

Authority and Musical Interpretation

Philosophers of music commonly distinguish performative interpretations—interpretations of works by performers—and critical interpretations—interpretations of works by critics, musicologists, and philosophers. In this talk, I would like to suggest that the distinction between critical and performative interpretations is well captured by an analogy to legal critics and judges. Rather than basing the distinction on differences between what can be expressed by each form of interpretation, I will argue that the difference between the two kinds of interpretation depends on a difference between the *authority* of performers and critics. While a critic offers one interpretation among others in what I will call a musical public sphere, a performer presents the audience with a musical directive to hear works in particular ways. This parallel draws attention to several features of performative interpretation that have been overlooked, and deemphasizes epistemic problems raised with performative interpretations which, I argue elsewhere, are typically blown out of proportion and ultimately fail to capture salient features of performative interpretation.

I will begin with just a bit of history. The rise of the critic in art and music is historically joined to the rise of the public sphere. Both Jürgen Habermas and Thomas Crow have described the critical influence that the heterogeneously populated *parterre* of 18th century theatre had on the success or failure of particular performances as well as works.ⁱ The same was true of music in the Paris Opera, according to James Johnson.ⁱⁱ There was an ever-strengthening tendency to make a distinction between true listeners—those who were moved by the judgments of the music itself—and those who were merely moved by cheap tricks or their own internal, *private*, reveries. Crow illustrated most clearly that, in the 18th century Salons, there was a persistent fear on the part of the Academie that the criticisms of a *parterre*-like public, that is one dominated by the rowdy and unreflective, would come to control the content of the exhibitions. Contemporary characterizations of the public contained both negative

elements, describing the mass-like features of the crowds in the Salons, as well as positive elements describing the surprisingly refined judgments emerging from varied perspectives (from the sensitive fishmonger, or the keen-eyed baker). A key to stabilizing the judgment of the public, and to preserving the practice of producing artworks, was a core of reasonable attention to the work itself (the autonomous work of art) represented by well-founded critical interpretations.

In the artistic public sphere whose core norm was autonomy (autonomy of aesthetic appreciation, autonomy of judgment, and autonomy of works)ⁱⁱⁱ the justification for an interpretation's being well-founded lay in its being grounded in the *work itself* rather than in any particular and arbitrary interest. This began as a negative critique of works that served the interests of residual feudal political and religious powers. But another danger opened on the side of reception the expansion of an ever more heterogeneous audience which raised the specter of interpretive chaos and philistinism. It is no coincidence, then, that professional art criticism arose simultaneously with the literary public sphere. At the outset, criticism was dominated by amateurs, presumably because the sphere of influence of the artistic public was still fairly small and homogeneous. As the literary public expanded with regard both to demographics and types and numbers of works presented, it ran into conflicts similar to those encountered by the political public sphere. The concept of the autonomous work demanded critical interpreters who wouldn't be carried away by their own merely contingent preferences, and who would not be unduly influenced by expressions of the *mass's* interests. These demands of the autonomous work could no longer be generally expected to be met by a heterogeneous audience that had lost its expectation of solidarity generated by a shared religion, shared social status, and shared education. Just as it was in the political public sphere, so it was in the literary public sphere: to preserve the public, the public needed to be divided into expert and lay audience. Habermas argues that it was through this

institution of professional criticism, that “lay judgment of a public that had come of age, or at least thought it had, became organized.”^{iv}

The art critic was to be both educator and spokesperson for this public. German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus suggests that,

In the period of aesthetics [around 1800], the critic appears, at least ideally, as the representative of the public; he becomes its preceptor only when the discrepancy between the ideal and the empirical audience, the difference between the *volunté de tous* and the *volunté générale*, has become too acute.^v

Dahlhaus’s allusion to Rousseau here is especially rich and leads us by an unexpected route back to the difference between critical and performative interpretations. The difference between the general will (*volunté générale*) and the will of all (*volunté de tous*) is that the former is the public will while the latter is merely an expression of private wills. Government fails and descends into tyranny when it expresses merely a private will (whether of the individual government actor, or of some aggregate of the people). In such cases, the general will needs to be protected from the government. In cases where the will of all usurps the power of the general will, the latter needs to be protected from (the mere private aggregate of) the people. It is in just these situations that Rousseau believes the intervention of a tribunate is necessary for the preservation of democracy. The tribunate is a judicial body with the power of interpreting the law, which is the expression of the general will, and mediates between the people and the government. In Rousseau’s words, the tribunate “is the preserver of the laws *and* the legislative power. It serves sometimes to protect the sovereign against the government...; sometimes to sustain the government against the people...; and sometimes to maintain equilibrium between the two...”^{vi} In every case, the tribunate issues an authoritative expression of the sovereign power (the general will)—even against the people.

Dahlhaus's suggestion that the *critic* mediates between the general will and the will of all is suggestive, but it is not quite to the point. Critics can give an account of what the music ought to express, and they can give an account of what the people ought to listen for. They can even point out where the general will and the will of all come apart. In the case of musical tastes, this might involve pointing out the admirable and worthy characteristics of underappreciated music. It might involve criticizing performers for performing underappreciated music in such a way that prevents appreciation. It might involve criticizing audiences for being taken in by unworthy music. Eduard Hanslick's influential music criticism in late 19th Century Vienna did all of these things, and many critics continue to do the same today.^{vii} In every case, though, the role of the critic is continuous with that of an active audience member who enters into discussion with her family and friends about what is worth listening to, or what was good, bad, interesting, or indifferent about a performance or a work. Critics differ quantitatively with audience members, but not qualitatively. That is, critics have a larger audience, and they have, on the whole, more experience and more musical background than typical audience members. The authority critics have, here, is the authority of an expert, or more experienced friend offering *advice* rather than *mandating* how the music is heard.

Critics are limited in this crucial respect, even in the case of a critic as influential as Hanslick. They cannot give *practical authoritative* expression to music. More specifically, they cannot give an authoritative expression of a particular work. Critics do not play the kind of role in musical practice—they do not have the institutional authority—to determine how the art works *will* go analogous to judges power to decide how the law will go in particular cases. Critics cannot preserve the law, either for or against the people, though they can make an argument to the people about how it ought to go. This is not to say that critics cannot be enormously influential in their role as educators and advice-givers. They can have and historically have had enormous influence on how artworks are viewed and understood, of

course. But having influence or offering advice is not the same as issuing an authoritative decision concerning how the laws *are to be* preserved and developed. The distinction is analogous to that between a legal commentator and a judge. As influential as the former may be, only decisions of the latter are authoritative and give expression to the law.

One could agree that critics are not like judges and suggest that they *ought to be*. There are two ways to make a move toward this recommended equivalence. Either one would grant considerably more authority to the critic or remove the specific institutional authority of the judge. Were the role of critics so changed, they would be able to determine how a work goes and we could not legitimately disagree. I can imagine an artistic practice in which there is an ultimate arbiter of works (radical actual-intentionalists place such dispositive power in the hands of the artist—and, I suppose, into the hands of those experts in a position to discover the artists actual intentions). Rather than looking to the work for its meaning, the audience would need to wait for the authoritative decision, or need to seek an existing decision of the authority, or need to come to a tentative view that may at any moment be overturned. This is not an appealing picture of aesthetic judgment, nor, I hope, is it at all accurate.

Were the role of judges to be changed, on the other hand, then their arguments would be reduced to at best cogent, well informed arguments of essentially the same kind that any member of the public might present. Characterized as members of the public sphere, critics claim to know of no authority other than the better argument. After the “great divide” of modernity, the role of critics became one granted and played by the public—criticism was and continues to be fallible and taken to be “good till countermanded” by further, better reasons. Though critical practice has, of course, become organized and institutionalized, it is all merely well-informed lay judgment and so has the character of one voice among others in public while at the same time *guiding* discourse. Even if it is the case that expert critics set the tone of the practice, take part in the institution of art, the critical interpretation done is

immediately critically defeasible in the way a judicial decision is not. In the end, a critic, is just one public voice among others.

The performer, on the other hand, is not merely one voice among others. That a musical performer is authoritative, at least in a some sense, should neither be controversial nor surprising. A musical performance is authoritative in two senses. First, performers are often invested with metaphorical authority. Performers are taught to take command of a work and of their audience, and to show this command in their playing. In master classes, the virtuoso violinist Isaac Stern told his students to carry themselves and to play as if to say, “I am here. Shut up and listen.” The history of virtuoso performers, criticism of their playing, and accounts of their lives, is rife with metaphors of authority. Violinists of the mid-nineteenth century were regularly described as “Alexander of the violin” or “Caesar of the violin.” Musicologist Mai Kawabata writes of one violinist, Alexander Boucher who, taking full advantage of his physical resemblance to Napoleon, went so far as to dress as the general for his concerts, striking various Napoleonic poses before and after performing. Kawabata goes on to give an account of how certain “heroic codes” affected a variety of elements of music performance practice—composition, the treatment of the bow, instrument, the conception of the relationship between soloist and orchestra, the soloist and the audience, and so on.^{viii}

More important than these metaphors of authority, however, are several elements of the structure of performances that point to a more literal authority of the performer. That is, the performer presents the audience with a musical directive to hear works in particular ways. Roger Scruton argues that we “put ourselves in the hands of the music” when we listen, that we are “led by it through a series of gestures whose significance lies in their intimation of community”^{ix} The way in which the works are presented, not only the particular “sensuous realization” of “way of sounding it” as Jerrold Levinson’s austere account of performative interpretation would have it, but myriad performance choices—the way

of sounding the work, program choice, venue choice, choices of how to appear and move on stage—are not under the audience’s direct control.^x Nor should it be. The performer chooses what music to play and how to play it. The audience sits silently (usually) and follows along. They are asked to follow the musical lines that the performer draws connecting and distinguishing various parts internal to the work, they are asked to follow the connections between works. Elements of the music, and the correct way of following them, are brought out in any number of ways—through dynamic and timbral variance, through physical gestures of the conductor or of different players. Sometimes audiences are even asked to follow connections between elements in what Peter Kivy calls the “world of the music” and elements in the “world of the world.”^{xi} That is, when one listens to a performative interpretation, one follows its movement.^{xii}

There is no room for the expression of dissent on the part of the audience within the norms of concert-going—the audience cannot simply choose to hear another interpretation. They cannot directly affect the interpretation presented to them within the conventions of classical music performance practice. Whether or not audience members agree, they are obligated to listen to and follow the particular shape the performer gives to the movement of the music. Whether or not audience members agree with any particular interpretive choices, each performance becomes a fact of musical life with which they must engage. One might say, following through on the analogy to the tribunate, that the performer's interpretation becomes *law* for the audience.^{xiii}

(Audience members could of course disrupt the performance by foot shuffling, coughing deliberately, groaning, singing, booing, throwing things, getting up and leaving. Disruptions like these are common enough to situate them within the conventions of performance, but they are not conventional behavior. It is tempting to characterize these examples of disruption as a sort of musico-civil disobedience. It is revealing to walk through examples of disturbance to explore the nature of

audience obligation, as well as some of the sanctions of not following along. Unfortunately, this is beyond the scope of this paper.)

Of course performers' authority over a work is not absolute, however assertive their claim might be in the concert hall. Any given night's performance will, in all likelihood, not be the final performance of this particular work. Though it may be deemed "definitive" by zealous critics, none of these critics would, as a result, recommend that every future performer perform in exactly the same way or recommend that listeners stop attending performances. Nor would such effusive critics recommend that performers stop performing the work. This is simply not the nature of modern performance practice. Audience members do not go to a concert definitively to *settle*, once and for all, questions about a work, but to listen to a particular account of it.

Happily, that the deliberation of the musical public sphere does not end with a single performance changes the performance from a mere authoritarian assertion of how a work *is*, to an authoritative contribution to an ongoing debate about how the work *should be*. Again, the parallel to an appellate judge in a constitutional democracy is especially fruitful here. Even though performers are and judges are authoritative, we must never lose sight of the fact that it is a *critical public* for whom they perform.

ⁱ Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991); Crow, *Painters and Public Life*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

ⁱⁱ *Listening in Paris*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

ⁱⁱⁱ These three interlocking conceptions of autonomy are enumerated by Jay Bernstein in his *Recovering Ethical Life*, p. 161-2
^{iv} STPS, p. 41

^v Dahlhaus, *Analysis and Value Judgment*, (New York: Pendragon Press 1983), p. 12.

^{vi} *The Social Contract*, Book IV, Chapter V, "On the Tribunate," in *The Basic Political Writings*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987) p. 215.

^{vii} Hanslick, Eduard, *Hanslick's Music Criticisms*, (New York: Dover Publications 1988).

^{viii} Kawabata, "Virtuoso Codes of Violin Performance: Power, Military Heroism, and Gender (1789-1830)," *Nineteenth Century Music*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Nov 2004): 89-107.

^{ix} Boghossian, p. 54

^x And it is, in general, better that they are not. The conception of authority I am tracing here has affinities with Joseph Raz’s “service conception” of authority, recently summarized and revised in his “The Problem of Authority: Rethinking the Service Conception,” *Minnesota Law Review*, vol. 90 (2006), pp 1003-1044.

^{xi} I am borrowing Peter Kivy’s pithy formulation in *Philosophies of Arts*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 207.

^{xii} This claim is in keeping with a venerable tradition in music that includes Rousseau himself. He claims in the “Letter on French Music” that when the listener “[gives] his soul over to impressions of music.”

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