The idea of a musical performance as an ‘interpretation’ cannot be dated before the 1840s, yet we use the term unthinkingly as a synonym for a privileged performance of any music from the past. Tracing a history and pre-history of the metaphor and its usage sheds light on the eclipse of more richly textured models of music-making from previous eras as well as on an aesthetic predicament within contemporary ‘historicist’ performance. The limitations of the metaphor suggest moving ‘beyond interpretation’ in favour of more experiential and intuitive notions of making music.

Musical interpretation and its authorities
When we use the word ‘interpretation’ to designate a musical rendition, we invariably pay a compliment to a certain kind of performance, especially of music from the past. To describe a performance as ‘an interpretation’ is to elevate the act of music-making, to invest it with high, even philosophic, value. Far superior to a mere rendition of notes on the page, an interpretation takes a considered view of a masterpiece, and offers a personal ‘reading’ which lends itself to a characterisation in words. Whereas one discounts renditions, one argues about interpretations. That is why an interpretation is never a neutral synonym for a performance, and why one elevates interpreters above performers.

As Alfred Cortot put it in 1934:

‘If you love music to the extent of dedicating your life to her service, music takes it for granted that you will not contract a marriage of convenience with her from petty motives. You ought to devote to her all your enthusiasm and all the resources of your love, without respite. (…) You will then have become an interpreter, not merely a performer.’

Interpreters, unlike performers, seem to inhabit a world of refined critical discourse which is why their interpretations, like those of texts, are judged profound or superficial, insightful or misguided, provocative or banal.

Warring interpretations, in fact, account for the most visible battle fought between factions of Classical musical culture of the late twentieth century – that over ‘authenticity’ and ‘period’ instruments. We fight about how music should be played because we assert competing sets of values, and defend them by applying ‘rules’ of interpretation according to different criteria. Such is the case with ‘respecting the composer’s intentions’, an interpretative rule – or is it a mantra? – which few musicians dare to flout, but which

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1 The subtitle to Ralph Kirkpatrick’s Interpreting Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier, New Haven etc.: Yale University Press 1984, for example, is A Performer’s Discourse of Method; in a bow to Descartes, the study even begins with an epigraph from the Discours de la méthode.

2 When Artur Schnabel gave a set of autobiographical chats at the University of Chicago in 1945, he recounts (in English) how ‘my Leipzig début brought me press approval of my Brahms and disapproval of my Schubert interpretation (…). Three days later in Munich I read the exact opposite of the Leipzig verdict’. Artur Schnabel, My Life and Music, Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe 1970, p. 43.

authorizes performances which sound nothing like one another. Asked in 2006 ‘what a conductor is really for’, Owain Arwel Hughes, who directs the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, replied: ‘to make music, to interpret and follow the wishes of the composer, which are paramount. It’s a joy to get as near as possible to the composer’s intentions and communicate them to an audience’. Yet such a trite confession of values explains little why the manner of interpreting the composer’s intentions by a conductor of a Mainstream symphony orchestra differs so markedly from that advocated by ‘historically aware’ performers. The rule of compositional respect propounded in Thurston Dart’s Interpretation of Music (1954) also emphasizes a musician’s heavy ‘responsibilities (…) to the composer’ but for Dart, interpretation means a restoration of musical ‘conventions (…) for the most part long obsolete and forgotten’.

Talk of interpretation always appeals to some higher authority, if not always a method. In fact, ‘authority’ often props up ‘interpretations’ from behind the scenes. Going back to theological disputes over biblical meanings or legal arguments about the application of Roman law in medieval Europe, the rabbis, church fathers and canon lawyers debated various interpretations – as in biblical or legal hermeneutics – so as to distinguish the valid from the invalid, the strong from the weak, the deep from the superficial. To avoid arbitrariness and indecision, one appealed to some authority, some overarching power or set of principles by which interpreters drew correct inferences and reached sanctioned conclusions.

In ‘interpreting’ a piece of music today, we still assume we are reading someone’s thoughts correctly. If only the author (or his emissary) were present, he – for it usually is a ‘he’ – would vouch for the correctness of our actions. Of course we can also set ourselves up as our own authority, but only after having paid our dues as an apprentice indentured to higher powers. To play a piece of music without caring for any agent of authority would mean that we would no longer be interpreting at all but approaching music via other, conceptual frames. Improvisers, for example, consider their practices hybrid acts of creation and embellishment, weaving the new into the old. As for composers who play or conduct their own music, it would never dawn on them to think of their performances as interpretations: for their acts of composition, on the other hand, they draw on the God-like metaphor of creation, breathing life into nothingness. If we look carefully, therefore, at the figurative language used to characterize and represent what musicians do, we end up with a revealing analysis of cultural usage which guides us to the sense behind actions and experiences.

Since the nineteenth century musical interpretation has appealed to several different interlocking authorities: (1) the composer who creates the work; (2) the musical text which is commonly a stand-in for the composer himself; (3) the teachers and music directors who transmit the authority of the composer or the text; and (4) superior, usually older musicians whom one emulates. These authorities – mortal or otherwise – are closely related to more abstract forms of authority. I am thinking here of (5) performers’ traditions, as in the assertion that this is the way we have always done it; (6) musicological rectitude (if one is so inclined to defer to it); (7) musical structure (as defined by music theorists and analysts); and something called (8) musical common sense. All these authorities conspire to validate interpretations, to assure us that we are doing the right thing, and to help pass on interpretative practices to the next generation.

Surprisingly, the idea of a performance as an interpretation is not that old. No one in the days of Josquin, Bach, Mozart, Chopin or Schubert would have imagined a debate about playing music which argued about the interpretation of a musical work. In fact,

any dispute about the correct interpretation of music is entirely anachronistic for much of the repertoire about which those debates rage. If we are brutally honest, there must be a sense in which we watch ourselves contemplating our own navels, providing amusement and fodder for aesthetic arguments, but surely not invoking ideas about music held by the composers whose works we cherish.

It is far too easy, in fact, to slip into a mode of thought in which ‘interpretation’ becomes a catch-all term for every kind of musical praxis, as if musicians have been ‘interpreting’ music over many long centuries. In his admirable handbook on Musikalische Interpretation, for example, Hermann Danuser asserts on the one hand that musicology must undertake ‘a systematic study of the origin, dissemination, meaning and historical transformations of concepts such as execution, production, performance, rendition, reproduction, representation, and since the nineteenth century, interpretation’. Indeed, he suggests that ‘nothing would be more erroneous than assuming all these expressions signify more or less the same thing’. Yet in the actual treatment of the history of performance he blithely categorizes performers from the past as ‘interpreters’, even though those musicians lived long before anyone had hit upon the idea of calling them by that name. To cite one example of this confusion, we are told that ‘Johannes Brahms expressed his attitude as an interpreter (Interpret) of Beethoven’s works as follows: “When I play something by Beethoven, I feel scarcely any of my individuality; instead, I’ve enough to do trying to render (wiederzugeben) as well as I can what Beethoven has prescribed (vorgeschrieben) in the piece”’.6 Having used the infinitive wiederzugeben – to render, to reproduce – Brahms makes it crystal clear that he thinks of himself – not as an interpreter – but as someone who executes what is prescribed in the notation. The distinction is crucial, especially if we wish to grasp the underpinnings of our own conceptual framework.

**Historical concepts of ‘performance’**

When we use a word as an unthinking badge of identification, unaware of its history, we ignore the repertoire of meanings and nuances which govern its contemporary usage. Take the words ‘performer’ and ‘performance’. Although not a common usage, one speaks of a performer already in the seventeenth century in nearly the modern sense, as when Christopher Simpson dedicated his Division-Viol (1665) to a patron who ‘was not only a Lover of Musick, but also a great Performer in it.’7 Simpson also notes that a player who lacks the ‘quickness of invention’ to master ‘the art of playing ex tempore to a Ground’ may wish to play ‘such Divisions [i.e. variations] as himself or others have made for that purpose; in the performance whereof he may deserve the Name of an excellent Artist’. Yet Charles Avison, writing in 1753, surprises us when he uses ‘perform’ to express what

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7 Christopher Simpson, The Division-Viol, 2nd ed., London 1665; facsim. ed. Faber: London 1955, pp. ii and 27. An identical usage is found in John Playford, An Introduction to the Skill of Musick, London 1674, p. 36: ‘The Figures usually placed over Notes in the Thorough-Bass of Songs or Ayres, for the Organ or Theorbo, is to direct the Performer to strike in other Parts to those Notes, as Thirds, Sixths, and the like, to the Ground’. The dedication to Sir Robert Bolles in the first edition of Simpson’s treatise, entitled The Division-Viol, London 1659, names its ‘Subject’ as ‘that Branch of Musick You most Affect; and also Perform’. This use of the verb ‘perform’ seems more irregular from a modern standpoint, in that the dedicatee is said to have both affected (i.e. treasured) and performed the practical branch of music. ‘Performance’ as a generic rubric for musical practice had to await the eighteenth century.
a composer does: ‘What then is the composer who would aim at true musical expression, to perform?’ The answer is not the expected one. Rather, ‘he is to blend such an happy mixture of air and harmony, as will affect us most strongly with the passions of affections which the poet intends to raise’.8 As late as 1786, moreover, one still encounters odd usages in English, as when Thomas Busby’s Dictionary of Music speaks of ‘teach[jing] the children of the chapel-royal (...) to perform the organ’.9

Earlier, in the High Middle Ages, performance was linked to the concept of promise, as in a text from 1413: ‘Yf it so were that he had any tyme perfourmed his promesse.’ Or in a text from 1600: ‘The inhabitants of Cairo will (...) promise much but performe little.’ One promised an action and then, in the act of fulfilling it, performed it. From performing an assigned task, following, say, from a legal contract or from the recitation of the divine service, it is easy to see how, after centuries, the term was extended to what actors do in the theatre and to the performance of operatic roles. Only when instrumental music came to spawn its own extended discourse in the eighteenth century did ‘performance’ enter the lexicon as a rather extravagant expression for all music-making, which over time, relaxed, as words do, into an unthinking synonym.

Obsolete meanings of words do not necessarily seem peculiar to us: from other areas of human activity, such as sport or the law, we still understand performance as ‘coming through with the goods’, and from our grasp of what actors do on stage, we know very well about role-playing. The point is that the process of uncovering the history of a word, watching how figures of speech became synonyms, sheds light on subtle aspects of meaning which we dimly perceive in our day-to-day lives but which buttress intuitive notions of ourselves.

If an interpretation is not therefore a benign synonym for someone who merely plays a piece of music, how did it come to be used within music? An exhaustive answer would exceed the scope of this essay, though it would well be worth researching in various languages and cultures. For the present purpose, I have a more modest goal in mind, namely, to present a potted history of the metaphor of performance as interpretation so as to characterize its strengths as much as to diagnose its foibles and weaknesses. Rather than treat musical interpretation as a casual figure of speech, I argue that it is an essential guide to understanding the experience of contemporary classical musicians. I also want to question the undeniable prestige of this concept and suggest some ways in which we might find our way beyond it. Since performance as interpretation arose within a very definite historical frame, might it be approaching the end of its useful life? In laying bare our assumptions about music-making, we can judge whether we are happy with the ramification of these ideas. Would we choose them now, or have they chosen us through a quirk of history?

The beginnings of musical ‘interpretation’
It is far from obvious why the act of playing the notes of a printed musical score should be compared with decoding the meaning of a sacred or cryptic verbal text. The verb ‘to interpret’ and the noun ‘an interpretation’ can, like ‘perform’ and ‘performance’, be traced back to the Middle Ages in most European languages, but it is only in mid-1840s that the

8 To succeed in ‘doing a Composition Justice’, Avison advises ‘playing it in a Taste and Style so exactly corresponding with the Intention of the Composer, as to preserve and illustrate all the Beauties of his Work’. Charles Avison, An Essay on Musical Expression, London 1753, pp. 107-8, 69.

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terms began to be applied to music-making. That is, whether one turns to the French *interpréter* or *une interprétation*, or related German words such as *dolmetschen*, *Auslegung* or even *Interpretation*, none have relevance to music before the nineteenth century. It was then that the idea became firmly established that an influential piece of music was best thought of as a text of sufficient importance and vagueness to require a reading or translation of its author’s meaning. Note that the author of any influential text, whether it is God, Shakespeare or Mozart, has to be unavailable to readers or players to say what he means. Interpretation thrives on ambiguity.

Whereas Germans early in the nineteenth century began to refer to one kind of musical performance as a *Darstellung*, a portrayal or a representation of the meaning of a text, it was the English who, by the 1840s, first started to speak incessantly of musical interpretations. In a review of Henry Chorley’s *Music and Manners in France and Germany* from 1841, for example, we see a mildly disparaging view of performers as poor translators or ‘interpreters’ who prevent listeners from grasping the sense of music from abroad:

‘It must on the other hand be acknowledged that we are singularly and unfortunately incomplete in our appreciation of the real artistic meaning and value of those works of which the various performers and professors whom we chance to listen to are only the formal interpreters.’

Exactly five years later, however, in 1846, a reviewer of a concert including, among other items, a Beethoven quartet and a Mozart cantata, speaks of performers who interpret artworks as if that were the most natural activity in the world:

‘Besides being the last concert of the season, the programme presented by the Musical World was one of very uncommon merit, both in regard to the music of which it consisted, and the performers engaged to interpret it. It will be seen by the following that the selection of pieces was made with a view to the promotion of a healthy and classical taste in art, the frivolous style of composition, too much encouraged, being, in this instance, wholly abandoned for higher matter.’

In the same review, moreover, it becomes clear that interpreters of music undertake poetical ‘readings’ of profound classical works from a past generation which exceed the mere technical brilliance of executants who only render musical works:

‘The C-minor Sonata for violin and piano of Beethoven is one of the grandest inspirations of that wonderful genius; the variety of styles embraced by the different movements presents ample occasion for the development of the kind of quality of which the executant’s talent may consist. It was incomparably rendered. Madame Pleyel, who has created so unusual a sensation in the brilliant compositions of the modern school, here asserts her supremacy in music of a loftier kind, not less difficult, because more profound. Her reading was highly poetical, her execution masterly and unerring.’

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10 *The Times*, 9 July 1841.
11 *The Times*, 9 July 1846. Another example in *The Times* from 1848 reports on a performance at the Philharmonic Concerts of Beethoven’s Third Piano Concerto and exposes a similar tension between admirable technical brilliance and a new commitment to interpretations of high art: ‘Madame Dulcken, a brilliant and showy pianist, full of energy and enthusiasm, always wins laurels when her task is to interpret the compositions of the great masters, and last night added one more to many successes as an expositor of classical music’. *The Times*, 11 April 1848.
By the 1880s, the interpretation of music in performance seemed deeper than whatever could be achieved in words. Edmund Gurney’s wide-ranging (if little read) *Power of Sound* (1880), for example, argued that music ‘criticism of the entirely enlightening kind never did and never can exist’. Instead, he argues, ‘the true *interpreter* [original italic] of Music must always be the performer, not the critic’. The statement is all the more tantalising in that Gurney fails to amplify his remark, and we are left to guess that an interpreter’s task in performance is ‘making others see and appreciate marvels otherwise quite beyond their ken’.12

A more explicit example of an interpreter’s seductive power is found in Mary Augusta Ward’s influential novel *Robert Elsmere* (1888), where we read of Rose Leyburn, a gifted young violinist, who ‘had got hold of an accompanist (…) and was now, in her lavish impetuous fashion, rushing through a quantity of new music, the accumulations of her visit to London, (…) her whole soul absorbed in what she was doing.’ The much older Edward Langham listens beside her window, out of sight:

> ‘All the Romance of his spoilt and solitary life had come to him so far through music, and through such music as this! For she was playing Wagner, Brahms, and Rubinstein, *interpreting* all those passionate voices of the subllest moderns through which the heart of our own day has expressed itself even more freely and exactly than through the voice of literature.’

Ward mints the phrase – ‘interpreting all those passionate voices’ – so as to heighten Langham’s attraction to Rose’s lightly veiled erotic allure. She surely borrows the reference from the theatre, in that Rose’s renditions of Wagner transcriptions and Brahms’s *Hungarian Dances* are made to ‘interpret’ famous composers’ ‘voices’, much as actors in Victorian theatre ‘interpreted’ famous characters found in familiar theatre plays. Ward’s ‘interpretations’ on Rose’s violin not only venerate privileged composers but offer immediate access to the inspired emotional content conveyed in their works.

**Before ‘interpretation’ – Quantz and C.P.E. Bach**

To understand the nineteenth-century linguistic shift, it is useful to survey some concepts used to signify music-making before the metaphor of interpretation was introduced. I have already mentioned notions of ‘performance’, for example, as used by Simpson and Avison. Equally interesting is Johann Joachim Quantz writing in 1752. What is striking about reading Quantz is that musicians or players (*Musici, Musiken* or Spieler), rather than interpreters or translators of texts, are seen as executants or implementers of music (*éxécuteurs* or *Ausführer*). Instead of telling us what the music means, players were charged with observing rules of propriety and good taste: it would not be unfair to say that Quantz is obsessed with propriety in music’s delivery (*Vortrag*), execution (*Ausführung*) and performance (*Aufführung*). Good musical delivery, according to Quantz, needs clear and informed leadership concerned with the improvement of knowledge. He describes an ideal musical leader, for example, as a ‘skilled and experienced musician (*Musikus*)

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13 Mrs. Humphry Ward, *Robert Elsmere* (1888), London: Smith, Elder 1898, pp. 176-77. The pieces are actually named: ‘Hans Sachs’ immortal song, echoes from the love duets in “Tristan und Isolde”, fragments from a wild and alien dance-music, they rippled over him in a warm intoxicating stream of sound, stirring association after association, and rousing from sleep a hundred bygone moods of feeling’. As can be seen from references from forty years earlier in *The Times*, the *Oxford English Dictionary* is wrong to claim 1880 as the first instance of this usage.
who not only has insight into clear-cut delivery (Einsicht des deutlichen Vortrags), but also, next to harmony, some understanding of composition (Setzkunst), and can hit upon the manner in which each piece must be executed, so that the composition is not by whatever means mutilated or spoilt. Whereas 'unclear or bad delivery can ruin the best composition', adequate delivery (gemäßer Vortrag) can actually improve a mediocre composition. Executants therefore 'simulate the affect of the composer and seek to express it', but they are often superior to 'many a composer who sometimes does not even know himself the right tempo in which to perform (aufzuführen) his own pieces'.

Quantz’s musical executant is not interpreting anything at all, but implementing the appropriate style for the music given him. How such a style is acquired is never in any doubt: one follows recommendations offered by leading musicians (such as Quantz) and is guided by such self-evident concepts as Reason, Experience, and Nature. Of course such concepts can flourish only in a social setting where cultural practices are taken for granted and discriminating minds agree how to play music appropriately.

A somewhat more sophisticated – indeed, attractive – model of rendition is found in Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach’s impressive chapter ‘Vom Vortrage’ (On Delivery) from his Versuch of 1753. Emanuel Bach’s views on performance proceed from his radical understanding of a musical work which, in his descriptive language, imagines a vessel possessing human qualities, if not a virtual simulacrum of a human being himself. For Bach, a piece (ein Stück) of music contains true content (wahrer Inhalt) and associated feelings (Affecte). Its creator or author (Urheber) experienced specific passions (Leidenschaften) in fashioning (verfertigen) it, and like a human being, the piece expresses jolly (lustig) as well as violent (gewaltig) emotions. To aspire to good delivery (guter Vortrag), the musician (Musicus) or player (Spieler) must first be moved (gerührt) by the piece so as to move (rühren) listeners, whom he helps to understand his intentions to the extent of reasonably communicating, with his face and body, the gestures (Gebärde) of the piece. Beyond sensing (empfinden) the author’s passions, the player is charged (schuldig) with satisfying all kinds of listeners (allerley Arten von Zuhörern zu befriedigen) and arousing their empathy (Mit-Empfindung) through the display of his own emotion. Where is the evidence of emotive experience? ‘Man sieht und hört es ihm an’ – ‘One sees and hears it in him’.

Going beyond Quantz’s musical leader (Anführer), Emanuel Bach invites his musician to trust his own ample insights (hinlängliche Einsichten) into an author’s work (ein fremdes Stück) so as to explain its true content (den wahren Inhalt zu erklären). At the same time he must shun any slavish or mechanical attitude (alles sclavische und machinenmässige ausschließet) toward the piece or its author. Instead Bach commands him to exploit the freedom (die Freyheit) to make music from his own soul (von der Seele zu spielen) rather than behave like a trained bird (ein abgerichteter Vogel). This feeling of empowerment even allows for intentional errors of the most beautiful kind to be made (die schönsten Fehler mit Fleiß begehen), so long as they serve good delivery and musical poignancy (rührendes Spielen). Naturally a musician has recourse to his own reason (Vernunft), but must also emulate the practices of good soloists and ensembles, not to mention experienced singers, so as to think lyrically (singend denkend) and hit on the right delivery (den rochten Vortrag).


proper to any particular thought (Gedanke). What he must not do is waste time reading rambling books and discourses (weitläufige Bücher und Discursen) which bang on about such abstractions as Nature, Taste, Song, and Melody, even though their authors cannot even compose two notes naturally, tastefully, lyrically or melodically. In short, Bach seems to be saying – in the most profound way – that the good player, by seeking to capture the author’s emotions (die Affecte vorzustellen), becomes the represented personage of the piece envisaged by the author.

**Mozart, Hoffmann, and Clement**

With Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart we meet up with an equally refined sensibility regarding standards of playing music, but as yet are given no hint that a performer’s task is to interpret a composer’s texts. Like Emanuel Bach, Mozart’s ideas on performance invoke the notion of feeling known through experience. Mozart is especially interested in musical sincerity, and when it is absent and replaced by mere pyrotechnic display, the audience is cheated. Such was his view of Clementi who, he writes, ‘is a charlatan (ein Ciarlattano) like all Italians (…). Apart from [his passages in thirds], he can do nothing, absolutely nothing for he has not the slightest sense of delivery (nicht den geringsten Vortrag) or taste, still less of feeling’. What is false, therefore, is tricking the audience into a belief in musical feeling, but not providing the authentic goods themselves. A good rendition, on the other hand, is not considered ‘deep’ as in an interpretation, but proper and correct (as in the idea of execution where you get a task right or wrong). For example, Mozart suggests (in 1778) the novel idea that the art of sight-reading consists in ‘playing all the notes (…) exactly as they are written and with the appropriate expression and taste, so that you might suppose the executor composed it himself’.

Paradoxically, then, authenticity of expression gives rise to the false but most agreeable impression that the player is the composer himself, his alter ego, an idea foreshadowed in Emanuel Bach and resonating up to the present day. Interestingly, Mozart wishes us to forget the composer altogether, and have us believe instead that the performer is the authentic source of the musical ideas, presumably because the quality of making-music, not a distanced ‘reading’ of the printed score, guarantees musical sincerity. Mozart’s *performer as composer* flies in the face of more deferential, views of the relationship often held – not surprisingly – by composers themselves, as when Brahms ignores his individuality in playing Beethoven.

It is E.T.A. Hoffmann who evokes visual metaphors for music-making, suggesting the idea of *performance as painting*, with the most superior kind of performer designated ‘an artist’. At the end of his essay on ‘Beethoven’s Instrumental Music’ in *Kreisleriana* (1810), he notes that:


'The true artist lives only in the work which he has comprehended in the master’s own sense and now conveys (vorträgt) in sound. He shuns any exercise of his own personality; his thoughts and desires aim instead to bring to bustling life in thousands of shining colours all the glorious and graceful images and visions which the master has enclosed with magic force in his work, so that they encircle man and his imagination in sparkling circles of light, inflaming his innermost soul and bear him in speedy flight to the distant realm of tones.'

The musician not only paints these images and visions in his performance, but acts as an empathic impersonator who ‘penetrates deep in the thoughts and intentions of the master’. Reviewing a performance of Beethoven’s Battle Symphony (op. 91) in which a director brought to life Beethoven’s ‘true musical painting’ (wahre musikalische Malerei), Hoffmann writes that ‘everything came so vividly to life that anyone who had ever been present at a battle, or at least nearby one, could not but forget concert hall and music and, with no great effort of imagination, experience those dreadful moments once more in his mind.’ The rendition succeeded because it conjured a realistic scene so admirably that at a crucial moment ‘a military man of high rank (...) reached involuntarily for his sabre, as if to lead his battalion into the decisive charge’.

It is no accident that, in Hoffmann’s writings, the notion of portrayal (Darstellung) is reserved not for performance of virtuoso music, but for the soon-to-be canonized works of Mozart and Beethoven. In 1815 Hoffmann refers to the idea of a faithful portrayal (die treue Darstellung) of Mozart’s Don Giovanni, ‘which will always appear patchy and disjointed (vereinzelt und verstümmelt) if it is not loyal (getreu) to the original score, that is, given with recitatives’. This loyalty to the work – Werktreue in German, a concept championed by Carl Maria von Weber – introduces an ethical category into the idea of textual fidelity: the composer has left us his text and the text is a stand-in for his intentions. Render the text without making alterations or deletions, and one is being faithful to it and, by extension, to the venerated composer who commands such respect.

Mendelssohn, Joachim and Wagner
So musical fidelity in German writings in the sense of a ‘correct rendition’ was not yet tied to making sense of a cryptic text. Musicians, according to Felix Mendelssohn, assert their artistry by faithful reproduction, and arbitrary alterations result in a primitive form of defacement: ‘It is inartistic’, he writes, ‘nay barbaric to alter anything [the old masters] have ever written, even by a single note’. But in a letter of 1844 referring to the thirteen-year old Joseph Joachim’s violin playing, Mendelssohn invokes the notion of decoding which foreshadows that of interpretation. ‘You must hear it for yourself’, he writes to a friend, ‘his manner of playing all modern and classical solos, how he deciphers everything in the printed score (wie er alles dechiffriert, was auf Noten steht), how he comprehends and hears music, and the promise in him of a noble service to art will, I am sure, lead you

to think as highly of him as do I'. The sense of 'decoding a text' is quite fresh since it is equated neither with his manner of playing nor is it equivalent to a perfect comprehension of music.

As the nineteenth-century moved toward a model of musical code-crackers, it is important to realize the new ideology coexisted with competing views such as the performer as acrobat, even when describing the rendition of the very same repertoire. To cite a fascinating example, consider the zany premiere in 1806 of the Beethoven Violin Concerto by its dedicatee, the Viennese violinist Franz Clement (1780-1842). Newspaper critics were most struck by the violinist's mastery of death-defying feats, the Wiener Tageszeitung noting: 'Above all it is Clement's proven art and charm, his strength and certainty on his slave, the violin, which were received with resounding cheer'. This daredevil charm was especially conspicuous: not only did Clement boast that he would be sight-reading the solo part, but that, after the interval, he would entertain the audience with 'a free improvisation and a “sonata” played on a single string with the violin turned upside down'. Nothing could be further from an 'interpretation' of the concerto.

One of the key figures who ensured that these kinds of musical high-jinks came into increasing disrepute was, in fact, Joseph Joachim (1831-1907), and the reception of his long career makes clear how, unlike other nineteenth-century virtuosos such as Paganini, Liszt, or Tausig, Joachim's fame rested on his role as an earnest priest of musical 'reproduction', a priest whose ministrations focused in particular on the music of unavailable authors, especially Bach and Beethoven. So pronounced is the Romantic sacrament of the musical work in Joachim's hands that his violin-playing came to be understood as a quasi-religious act.

Andreas Moser (1859-1925), who studied with Joachim and wrote a biography of the violinist around the turn of the last century, continually stresses Joachim's devotion to both the text and the composer's intentions. As opposed to Franz Liszt, who 'sometimes overstepped the bounds of artistic license', Joachim – Moser writes – 'always strove to lose himself, heart and soul in the spirit of the artwork he was reproducing (in den Geist des reproduzierenden Kunstwerkes zu verenken), and through the medium of his own deep artistic feeling, to reproduce it to the listener in its full purity and beauty. It is this that gave his performances the distinction and perfection (...) for which it is now proverbial'. Rather than link 'reproduction' to some debased mechanical action (as in Walter Benjamin's twentieth-century critique), Moser links 'reproduction' to the very 'spirit of the work'. It is perhaps only when the patently reproductive aspects of musical performance come to be viewed with aesthetic suspicion – no doubt because of the rise of photography and the sound recording – that people begin to devalue 'mere' reproductions and look to interpretations as a new way to divine an artistic spirit.

Reviews of Joachim's performances of the Beethoven violin concerto, for example, paint a rather different picture from Clement's circus-like feats at the premiere a half century earlier. During the Adagio, one critic wrote in 1852: 'I looked up towards the platform but could no longer see the figure of the violinist, for it seemed completely beyond the interpretation of music.'
obliterated by another (…). It is he himself, the creator of the Ninth Symphony, whom I thought to behold face to face. Three years later, Hans von Bülow had recourse to even more vivid religious imagery:

‘It was not Joachim who yesterday played Beethoven and Bach, Beethoven himself played! That was no mere interpretation (Verdolmetschung) of the highest genius; it was a revelation. Even the most incredulous must [now] believe in miracles, since such a transubstantiation has never before been witnessed. Never has a work of art been so transfigured before the mind’s eye with such life and spirit, nor has the immortality of genius before appeared so lustrous and sublime in its truest reality. One wished to listen kneeling’.

(Presumably Bach was too old to make a personal appearance.) So even the decoding of a genial text is too limited a form of praise for the truly great genius, who now merges with the composer in a sacramental miracle imitating the mystery of the Eucharistic communion.

With these extreme formulations devalued into common currency, it is no surprise that critics began to distinguish readings according to their relative superficiality or depth. Thus for Eduard Hanslick, the Beethoven Violin Concerto played by Vieuxtemps, ‘sounded more brilliant and lively; [whereas] Joachim’s captured more of the depth (Joachim holte es mehr aus der Tiefe) and surpassed, with truly ethical power, the effect which Vieuxtemps obtained by reason of his passionate temperament’. As long as the musical translator managed to conjure up a vision of the dead composer in the midst of a performance, then the apparition itself provided the authority sanctioning the blessing. This kind of virtuoso, however, was not to draw attention to himself, but rather aimed to be as transparent as possible. Interpretation aspires to reproduce the composer’s spirit in a looking-glass, or in Moser’s words about Joachim, to be ‘a mirror which, held before an object, reflects it in its unclouded purity and truth’. The main thing was that the interpreter not obstruct the vision of the sacred texts: so fine was Joachim’s interpretation in performing the Viennese classical masters, Moser writes, that ‘we always stand opposite wholly determinate physiognomies, which only bear their own characteristics, never those of the impersonator (niemals die des Darstellenden)’.

This critical support for the idea of a performer as spiritualist was only the icing on the cake. For the performer the act of performance meant being true to the composer, decoding texts so as to get at the composer’s sublime intentions. The precise method for doing this, however, once a reasonable text was available, was not prescribed. In fact one of the key nineteenth-century debates centred on whether the text sufficed as the authority for a deep reading or whether the text might even hamper a truly inspired rendition (as in Wagner).

Richard Wagner’s ideas on musical rendition (Vortrag) from his 1869 essay ‘On Conducting’ transport mid-century spiritualism to new heights, and he surveys the field from the superior vantage point of the self-confident conductor which he certainly seems to have been. According to Wagner, orchestral music needs, first of all, informed direction and he recalls performances in his youth at the ‘famous Leipzig Gewandhaus concerts in which pieces were simply not directed; instead they were merely sight-read (abgespielt), like the overtures and entr’actes in the theatre, under the leadership of the leader of the first violins, Mathai’. Observing Habeneck in Paris conduct Beethoven in 1839, Wagner says he finally understood what rendition (Vortrag) meant, namely that ‘the orchestra had learnt to recognize Beethovenian melody in each bar and sang it, a recognition which entirely escaped our worthy Leipzig musicians’.

The praiseworthy executant, for Wagner, ‘claims the honour of standing in for the master in full (für den Meister voll und ganz einzutreten)’. Rather than being limited merely to
deciphering a composer’s vague intentions, Wagner’s knowledgeable executant is handed the keys to the palace and possesses a virtual proxy for the Master’s wishes. He is forced, by the power of his intuitions, for example, to make ‘modifications of tempo’ so as to achieve the composer’s subtlest characterisations. Far from wilful interpretations which express a musician’s subjective feelings, these readings amount to nothing less than ‘the requirements of a correct rendition (Bedürfnisse eines richtigen Vortrages) for our classical music’.

In entrusting conductors with his wishes, moreover, Wagner emphasizes the performert as proxy by his use of the term alter ego, inscribed on the dedication score of Lohengrin that Franz Liszt conducted in Weimar as well as in a striking letter to his Jewish Parsifal conductor, Hermann Levi, which opens: ‘Liebes Alter Ego’. Providing the composer himself is not standing behind the scenes instructing the conductor, Wagner recommends intuition and empathy to decipher intentions lying behind the musical notation, a method which – though unacknowledged – is still by far the most widely practised in the classical musical world at large.

These intuitions concern more than some mere passing associations but embrace the most deeply held convictions in which musicians traffic. To persuade readers that the first pauses (fermatas) in Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony must be held as long as possible, Wagner damnst those who cut them short and supplies a revelatory fantasy to defend his view:

‘Usually the fermata of the second bar is left after a slight rest; our conductors hardly make use of this fermata for anything else than to fix the attention of their men upon the attack of the figure in the third bar. In most cases the note E flat is not held any longer than a forte produced with a careless stroke of the bow will last upon the stringed instruments. Now, suppose the voice of Beethoven were heard from the grave admonishing a conductor: “Hold my fermata firmly, terribly! I did not write fermatas in jest, or because I was at a loss how to proceed; I indulge in the fullest, the most sustained tone to express emotions in my Adagio; and I use this full and firm tone when I want it in a passionate Allegro as a rapturous or terrible spasm. Then the very life blood of the tone shall be extracted to the last drop. I part the waves of my sea, and the depths shall be visible; or, I stem the clouds, disperse the mist, and show the pure blue ether and the glorious eye of the sun. For this I put fermatas, sudden long-sustained notes in my Allegro. And now look at my clear thematic intention with the sustained E flat after the three stormy notes, and understand what I meant to say with other such sustained notes in the sequel”.

Wagner can call on the authority of Beethoven’s God-like voice – one notes the parting of the waters – because, as the composer’s alter ego, he has grasped Beethoven’s intention. The method, to the extent it is discernible less the hyperbolic theatricality, is straightforward: conductors have mistaken the character of the opening fermatas in Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, not recognising them as actions of a fearsome Demiurge. To portray them adequately means capturing the powerful spirit by a dramatic lengthening of each held note. An added benefit is

26 The actions and beliefs of a proxy differ fundamentally from those of an interpreter, which is why it is a mistake for Stephen Davies and Stanley Sadie to claim that Wagner ‘fostered and encouraged’ the idea of a personal interpretation of Beethoven’s music: Wagner neither used the word nor invoked the concept.
that the sostenuto string sound will make a reappearance in the second and fourth movements, confirming the sense of the gesture across the expanse of the symphony.

According to this method, it is not terribly important what Beethoven actually thought about his fermata but rather that Wagner imagines himself the recipient of such information. It also helps such fantasies when the phantom composer is dead and buried, thereby preventing a sudden and inconvenient intrusion. That is, our penchant for nurturing such illusions is in indirect proportion to the real possibility that the composer or his emissary might actually burst our imaginary balloon. (One can easily see the limitations of this empathetic method for the performance of contemporary music when the composer is alive and kicking.) The remnants of this method, moreover — though it was by no means confined to Wagner or his circle — are still much practised today. Indeed, professional musical life as we know it would die a certain death if this method were suppressed. For these intuitions are the principal source of a performer’s creativity, perhaps the fundamental topic of invention in playing music from the past, the primary motor for creative interplay between collaborating musicians, and, sad to report, the cause of considerable pain when two equally inspired collaborators fail to hear the same thundering voices. Although it was clear to Wagner that to hawk his wares as a mere ‘translator’ or ‘interpreter’ (Dolmetscher) of compositional content would have degraded the value of his insight as one among many possible interpretations, one can also see how musicians of a later generation — and of possibly greater personal humility — transformed the proxy approach into a weakened and ‘subjective’ method of interpretation, which amounts to claiming no more than ‘what this symphony means to me’. The difference turns on not much more than a choice of contrasting rhetorical styles. The Wagnerian method of intuition, despite its overconfidence, remains an impressive alternative.

**Vortrag and Interprétation: German and French usages**

Although it is difficult to pinpoint the precise years when the metaphor of *performance as interpretation* became widespread in each linguistic culture, it had certainly spread like wildfire in Britain and the United States by the turn of the twentieth century. In two translations of Wagner’s treatise on conducting, for example, both Dannreuther (1887) and Ashton Ellis (1892-9) routinely translate *vortragen* as ‘interpret’ and indeed pepper the English prose with related words foreign to the sense of the German. In a 1908 review in the *New York Sun* of Toscanini’s *Meistersinger* performances, moreover, one reads that ‘taking into account the temperament and acquired tastes of an Italian musician the interpretation of the score by Mr. Toscanini was thoroughly commendable’.28 Thereafter, ‘interpretation’ and ‘interpreter’ enter the vocabulary even as subjects of historical and critical study, as illustrated in the following titles of books and articles: Arnold Dolmetsch, *The Interpretation of the Music of the 17th and 18th Centuries* (1915); John Alexander Fuller Maitland, *The Consort of Music: A Study of Interpretation and Ensemble* (1915); Achille Rivarde, *The Violin and its Technique as a Means to the Interpretation of Music* (1921); Alexandre Cellier and Fred Rothwell, *The Pianistic Interpretation of Bach’s Music* (1924); and E. O. Turner, *The Composer and the Interpreter* (1937).

Within the German-speaking lands, the word *Vortrag* remained the most privileged term for performance elevated beyond mere ‘execution’ (*Ausführung*) or even ‘rendition’ (*Wiedergabe*) until well into the twentieth century, with Heinrich Schenker’s essay on performance published in *Der Tonwille* — entitled *Der wahre Vortrag* (1923) — echoing Adolph Bernhard Marx’s *Anleitung zum Vortrag Beethovenscher Klavierwerke* (*Introduction to the Rendition of Beethoven’s Keyboard Works*) (1863), itself invoking a lineage going back

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to Quantz and C.P.E. Bach. Early uses of ‘translation’ (Dolmetschung) for performance seem never to have caught on since the literal meaning of the German word, unlike the medieval Latin root interpretare, is restricted to the notion of translation between languages, and excludes any connotation of a hermeneutic. Neither did the German term for hermeneutic interpretation, Auslegung, ever seem to catch on as a general category or metaphor for higher-level performance. Instead it was the foreign loan-word Interpretation, the verb interpretieren, and the noun-form for an interpreter, ein Interpret, which slowly made inroads into common and scholarly parlance, though only without restriction after 1945.

One sees an early trace of the new usage in a Kurt Weill essay – Down with the Merely Average!: On the Crisis of Musical Interpretation (1925) – and in a doctoral thesis from 1931 – Artur Hartmann’s Untersuchungen über metrisches Verhalten in musikalischen Interpretationsvarianten (‘Studies in Metric Behaviour in Interpretative Variants of Musical Performances’) – but these kinds of titles are rare before the Second World War.29

In France as in Germany, performance as interpretation joins common parlance by the end of the 1890s, far later than in England, but even French dictionaries from the last decades of the nineteenth century fail to identify the new musical usage until after 1900.30 In 1899, Pierre Lalo calls the conductor Felix Weingartner ‘an eloquent and faithful interpreter of Berlioz, Beethoven and Mozart’ and in 1909 Saint-Saëns compliments the way a singer ‘interprets’ a solo in La Rédemption (1882) by Gounod.31 Significantly, Alfred Cortot’s celebrated lectures were issued in French in 1934 as Cours d’interprétation and in English translation shortly thereafter as Alfred Cortot’s Studies in Musical Interpretation (1937). The year 1934 also saw Eugène Borrel’s monograph on the execution of French ornaments and figured bass, entitled L’interprétation de la musique française de Lully à la Révolution. Before 1900, the more usual term for ‘performance’ had been exécution as in Alvin and Prieur’s Métronomie expérimentale, Paris, Bayreuth, Munich: Étude sur les mouvements constatés dans quelques exécutions musicales en France et en Allemagne (1895).32

29 Kurt Weill, ‘Fort vom Durchschnitt: Zur Krise der musikalischen Interpretation’ (1925) in Musik und Theater: Gesammelte Schriften, ed. Stephen Hinton and Jürgen Schebera, Berlin: Henschelverlag 1990, pp. 22-25. ‘A complete interpretation comes about when an important personality unites musicianly obsession and virtuosity in the same person. He approaches the work with utter objectivity and lets the new experience of the art grow out of the clearest objectivity (...). We have in our midst enough artists who have reached [the summit], enough talents who will reach it. But it must be the goal of everyone who chooses musical reproduction (die musikalische Reproduktion) as a career. Otherwise we shall suffocate in mediocrity’. Artur Hartmann, ‘Untersuchungen über metrisches Verhalten in musikalischen Interpretationsvarianten’, PhD Thesis, Hamburg, 1931.


The gamut of practices embraced by early twentieth-century ‘musical interpretations’ was vast if one considers that the term embraced personal readings of masterworks on one end and inchoate historical reconstructions on the other. With hindsight, it appears that the fledgling discipline of historical musicology launched at the end of the nineteenth century posed a particular problem for notions of performance as interpretation. With its promise of a scholarly study of music history based on a careful sifting of musical styles, a philological method for establishing proper critical texts, and its proposed sub-discipline called Aufführungspraxis (performance practice), musicology immediately encroached upon areas that had previously been the exclusive province of performing musicians. In particular the claims of intuitive performance, which had never sought philosophical support, must have begun to seem somewhat dubious. Nevertheless, these doubts about how precisely one might obey or interpret a composer’s intentions prevented only few musicians around the turn of the century – people like Arnold Dolmetsch and Wanda Landowska – from questioning deeply held beliefs. The proof of the pudding lay, as it still does, in the eating, and a creative and moving rendition of a great masterwork was itself the mark of a fine interpretation, a reading of the work to which critics and listeners ascribed self-evident validity.

Auer and Casals
All the same, one detects a sense of irritation in such musicians as Leopold Auer (1845-1930) and Pablo Casals (1876-1973) when they address questions relating to the historical study of music and its implications for musical interpretation. For Auer, the great violin pedagogue of the early twentieth century who taught Mischa Elman, Efrem Zimbalist and Jascha Heifetz, there is a diversionary character to historical reconstruction which he simply shunts aside:

‘How is a violinist to conceive the meaning of an older work which he may be studying if his own musical instinct, his freedom of conception, are obfuscated by the dictum: “This must be played in such and such a manner, because so and so played it in that way two hundred years ago”?’

‘One tradition only do I recognize – that it is the function of the artist to enter in the spirit of a composition, and reveal to us the intentions of the composer. The musical message of the composer, the true spirit of his inspiration, the soul of his music – that is what we are interested in. Though no two great artists now playing before the public interpret the Bach Chaconne, let us say, in exactly the same manner – yet hearing either the one or the other, at different times, we may nevertheless feel that the true inwardness of Bach’s music has been presented to us in each case. And what more can we ask? (…) The musical spirit of Bach transcends all narrow limitations of period, and the artist of to-day who truly enters into this spirit will play Bach as he should be played, and will play Bach better because he will play him in the interpretative spirit of our own generation, not that of 1720.’

Auer’s spiritualism and espousal of artistic freedom repeat sentiments which survived more or less intact from the time of C.P.E. Bach. What is new is Auer’s attempt in 1921 to counter a simple historical objection: since you claim to interpret the original intentions of the composer, why ignore what can be known historically about that composer’s intentions? Auer’s answer, which at first sounds merely pigheaded, in fact suggests a stark and not so foolish dualism between the trivial material of historical reconstruction – the debris of the past – and the spirit of an artwork, accessible only to artists and their
‘instincts’. The very idea that one should abandon one’s ‘freedom of conception’ seemed as absurd to him as an artist who betrays his fundamental instinct. Auer also argues – reasonably – that historical reconstruction may well countermand the musician’s most important task, to move listeners in the here and now:

‘The great living violinists can awake the overtones of our heart-strings today. Tartini similarly moved the listeners of his time, and the style, the interpretation of each is and was true to the aesthetic demands of their contemporaries. It is impossible to make any adequate comparison of the playing of these artists. For one thing, no man still living is in a position to describe Tartini’s playing from actual hearing. Yet, wonderful as his playing must have been, if we are to judge by the accounts of it which have come down to us (…) it is a question whether, were Tartini himself to appear in recital today, a twentieth-century audience would be enthusiastic over his playing. The gap between the aesthetic concepts, the musical concepts, the critical values of his time and our own is too great to be easily bridged.’

It never dawns on Auer that one might ‘enter into the spirit of a composition’ by studying how ‘so and so played it two hundred years ago’: reflecting on this point of view would no doubt have threatened the powerful authority vested in the author of *Violin Playing as I Teach It*. For this reason, there seemed no possible rapprochement between intuitive performance and a reconstruction which historical approaches promised to achieve.

A new attempt to package the old spiritualism into an ‘organic’ form of interpretation is graphically illustrated by Pablo Casals, who, like Auer, rejected music-historical methods. In an interview published in 1956, Casals avers that it is fruitless:

‘to go into research to build up the true style and bring it to life. (…) Now then, the performer looking at the score in front of him has got to reconstitute, not a so-called objectivity, but all the different phases which the author’s mind went through when creating this work, and in doing so, observe the reactions which they produce deep down in his own mind. How curious this fetish of objectivity is! And is not responsible for so many bad performances? There are so many excellent instrumentalists who are completely obsessed by the printed note, whereas it has a very limited power to express what the music actually means. (…) yet it is through these notes that we must reconstruct all the author’s states of mind! Are there any set of rules for this re-creating process? I cannot think of any.’

Only in this way, Casals believes, can one arrive at an ‘interpretation’ which is ‘something organic, not mechanical, something which makes you know how to vary all repeated passages, how to establish a gradation of detail in the general unity of the work, how not to be put off by some small rhythmical liberties which the music demands’. Intuition has therefore been augmented by arduous contemplation of an imperfect notation, a notation which guides inspired performance: surely the religious metaphors of devotion, humility and revelation point away from the more intellectualized notion of interpretation toward the more ecstatic metaphor of *performance as religious experience*. But if the goal of music-making is to reconstruct the states of the composer’s mind and transmit one’s own

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33 Leopold Auer, *Violin Playing as I Teach It*, London: Duckworth & Co 1921, pp. 126, 143-144, 150, 140-141. Chapter 10 is entitled ‘Nuance – the Soul of Interpretation’ where one reads: ‘In some cases these offences against good manners in interpretation are the result of a commendable desire on the part of the student to follow closely the interpretation of some great virtuoso, to play the work as he has played on the concert-stage. (…) The student, in his earnest effort to achieve a perfect replica of the expressional feature he is imitating, does not realize that he is worshipping the perversion of an idol’.
empathetic reactions, is Casals actually speaking about interpreting the text at all? Or is the metaphor of performance as interpretation teetering on the brink of unintelligibility? Casal’s interviewer noted ‘how often you use the words “life and living” when talking of interpretation’. Casals answers: ‘This is because, on the one hand, I consider life as our great adviser and, on the other, for an artist, and especially for a performer, the essential problem is to produce a vital creation’.

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Early Music as annexation of traditional metaphorical territory

The intuitive method of performance becomes problematic as soon as the first murmurings of the historical performance movement are heard. For ‘Early Music’ has always been happier on the terra firma of rationalism. And although the metaphor of performance as religious experience within Early Music fell quickly by the wayside, the traditional idea of decoding a composer’s intentions remained very much intact. The big difference turned on a question of method.35 Whereas an artist’s personal engagement with the notated musical text had previously been paramount, the historical performer had recourse to a far more objective authority: that of History itself, especially as transmitted by the rapidly expanding discipline of historical musicology. Irrespective of – indeed, ignoring – any emotional engagement with the performed repertoires, ‘the interpretation of early music’, Thurston Dart writes in his classic text of 1954, ‘is therefore a most complicated matter and the primary evidence, musical notation, on which our interpretation must necessarily be based has to be examined with the greatest care’. The great paradigm shift toward historical performance arrived, then, not as the imposition of a radical new method of musical interpretation but rather as a clever annexation of traditional metaphorical territory – loyalty to the work – governed by a new authority – History – to whom performers could appeal.

Placing the authority for musical interpretation largely in the hands of a scholarly discipline – a phenomenon which has failed to take root in theatre or ballet, for example, and which has had limited success in the case of opera – brought with it benefits that could not have been dreamt of even half a century before. Not least among them was a liberation from the very sloppiness of musical traditions and their authority. Musicians of many different stripes were spurred into an Oedipal revolt against their authoritarian fathers and used the opportunity to engage in fresh inquiry and bold experimentation. Indeed, the achievements of the historical performance movement have been so widely applauded as to have become one of the dominant ideologies of the performance of classical music by the end of the twentieth century. ‘Music is both art and a science’, as Thurston Dart eloquently puts it; like every art and every science it has no enemy save ignorance.36

Yet the historical performance movement left an aesthetic predicament in its wake with which all musicians, even those in the musical Mainstream, have had to contend. For while there has been excellent advertising regarding the value of original instruments and of historical performing practices, there have been very few defences of Mainstream

34 Josep M. Corredor, Conversations with Casals, London: Hutchinson 1956, pp. 182-84. Chapter 9 is entitled ‘On Interpretation’.
36 Dart, Interpretation, pp. 13, 168.
resistance to the historical performance movement, at least few with any real content. At the same time Mainstream culture has moved ever closer to Early Music in its views – if not its practices – of period style and history. And for its part, Early Music, with its dependence on History, has handed over the keys to the shop to outsiders and is forbidden from mounting any defence of its practices on purely creative grounds. To encapsulate the bind: historical performers have become rational Methodists who have lost their religion. Their Mainstream counterparts, on the other hand, espouse their spiritual beliefs – that intuition guides interpretation – but can no longer find a church in which to hear a proper sermon. This dichotomy presents a peculiar and precarious state of affairs. It cannot last indefinitely.

The idea of an historical method which results in a performer’s interpretation – with or without added intuitions – is therefore a striking novelty of the late twentieth century at the same time that it offers a continuity from previous eras. Yet in the concrete interaction between scholarship and performance, one must recognize crucial differences in attitude and practices between music historians and performing musicians. More often than not these differences are passed over in the attractive fantasy of a mutual aid society between scholars and performers which rarely stands up to close inspection. Whereas an historian needs evidence to back up historical assertions, everyone agrees that performances never succeed on the basis of historical evidence. Historians can never collect too much evidence or documents. Assuming a community of historians takes an interest in a particular area or issue, new sources will always be welcome, as they should be in a scholarly discipline. In the world of performance, however, newly uncovered historical evidence may result in debates rather marginal to the experience of the music-making and yet – given the authority of History – may automatically be elevated to a position of aesthetic significance. Given this war of interpretations, musicians risk losing the confidence to decide if a particular bit of historical reconstruction is aesthetically relevant. Even historians, after all, advance claims about the relevant importance of the evidence they uncover. Historical logic within the culture of Early Music, moreover, all too often supplants aesthetic judgements, and it is a self-fulfilling prophecy to claim, as many do, that historical inferences offer vast improvements to musical practice and serve the interests of the composer who is still, as we will recall, conveniently dead. This objectivism thus places performers in the odd position of arguing from historical evidence which at the very least detracts attention from the substance of their musical interpretations. More perniciously, the elevation of historical evidence to aesthetic importance creates an inordinate amount of guilt in performers – since who can ever have enough historical information to back up one’s work? – and guilt leads not only to insecurities in performance but also to a puritanical attitude that inhibits experimentation and free play.

Everyone, it seems, is obsessed with locating the correct style for a piece of music, a method which has doubtless enabled some new ‘interpretations’ of great depth. But the notion of period style and period instruments is in any case a very odd one when performing the music of great composers: they were the ones, after all, who broke with conformist notions of style which afflicted their contemporaries. It seems clear that these composers were taken into the European canon of high art precisely because they did not compose in a period style. It is perverse, then, that historical performance is content to serve up evidence about performance practices of the period – often from testimony of self-authorized second-rate musicians who happened to publish treatises – from which one constructs an interpretation of the overall playing style. And by what historical justification should one assume that even if our reconstruction of period style were flawless – which we know it is not – that this style ought to be the ideal one for pieces of music merely because one can demonstrate some points of contemporary contact between these practices and the composers involved? More often than not, it
is the justifiable rebellion against an unquestioning Mainstream musical culture which lies behind such assertions. But curiously, the rhetoric arguing for the interpretative superiority of historical instruments and practices replicates more than anyone else Richard Wagner in its appeal to intuition which claims, in the absence of evidence, to know absent composers’ intentions.

So long as the authority for musical ‘interpretation’ rested in some equally metaphorical or nebulous sphere – such as Auer’s invocation of the composer’s spirit or Casals’s communion with the author’s mind – then the metaphor remained relatively harmless, a way of flattering the integrity which lay behind serious performances of artworks. When, on the other hand, the metaphor began to take its own entailments literally – as in the historical performance movement – and appealed to scholarly methods and historically verifiable reconstructions to validate performances, then ‘interpretation’ became far more insidious. It is in this sense that Early Music, as a cultural phenomenon, highlights the problem of musical interpretation generally and underscores the threat posed to a raft of traditional musical practices echoed in competing models of music-making.

Prospects beyond Interpretation

It is only when one steps back from the now-tired debates about musical interpretation, then, that the cultural power of this conceptual metaphor becomes apparent and the varieties of artistic fruit it has borne can be viewed and assessed: musicians, after all, have adapted ‘interpretation’ to all kinds of contrary purposes, and to stunningly positive effects. On the other hand, when one reconsiders the relatively recent vintage of the metaphor and shoots a glance back at earlier notions of music-making, it is striking how performance as interpretation – by virtue of its ‘high’ ideational station – has eclipsed and suppressed equally compelling ways to think about musical performance. It is not, then, so much a matter of restoring older frameworks for music-making per se, such as Emanuel Bach’s soulful empathizer, Mozart’s sincere impersonator, E.T.A. Hoffmann’s conjurer of images, or Wagner’s proxy spiritualist. It is rather that these superannuated models strike a sympathetic chord because they seem true to some portion of our experience, even if the dominant ideology tells us they are dubious, marginal or insignificant.

It is fair to say that the goal of propounding an interpretation is scarcely uppermost in the minds of musicians whilst we make music. We may be ‘reading’ from a score or individual part, but we far more readily ‘enact’ or ‘become’ what we are singing or playing rather than ‘advance a claim about what the music means’. Much musical experience, moreover, occurs when a musician is alone or an audience absent: in those moments, there is no one to tell, no one to whom interpretations are offered. Following on from Emanuel Bach’s ‘explanation of a piece’s content’ or from Casals’s ‘reconstitution of an author’s mind’, it seems more appropriate to restrict interpretation to a stage of study and reflection before a musician begins to play. In that way, we would stop mistaking musical experiences for interpretations, exaggerating both the pre-performance process of thought as well as the assertion of meanings during the performance, irrespective of whether these are metaphysically subjective or historical verifiable.

Interpretations worthy of the name require their own logical coherence and rhetorical force as distinct from the interpreted object or text. While it is perfectly obvious where to draw the line between an essay on a Shakespeare sonnet and the sonnet itself, how one grasps the logic of a musical rendition as a ‘discourse’ or even ‘practice’ separate from the music being rendered is far less clear. In an ordinary sense, moreover, interpretations usually substitute for the work being interpreted. Yet musical interpretations in no way do this. As the critic Susan Sontag put it in a much-cited essay of 1964 called ‘Against Interpretation’: ‘It is always the case that interpretation (…) indicates a dissatisfaction
(conscious or unconscious) with the work, a wish to replace it by something else'. Surely it is a logical impossibility to imagine replacing a piece of music by its performance: indeed, it is the one thing no musician thinks of doing. There are good reasons, therefore, why music-making might wish to be hostile to the notion of interpretation, which, with some historical hindsight, we can even see as having held music hostage against its will. Sontag's essay concludes with a salutary suggestion: 'In place of interpretation,' she writes, 'we need an erotics of art'. Whereas interpretation in her view amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone, 'translat[ing] the elements of [art] into something else', musicians have no such luxury, since we never leave a piece of music alone: we are always tangling with it, wrestling with it, seduced by it.

So – tying up threads from Emanuel Bach, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Wagner and others – it is worth thinking about the ways in which, when we play, we are imagining music, fantasising about it, which is the same as saying that we picture and project an expression of its lived experience. After all, in most European languages we still cannot help but invoke the metaphor of play for music. Wir spielen Musik. On joue de la musique. Wij spelen muziek. We play music. This simple word is nothing to be ashamed of, but rather a cause for great celebration. By putting performance in these terms, proclaim a loyalty to the playful and emotive elements which are music's greatest joy. After all, it is they, and not the cognitive, intellectual and academic challenges, that attract us to music in the first place, a fact which is all too easily forgotten.

Ultimately, then, the metaphor of interpretation – imposing as it is – can be recognized for its debilitating limitations as much as for its ennobling capacities. For much as we musicians think of ourselves as interpreters with our corresponding need for validating authorities, we are also mere players as well, and a host of competing metaphors are hidden from us in interpretation's drive to steer the musical experience. A list of competitors might be expanded in nearly limitless directions. All one has to do is imagine musical performance in a variety of different guises: (1) as a game; (2) as sport; (3) as tool; (4) as magic; (5) as impersonation; (6) as dance; (7) as seduction; (8) as love-making; (10) as contemplation; (11) as devotion; (12) as prophecy; (13) as Ouija board; (14) as ministry; (15) as palliative; (16) as poetry; (17) as drama; (18) as composition; (19) as creation; or (20) as mere child's play. All these similes exist in overlapping circles of meaning even when they are contradictory, for human beings are very good indeed at juggling masses of conceptual figures, each tugging at the other's hegemony, enabling what we know and sparking how we act.

Musicians are not only biblical scholars pouring over dead manuscripts in the library so as to extract the divine spark: we are also competitors, sportsmen, artisans, magicians, actors, mimes, libertines, lovers, monks, nuns, saints, seers, psychics, priests, physicians, bards, composers, gods, children, players, hedonists in search of pleasure for whom unfettered play is the objective, the dream of a world, if you will, without coercion and or the imposition of authority. That we are tied to our texts and rarely stray from them (unlike most other musicians) means that unfettered play remains an unrealisable if still no less desirable ideal. So the time might be ripe to abandon our habit of asking: 'should I interpret the music this way or that?' and revel in the wealth of experiential possibilities open to us as lovers and players of music. For if we can capture this sense of music-making in a world that descends so easily into brutality, we can surmount the greatest challenge and reap the richest reward.

37 Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation and Other Essays, London: Eyre & Spottiswoode 1967, pp. 10, 14, 8.