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# On the Meanings and Media of the Art of Music Performance. A Few Semiotic Observations

*Apie muzikos atlikimo meno reikšmes bei terpes. Keletas semiotinių pastebėjimų*

## Abstract

Commonly, music performance is thought of as a one-way system of communication, running from the composer to the listener through the medium of the performer. Each performance is also said to attempt mediating between tradition and innovation, or between 'objective' fidelity to the score and 'subjective' performative expressiveness. In all cases, the composer's idea seems to be taken as a kind of absolute, and the performer is supposed to remain as 'transparent' as possible – all that matters are the composer's intentions and their effect on the listener. But, if we examine this phenomenon more closely, the question arises what and how does the performer actually mediate?

**The aim of the present article** is to pay attention to a specific phenomenon of the music world, namely, the performers of music – the personas and their art. A few interrelated topics are discussed, such as the notion of mediation, as applied to the art of music performance, and different media through which the art of music performance is disseminated; related to that is the consumption and marketing of nowadays' practices; in addition, the author takes a brief look at the traditions, or schools, which can also tell us certain things about the music performance art; and, finally, the performer's corporeality – i.e., the signs that are conveyed through the performer's bodily qualities and actions – is examined.

**Keywords:** performance, mediation, semiotic self, subjectivity, communication, consumer media, corporeality.

## Anotacija

Muzikos atlikimas paprastai yra suvokiamas kaip vienakryptė komunikacijos sistema nuo kompozitoriaus iki klausytojo, realizuojama per tarpininką – atlikėją. Taip pat manoma, jog kiekvienas atlikimas – tai dažniausiai vidurys tarp tradicijos ir inovacijos arba tarp „objektyvios“ ištikimybės partitūrai ir subjektyvaus atlikėjo išraiškingumo. Kai kompozitoriaus idėja suvokiama kaip tam tikras absoliutas ir kai tvirtai laikomasi nuostatos, kad vidinės muzikos reikšmės slypi išimtinai jos objektuose, paprastai teigiama, jog atlikimas neturi jokios įtakos kūrybiniam procesui, o atlikėjas tėra mediumas, su kurio pagalba muzikos kūrinys turi pasiekti savo galutinį tikslą – klausytoją. Pageidaujama, kad muzikos atlikėjas būtų kuo mažiau pastebimas: šioje komunikacijos grandinėje svarbios yra tik kūrėjo intencijos ir jų poveikis suvokėjui. Tačiau pasvarstykite, – kam ir kaip atlikėjai „tarpininkauja“?

Šio **straipsnio tikslas** – atkreipti dėmesį į savitą muzikos pasaulio fenomeną, t. y. į muzikos atlikėjus, į jų personas ir jų meną. Autorė tyrinėja keletą tarpusavyje susijusių temų: sąvoką muzikos atlikimo praktikoje, įvairias terpes, kuriose sleidžiasi atlikimo meno prasmės, šioms dienoms būdingus atlikimo meno vartojimo, jo komercializavimo ypatumus. Glaustai aptariama, kuo atlikimo menui svarbios tradicijos arba mokyklos, taip pat – kuo reikšminga atlikėjo kūniškoji raiška, t. y. ženklai, kuriuos klausytojas gali suvokti iš atlikėjo fizinių savybių bei veiksmų.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** atlikimas, medijavimas, semiotinis „aš“, atlikėjo subjektyvumas, komunikacija, vartotojų medijos, kūniškoji raiška.

## Introduction: Performer as Mediator

Having overcome long years of being neglected or approached with a certain degree of scepticism, the art of music performance has now firmly gained its room in the mainstream musicology and its various branches. However, even though considered one of the respectable academic fields, the research on the performance practices is usually restricted to the traditional study of printed texts, scores, or instruments as primary sources of interest. Even the study of such important evidence of music performance art as sound recordings, although becoming more and more popular among certain academic environments, is still treated as some sort of supplement to the 'serious' research among the others.

This is hardly surprising, given that an essential concept of the Western art music since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is that of the *musical work*. When we think or speak about the performing of music, we rarely conceive the act of musical performance as possessing any meanings in its own right. This 'secondary creation', performance of music, is usually understood (if taken into account at all) as being nothing more than an approximate and imperfect presentation of the work that is being performed. The idea that music's inner meaning resides specifically in its objects leads to further convictions, such as that musical performance plays actually no part in the creative process; it can only be the medium through which the once-created, isolated, and autonomous musical work has to pass in order to reach its goal, the listener. Thus, a musical performance is thought

of as a one-way system of communication, running from composer to listener through the medium of the performer. As Nicholas Cook puts it, according to the language we traditionally use to describe performance in its specifically musical sense, 'we do not have "performances" but rather "performances of" pre-existing, Platonic works. The implication is that a performance should function as a transparent medium, "expressing", "projecting", or "bringing out" only what is already "in" the work, with the highest performance ideal being a selfless *Werktreue*' (Cook 2001: 244). Each performance is also said to attempt mediating between tradition and innovation, or between 'objective' fidelity to the score and 'subjective' performative expressiveness. In all cases, the composer's idea seems to be taken as a kind of absolute, and the performer is supposed to remain as 'transparent' as possible – all that matters are the composer's intentions and their effect on the listener.

There is one concept that has been mentioned here repeatedly and that deserves a particular interest within the framework of this article, namely, that of *mediation*. As making music and listening to it were not such a long time ago the social activities with rather strong religious or ceremonial connotations, it is little wonder that the music of the Western classical tradition still bears the imprint of the Christian culture from which it has initially grown. What is more interesting is the fact that even nowadays more than one study dealing with performance practices begins with a sentence similar to this: 'this book is about a musical trinity – the composer, the performer, and the listener'<sup>1</sup>. Up to date, musical concepts and, especially, the actors of the musical world are treated as somewhat 'sacred'. The concept of the *medium*, constantly applied to the performer, also has the same 'holy' roots that are inherited from the Romanticist tradition. (The composer is the *medium* as well, just one of a 'higher rate', someone between the Holy Spirit and the lesser mortals.)

This article presents a less sentimental approach to the music performance phenomenon. While encountering the assumptions mentioned above, the following questions naturally arise: What and how does the performer actually *mediate*? What possibilities or, maybe, limitations does the contemporary musicians' community offer to him, with all the industrial society mechanisms involved? Putting aside the complex and manifold relationship that exists between the composer and the performer, this article focuses instead on the performance practices as such, and the different types of media in which they exist. Here, I suggest that the performer is a self-sufficient figure of a current musical life, at least sufficient enough to talk about this phenomenon leaving aside a musical work for a while and concentrating

on the two last figures of the communication chain, namely those of the performer and the listener. One must have in mind, also, that there exist many other members of this chain nowadays, such as musical managers, producers, recording engineers, etc. Thus, an emancipation of performance art from the paradigmatic concepts is possible by examining what constitutes the performer's 'semiotic self', what meanings the performers produce in their creative work, and also current cultural constructions in which those meanings are flourishing: various aspects of media and modes of performance, institutional embedding, and different forms of performer-listener communication processes, such as a concert hall or sound recordings, among others.

### 1. The Performer-Oriented Approach

There are so many clichés of thinking deeply rooted in the Western art music tradition that it would be easier to start the performer-oriented approach from the traditions that do not rely on the notation, such as jazz, for instance, if we still want to stay in the Western music social practices. As Roger Scruton says, the jazz performer is, in a sense, also the composer, or one part of a corporate composer. But to describe free improvisation in that way is to assume that composition is the paradigmatic case, and improvisation secondary. However, it would be truer to the history of music, and, as Scruton claims, truer to our deeper musical instincts, 'to see things the other way round: to see composition as born from the writing-down of music, and from the subsequent transformation of the scribe from recorder to creator of the thing he writes' (Scruton 1999 [1997]: 439).

Given that *music as work* replaced *music as event* only during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there are more writers who offer such a music making-oriented point of view. Christopher Small goes even so far as to suggest that 'performance does not exist in order to present musical works, but, rather, musical works exist in order to give performers something to perform' (Small 1998: 8). For him, music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do. It is of special interest to read how Small, in his rather provocative book called *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, proposes a framework for understanding all *musicking*<sup>2</sup> as 'a human activity, to understand not just how but why taking part in a musical performance acts in such complex ways on our existence as individual, social and political beings' (Small 1998: 12).

A performance-orientated approach to music history might perhaps attempt to see back through the period which Lydia Goehr has called an 'era of the work concept'<sup>3</sup>, and try to approach an earlier understanding of

performance as the final stage, the *execution*, of the overall process of making music. Obviously, so far music history has been dealing with the concept of the autonomous, isolated musical work. Some attempts to make the kind of 'revisionist' history, however, are noticeable recently, and this raises some hopes that it is possible indeed to begin to value the autonomous character of the performance (as raised by the Romantic virtuosity), just as the autonomous nature of the musical work has been long valued. In the recent studies the discourses about performance practices are provided with completely new aspects that have never been attributed to this field before. From this we can see that the phenomenon of musical performance clearly has its potential to emancipate from the common work-praising approaches to the music history. As Jim Samson suggests, the 'so-called "interpreting" is less about mediating performer and composer than about mediating performer and performance traditions; there is maybe a larger point behind that, where we might say that interpreting is really about finding a balance between a liberal realisation of the self and a contractual acknowledgement of collective norms and inherited knowledge; <...> Whereas in most cases the composer's idea is not even available to us, we might let ourselves to assume that the performers don't really uncover original meanings when they interpret; instead they create new ones' (Samson 2005: an unpublished lecture).

## 2. Different Media for Performance Practices

Relevant to such a performer-oriented approach is taking a brief look at some of the institutions through and in which the Western classical music tradition is disseminated, performed, and listened to today.

### 2.1. A Concert Hall

It is possible to demonstrate what kind of questions may arise of a performance by examining such an important event of the Western musical culture as a piano recital, or a symphony concert – as they might take place in any concert hall. If we try to reflect upon the messages that are being sent and received here, we might learn not only the meanings of the musical works that are being performed there, but also the implications of the event, i.e. the concert itself.

Musical performances of all kinds have always been events to which people go, at least in part, to see and be seen; it is part of the meaning of the event (Small 1998: 23). In the ceremony that is to take place in the modern Philharmonic Hall or Opera House, however, socializing and listening are kept strictly separate from each other

and are allocated separate spaces (the foyer, for instance, in contrast to the auditorium, is a place exclusively to socialize). This interesting ritual also has its insiders and outsiders – the socializing behaviour of a foreigner is very much different from the one who belongs to the community of the place.

Now when we enter the auditorium, it is worth mentioning that the modern concert hall is built on the assumption of musical performance as a system of one-way communication, from composer to listener through the medium of the performers. That being so, it is natural that the auditorium should be designed in such a way as to project to the listeners as strongly and as clearly as possible the sounds that the performers are making with the stage being the centre of everyone's attention concentrated (Small 1998: 26). Auditoriums do not allow any communication with the outside world; commonly, there are no windows through which light or sounds from outside might enter. Paradoxically, the live event is often said to be able to bring the performers and spectators into a community. This view, in Philip Auslander's words, 'misunderstands the dynamic of performance, which is predicated on the distinction between performers and spectators' (Auslander 1999: 56). Indeed, both performers and listeners in the concert hall are not only physically isolated from the world of their everyday lives, but, rather, they are isolated from each other by common norms of ritualised behaviour.

Quite often, concerts are arranged in difficult, remote places, and recitals are played by candlelight or otherwise emphasizing the oneness of the event. Here we might remember once again the religious connotations of the musical practices, especially of their live presentations. Of special value to the consumers and investigators of musical performance there seem to be traditional mystifications of the event, as opposed to the 'worldly' mediated environment<sup>4</sup>. In addition to this, as Eero Tarasti writes in his *Existential Semiotics*, 'religiosity has often meant a kind of isolation, denial of the world. Marginality has been raised into a method. Setting oneself outside has become a new idea in the present "ecstasy" of communication. <...> The new ideal of an artist, composer or performer is a person who avoids publicity and negates it'. However, as Tarasti rightly observes, we can guess that 'it is precisely the negation of publicity which has become the source of a new kind of still greater publicity' (Tarasti 2000: 93). Indeed, we might mention a number of the artists, composers and performers alike (Arvo Pärt, Glenn Gould, or Vladimir Horowitz, to list only a few), who have become even more desirable after their apparent retirement from the public eye.

Yet, although being a kind of axis upon which the world of music revolves, the concert hall is by no means

the only medium for the event of performing music to take place; and this practice with its rituals has even been heavily criticized by some artists. Probably the best known opponent of the concert hall and the public concert life in general was the prominent Canadian pianist Glenn Gould. The artist, who literally had the world at his feet, gave up public performance, devoting his musical career to recording LPs, and working in radio and television. He saw public performance as reminiscent of a gladiatorial contest where artists slug it out with the public. For Gould, it was the technologies that came to replace a live concert. He believed firmly that the influence of recordings upon the future would affect not only the performer and concert impresario but composer and technical engineer, critic and historian as well. It was most important to him that it should affect the listener to whom all of this activity is ultimately directed.

## 2.2. Sound Recordings

'A new kind of listening – listening in private to a performer recorded far away and years ago – so completely severs music from its social context, that one may reasonably doubt that the experience of music has remained the same since the invention of the gramophone' (Scruton 1997/1999: 438). Indeed, as many theorizing and practicing musicians have been repeatedly observing, new important aesthetic effects stem from this physical separation of listening to performing. On the one hand, the performance has become disembodied and transportable, thus altering significantly ways of listening. On the other, musicians were able for the first time to hear themselves the way others hear them, and this chance for 'self-consciousness' has undoubtedly contributed to some great changes of the nature of interpretation. There is perhaps no real necessity for the music-lover to know how the music is actually recorded. Nevertheless, when taken seriously, recordings can provide one with the serious clues of how to judge the music performances that are on them. Being themselves a complex technological, musical and social phenomenon, sound recordings are a matter of great relevance to the ways in which the art of musical performance is both being practised and perceived.

A concert hall, as it has been shown above, is already rather unnatural environment of human relationships. Even more so, a sound recording is a kind of non-existent, virtual space. This is an artificially created medium of communication, where only some of the signs – sounds of music – are selectively left. The pauses, for instance, are cleared out: there are usually no sounds left of the performer's breathing, coughing or turning of

pages; also artificial is the duration between the movements of the musical work, let alone the possibilities of manipulating the recording itself – making of separate episodes, voices, etc. As Robert Philip observes, 'the illusion has become more complete as sound-reproduction has improved, but illusion was always the point <...>' (Philip 2004: 26).

This kind of virtual world provides a person with many possibilities for one's isolation. One type of such 'virtual' privacy is the usage of one's walkman across the ears, by means of music that only this person can hear, being totally isolated from one's surroundings. Similarly, with technologies one is able to create one's own ritual staying home and listening to the music there. This, by the way, was a dream of Gould who, speaking about the *well-tempered listener*, thought that this is the future of the musical practices, when the listener can create the meanings he wants by technically manipulating whatever possible parameters of music he is listening to. Interestingly enough, most of what Gould dreamt about has actually become the routine reality of the popular culture (but not art music, to which the imagination of the artist was projected), still, some aspects of his visions might indeed be also noticed in the rituals of listening to the classical music sound recordings.

Thus, a crucial mutation of communication between the performer and the listener was embodied by the technologies. It was the loss of the authentic interaction, which was instead overshadowed by technical perfection. If the communication chain of composer-listener were enough, then sound recording practice would seem to be the best solution: it is only you and music then. But what is missing here is the human contact of the live performance which produces the 'vibrations' mentioned by many artists, 'a type of collective emotion' which is lost to the recording. Our musical experience becomes in this type of listening predominantly what Pierre Schaeffer called *acousmatic*: sounds that one hears without seeing their source; music has become literally disembodied (Chanan 1995: 128).

If we talk about the live music-making and recordings, the balance between these two types of music consumption has changed radically over the last century, both for musicians and for audiences. Most people today obtain most of their experience of music from recordings. By the same token, professional musicians are accustomed to making CDs, and the reputations of the most famous of them rest heavily on their recordings (Philip 2004: 47). Even though in the realm of classical music the live concert still remains the authentic measure of one's talent and success, there is no question by now that live performance and mediatized forms compete for audiences in the cultural marketplace, and that

mediatized forms have gained the advantage in that competition (Auslander 1999: 6). As Philip Auslander puts it, 'it is absolutely clear that our current cultural formation is saturated with, and dominated by, various mass media representations' (Auslander 1999: 1). And, once recorded and put on the shelf together with other media representations, musical performance becomes one of the cultural commodities.

### 2.3. How Performers Present Their Selves: The Consumer Media

The world of music performance is surrounded by all the consumer media, brand-making mechanisms: competitions as a means to find out the new stars, programs for a concert season, concert advertisements in press and media, music critics (another important medium!), program notes, musicians' magazines, documentaries or semi-fiction films, etc. It seems that together with the sacralized, ethic attitude there is also a kind of pragmatic approach existing, if not prevailing sometimes, in the contemporary musician's society. Nothing is considered as inappropriate anymore.

If we remember the concept of a *mediator*, then by what means is the performer 'mediating', communicating nowadays? How do performers present themselves, and to whom actually do they address their messages? Curiously enough, we will face more often than not the visual artefacts which serve to promote the sonic art and its practitioners. The visual culture of our days allows putting the music played, both its records and live performances, on the same shelf together with photographs and magazine articles: these are all products of the commercial apparatus of the music industry. Clear comparisons can be drawn with the popular culture, the representations of which can sometimes upstage the music itself. (This must be now understood without any negative connotations, although the commercializing of the classical music will probably never be perceived as something positive by its purists.) The things can be more liberal in the popular art though. As Philip Auslander puts it referring to a pivotal role of visualization in the pop culture, 'if rock music can be seen as a form worthy of aesthetic appreciation, despite (or because of?) its industrial origins and commercial character, the visual culture that surrounds the music and its live performance must be seen as contributing to that aesthetic experience, not merely as a systematic misrepresentation of the music whose sole purpose is the cynical promotion of an attractive illusion' (Auslander 1999: 65). I want to suggest here that whatever aesthetic or ethical evaluations may arise in some particular cases of the art music environment, the performer-oriented

approach must take into consideration that the new meanings which performers create while interpreting others' music can be and are related not only with the music performed.

What is the musical message of the pianist, a truly remarkable virtuoso, when he demonstrates his impressive musculature in the picture that his public relations assistant sends to the organizers of the festival? What professional skills are represented in the photo of a beautiful half-naked violin player having a sea bath with the instrument gracefully resting in her hands? And in what terms actually should we compare those artists with the purely ascetic ones, such like Sviatoslav Richter, Grigory Sokolov or Ivo Pogorelich, or with Glenn Gould, passionately creating TV and radio broadcasts? They are all so different, and the only means in common that they have are their instruments and music<sup>5</sup>. But are the musical sounds really the only means of the performer's communication, and is it only the composer's intentions that the performers 'mediate'? It seems that of no less importance for their personalities, their socially defined roles, and for everything that takes place outside the concert hall or even within, are the signals sent via their public or on-stage behaviour, performers' outfit, verbal communication, books written, myths created. Obviously, most of them have a long time ago abandoned the romantic conception of the artist as an unworldly creature starving in the attic and following the divine precepts. Rather, they would not mind being looked after by an apt PR, and, together with the music played, to be noticed themselves.

Thus, there are a number of the factors that determine the career of today's performer. Culture's dependence on the market is also shown by the fact that the real starting point of the career of any pianist is considered usually the debut in New York, and the 'real' value of his or her art is suggested by the CDs issued by the best companies. In the contemporary competitive musical world, it is necessary to be a winner of one or more international competitions, to find a good manager, to have a firm financial support and a good contract with the recording company. Curiously enough, even considering all this, the music schools of the whole world are overloaded with the ones wanting to become music performers.

### 3. Boundaries of the National Schools

If we mention schools, this is yet another important aspect of what a musical performance is able to communicate to the listener. In any field, the notion and influence of the school, or tradition, have changed over the course of time; these concepts are vanishing due

to the increasing standardization and general globalisation of culture. Can we still make any reasonable distinctions between the individual or even the collective styles in this context where national and cultural diversities tend to interrelate and overlap? A gradual assimilation of individual styles and identities in the art of musical performance that started with the invention of gramophone is now especially relevant. It is surely more difficult to talk about the notion of the 'school', when an access to any kind of information has so significantly increased in comparison with the times when the only means of absorbing someone else's knowledge, or getting acquainted with a certain tradition, was a live interaction. Nowadays, the favourable conditions for the traditionalism of the musical performance art are provided not only by sound recordings, but by all kinds of multiplied information. A significant penetration of the media to musical life helps to create the stereotypes in the minds of the listeners and potential performers.

At this point, we perhaps need to clarify what a 'school' is. I would propose using the definition offered by Donatas Katkus, according to whom the first constituent of a school is 'a master, a concrete person possessing his or her knowledge and abilities, taste and aesthetic views as a certain whole which is continually repeated when teaching every individual student'; the second – 'a school as a system where not one but many people draw on the similar principles, standards, aesthetic norms, tastes and fashions'; and the third constituent would define 'tastes or aesthetic norms of the period, or, speaking in terms of the current practices, it would be a commercial image of music-making, i. e. a popular cliché' (Katkus 1997: 176). Thus, the concept of 'a school' means here a kind of type of standardization related to the style and the way of playing technique, gathering of experience. This way it becomes a somewhat unifying factor in a rather pluralistic panorama of the several past ages of performance art. However, facing an increasing globalization of culture, the concept of 'school' becomes not only a unifying, but also, or even rather, the factor that helps to preserve a country's specific cultural identity<sup>6</sup>. In any case, belonging to a certain school embraces a socially determined identity of an artist, which, among other things, consists of preestablished social codes and stereotypes of the given performance tradition ('school'). What was the evolution of this important notion through the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

Many researchers observe that the schools of playing were very much a feature of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century playing. Due to the comparative isolation of both musicians and audiences as compared with today, styles in different countries were quite distinct and diverse, and we can still hear those differences in recordings of the performers

of the different countries from the 1920s and 1930s. The ways of playing in different countries, in accordance with different traditions or schools, used to be strongly contrasted with each other. Today, however, when recordings are available across the world, and musicians of all nationalities sit in orchestras far from the countries where they were born, styles and approaches have become, to a large extent, globalised, and this makes the musical world a very different place. The diversity becomes much less pronounced once one gets into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is now very narrow indeed except among outstandingly individual players (Philip 2004: 23).

As one of the most active scholars in the field, Robert Philip, notices, that this informality and diversity was welcomed a hundred years ago is due partly to the fact that people did not have the perfection of edited recordings as a yardstick. But it was also the case that each concert was a unique and unrepeatable event. In Philip's words: 'they looked different, they walked differently to the platform, turned to the audience differently – Kreisler greeting them like their favourite uncle, Rachmaninoff scowling as if the last thing he wanted to do was to play the piano' (Philip 2004: 22). On the early recordings we indeed can hear something of how diverse they were in the days before the globalisation and homogenisation of styles.

Although the issue of the school is by its nature rather complicated, yet the distinction between the schools became vaguer by the 1940s. The younger generations still learned valuable things from distinguished teachers, but with their tendency of listening to as many diverse recorded performances as possible, the element of any traditional method or style grew weaker and weaker with every successive generation. The general globalisation of performance through recordings and other means of standardizing the culture have borne controversial fruit. On the one hand, professional standards across the world have risen to an extraordinary extent over the last fifty years. On the other hand, there is great pressure for musicians who wish to succeed in the international market to model themselves on these international standards. Nobody wants now to be successful only locally, and therefore local traditions have gradually become eroded. It is to be mentioned, however, that even in the context of this general 20<sup>th</sup>-century's trend towards uniformity of style, the term of the 'school', especially in case of the old, prominent traditions, such as Russian, French, German, or Italian, is still widely used. Performers that in one way or another are able to situate themselves in a certain distinct professional genealogy usually are very eager to emphasize the importance of this aspect of their artistic practice.

#### 4. Body is a Message: On the Physical Side of Performance

So far, mostly the so-to-say outer part of the world of musical performance has been discussed here, that is, the phenomena and processes that happen somewhere *around* the performers of music, but not *in* them. Of no lesser importance, however, is a somewhat more contiguous dimension, i. e. the meanings that are conveyed directly through the performers *themselves*.

As it was mentioned above, the 'sacred' roots can be observed in nearly everything that is related to the act of music performance. It will not come as a surprise then if I point out that there is an evident tendency in the Western culture to regard art music as a kind of mental, 'abstract' type of human creative activity. Even in the field of music performance, which apparently is intrinsically related to one's technical, or physical, abilities, the values mostly referred to are spirituality, creativity, or intellectuality, among others. In the mind-body relation, the latter is generally thought of as a mere adjunct to the 'higher' realm of the former. However, a semiotic theory has the advantage of not forcing any unwarranted separations between the 'spiritual' and the 'physical', nor limiting itself only to the cerebral side of musical performance.

One of the possible ways to analyse musical performance in semiotic terms is to pay attention to the relation of mind and body in performing music and to acknowledge that a significant part of the performer's identity stems precisely from his bodily signs. Referring mainly to the art of piano practitioners, I will try to discuss a few aspects of the corporeal identity of a performer as important carriers of the meanings of the performance itself. Let us begin with several considerations of a more general character.

##### 4.1. Subjectivity of a Performer: A Semiotic Self

Many of the authors in the semiotic field have been dealing with the concept of Semiotic Self, which consists usually of two aspects: an inward and an outward side within the subject. Among these dualities, we have, for instance, the 'I' (self as such) and 'Me' ('I' in the social context), as used by George Herbert Mead; *Moi* and *Soi* by the French authors (Paul Ricoeur, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Fontanille); Controlling, deeper self *versus* Critical self by Charles Sanders Peirce; or the Bergsonian differentiation between the 'superficial' and the 'deep' ego. This concept is now increasingly used as applied to the art of a performer, and it can be considered as yet another potential broadening of the discourses on music

performance practices and the new meanings created by them.

Talking about the art of music performance, we assume that each interpreter of music has one or a few characteristic features, a kind of 'semantic gesture', which dominates his or her interpretation and distinguishes it from other performances. However, having his or her immanent personal qualities, one is nevertheless influenced deeply by all the social and cultural background that forms the social identity of an artist. Moreover, a person can accept only some certain parts of the environmental norms, and refuse, or resist, the others. Thus, the continual dialogue is established.

Naomi Cumming, who has offered profound reflections upon what might constitute a performer's 'identity', talks in this context about – again – 'an outward and an inward face'. On the outward side, it is the perceptible result of an individual's patterned choices within a social domain, those characteristic manners of forming sound or gesture that distinguish him or her from the 'crowd' – a personal 'style' (Cumming 2000: 10). Perceiving the 'selfhood' as an intrinsically social, interactive, and mobile experience, Cumming writes:

<...> It is when I become aware of the 'outward' face of my musical identity, as a pattern of actions, that I can begin to question how I am constrained in my performance. What is the ideology that governs me? What is the domain of my choice? How free am I? These are musical questions, and yet they are an allegory of broader questions about the expressivity of social life. Noticing those sounds I 'cannot' make, I begin to gain awareness of those scarcely articulate 'beliefs' that present themselves as inhibitions to a convincing performance of a work. I see that my musical inhibitions and social ones are not entirely unconnected. The 'outward' identity, of choices audible in sound, reflects a pattern of belief, desire, and inhibition that constitutes an 'inner' self – what it is to be 'me' (Cumming 2000: 11).

The semiotic model that is employed in this article combines both – the inner self and the outward identity, the spheres of performer's *Moi* and *Soi*, the individual and collective subjectivities. The crucial importance goes here to the code, or principle, of the *Me-Tone* (*Ich-Ton*), borrowed from Jakob von Uexküll. *Me-Tone* of a particular organism (when applied to the musical field, it can be a composer, a composition, or, for purposes of the article, a performer) determines its characteristics – the identity and individuality.

The scheme in Figure 1 is elaborated from Eero Tarasti's semiotic square of a Performer's subjectivity and his four logical cases in light of Hegel and Fontanille<sup>7</sup>. It serves as an illustration of the individuality and standards underlying the creative work of a performer:

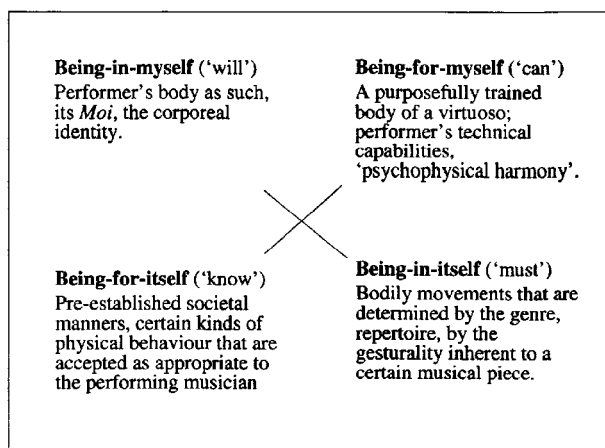


Figure 1

1. *Being-in-myself* (Greimasian modality of 'will') means an inner identity (*Moi*) of a performer. This part might include a personal (family) background, tastes or religiousness if any. It also encompasses the person's musicality, together with a distinctive 'performer's charm', or charisma.

2. *Being-for-myself* ('can') embraces the performer's technical capabilities, 'psychophysical harmony'. Virtuosity, corporeal reality, a certain quality of sound, realized in performance, are also included into 'being-for-myself'.

3. *Being-for-itself* ('know'), or the *Soi* of a performer, consists of pre-established social codes, stereotypes of the given performance tradition ('school'); usually, according to the standards, some manners of playing are rated better than others.

4. *Being-in-itself* ('must') means the composer's intentions as put in the score, the work's immanent modalities. It is something called out by the requirements of a musical work – the subjective potentialities of its style which, if absent, would not allow the work to 'live'.

Having established that, how could one apply this scheme to the corporeal identity of a performer, to the outwardly visual and innerly somatic elements of the music performance art?

#### 4.2. Corporeality of a Performer

As Cumming points out, although a listener's attention, when playing a CD, may not be directed to bodily actions, the impression of a 'personality' can be gained subliminally through the markers in sound of what seem to be the performer's characteristic physical responses (Cumming 2000: 22). These characteristic bodily responses of a performer will be discussed here as determined by several factors: the capabilities and limitations

of the performer's body as such, and also by the sort of 'behavioural codes', the sets of norms and standards that exist in the interpretation schools and concert practices of the Western musical performance and strongly regulate them.

The scheme that will be employed in doing that will be the aforementioned semiotic square of the performer's subjectivity. Here, the four angles of the square have slightly changed (see Figure 2):

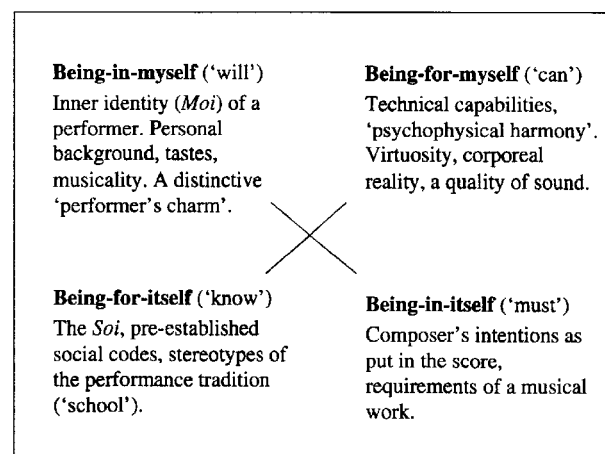


Figure 2

1. *Being-in-myself* denotes a performer's body as such, its *Moi*, the corporeal identity;

2. *Being-for-myself* is a purposefully trained body of a virtuoso that is seeking to master a certain musical instrument; the performer's technical capabilities, 'psychophysical harmony';

3. *Being-for-itself*, or the *Soi* of a performer, consists of pre-established societal manners, certain kinds of physical behaviour that are accepted as appropriate to the performing musician;

4. *Being-in-itself* means the bodily movements that are determined by the genre, repertoire, by the gesturality inherent in a certain musical piece.

Now, we must keep in mind that corporeal identity of all the performers encompasses all four angles of the square, but perhaps, in the individual cases, some features are more distinct than the others. Thus, while examining each of these four logical cases with the examples of particular artists, I will only refer to the most revealing instances, instead of claiming that some artist possesses only this feature and not the others. Let us start a more thorough discussion from the modality of 'Will'.

First of all, my assumption is that not only certain messages are conveyed through the performer's body, in this way communicating to the listener or spectator,



but also that the body itself *is* a message. Many times we might have asked ourselves, what is it that distinguishes a performance with optimal lightness and grace, or, with concentration and deepness, from one which is acceptably competent and yet somehow ordinary, which apparently lacks nothing and yet lacks something? In terms of physicality, it might be just a slight difference of shaping one's gestures, and this slight difference brings a huge difference in how this performance communicates and affects. In other words, the apparently insignificant transformations that a certain performer brings to a piece of music using his bodily gestures as a means of conveying the message provide this piece with the important qualitative changes.

It is a performer's body as such that creates the primary *charme*, as Vladimir Jankélévitch calls it, the identity and charisma of an artist. How else, if not in terms of their personal identity, could we define the gestures and facial expressions of Lang Lang, flat and elastic fingers of Vladimir Horowitz, huge hands of Sergej Rachmaninov and Ivo Pogorelich, an all-body motion, singing and conducting of Glenn Gould, singing and standing up of Keith Jarrett, a generally still posture of Radu Lupu, or purposefully hypnotizing looks at the audience by such artists as Gidon Kremer or Yo-Yo Ma?

Talking about more 'mundane' issues, certain performative movements depend also on simply physical requirements of the act of performance itself: the weight must be delivered to the hand from the spine or the belly, one has to achieve a completely relaxed and yet concentrated wrist, etc. Still, these movements usually differ as related to the particularities of a given body. One performer has larger hands, therefore, she/he is shaping his or her gestures accordingly; another is able to produce a deeper, more rotund sound because of the bigger weight of the arm and hand, etc.

Moreover, as the instrument for a performer is some kind of extension of his or her body, I would suggest discussing the bodily relation with the instrument in terms of the *Moi* as well. Performance encompasses a physical relationship of artist and instrument – a great deal of sensory perception is involved in the act of musicianship, and achieving a good 'relationship' with one's instrument is a crucially important thing. It is much easier to do this for the string players, but it seems that some of the piano geniuses, who could afford having their personal pianos, knew that as well. Therefore, Josef Hofmann would demand a narrower keyboard, Vladimir Horowitz – a very shallow keyboard that would allow him playing with the flat fingers and achieving a fantastically light *pianissimo*; Glenn Gould needed to feel the illusion of a vibration while playing – for that, he would carry one of his own pianos where the keys were

made more distant from each other than usually. All of these peculiarities were determined, surely, by the corporeal characteristics of the individual players: what is good for one would be not acceptable for the other.

And, continuing the issue of the instrument, we enter the realm of 'Can' modality. Each of them having their individual bodily nature, the performers have been taught since the early training days the specific elements of mastering their instrument. Countless scales and exercises are designed for that purpose, not to mention the more difficult tasks of the pedagogical system – to teach one the ways of using the natural weight of an arm, proper manners of sitting that would help the body to relax, and so on. Thus, one can say that the body of a performer has to get accustomed to the profession chosen. Surely, some professions are more demanding than the others – a singer is a supreme case here, but, through the constant repetitions of the same movements, instrumentalists too experience rather significant changes of their physical qualities in the course of their careers. Certain learned gestures or movements are repeated over and over again under the same circumstances and in a manner as similar as possible – no doubt, this leads to some kind of 'adopting' these gestures, to making oneself master of them as if they were the performer's own and, in the successful cases, reaching a sort of 'psychophysical harmony'.

Certainly, not only the virtuosic side of the performance, but also, for instance, creating 'a beautiful tone', through a well-balanced physical adjustment to the instrument, is central to creating the impression of a musical personality. The 'sonic self', to borrow the term by Naomi Cumming, is thus conceived (Cumming 2000: 22–23). However, what counts as the 'beautiful', or 'natural' character is determined by the performance tradition. The performers' body is entrained, or habituated, to produce a certain kind of sound, according to the tradition they follow (Cumming 2000: 29).

Thus, whereas the two aforementioned aspects ('Will' and 'Can') were related to the inner identity, the *Moi* of a performer, the other two are from the outer field. As already mentioned above, the *Soi* part of the dichotomy of the semiotic self consists of pre-established societal manners, certain kinds of behaviour that are accepted as appropriate to the performing musician. Alan P. Merriam writes in his *Anthropology of Music*:

As there are specific kinds of physical behavior concerned with the manipulation of voice and instruments, there also seem to be characteristic bodily attitudes, postures, and tensions, and it is possible that such bodily characteristics can be correlated with other behavioral elements to reveal significant facts about music making (Merriam 1964: 108).



complicated affair than it is assumed by those who concentrate their attention exclusively on the musical work and on its effect on the listener. If, however, we widen the circle of our attention to take in the entire set of relationships that constitutes a performance, we shall see that its primary meanings have to do with much more than just the piece that is being played or what the composer has put as his instructions. As Audronė Žukauskaitė writes while trying to define the essence of the post-modern art, 'first of all, the work of art is not a medium, carrying a certain message <...>; the work of art is *both* the medium and the message: all the information, necessary to understand it, can be found within itself' (Žukauskaitė 2005: 136). If we shift this insight into the performance practices, we see that it is equally relevant for the discourse about the contemporary music performers.

The aim of this article was to demonstrate that there is a rather broad spectrum of possible media for the performer nowadays to generate the meanings she/he wants to. Curiously enough, some of them can be considered as rather closed, isolated if not virtual, whereas the others are not individual at all but highly social. Moreover, some of the meanings are not something external, but, rather, these are the signs and messages that can reveal many things about the art of music performance through the bodies of the artists themselves. And all of these meanings should not be separated from the meaning of the sounds, as well as from the understanding of the overall activity of performing or consuming music.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This particular quotation is borrowed from David Barnett's book *The Performance of Music: a Study of Terms of the Pianoforte* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1972, p. 1), although it is by no means a unique sentence to be found in the literature on performance practices.

<sup>2</sup> Small proposes the following definition for the word *musicking*: 'To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practising, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing' (Small 1998: 9).

<sup>3</sup> The approach of the 19<sup>th</sup> century towards the musical work is thoroughly examined in Lydia Goehr's *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works. An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> The same is observed by Philip Auslander in his fine study *Liveness. Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, where he expresses his impatience with the traditional, 'unreflective' assumptions about the live event being more 'real' than the mediatized one (the latter conceived as a somewhat artificial reproduction of the real). Talking about the live theatre performance, Auslander quotes such commonly used clichés as 'aura', 'the magic of live theatre', the 'energy' supposedly existing between performers

and spectators in a live event, and the 'community' that live performance is said to create among performers and spectators.

<sup>5</sup> A particularly interesting phenomenon is the marketability of certain performers. Obviously, some of the artists possess more of a personal charisma than the others, and again the dissemination mechanisms come to help them.

<sup>6</sup> Having in mind, for instance, Lithuania's complicated political life during the past centuries, it is very interesting to investigate and emphasize the means by which Lithuanian musicians have absorbed so many different influences from the great neighbouring musical cultures and yet have retained some intrinsic qualities of their own musical identity.

<sup>7</sup> For a broader explanation of these philosophical concepts see Tarasti's *Existential Semiotics* and, especially, his *Existential and Transcendental Analysis of Music* (both listed in Bibliography).

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