

Abstract

In 2014 at the *Darmstadt Ferienkurse Für Neue Musik*, Jennifer Walshe and David Helbich tutored the biannual event's first ever composer-performer workshop (Yip, 2015). To a 19th-century reader, this statement would surely confound: there was never a need to distinguish between composition and performance in a typical musician's career (think Bach, Mozart, Ravel, Liszt et. al.), but the early decades of the 20th-century turned this notion on its head, with musicians increasingly specializing in one or the other discipline; it is only in the last few decades that the musical community has seen a re-emergence of the now so-called "composer-performer". This paper explores the history of the relationship between performers and composers, identifies causes for and consequences of the *fin de siècle*'s explosion of musical specialization, and investigates the factors that are sowing a fertile modern environment for composer-performers to flourish.

A Functional Society

Let us attempt first of all to describe, in turn, the processes of musical performance and musical composition, as well as their relationship. The former might be seen as the practice of translating a source of codified information from something only cryptographically coherent into something tangibly, perceivably heard. (While we often identify said source to be a score, it may have any number of possible origins – the performers own imagination, for instance, as is the case with improvisation.) Call this practice of translation "interpretation", if you will. On the other side of the spectrum, and assuming a non-experimental, active compositional process, the composer begins with some form of internal sonic concept, a mental sound imagined rather than perceived (a private performance, perhaps). The act of codifying this conception into a universally understood format that can exist outside the composer's imagination, again typically via notation, is, like performance, a kind of translation... We therefore see that both performance and composition are in essence processes of elucidation, mirroring each other about a fulcrum of notation – in simple terms, identical processes performed in reverse, inseparable and mutually interdependent, and that the skills required for each are not so different (recall the non-specialized musicians of the 19th-century and earlier) (Alperson, 1991). On a whole we arrive at a system of music creation from conception to execution that, in theory, should function flawlessly, but keep in mind two crucial assumptions made here: firstly that performers do not improvise, and secondly that composers do not experiment (passive composition), i.e., that notation is always required; these clauses, as we will see later, have profound implications on the composer-performer relationship.

The Genius Complex

Despite what seems to be a well-oiled relationship on paper, it is observed in the modern era, and since the early 20th-century, that "(performers are) often... quite cynical towards composers" (Palej in Hong, 2018). This souring of relations might be traced to a seismic shift away from pitch- and rhythm-centric composition in the post-war era (when musicians did not yet specialize), contra-indicating an unchanged notation system, and thereby necessitating exceptionally complicated scores demanding a hitherto unprecedented level of technical virtuosity (see the mind-boggling scores of Ferneyhough as a modern example of such music). Gradually, musicians faced with the existence of increasingly complex pieces found it more practical to be involved exclusively in either composition or in performance, resulting in today's musical culture of implied expertise where "roles" and "identities" are synonymous (Vincent, 2014) (Reese, 1973). Composers began to recede from public visibility as a result of no longer performing themselves, taking with them their increasingly esoteric compositions, and leaving superior performers, armed largely with repertoire of the past, to function as the public persona of art music, resulting in a stagnation of demand for new music amongst audiences (Foss, 1963). In this way a tragic rift developed between these two new 'factions' of musicians: the "composer" became a mythical figure behind the scenes, speaking in tongues through their delegated performer deputies, and the unfortunate idea perpetuated that these backseat

prodigies were the generative source of musical creativity without whom there would be no music – unfortunate because performers, as musicians first and foremost, have always been equally capable of musical creativity on a conceptual and original level, but as performance specialists were limited by repertoire that was increasingly becoming dated due to the aforementioned disconnect with contemporary composers. This lamentable "genius complex" dividing the two groups, as it manifested in the mid-20th-century, is portended by an oft-quoted and decidedly flippant Beethoven remark: "Does he think I have his silly fiddle in mind when the spirit talks to me?"

The modern mistrust and misandry mutilating the composer-performer relationship in notated new music is certainly not in bad faith. There is a simple and atavistic fear amongst composers of abusing and being misunderstood, and an equally simple and atavistic fear amongst performers of misunderstanding and being abused (Foss, 1963). These *were* a single group of artists, separated by the technical demands of 20th-century musical aesthetics, hampered in their endeavors of elucidation by the noxious "genius complex" categorizing each as entirely different species of animal, and attempting to communicate via a system of notation that had by the time of Darmstadt become woefully inadequate. We turn our attention then to this latter point, recalling notation as being the axis about which composition and performance revolve, to examine its shortcomings in the post-war era, and consider the composer-performer dynamic in practices where traditional notation is absent: namely improvisation and experimental composition.

Notate This

It is often said that the history of notation is the history of composers demanding ever-increasing creative control, and this is plainly evident in the obsessively detailed scores of the early-Darmstadt (Smalley, 1970) – in a situation where they could no longer perform their own works, the composers' minute attention to detail was ostensibly in compensation of this division of labor, affording them a closer simulation of actually performing themselves. In truth, however, the desire for a technically definitive rendition of a given piece is nothing new, and is indeed a relevant description of music as early as Debussy or Webern, where the successful performance of a piece is as straightforward as placing the right sonic events in the right temporal place, as perfectly as is technically possible (Pruslin in Smalley, 1970). There is no "interpretation" whatsoever on the part of the performer throughout the process of translating score to sound – in pitch- and rhythm-centric music such as Debussy's, having this information communicated to the performer via staves and bar-lines was absolutely adequate. However, once composers began demanding detailed control over additional musical elements through the same notation system (articulation, timbre, space etc.), it left room for interpretation that would not have been desirable in a divided composer-performer social structure. "The ideal performer is not an interpreter but an administrator", says Stuckenschmidt, who in the early-20th-century radically advocated the delegation of performance entirely to machines who would render a piece as technically perfect as the most dictatorial composer could possibly imagine, thus effectively deleting both performance and notation from the musician's music-making portfolio in the quest for "definitive" music (Patteson, 2016). Early machine-made music (of the likes of Varèse, Schaeffer et. al.) presented an alternative solution to the stalling tradition of common practice music, and bluntly exposed the inadequacies of traditional notation once music breached the boundaries of staves and bar-lines, making an arduous task out of attaining the creative control necessitated by the division of labor between composers and performers (Foss, 1963). What remained unchanged, however, was the ever-present desire for creative control over one's own work via increasingly meticulous notation, be it Webern or Stockhausen, and it should be apparent that this was not a selfish arrogance on the composer's part when, if given the possibility, these particular composers would in all likelihood have rather performed the work themselves.

As a starkly contrasting example, both experimental and improvisational music in the mid-20th-century were entirely free from the problems of the composer-performer division for fairly obvious reasons: with the former, there was no aesthetic desire for a definitive sonic result, and therefore scores often did not resemble anything like a completed piece of music (e.g. the text-based instructional scores of Cage, Maciunas etc.). Unlike the late-serialists or early electronics (who themselves utilized graphic notation where applicable), experimentalism was antithetically concerned, for reasons of indeterminacy, with placing *more* creative control in the hands of the performer, denouncing the composer-performer divide as propagated by integral serialism (Reese, 1973). In the case of improvisational music (existing largely outside western art music in this period), notation simply did not exist; additionally, and considering it as a form of spontaneous composition, there would be no distinction between composer and performer because they were one and the same person. Both musics thereby avoided the problem of archaic notation and were very much unfettered, by either re-inventing or completely rejecting notation, to explore sounds beyond notes. Undoubtedly the composer-performer dynamic in these cases would be anything but the skeptical misandry as described by Paley in traditionally-notated new music – here is the elimination of the intermediary over which composers and performers have been stumbling in their attempts at communicating ideas that are not necessarily best codified on staves and bar-lines, thus allowing composition and performance to function as a single music-making process; we might then expect that of all the musics mentioned so far, these (especially in their modern forms) would be the ones most readily performed by the creators themselves (e.g. Pauline Oliveiros, Vinko Globokar) – an opportune reversal of musical specialization, empowering a breed of musicians unencumbered either by notation as were 20th-century composers, or by repertoire as were 20th-century performers.

The Problem of Repertoire

But what of rehearsed, concrete new music that requires some form of notation? Unfortunately the simple elimination of traditional notation by itself would not repair the composer-performer chasm overnight, nor would the introduction of composer-specific, bespoke notation. Basic music education today is taught, for better or worse, using traditional notation, and the short term effects of undoing that would likely result in a sudden loss of fluency and ability amongst musicians – not very desirable. After all that has been said so far however we cannot ignore the deficiencies of traditional notation when tasked with new music, and all the dilemmas it causes for those involved in "interpreting" it from either side of the music-making spectrum. Neither can we disregard the harmful musical specialization required to effectively work with such arcane developments of notation, nor the debilitating division between musicians it entails. We have observed the transition across varying disciplines of new music from meticulously detailed scores to graphic notation or text-based instruction, or to no notation whatsoever, and we might suppose that a satisfactory solution for concrete music must exist in some way, shape, or form...

We must first recognize that traditional notation was developed primarily to satisfy two purposes: firstly to effectively communicate information pertaining to pitch and rhythm (i.e. notes) in a time when these were the major innovations in music, and secondly as means of sharing said information with other musicians in a time when neither recordings nor the internet existed (Giddings, 2019). Hypothetically speaking, absolutely any kind of music – even the most intricate inventions of integral serialism – can be learnt aurally. Indeed we balk and shudder at the thought of such impracticality, but we simply have not been trained to use our ears in the same way we use our eyes when learning a new piece. Thus the existence of notated music, and with it, repertoire: a common practice of music, a "pool" of pieces with which familiarity was expected amongst practitioners; a sophisticated system of data transfer revolving around notation as means of sharing musical information. At this point we inquire: exactly how relevant is this for music written *today*? Consider the appetite for new music that is

timbrally- or spatially-oriented, rather than pitch- or rhythm-based. Consider the aforementioned multitudes of pieces inefficiently notated through archaic code out of sheer lack of a more competent system. Consider the existence of recording technology through which musical information can be shared, and consider that a recording effectively functions as the aural equivalent of a score (not music per se, but a rendition that allows study and transmission). Given all that, exactly how concerned should we be with performing music that was not specifically written for ourselves?

The concept of repertoire is an outdated one that persists today due to the wealth of notated music, pre-recording technology, in need of a living voice. For those of us involved in new music however, and recalling the non-specialized musicians of the past, we are reminded that music-making has never been about adding to an arbitrary collection via the creation of new repertoire – it is about creating *new music*, and we might then argue that we should no longer, as musicians, be so concerned with composing for unspecified performers, or performing for unknown composers. Anyone even remotely affiliated with musical education is acutely aware of the global scale at which new music is being created on a daily basis, music that, regardless of quality, is inherently original, engaging, and most significantly, entirely proprietary to its creator. It is futile, inconsequential and utterly pointless to attempt to pass these new musics off as "new repertoire" in an era where recording technology effectively ensures that these new pieces will survive down the ages in some form of recognition, acknowledgement or plain old existence, which is to propose that the solution for concrete music "requiring" notation is simply not to notate: The technological advances afforded by the 21st-century make even the textural and timbral complexity of a hundred-piece orchestra available to the individual, should they wish for such extravagance. We thereby arrive finally at the modern "composer-performer", who seeks to take full advantage of such an environment by concerning themselves with music that is exclusively their own: they take double the responsibility in exchange for the freedom of bypassing the unnecessary hindrance of notation, for the opportunity of absolute definitive control over their music without having to stifle the equally valid creative impulses of other musicians. They eliminate the accurately-described "nonsensical" division of music-making, recognizing the identities of "composer" and "performer" as a result of 20th-century specialization, but celebrating the roles of "composition" and "performance" that, devoid of notation, are once again mutually implicative (Foss, 1963) (Hong, 2018). For several decades now we, as specialized composers or performers, have been strangled by the fear of expertise, terrified of autonomous creation in the belief that others could do better – but the modern musician has no fear of inferiority once they realize that art is about creation, not interpretation and especially not reproduction.

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