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A term used in musical parlance with reference to the understanding of a piece of music. It has often been used primarily to signify the way in which notation should be interpreted, as in Arnold Dolmetsch's *The Interpretation of the Music of the XVII and XVIII Centuries* (London, 1915), and the more recent, similarly titled books on the same topics by Donington and Dart (and also the discussion in recent editions of this dictionary), that is, the study of Performing practice. The present article considers the more general use of the term, in particular the understanding of a piece of music made manifest in the way in which it is performed. (For discussion of the understanding of music by writers, critics or audiences, *see* Reception).

This concept of interpretation takes as starting-point the relevant definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'the rendering of a musical composition, according to one's conception of the author's idea'. It however may, and normally does, extend beyond the interpreter's conception of the author's idea and represent, rather, the interpreter's own idea of the music, possibly embodying understandings of what is taken to be latent in the score but also his or her own view of the best way of conveying that idea, in a particular performance, to the audience in the circumstances of that performance.

The notion of interpretation is relatively recent, and has acquired increasing importance because of the possibilities of comparison made available through recordings. It had no currency before 1800, largely because of its dependence on the idea of a canonical repertory that is performed by different artists; no such repertory developed until the early years of the 19th century, the period of travelling artists, large commercial centres with concert halls and opera houses, and the aesthetic changes that led to the rise in the status of the composer and in turn to the idea of 'great works' that needed to be explained, elucidated and 'understood'. It is not a coincidence that the rise of the conductor, as the person who would 'interpret' the piece of music, by conveying his understanding of it at each performance, took place at exactly this time. The idea of personal interpretation was especially fostered and encouraged by Richard Wagner and his view of Beethoven's music (*see* Conducting and Performance).

For music in the Romantic tradition, or music performed in the light of that tradition, the term 'interpretation' is appropriate, since one common use and meaning of the term applies when something is disclosed or revealed. Moreover, musical performance characterizes the work it is of, even if in a purely musical way, through the very process by which it realizes that same work: the work is given life through its performances and is usually accessed only through them. The listener's perception and understanding of the work is thus inevitably affected by the manner in which a piece is presented by its performer. To the extent that the listener's contact with the work is mediated through those acts of the performer by which the piece is embodied, it is appropriate to regard performances as interpretations of the works they are of. An interpretation presents a vision of a work, a perspective on it, through the manner in which it is played.

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The performing instructions added to and encoded in a score – along with unuttered ones that are understood, according to the performing conventions of the composer's time and provenance – carry the composer's instructions to the executant (*see* Tempo and expression marks). These always under-determine the full sonic detail of any actual performance, allowing the possibility of different renditions that are nevertheless equally faithful to the work. The performer inevitably must make many decisions concerning how the work is to be played. These apply not only at the micro level (affecting subtleties of attack, intonation, phrasing, dynamics, note-lengths and the like) but also at the macro level (concerning the overall articulation of the form, the expressive pattern etc.). The performer's interpretation is generated through such choices.

An interpretation is distinct from the performance in which it is embodied. Whereas a given performance is a unique event that might be reproduced (as by a recording) but cannot be re-enacted, an interpretation results from a series of decisions that can be repeated on different occasions of performance: different performances by a given player or conductor might embody the same or a very similar interpretation.

Most extended works lend themselves to a multiplicity of revealing, aesthetically rewarding interpretations; indeed, works are valued for their fecundity and flexibility in this regard. No single interpretation can be regarded as exclusively 'correct', although some may be reckoned incorrect, in some senses, if they manifestly defy the composer's instructions or understandings: this raises the issue of the propriety of deliberately (or otherwise) setting aside the composer's performing instructions for the sake of an interpretation sought by the performer. The composer's instructions do however leave many crucial decisions to the performer, which is why performing is recognized as a vital and creative act. Performances very different in sound may be fully and equally accurate in instancing the work they are of, and each of these might express a different interpretation of the piece in question. Interpretations are often compared, and one may be judged superior to another because it provides a clearer, more interesting vision of the work.

Such terms as 'vision', 'account' or 'perspective', as applied to performance interpretations, may however be misleading. While a description or depiction is distinct from its topic, an interpretation of a musical work is not entirely separate from the work it is of, because the work is embodied and instanced within the interpretation. Further, such an interpretation has no propositional content (or none that departs from any verbal text that the work might have); the interpretation does not say anything about the work. It reveals it in a particular, purely musical light, but without describing it.

Critical interpretations – interpretations not realized in performance but written or spoken, whether by a non-performer or the verbalization of a performer of his or her understanding of a work – are distinct from performance interpretations. The latter may be informed, inspired or influenced by the former; and the former might be suggested by the latter. There is however no logically tight relation between the two; the one may or may not be compatible or consistent with the other: that is, a particular performance interpretation does not imply or entail any particular critical interpretation, or vice-versa.

It is difficult to determine the distinction between interpretation and licence in performance. It cannot be maintained that a performer is interpreting X's work if it is not actually X's work that he or she is playing; and if the performer does not follow the composer's work-determinative directions, reading them and the musical score in the light of the conventions, styles and practices they presuppose, it may be argued that the identity and status of the performance is called into question. While it may, then, be

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argued that ignoring the composer's work-determinative instructions and understandings is not an interpretative option to be ranged alongside the performer's usual freedoms, it would clearly be absurd to exclude, say, the performance on the piano of works written for the harpsichord by Bach, or even arrangements of works for forces different from those intended by the composer, from the realm of interpretation: transcriptions are different from the works they are of, and a performance of a Bach work arranged by Busoni becomes an interpretation of Busoni that incorporates Busoni's interpretation of Bach and inevitably also something of the performer's own interpretation of Bach. The act of interpretation is then widened, involving not merely the interpretation of the composer's vision of the work but more complex layers, including those of intermediaries and historical traditions of performance and instruments, as well as the presuppositions of the performer and his or her audience (which are associated with their period and the circumstances of their musical experience).

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