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Music-making is a virtually universal human activity. At its most fundamental, it is a form of private biological necessity (in that, for example, individual survival is assisted by being sung to as a baby by a birth mother). At its most elevated, musical performance is public property; it played a pivotal role in some of the earliest traces of elaborate Western art, with the story of Orpheus, a pre-Homeric hero (thus now of at least some 3000 years' standing), possessing the legendary ability to tame wild animals and resist the Sirens by singing and by playing the lyre. Across the ages and throughout world civilizations it is the actual, direct, live experience of music that seems to have been integral to the human culture carried forward from its apparent European origins some 40,000 years ago to the modern world (Mithen, 1996, pp.159–63).

## 1. General considerations.

It can be argued that, in this modern world, music performed is perhaps the most widely disseminated kind of public property. In the 1980s and 90s – and for all that the following may prove to be forgotten names from mass entertainment – Queen, Madonna and, later, the Spice Girls were truly global cultural phenomena, and what they were all doing was performing music for other people. In the field of classical or art music, a similar effect has been known for centuries, from Blondel in the 12th to Paganini in the 19th and, we might conjecture, Casals and Segovia in the 20th. Musical performance, then, seems to have a double aspect in human culture, in that it is both endemic, more or less evenly spread throughout the species and its history since prehistoric times, yet also value-bearing. Just as ‘fixed’ works of art are held to range from the ephemeral (lost in history and never intended to be kept) to the preservable (deliberately saved artefacts, curiosities, social objects) to the canonical (enduring works of ‘genius’), so musical performance can range from something ordinary to a level that becomes a gold standard – although we shall encounter, with the example of Inuit throat games (which in early ethnomusicology would have been called ‘primitive’ music) the challenge of what may well amount to ephemeral genius.

In the Western art tradition, musical performance is commonly understood, and not surprisingly, in something like the way that are the works of music that performance brings to life, so that a familiar list of musicological categories is available: the historical, analytical and psychological dimensions. In performance studies, however, each of these dimensions must take on a special flavour. The history of performance was essentially mute until the 20th century with its invention of non-human storage of music (see §2 below). Time and again, therefore, earlier epochs characterize performance as something valid only for the present, or for veiled, mediated recollection; and though performance may have been reflected, represented and even to some extent ‘recorded’ in literary or visual art, music in performance was not essentially open to scientific or even philosophical inspection: ‘the composer works slowly and intermittently ... the performer in impetuous flight; the composer for posterity, and the performer for the moment of fulfilment. The musical artwork is formed; the performance we experience’ (Hanslick, 1854; 1986, p.49). Analytically too – to address the second dimension mentioned

above – the ‘work’ of music has typically taken precedence over any of its ‘realizations’. Technical commentary on music since the Middle Ages has largely been restricted to commentary on general musical practices (see the comment in §4 on musical treatises) and on notated pieces or repertoires. Only in the late 20th century did momentum begin to gather for the study of ‘music in performance ... where analysis, cultural studies, hermeneutics, and performance practice meet’ (Bowen, 1999, p.451). Thirdly, music psychology may also be considered inchoate in respect of (as it were) real-time music, for all the strides that have been taken in building models of contemplative musical understanding. We are hardly in a better position than was Lucretius in *De rerum natura* some 2000 years ago to ask interesting questions about the essence of ongoing human experience, although it will be possible to codify modern thinking on the fundamental specifics of contemplating musical performance (see §3). Finally, in these introductory comments, the dimensions of interpretation and notation must also be mentioned, since these concomitants of mainstream musicology are evidently central to the phenomenon and to the study of musical performance; issues entailing them are threaded through the following discussion, which addresses the role of the performer, including the somewhat altered status of performance in the 20th century, the basic elements of musical performance that have nevertheless endured and, more briefly, the musical training and learning of the performer.

## 2. Role of the performer.

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The role of the performer in Western music is nowadays typically characterized in two ways. First, the performer is seen as the composer's ambassador, with decisive powers, a perception that is at least as old as the mid-18th-century: ‘What comprises good performance? The ability through singing or playing to make the ear conscious of the true content and affect of a composition. Any passage can be so radically changed by modifying its performance that it will be barely recognizable’ (Bach, 1753; 1949, p.148). That is an enduring truth, and in some senses it must be the case that the great composer-performers, such as Boulez and Britten in recent times, are likely to be offering the ‘truest’ content and affect of at least their own music (but Rachmaninoff is a cautionary case of a maestro who gave up performing his concertos because he felt that the younger generation of concert pianists included some who could offer better interpretations).

Secondly, however, there has been an emphasis fuelled by social science to examine the relativities and interdependencies of music-making and posit a more democratic picture in which those for whom performances are performed have a supposedly equal significance:

... as cognitive psychology has taught us, the temporal materialization of a musical artwork emanates not from the composer alone or from the performer alone but from a triarchical interrelationship among composer, performer, *and* listener ... for performers to discharge faithfully their aesthetic responsibilities, they must give considerable attention not only to their understanding of the composer's demands and desires but also to the sensibilities of the audience (Narmour, 1988, p.318).

Certainly, through the commercialization of classical music, performing has become strikingly market-led, and since at least as early as the rise of the public concert in the 18th century (Raynor, 1972, pp. 314–30) market forces have been significant in the careers of professional performers. Historically, the sensibilities performers have most needed to flatter in approximately the last three centuries have

been those of music critics, who were diagnosed by Hans Keller (1987) as constituting an entirely phoney profession but who have been and remain potent arbiters of public taste all the same. Whether we choose to see the performer as a creative vessel of transmission from composer to audience, or as cog in a three-cog mechanism that can never work with only two cogs – and this may come down to the question of whether the art of music conveys a message or is pure activity – there is no known ramified art of music that is performer-less (a notion with which composers using electronic sound generation have indeed toyed, working interestingly against the grain of existing musical constraints).

The place of performance in the history of music changed in the 20th century with the onset of mechanical and acoustic, and afterwards electronic, recording (see Recorded sound).

We may be witnesses, the only direct witnesses there will ever be, to the beginning of the music of the future. Is it not easy to imagine that two thousand years or five thousand from now people will say that Western music really only got going properly during the twentieth century from which distant time there date the earliest proper sonic and visual records, following that strange ‘mute’ early period of music history that spanned the Greeks (of which we know essentially nothing), via medieval polyphony (of which we know a certain amount), to, say, Mahler, the last great pre-technological composer (of whose work and times we know much more but not, really, enough: none of his performances survive recorded, and there are just memories mythically handed on to indicate that he was one of the greatest-ever conductors)? (Dunsby, 1995, pp.15–16).

Musical performance no longer has a lost, silent history but impinges on current practice: we have precious little idea of how Blondel actually performed his songs and of the impression they made, but we have a very good idea of how Schoenberg performed his *Pierrot lunaire* since he conducted a sound recording of it in 1940, 28 years after its composition (now issued on CD) – a continuity that spans nearly the whole century. It is no surprise, then, that in the modern musical world, where we are becoming used to access to sonic history and its visual context, performance is being interrogated continually by the concept of ‘authenticity’ (Kivy, 1995), or by what it has been suggested should be called ‘authenticism’ (Taruskin, 1988), the consensus seeming to be that ‘historical authenticity alone will never lead us to a true revival without an admixture of a degree of our own artistic beliefs and instincts’ (Lang, 1997, p.179): we shall see how inherent in musical performance is the human agent to whom Lang refers.

### 3. Basic elements.

What has endured through the electronic revolution is what might be called the basic elements of musical performance: understanding, actuality and the ineffable – performance being an activity of sentient human beings, an activity that draws on the past and unfolds into the future (satisfying our eagerness to perceive what happens next), but one that exists in that inevitably mobile time called the present.

Understanding follows from sentience and is not restricted to ‘high’ art. Compare what a conductor is doing in London at a symphony concert with what a female Inuit is doing in northern Canada performing a largely unobserved but locally, socially significant throat game. The conductor is probably highly educated, having learnt a great deal about organology, music history, music theory and so on,

and earning large sums of money. Without having achieved a wide cultural assimilation, the conductor would be useless. The Inuit, on the other hand, knows very many more concepts of snow than the Londoner's, and has no concern about the history and theory of Western music. Yet the Inuit performer may actually be singing 'better' than the celebrated conductor is conducting. It is worth bearing this in mind when reading of how sophisticated the musical understanding of some performers needs to be: 'the interpreter, in order to produce more than just an idiosyncratic response, must rely on a combination of sound technical analysis and relevant musicological scholarship' (Cone, 1995, p.242); similarly, of conductors, 'however extensive the scope of his imaginative powers, his comprehension will remain limited unless he is adequately equipped with knowledge' (Scherchen, 1929; 1933, p.18). This may be true in our culture, but analysis and scholarship are of no direct 'emic' (or one might say 'native') concern to the Inuit performer. What 'understanding' really means, then, in musical performance in general, with an eye to other cultures, and to other forms of judged public exposure (see Green and Gallway, 1987, for an application of sport-training methods to musical performance), is informed intensity. The importance of this may be easiest to grasp by contemplating its opposite: where, in all the musics of the world, is there found communal music-making that is fundamentally uninformed and careless? Probably as near to nowhere as makes no difference.

Actuality is the reason that people flock to live performances, and again this is a transcultural fact. The technological revolution mentioned above has not altered this. There have been cases where live performance has been challenged, notoriously by the Canadian pianist Glenn Gould who in 1964, in his 30s, gave up public performance in favour of the recording studio ('no famous musician had ever done anything like it', Page, 1987, p.xii). However, the excitement of actually witnessing performance seems to be at the sharp end of musical practice, the authentic medium for informed intensity, and unlikely to disappear. This excitement surely lies to some extent in the stimulus to be found in any communal activity, there being something that touches our primeval sensibility in the 'buzz' of a crowd of people. Yet the excitement depends too on a feature proper to music, which is the nature of sound, for it remains true that any electronic reproduction of non-electronic Western music (and probably any non-electronic human music at all) is not in fact a reproduction but a mere simulacrum, an approximation. It is only in live performance, offering 'real' sound and a balance of the expected with the unexpected, that the capacity for plenitude in human musical experience can be fully satisfied (see Clynes, 1982, and Wallin, 1991). That is from the listening side, and it almost goes without saying that performers themselves, *pace* Gould and the unquestionable integrity and depth of his arguments about his own artistic personality, perform differently in public from how they do in private; and this difference between the public and the private is a common human experience in everyday life.

What is called above the 'ineffable' can be discussed under many different rubrics – artistry, charisma, inspiration, magic, star quality – none of which can ever quite capture a quality to which performers would nevertheless not aspire if they did not believe that audiences were acutely sensitive to it. This ineffable quality of musical performance at its highest is bound up with our tendency to believe that something may be 'perfect', and that this is the ideal of artistic experience (see Kant, 1790; 1987, pp. 79–84, although noting that unfortunately Kant believed music to be of only secondary importance), an ideal in delicate balance with the fact that real-time musical performance is inevitably contingent, always involving an element of risk (Dunsby, 1995, pp.12–14). Musical performance is held to have a special social power equal, according to Lévi-Strauss, to that of myth, both music and myth being 'instruments for the obliteration of time'; Lévi-Strauss goes so far as to ascribe truly magical powers to the results of musical performance during which he claims 'we enter into a kind of immortality' (Lévi-Strauss, 1964; 1970, p.16; see also Nattiez, 1993, pp.15–19).

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## 4. Learning to perform.

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The requirements of musical performance in Western culture are stringent. As with the learning of different languages, training is most likely to succeed when begun in childhood, usually between the ages of five and eight. One measure of what is required is provided by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, by far the world's largest assessment body for educational music-making of many different varieties, administering in the UK alone more than 300,000 individual examinations annually. It indicates some eight or nine years of almost daily practising as a prerequisite for reaching a level on one instrument or in singing that might qualify the student for tertiary-level study. Only after a further three or four years of intensive, full-time study combined with performing experience might a student be ready to (for example) take an audition for a semi-professional orchestra. The proportion of trained performers who go on to be able to work professionally is small, and the proportion who can become soloists is minute. As one source of professional advice to young performers puts it: 'On the realities of the music business ... unlike the business world, the amount of effort and time put in to master your craft in the arts does not pay off with predictable success. It is difficult to separate reality and fantasy when trying to be good enough to "make it"' (Dunkel, 1990, p.51). Thus professional performers are somewhat rare among the population. They also tend to be specialized; a case such as Mozart, considered by his father Leopold to have the potential to become as great a violinist as he was a pianist, is wholly exceptional. Amateur musical performance, on the other hand, is a huge human phenomenon, from Caribbean steel bands to Welsh choirs, from the Inuit throat games of the western north Atlantic coast and the northern Pacific Rim to the didgeridoo players of native Australia.

Learning musical performance to any significant level has always been arduous but also immensely satisfying, as might be expected of an activity that has demonstrably health-improving clinical effects (see Music therapy). Musicians throughout the centuries have written about performing, and it is from treatises on performance that our views on the interpretation of pre-20th-century music back to the Middle Ages are principally founded. However, it has always been agreed that one cannot effectively learn to perform, be it singing or playing, from a book, or from musical notation, given that 'the text carries no more than the minimal necessary information for a new performance. It is not the composition itself' (Boorman, 1999, p.406), and given that Lang's 'beliefs and instincts' are always in play, making each interpretation unique. Rather, the history of performance shows multi-generational chains of apprenticeship and pedagogy, for instance in religious orders, or in traditions linked to repertory and instrument (one fascinating case being the genealogy of the modern style of piano playing, which can be traced back largely to Beethoven through Czerny, Liszt and succeeding generations in both Europe and the USA). It would be pure speculation to suppose that no-one is likely to learn to perform from a computer, yet it can be asserted that technology has so far had little specific impact on becoming a performer, but for the profound effects mentioned above of musical recording.

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## See also

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Psychology of music, §IV, 2: Performance and skill

Philosophy of music, §IV, 2: Anglo-American philosophy of music, 1960–2000: Performance