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Questions Not Answers: the Performer as Researcher

This essay considers the ‘research’ done by performers of Western classical music. The tasks and findings of the present-day player of written musical texts are related to Harold Bloom’s concept of ‘misreading,’ to Roland Barthes’ ideas regarding ‘readerly’ and ‘writerly’ texts, and ideas of Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault, and others. The authority of composers and their ‘ownership’ of musical texts are questioned. Included are examples of specific interactions between the author and texts by Robert Schumann, Ludwig van Beethoven, Frédéric Chopin, Johannes Brahms, Maurice Ravel, and others.

When the object that I incorporate is the speech of the other – precisely a nonobject, a pattern, a model – I bind myself to him in a primary fusion, communion, unification.

Julia Kristeva, Tales of Love (1982)

What does the performing musician do?

Is the player of prewritten musical texts ... an interpreter, or a reader? A psychic medium? A recreator? A steward? A shaman, priest, or preacher? An actor, or sleuth?

In the theater, in the performance of a new play, the actor who first plays a role is said to have ‘created’ the role. In Western classical music, can it be that performers have been overwhelmed by the authority of the genius/creator, the composer? The origins of that authority are traced by some to the Viennese classicists, especially to Beethoven. I imagine J.S. Bach might not have acknowledged such controlling power. (In my dreams, the pious and humble Bach says something like, ‘I do not create anything, God is the Creator!’) After all, the word ‘Komponist’ is a rather late addition to the vocabulary of musical possession. If composerly authority arose around 1800, perhaps it is in demise now, two hundred years later. I suggested as much to Philip Glass during a recent project we did in Princeton. Glass had said:

‘We end up as composers with a very strong conceptual idea about music.... But when we play music, other emotional centers are involved.... What the performer brings to the work ... may not come from the conceptual side, but may come from another part of our being.’

2 For example, Edward Said (by extension from Theodor Adorno) and Tia DeNora, see her Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792-1803, Berkeley 1995.
3 And I’m signifying Beethoven with a single word while using some additional letters for JSB. The whole matter is intricately connected to the understanding of music as a preservable act (or commodity) and the differentiation of ‘composers’ and ‘performers’. Also involved is the emergence of the concept of musical ‘works’. See Lydia Goehr, The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music, Oxford 1992.

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During a public conversation with Glass in Princeton, I said:

‘Something that interests me right now is ... the demise of the composer, in my opinion. Now, it’s becoming a little less clear who creates a work, who plays the work, and who listens to the work. Those roles used to seem to be so clear – Beethoven wrote it, Brendel played it, and the audience at Carnegie heard it. But I don’t think that quite works anymore.’

Along with Stan Godlovich, many of us now question the hierarchy of composer as creator, performer as servant, and listener as passive bystander. But whatever model we prefer, ideas and ways of hearing/thinking emerge in live music making. Developing Roger Sessions’s notion of the musical performance as criticism, Edward Cone writes, in his essay ‘The Pianist as Critic’: ‘Each performance is an implied act of criticism.’ Leonard Meyer goes so far as to term musical performance ‘the actualization of an analytic act.’ I cannot help imagining that Heinrich Schenker’s earliest ideas about musical structure began to emerge during the many hours he spent hearing his piano students play sonatas (by Beethoven!) over and over again.

I am a performer of music written down by others. My playing is my research. More simply, my playing is reading – physicalized reading. And that close reading has led to some thoughts which do not comprise fully realized analyses in the conventional musicological sense, but do, it seems to me, offer empirical evidence that performance – with its attendant reading, hearing, and rereading, and rehearing – constitutes research. There’s a heightened level of awareness in the performer playing a piece of music in public that is only attained there. Performing is at least a fact finding mission.

Perhaps, in their work, ‘composers’ too are making readings. Ferrucio Busoni remarked: ‘Every notation is, in itself, the transcription of an abstract idea. The instant the pen seizes it, the idea loses its original form.’ Karlheinz Stockhausen writes, in the instructions for Litanei:

‘I do not make MY music but only relay the vibrations I receive; that I function like a translator, that I am a radio.

...’

9 ‘... the actualization of an analytic act – even though such analysis may have been intuitive and unsystematic.’ Leonard B. Meyer, Explaining Music: Essays and Explorations, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1973, p. 29.
10 Schenker keenly associated performance and ‘synthesis’ (analysis). In the way Schenker’s ideas became formulized and recentered in their practice by some in the New World – so too Sigmund Freud’s ideas, or the architectural ‘modernism’ of Mies van der Rohe.
Now comes the difficult leap:
no longer to transmit man-made signals;
music, tintinnabulation,
but rather vibrations which come
from a higher sphere, directly effective;
not higher above us, outside of us,
but higher IN US AND OUTSIDE."¹²

To me, the distinctions between reading and writing are increasingly unclear. (Question: Which came first?) Wilhelm Furtwängler is purported to have said: ‘I raise the baton and then something happens.’ Certain musicians and musicologists are now beginning to consider what ‘happens’ with musical texts in use, as Roland Barthes and others explored verbal text. Barthes distinguishes the ‘readerly’ from the ‘writerly’:

‘The goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its consumer, between its author and its reader. This reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness – he is intransitive; he is, in short, serious: instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a referendum. Opposite the writerly text, then, is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the readerly. We call any readerly text a classic text.’¹³

Harold Bloom tells us that every poem is the misreading of a ‘parent poem’;¹⁴ so, with every performance (every misreading!) of a written piece of music, do we make a new ‘poem,’ a new art work? Some might assign primacy to the first notation of the work. But, is this so simple? Technology has elevated or disclosed the stature of the player of musical texts. With each performance, there is the possibility of describing a new pattern of digital information; our performance, as recorded, comprises a new set of yes or no answers to the eternal, pervasive, and leveling question. Of course, memory is recording too. An artistic experience is preserved as a pattern in the brain. As Bill Viola writes:

‘We view video and film in the present tense – we ‘see’ one frame at a time passing before us in this moment. We don’t see what is before it and what is after it – we only see the narrow slit of ‘now’. Later, when the lights come on, it’s gone. The pattern does exist, of course, but only in our memory.”¹⁵

So recording, even if imperfect, is simultaneous with hearing. The ancients closely associated music and memory. Memory systems of the past suggest that it’s naive to see

¹² Karlheinz Stockhausen, From the Seven Days (Aus den sieben Tagen), trans. by Rolf Gehrhaaar, John McGuire, and Hugh Davies, Vienna 1968.
the advent of sound recording in the nineteenth century as more than a technological advance following from earlier concepts. In the visual arts, there is a continuing discussion regarding the changes in seeing and representation which either followed from or necessitated the invention of photography. Perhaps the changes we observe in musical performing styles that might seem to have been caused by recording are part of larger developments that, in a sense, mandated the invention of recording? Much remains to be done in considering the brain’s specific chemical response to music. La Monte Young proposed that specific sound patterns might evoke particular brain activity/sensation, raising the possibility of musically induced ‘feelings’.

I want to change systems: no longer to unmask, no longer to interpret, but to make consciousness itself a drug, and thereby to accede to the perfect vision of reality, to the great bright dream.

Roland Barthes (1978)

My piano teacher Jacob Lateiner insisted that ‘analytic thinking’ should not precede practice. He’d say something like: ‘Don’t go looking for things, or you’ll find them.’ An idea, an intuition, might arise in study or rehearsal, and be confirmed or discounted by conscious thought. These ideas usually began with questions about a puzzling instruction or detail in a musical score. Perhaps because of this notion that one should not go looking, the repertory-based ideas I will mention take the form of questions rather than answers. It’s often clear that very effective learning occurs when the ‘teacher’ poses questions to which there are no answers already in mind. Perhaps for this reason, musicians may do excellent teaching faced with music that is not well-known to them in advance. In these situations, our footing is more like our students’, leading to genuine exploration and thinking. We offer a model of engagement, rather than answers to specific musical questions. Uncertainty is vitally necessary.

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16 See Peter Galassi, Before Photography: Painting and the Development of Photography, New York 1981. Marshall McLuhan develops the idea of technology as the extension of the human body, but already in 1870 Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: ‘The human body is the magazine of inventions, the patent-office, where are the models from which every hint was taken. All the tools and engines on earth are only extensions of its limbs and senses.’ See ‘Works and Days’, in: The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson VII, Boston and New York 1903-4, p. 157.

17 Young writes: ‘Current psychoacoustical research and the assumptions of place theory and volley theory suggest that when a specific set of harmonically related frequencies is continuous or repeated, as is often the case in my music, it could more definitely produce (or simulate) a psychological state since the set of harmonically related frequencies will continuously trigger a specific set of the auditory neurons which, in turn, will continuously perform the same operation of transmitting a periodic pattern of impulses to the corresponding set of fixed locations in the cerebral cortex.’ La Monte Young, ‘Notes on The Well-Tuned Piano’, from the notes accompanying the recording The Well-Tuned Piano 81 X 25, New York 1987, p. 6.


19 Lateiner traces these thoughts to ‘collisions of instinct’: places in a musical text where the composer’s notation seems to collide with the performer’s instinct. See my article on Lateiner’s teaching: ‘Strenge Sachlichkeit: The Teaching of Jacob Lateiner’, in: Bruce Brubaker and Jane Gottlieb (eds), Pianist, Scholar, Connoisseur: Essays in Honor of Jacob Lateiner, Stuyvesant, N.Y. 2000, p. 219.
Genuine uncertainty may account for the particular, continuing appeal of live performances of old music. We might even link uncertainty to ‘expression’; perhaps that’s the definition of the word? This suggests a kind of musical learning I’d advocate. Research is the soul of education. We can’t simply repeat to our students, or to ourselves, what we heard from our teachers. Our knowledge of the past offers a basis; our students will synthesize new answers to questions that haven’t yet been asked and communicate with future audiences in ways not yet imagined.

In asking questions, I’m motivated as well by the theatrical visionary Konstantin Stanislavski and his notion that is frequently signified as the ‘magic if’. Here is the speculation and questioning that can lead an actor into a role. Performing may disclose the similarity or coincidence/simultaneity of thinking and ‘feeling.’ That might have been what Charles Wuorinen had in mind when he defined ‘reason’ as ‘slowed-down intuition.’

Question: Is the scherzo in Robert Schumann’s Piano Quartet, Op. 47 a reading of Franz Schubert’s Erlkönig?

During a rehearsal of Schumann’s Op. 47, one of the string players suggested that the quartet’s second movement was an airy, ‘Mendelssohnian’ scherzo. My immediate reaction was an only slightly uncertain thought: ‘No.’ The key of the movement, G minor, seemed to argue against it. And there’s a certain difficulty to the music, a physical unease or awkwardness. In this movement, there’s a recurring, punctuating sentence given to the piano (Example 1).

A few hours after the rehearsal, I wondered: Is this punctuating sentence, that I’ve been playing off and on for at least twenty years, Schubert’s Erlkönig (see Example 2)? I looked at the text and confirmed that G minor is the original key of Schubert’s song—his Op. 1. Further evidence of this link or modeling may be offered by the scherzo’s final cadential passage. The piano sentence appears once more, followed by a phrase recalling the movement’s first trio section. That phrase is followed by an extremely plain (and generically normative) unisono cadence (Example 3).

20 Uncertainty or ‘certainty’ is at the core of one of the central difficulties of modern literature: How to signify the twists and turns of real experience, the unfolding of ‘chance’ events that are necessarily determined, or recorded, by the writer before the reader begins to experience the text?
22 The questions here arose during the period 2001-2006.
23 Schumann famously set down in words his opinion of Frédéric Chopin’s Op. 2: ‘Hats off gentlemen, a genius!’ As Peter Ostwald points out, this may have been in contrast to Schumann’s own sense of development as a composer of an ‘Op. 2’. See Peter Ostwald, Schumann: the inner voices of a musical genius, Boston 1985, pp. 82-84.
But, how suggestive these final two notes are. Is this the stark authentic cadence – the objective despair of the ending of the *Erlkönig* (Example 4)?

In my mind, this was close to what happens at the end of Schumann's piano piece *Aufschwung*, with its slightly diminutive single-forte dynamic marking, and plain cadence (Example 5).

24 It is the second piece from the *Fantasiestücke*, Op. 12.
And, in *Aufschwung* as well, there’s strong similarity to the motivic material of the *Erlkönig*.

(Example 6)

The anomaly, the puzzling detail that began this thought process was the *forte* marking (instead of *fortissimo*) at the final cadence of Op. 12, No. 2. My thoughts about it almost certainly began with a ‘misreading’: Schumann marks several notes with single ƒ initials. But, this insistent accenting is not likely to represent less sound than the preceding *fortissimo*. Whether ‘God is in the details,’ or ‘the Devil is in the details,’ at least it may be that these details lead us to something inside, something fundamental. That seems congruent to Barthes’ sense of ‘readerly’ text:

> ‘In this ideal text, the networks [*réseaux*] are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one.’

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The notion of ‘lexia’ as described by Barthes is significant to these considerations. What constitutes textual identity? What is a ‘unit’ of musical speech, thought, or construction? A motive? A rhythmic figure (Beethoven’s Op. 67)? A harmony (Tristan)? Are there no coincidences?

Well before the remark about the scherzo’s character, the rehearsals of the quartet had disclosed the challenging paradox of the text as a representation of sonic design and as a set of instructions to performers. As we worked on a four-voiced passage in the last movement of the quartet (Example 7), the cellist noticed something about our ensemble playing.

She said that I wasn’t playing the piano part exactly together with her. I thought that I was. We tried the passage again. Again, she felt it wasn’t together. We played it through, cello and piano alone; the other players listened. ‘Not together,’ she said. But the violinist Jamie Buswell thought it was together and so did I. Then it dawned on me: I couldn’t or didn’t reach all the left-hand tenths in the piano part. I was keeping the tenor voice together with the viola line; as a result, the lower note of each left-hand tenth was sounding early, and before the corresponding note in the cello part. Then I saw something else: all these particular notes in the cello part are marked with staccato dots. The staccato dots had long puzzled me. Now I wondered if Schumann realized or even planned that these notes would not be ‘together’ with the piano? In this section of the movement, this is the only definite divergence between the articulation marked for piano and strings. In earlier performance practice exact simultaneity was much less important than it seems today. Pianists often sounded a bass note before the upper notes in a notational ‘simultaneity’. Perhaps a performance practice anomaly is recorded in Schumann’s notation?

Another example of ‘compound articulation’ occurs in a passage beginning in m. 131. Only the violin ends the three-note gesture with a quarter-note (Example 8).

Example 7

This seeming inconsistency relates to the pedaling marked in the piano part. The quarter-note violin elongation is sustained further by the pedaled piano sound, resulting in a compound sonority of continued duration with evolving timbre.

When I see a misprint I always imagine that there has been some new invention.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe\textsuperscript{27}

Question: Does the first theme of Frédéric Chopin’s Ballade No. 1, Op. 23 begin with a long-held C (in measure 6, or even in measure 1)?

A detail common in performances of Chopin’s First Ballade is the rendering of certain measures notated in 6/4 meter as something like 7/4. Is this ‘instinct’, or a bit of ‘received wisdom’ (received performance practice)? Listening to many pianists, one could count

out measures clearly in seven, an extra quarter-note rest in the bar (in measures 10 and 12, for example). There’s precedent for playing with unequal beat-lengths such dance pieces as Chopin’s mazurkas. This doesn’t seem a similar case. (And there’s a difference between elongating a beat and adding an additional beat.) Why does it matter that the length of these measures in the ballade not be increased, not be treated so freely? There is a pulsing quarter-note accompaniment figure that might not take well to such interruption. But, after years of playing and hearing Chopin’s Op. 23, a clearer confusion, regarding antecedent and consequent phrase groups, surfaced in my conscious awareness: Is the phrase group that begins in measure 8 after the tempo marking Moderato (see Example 9), a ‘question’ or an ‘answer’? In trying to pair the groups into phrases, I kept finding that they didn’t come out ‘evenly.’ I wondered: If the phrase group in measure 8 is a consequent group, where’s its antecedent? Perhaps directly before, beginning with the accented C in measure 6? And then, this C in measure 6 might be heard to continue from the very first pitch C in measure 1 – extended registerally, reaching upward through four octaves. The low initial C also continues to the bass note D in measure 8. Eventually, the low C moves to B-flat in measure 166, passing through C-flat and completing the fundamental motive.

So the ballade’s essential line may begin with C-(G)-B-flat, followed by the sinuous eighth-note figure. The ramifications of this reading are many. Is the germ, the conflict/dichotomy of these two parts of the phrase, already present in the two elements of the introduction (mm. 1-3 and mm. 4-5) of the ‘Ballade ohne Wörtchen’? Square/round, long notes/short notes, archaic/modern, spoken/sung, strong/diminutive – how many dichotomies might we be hearing? It provokes me also that Chopin’s Ballade No. 4, after its introduction, ‘begins’ with a long C in the same register.

In rehearsing performances (rehears-sing), removal and rearrangement are useful disruptions of a text. For the player or listener, the friction of fundamental irregularities can be worn to the dull smoothness of ‘this-is-how-it-goes’ with frequent repetition. How to hear anew a familiar or canonic script? Somewhat whimsically, I asked a student in a masterclass to skip from the opening motto of Chopin’s Polonaise-fantaisie to their continuation hundreds of bars later in the piece. The student played bars 1, 2, 7, 8, and then bars 214, and 215 (see Example 10).

Example 10

30 The evocative title that appears in the German first edition of Op. 23.
Is all the music from m. 22 to m. 214 inside ‘parentheses’? Is there very large-scale harmonic suspension or prolongation? In performing the *Polonaise-fantaisie*, a great challenge occurs around this resumption in m. 214 (and particularly at m. 216). In many performances, this continuation sounds as though the piece is circling back to something already heard, or beginning again – rather than conveying a sense of resumed progress.

Contemplating something in a piece of music often includes considering something similar in another piece (as the long-range continuation in Chopin’s Op. 23 led me to the *Polonaise-fantaisie*). Through close analogies, Rudolf Kolisch used the metronome markings left by Beethoven for a few movements of music to suggest tempo or speed parameters for all of Beethoven’s pieces.\(^{31}\) Julia Kristeva has shown that shared lexia, shared ‘units of reading’, ‘intertextualize’ verbal texts. The American photographer Alfred Stieglitz based his ‘Equivalents’ on the notion that photographs might be equivalent tonally or texturally although unrelated thematically.

History has altered its position in relation to the document: it has taken as its primary task, not the interpretation of the document, nor the attempt to decide whether it is telling the truth or what is its expressive value, but to work on it from within and to develop it: history now organises the document, divides it up, distributes it, orders it, arranges it in levels, establishes series, distinguishes between what is relevant and what is not, discovers elements, defines unities, describes relations. The document, then, is no longer for history an inert material through which it tries to reconstitute what men have done or said, the events of which only the trace remains; history is now trying to define within the documentary material itself unities, totalities, series, relations.

Michel Foucault (1969)\(^{32}\)

The video artist Douglas Gordon has made *Twenty-four Hour Psycho*, musician Leif Inge has produced 9 Beet Stretch, twenty-four-hour-long versions of classics: the film by Alfred Hitchcock and a recording of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, respectively.\(^{33}\) Such ‘postproduction artists’\(^{34}\) are making pathways through accumulated culture. Operating like DJs, they are reading and facilitating readings of ‘classics’. Is this different from what the pianist performing classical music does?

Douglas Gordon’s work provoked me to fashion a chamber piece for piano, violin, viola, and cello: Bruce Brubaker’s *Mahler’s Ninth Symphony*.\(^{35}\) I began with a score of the last movement of the Ninth Symphony by Gustav Mahler. I took simultaneities from the score in the order they appeared, although not always consecutively. I wrote down only

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33 I spent about two hours watching *Twenty-four Hour Psycho* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Oddly, there was no seating, and museum patrons who tried sitting on the floor were told by guards to stand up. As a result, most visitors stayed less than a minute in the room where the piece was installed.


things found in Mahler’s text, leaving out a lot. I prolonged most harmonies for ten or more seconds – a more glacial pace than the symphony. My choice of instrumentation was occasional: the piece was to be played on a chamber festival program of piano quartets. John Cage wrote his way through James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* and other texts, to make what Cage termed ‘mesostics’. In some music, ‘borrowing’ is so commonplace that another word seems called for. If jazz players use the ‘changes’ from George Gershwin’s ‘I Got Rhythm’ they are working with material that has by now become (or returned to being) part of ‘nature’. Modeling seems to be in operation in the finale of Brahms’s Second Piano Concerto, and in Pierre Boulez’ *Structures* (after Olivier Messiaen) and John Adams’s *Eros Piano* (flowing from Toru Takemitsu’s *River Run*, itself with beginnings in Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*). But, is my Mahler’s Ninth Symphony something other than modeling? Is it appropriation, theft, or just reading?

Every poem is the misreading of a parent poem. A poem is not an overcoming of anxiety, but is that anxiety.... There are no interpretations but only misinterpretations.

Harold Bloom (1973)

I’ve worked on a project called *Haydnseek* with the American composer Nico Muhly. This began from my observation that two of Franz Joseph Haydn’s piano sonatas, in C major, Hob. XVI:50, and G major, Hob. XVI:39, ‘share’ one measure (Examples 11 and 12). This lexia is an intertextual link. (I imagine printing the sonatas as two very long unbroken

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Example 11
Franz Joseph Haydn, Sonata in C major, XVI:50, movement 1, mm. 129-30.
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Example 12
Haydn, Sonata in G major, XVI:39, movement 2, mm. 59-60.
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37 Postmodern appropriative art questions or reflects the questioning of the concept of ‘intellectual property’.
38 Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, pp. 94-95.
systems of musical text that intersect like a crossword puzzle!) Haydn’s awareness of the possibilities inherent in reuse and borrowing is evidenced by the funny footnote that appears in the first edition of the six sonatas, Hob. XVI:34-39:

‘There are two separate pieces among these six sonatas in which some bars show the very same idea: the composer has done this on purpose for the sake of the difference in treatment.’

In Haydnseek, I perform the two sonatas on a modern piano; Nico Muhly shares the stage. With files stored in his laptop computer and an electronic keyboard, he produces a sound fabric that underlays/overlays my playing of the sonatas. At times, the electronic sounds are gentle additions to the piano sonority, harmonic slantings, or shifts. At other points in Haydnseek, the electronic sounds are invasive, even violent. Muhly has termed this ‘graffiti’. Are we defacing Haydn’s music? (It’s in the public domain, so we didn’t have to ask anyone’s permission.) It could be a refocusing of hearing. It’s a decentering experience certainly. Haydn’s music is already filled with cheeky discontinuities and humor. As we worked on Haydnseek, Nico mentioned to me that almost every ‘idea’ that came to him seemed already to have been explored in Haydn’s text. Haydnseek may be related to the long tradition of complementary music: Edvard Grieg’s second-piano accompaniments for Mozart’s piano sonatas, Charles Gounod’s additions to J.S. Bach’s music, Robert Schumann’s piano accompaniments for Niccolò Paganini’s solo violin caprices. Motivations for notating music may differ; some musical transformations carry greater artistic pretension. How easy is it to distinguish those motivations in the resulting texts or performances? Was my Mahler’s Ninth Symphony an ‘arrangement’?

Many of these thoughts connect repertories or move in the direction of hearing any particular piece as a momentary iteration of more fundamental musical ideas. Performances of what then? Perhaps performance is the more basic act and the reader of composers’ texts is only looking for specific surfaces for this act? Question: Which came first, the composer or the performer?

Question: Is Frédéric Chopin’s Barcarolle, Op. 60 the ‘parent poem’ of Maurice Ravel’s Une barque sur l’océan?

Is F-sharp minor the key of boat songs? There’s Felix Mendelssohn’s Venetian Gondola Song, Op. 30, No. 6, Chopin’s Barcarolle, Op. 60, and Ravel’s Une barque sur l’océan from Miroirs. La mer is in G minor, I suppose.

The day before giving a masterclass in the annual Tel Hai piano masterclasses in Israel, I attended a colleague’s session. A student played Ravel’s Une barque sur l’océan. The next day, in the midst of hearing a performance of Chopin’s Op. 60, I suddenly wondered: ‘Isn’t this the same piece we heard yesterday?’ (Barq-arolle, Barca-rolle, Bark-a-roll...) I was immediately thinking of bebop. Is Ravel’s Barque a sort of Charlie-Parkeresque, double-time, rhythmic filling-in of Chopin’s structure? Could the increased thirty-second-note surface action and intensified hemiolic play in Ravel’s music signify an ocean, as opposed to the more gentle waves of the lagoon in Chopin’s Op. 60! In some sense, does Ravel’s music just turn Chopin’s text upside down?

39 Vienna 1780.
In Chopin's Op. 60, the initial low C-sharp bass note, mm. 1-3, rises to F-sharp in measure 4. In the accompaniment figure that follows, G-sharp and A-sharp float above the bass F-sharp (Example 13).

![Example 13](image)


The uppermost voice in *Barque* traces an analogous descent while making more explicit the hemiola of Chopin's Op. 60 (Example 14).

![Example 14](image)

Maurice Ravel, *Une barque sur l'océan*, m. 1.

Could one read in Chopin's Op. 60, with its syncopated second-beat strengthening, a signification of the single oar of the Venetian gondolier? A strong motion on the second big beat in a bar follows a propulsive downbeat stroke in the bass. Perhaps the surges of the boat's forward travel are felt as firm syncopations, each coming well after the *remo* enters the water? The redirection of gesture is already suggested in Chopin's music. Consider the coming-to-a-stop-in-the-water, registerally-ascending passage in diminuendo (m. 32), which later becomes forward-directed with the substitution of a crescendo (m. 92; see Examples 15 and 16). Does this gestural turn-about in Op. 60 inform the linear descent traced in *Barque*? Does the repeated rising G-sharp to C-sharp motive in *Barque* (m. 4 and m. 6) answer the C-sharp to F-sharp motion in the *Barcarolle*? Is *Barque* presaged in the *Barcarolle*?

How well to play a figure like the water-wave music of measures 4-5 in Chopin's *Barcarolle*? In terms of tone, how evenly played should these notes be? How equally in time? In repetitive
music, is ‘expression’ the human performer’s failure to be regular? In many repertories, music which signifies or is derived from some regularly repetitive aspect of the natural world poses these questions. A further development may be the musical signification of repetitively regular ‘technology’ in the modern world. Does this begin in the 1830s? Chopin’s Etude, Op. 10, No. 1 might be seen as a transference of industrial revolution mechanization to the domain of piano music. The piece literally represents (requires) the engagement of a human operator with the iron-framed machine. Later, in music by Ravel or Philip Glass, the aesthetic question is similar, though the range of nuance perhaps more subtle. Every rhythmic pattern is uniquely rendered by the human performer on the occasion of each performance. In the late twentieth century, sequencers and drum machines became new paragons of rhythmic regularity. Pop drummers were noticeably affected; we are all affected. In performing Glass’s music, I become aware of tiny rhythmic variances in repetitive material as I play. With luck, it’s not ‘writerly’ – I only hear the fluctuations as they pass by.

Works that contain their own dissolution may seem manifestations of the ‘modern’ understanding of the writer’s use of language, and the choice to question or withhold it. According to Ludwig Wittgenstein, the limits of language are the limits of the ‘world’.

Example 15
Chopin, Barcarolle, Op. 60, mm. 32-33.

Example 16
Chopin, Barcarolle, Op. 60, mm. 92-93.

41 More recent drum machines have ‘human feel’ settings that mimic musicianly imperfection.
The further material that concludes the piece doesn’t use the A-B-E-G-G theme. This extraordinary sonic removal or reversal is paralleled in Karlheinz Stockhausen’s Klavierstück III (1952). There it might be seen as a manifestation of the sound world Stockhausen encountered in the musique concrète studio, with the possibility of running a magnetic tape backwards and ‘removing’ or ‘taking back’ sounds. Does Schumann’s music prefigure this later technology?  


Parmigianino’s painting referred to as the Madonna with the Long Neck is often held to be the definition of ‘Mannerism’ in visual art. Coming at the end of the Italian Renaissance, the work literally seems to elongate and stretch paradigmatic painterly balance. It’s a work of high accomplishment, and a parody. Often, the music in Beethoven’s earliest publications is viewed as extended and expanded classicism. Musicians and musicologists seem content to acknowledge Beethoven’s humor, but not to read the texts as satire, parody, or mannerism. During a morning of practicing the C-minor Piano Trio, Op. 1, No. 3, I stopped for a moment to write in large letters on a sheet of paper: ‘Beethoven was a Mannerist!’ The passage that directly provoked me begins around m. 80 in the trio’s first movement. It’s an unlikely ‘balancing’ of juxtaposed extremes (see Example 18).

What’s the significance of this mannerist thought? Is it connected somehow to the notion of ‘voice’, or identity, and to the role of ‘composer’, perhaps defining what Edward Said termed the composer’s ‘egoistical privilege’? The concept of ‘Romantic irony’ relates to the awareness and inevitable self-consciousness that arose as eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century European writers/communicators recognized they were using language. The conflict between ‘direct expression’ and using language may dominate an artist’s thought and work. This irony is a feature of Beethoven’s style: the listener made conscious of the vehicle of expression. Perhaps irony is the inevitable result of the ‘separation’ of composer and work that Lydia Goehr describes. Parodies generally seem to signal the coming destruction or abandonment of a particular style, or set of artistic conventions. Do the impulses that underlie the role of the separate composer also

44 This too is similar to questions regarding the origins of photography. Michael Finnissy’s huge new piano work The History of Photography in Sound (1997-2000) may provide a disciplinary bridge.
45 Madonna with the Long Neck (1534-40), oil on wood, 216 x 132 cm, Uffizi, Florence.
46 With the exception of Claudio Arrau, who said in discussing Beethoven’s music: ‘I think humor has nothing to do with music. Humor has to do with thoughts and words. Only in an artificial sense can one say that music is humorous.’ See Joseph Horowitz, Conversations with Arrau, New York 1982, p. 169.
mandate an eventual demise – eventually allowing a bell-shaped curve to correctly graph the glory/authority/function of the ‘composer’?

What’s the difference between the humor or even comedy of Haydn’s music and the parody or mannerism of Beethoven’s music? Compare cadential run-on sentences from Haydn’s Sonata in A-flat major, Hob. XVI:43, mm. 135-40 (Example 19), and Beethoven’s Op. 31, No. 1, mm. 30-45 (Example 20).

Beethoven’s presentation of recapitulatory material as intensified variant is notable in Op. 2, No. 1. Compare bars 1-8 (Example 21) to the restatement in bars 101-108 (Example 22). In this recapitulation, the theme’s expected initial upbeat middle-C appears already in measure 93 and is extended from there to measure 101! Recapitulatory changes are more extreme in Beethoven’s later music – the Violin Concerto or the Piano Sonata, Op. 109. Why is a recapitulation more strongly stated than an exposition? Is it necessary because the function of the material is partly obscured (Op. 109)? Are Beethoven’s reproportionings of classical forms mannerism? Is this the lengthening of the Madonna’s neck? Has the receiver’s capacity to absorb been dulled by prolonged exposure to the
conventions of reprise? Do Beethoven’s texts acknowledge language’s conventions and limits by challenging them?

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music publishing, pieces were often grouped in threes or sixes, presented to the musical consumer in bouquets. Did this enter into the conception of pieces so associated? In Chopin’s ‘quartets’ of mazurkas (Opp. 17, 24, 30, 33), the fourth work is the most elaborate, the longest, the most novel, the culmination. Consider Beethoven’s early three-part publications. In Op. 1, Op. 2, Op. 9, Op. 10, the third work in each opus is the grandest, the most impressive. The internal, enclosed, middle-of-the-opus works are more ‘private’ in tonality and gesture. It may not only be in playing the music that these designs appear, but, in playing, musical grandeur or intimacy becomes corporeal. The performer’s body molds itself to make sound. Physical sensation may underlie musical ‘thought’ from the outset. (Which comes first?) A skilled keyboardist may notate pieces whose phrase shapes fit the ‘geography’ of the keyboard (J.S. Bach’s

Example 19
Haydn, Sonata in A-flat major, Hob. XVI:43, movement 1, mm. 135-40.

Example 20
Beethoven, Sonata in G major, Op. 31, No.1, movement 1, mm. 30-45.

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B-flat-major Invention. Kevin Kopelson has observed that we occupy the physical bodies of long-dead composers as we play their piano pieces—a kind of eternal life for them, or transubstantiation and time travel for us!

Beethoven’s elongated cadential passages are mannerism; barely exaggerated pop culture send-ups depend on it. Is another mannerist gesture the conclusion of movements with final, full measures of fermata-marked rest? Perhaps Beethoven is making a boundary, digging a moat, or erecting a perimeter fence? (There are no such initial measures.) Is this ‘bounded artwork’—the making of a frame, the closing of a curtain, the retransition to the sounds of the world after language has ended?

During a few years when I played Beethoven’s Sonata Op. 109, I adopted a somewhat unconventional performance strategy. (I had not yet come to think of this as an issue involving boundaries.) The sonata’s first movement is so compact, the first theme so brief. After the applause that greets the performer’s arrival on stage, there may be an unsettled atmosphere in the hall. It takes awhile before relative quiet arrives. When the pianist’s hands reach toward the keyboard the audience may become more attentive. I developed the habit of putting my hands on the keys as if I was going to begin Op. 109 and then waiting, my body held still. I’d wait as long as a minute before playing. That’s quite awhile. As odd as this might have seemed to

Example 21

Example 22

some audience members, the result was that the music’s first phrases were heard. Now, I would categorize this as an attempt to create a boundary, a frame, around the work.50

The sense of appropriate framing has continued to change. Allan Kaprow said: ‘The boundary between art and life should be as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible’,51 and in the mid-twentieth century many new paintings did dispense with physical frames. Perhaps this was an extension from the trompe l’oeil painting practiced by nineteenth-century artists like William Harnett or John Peto. In contrast, grand nineteenth-century concert halls had gilded proscenium arches – an actual frame around the musicians and the sonic product. The gold-leaf proscenium in Boston’s Symphony Hall has a large medallion at its apex that bears a single word: ‘Beethoven’.

Of course, ‘classic’ texts, ‘readerly’ texts, may be entered variously. The earliest use of Beethoven’s piano sonatas (including Op. 109), private works for home consumption, is unlikely to have comprised readings from first note to last that would have been coherent or ‘bounded’ by later standards. The purchase and delectation of a sonata really was (and is) very similar to the purchase and reading of a novel. We don’t have to finish reading a novel, start at the beginning, or read the words or pages ‘in order’. It’s private activity.

**Question:** Is Beethoven’s Piano Sonata Op. 101 a reaction to a new bass note?

The additional high notes on Beethoven’s new Erard piano show up right away in the so-called ‘Waldstein’ Sonata, Op. 53, – presented in ascent, one by one, in the second half of the sonata’s first movement! Perhaps, later, the overall design and dramatic ‘narrative’ of Op. 101, with its withholding of tonic cadence throughout the sonata’s first movement, relate to the use of the low, then newly available ‘contra E’, as Beethoven marked it, in the denouement of the sonata’s last movement. Does this registerally extraordinary conclusion to the sonata motivate the entire structure?

**Question:** Are Johannes Brahms’s three sonatas for violin and piano, Op. 78, Op. 100, and Op. 108 a metapiece, a ‘Bildungssonatentrilogie’?

As the first of Schumann’s Fantasiestücke, Op. 111 shares tonality and motivic material with its number-sake Beethoven’s Op. 111, Brahms’s First Violin Sonata in G major may share material with Franz Schubert’s G-major Piano Sonata – two Op. 78s. In working on Brahms’s Second Violin and Piano Sonata in A major, I became aware of its contained notated dynamic range: the upper limit is forte. There is no fortissimo indicated anywhere in this middle-of-the-group, ‘private-tonality’ sonata. Do Brahms’s three violin and piano sonatas trace an overall harmonic scheme? Is this a trilogic journey of self-discovery?

**Question:** Do unaccompanied right-hand passages in solo keyboard music require heightened rhythmic freedom in performance?

Multivoiced keyboard music imbeds signification of ‘ensemble’. Especially in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music, if accompanimental parts pause or arrive at a held note, a single-line continuation may take flight like a solo singer or violinist (Example 23).

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Question: Does the ‘Crucifixus’ from J.S. Bach’s B-minor Mass underlie the fugue in César Franck’s Prelude, Chorale, and Fugue?

Question: Does Brahms’s C-minor Piano Quartet, Op. 60 gloss Beethoven’s Op. 67?

In a seminar that Milton Babbitt led at the Juilliard School, after an especially remarkable and ‘suggestive’ observation by Babbitt of structuring in a symphony by Mozart, the question arose: ‘Did Mozart put that there?’ Babbitt seemed unshakeable: it wasn’t a matter of history. If the detail could be discerned, then it was there.

To make Cheap Imitation, John Cage replaced pitches in his arrangement of Erik Satie’s Socrate, avoiding issues of copyright infringement. Question: Have I replaced analysis with a simulacrum? Or, like Jacques Prévert, found the making of lists all that remains possible in writing? Now, students of physics can accept and integrate differing models of the universe. One theory doesn’t necessarily replace/displace another. Perhaps in Jean Baudrillard’s wake we have ‘dropped out’ of musical analysis? Perhaps after Marshall McLuhan we can recognize no more linear thinking, only pattern recognition? No more answers, only questions? Perhaps, that’s not a grievous fault.

There is a great difference whether a poet is looking for the particular that goes with the general, or sees the general in the particular.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1825)

‘To me, it’s plausible that performers are most strongly in touch with musical ‘expression’ in its collective sense. Perhaps individual pieces are not products of a single author but varied manifestations of some more universal musical communication. Perhaps music is not originated or owned by an individual? We have tended to see allusions and modeling as exceptional conditions occurring when a composer invokes the work of another. If we begin from recognition of the essential communication that underlies musical performance – then specific details, specific instructions, or the very notion of composed

52 Mr. Babbitt favored the word ‘suggestive’ to describe the wonderful provocations he pulled from canonic texts.
55 From Art and Antiquity, in: Maxims and Reflections, pp. 33-34.
56 Of premodern musical practice, Lydia Goehr writes: ‘This general sense of borrowing was comparable in fact to the general use of language for which there is no uniqueness or ownership of any given expression.’ Goehr, The Imaginary Museum, p. 183.
57 ‘I am!’, for example.
58
musical ‘works’ recede, and the prevalence of repeated material and intention becomes not exceptional, but inevitable, normative. Carried with this thinking is a benefit. Much teaching of Western classical music performance relies on establishing general practices for music making in ‘good taste’. Works are seen as particular and specific but subject to a stylized and genericized performance practice. (The melody goes up – get louder, taper the phrase ending...) But, if ‘pieces’ were viewed only as various elaborations of some underlying universal expression, their details might be more vividly discerned. Rather than a highly generalized performance practice – used to make a repertory of exceptions ‘universal’ – imagine each performance as an ‘exception’.

Moreover, they are not deformed by style,
That fire that eats what it illuminates.

Howard Nemerov, ‘Style’ (1967)

Performers of new classical music are often eager and expected to receive coaching and performance advice from the composer of the music they play. I have participated in this kind of exchange with John Cage, Philip Glass and others. I have come to wonder if it is right to assign aesthetic ownership of musical texts, or to see composers as artistic proprietors? I was intrigued to discover that Ralph Shapey only heard Russell Sherman play the Sonata Profundo, written for Sherman, at the first public performance in New York. In festivals that I have curated, I have condoned or encouraged some student performers who didn’t play in advance for the writers of texts. George Perle and Gunther Schuller both responded with high approbation to excellent performances they had not coached. Perhaps composers may enjoy a sense that these texts can be read (in the future) without their direct aid. In preparing several pieces written by Alvin Curran, I wanted to take possession of the music in a very direct way; I recorded the pieces without playing them first for Curran. He did answer detailed questions I posed about notation, but not questions I raised about allusions to other music. Perhaps, after all, there are questions that we do not want composers to answer. Without definite creatorial statements in words, I may be less encumbered as my performance, my reading, of a text takes shape.

I shall no longer believe in interpretation. I shall receive every word from my other as a sign of truth; and when I speak, I shall not doubt that he, too, receives what I say as the truth.... Nothing is left to suggestion, to divination: for a thing to be known, it must be spoken; but also, once it is spoken, even very provisionally, it is true.

Roland Barthes, A Lover’s Discourse (1977)

59 When I asked Cage about what was probably a deliberately-difficult-to-decipher notation in Seven, he said only, ‘Listen, and you’ll know what to do.’
60 Barthes, A Lover’s Discourse, p. 215.