Specifically the problem lay in achieving a balanced delineation of these characteristics while at the same time preserving a natural rhythmic flow. It seemed inappropriate to play it like this:

Play again the first line of the first movement but with second phrase running into hook-like motive.

-where the second sub-phrase runs into the hook motive. My solution was to introduce a quantum-like interval before the hook. Like this:

Play normally the first line.

I remember feeling reasonably satisfied with this provisional solution and, through repeated practice – uninterrupted by rational assessment – conceptual knowledge transformed to embodied knowledge. Two things happened as by-products. First, the quantum-interval strategy that I'd applied to an instant in the first line of the piece became naturally manifest elsewhere. For instance here:

Play the phrase beginning half-way through the second line of the first movement.

And here:

Play the sub-phrase at the top of p7. And then explain.

Secondly, the quantum idea itself became subject to transformation. The initial problem of delineation was additionally solved, I think, by minute adjustments of dynamics and articulation. In retrospect the initial strategy merely provided a space for other possibilities.

In conclusion I conceive of improvisation in notated music as the performer's means of drawing ever closer to an imagined, temporarily idealised, performance. Because the imagined performance is inhabited by infinite possibilities this constitutes a musical idea. The desired effect is to create the illusion that the performer is making it up as s/he goes along – an act that is deliberate yet spontaneous. And such an attitude both mitigates the effects of anxiety and defines the performer's relationship to the composer. Authenticity resides in this.

When it comes down to it, though, these intellectual musings are subsumed by something much stronger and more instinctual. In the live, ritualised performance of notated music – when the symbol of the music rests on the stand in front of you – you are taken over by the direct connection between the body and the sound, with the score paradoxically essential yet subsumed into a margin of the experience. We expect the outcome to be at once controlled and capricious.

Now play the entire piece.

References

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