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Contemporary performance practice and tradition

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ABSTRACT: The interpretation of complex modernist music demands rhythmic and dynamic and pitch accuracy, but it also often displays a significant lack of expression – a tradition adhering closely to the text. However, players find it difficult to suppress an impulse to ‘phrase’, derived from retrieved tradition, imposing familiar gestures from an earlier repertory where none is intended. Performance traditions become attached to works and originate from the techniques and idiosyncrasies of specific performers. Does a player observe the effect of a work’s first performer or is the detail of notation sufficient for an ‘authentic’ rendition? The role of the performer is to identify with the work using a number of different strategies that hold the key to a performance stimulated by creativity and imagination rather than observance of tradition. This paper discusses performance practice in modernist repertory with reference to two works for solo clarinet by Boulez and Carter.

KEY WORDS: Interpretation, tradition, contemporary performance practice, Carter, Boulez

Performance practice in recent contemporary art music is an area that musicology has largely left unexplored. Very few expert performers write about what they do:¹ some contribute in an anecdotal way, mostly in interviews; and some, in time-honoured fashion, write treatises.² However, these forms of communication differ from those of earlier

¹ There are some notable exceptions: for example, Boulez, violinist Mieko Kanno (2003, 2007) and pianist Herbert Henck (1980) available at <http://www.herbert-henck.de/index.html>.

² A number of treatises for woodwind, by way of example, include those by Robert Dick (1975); Heinz Holliger (1972); Libby Van Cleve (2004); Peter Veale and Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf (1994); Daniel Kientzy (2000); Philip Rehfeldt (1973; rev. 1994); and Giuseppe Garborino (1978).

centuries in that they deal purely with technique, amounting to descriptive ‘how-to’ manuals of new and ‘extended’ techniques that tell us little about style or expression. Charles Rosen writes, “In interpreting a work of twentieth-century music³ we can emphasize its radical nature, or we can try to indicate its nineteenth-century origins” (Rosen, 1998, p. 72). Players may believe that in playing new music they do not have to reckon with the weight of an established performance practice, that they can create their own in new music. In modernist music – for example, originating in music by Boulez and Stockhausen in the late 1940s and 1950s – there is an interpretational approach that has become the accepted style, demanding a level of accuracy, cleanliness of attack, and often a significant lack of what one might call ‘expression’ – a performance tradition which, in theory, adheres closely to the score: in Rosen’s words its “radical nature”. However, performers of modernist music, almost all conservatoire-trained in the classical tradition, find it impossible to suppress an impulse derived from earlier styles to ‘phrase’ or ‘shape’, a kind of ‘utility musicality’ which, almost by default, finds gestures and contours relating to Rosen’s “nineteenth-century origins” even where none exists. A pre-Second World War example is the opening oboe solo of Varèse’s *Octandre* (1923). The opening four bars have almost no expression marks apart from a single *mezzo piano*, two small *crescendo*/*decrescendo* markings and an accent, but most oboists liberally use expressive devices including a wider dynamic range, rubato and ornamental vibrato.

Complexity in modernist music since 1945 applies not only to rhythmic irregularities but also to the way in which the serial tendency has required more information on the page, allowing the performer access to something in addition to a technically accurate rendition of pitch and rhythm: Schoenberg’s notation of *Hauptstimme* and *Nebenstimme*, for example, is an attempt to balance complex counterpoint and texture. The increased detail of ‘action notation’ descriptive of the sounds intended and modes of execution is evident from the late nineteenth century in Mahler and in the Second Viennese scores, including particularly extended string techniques and fluttertongue and echotone for the woodwind. This widens the range of colour, and in the detailed notation of articulation it also directs the player’s attention towards sound production: how notes start and finish, different types of staccato, minute gradations of dynamic, and so on. This notation is a much more detailed road map for interpretation, generating a different kind of approach to performance practice in an unfamiliar radical style where traditions from earlier music may be inappropriate. Putting aside for the moment the issue of rhythm in composers such as Brian Ferneyhough, one might argue that much of the more recent music from the 1970s to the 1990s is over-notated and prescriptive, constraining a player’s ability to engage with a personal expressive interpretation – but I would argue that quite the reverse is true. Traditionally notated scores from this period (those not using time–space notation or graphics) increasingly look the way the music sounds, and together with the notes and rhythms there has to be an internalizing of the additional information leading to a better understanding of style.

Rhythmic complexity and action notation are often the stumbling blocks for performers. In Ferneyhough’s music (as in that of many of the so-called ‘complex’ composers) the notation specifies as accurately as possible every possible parameter. His *Unity Capsule* for solo flute (1975–76) is still probably the most extreme example in the repertoire of any

³ Here Rosen is talking about his particular repertoire of Carter, Boulez and the Second Viennese composers.

instrument in its use of extended techniques and precise notation. Traditionally notated with additional layers of action notation, the pages reveal the technical information needed, but in their graphic nature, particularly the use of a smaller basic note values resulting in flurries of grouped semi- and hemi-demi-semiquaver values, they also give a clear sense of shape and gesture, speed, activity and stasis that are indicative of 'interpretation' and not simply the mechanics of accuracy.

Musicologists have recently challenged the idea of music existing in scores,⁴ fixed, unchanging and impervious to the whims of performers, but recordings over the past century show us how performance style has changed quite dramatically. Daniel Leech-Wilkinson in his study of expressive gesture in Schubert singing tells us that, "When one listens closely to, and thinks about, the huge diversity of manners of performance over the last century, it's impossible to avoid the conclusion that pieces of music change over time" (Leech-Wilkinson, 2006, p. 51). Works performed at any particular point in time will reflect the performance practice, style, mannerisms and fashions of that time as evidenced in recordings by the most prominent performers of the day. These performance 'practices' are what José Bowen has called "remembered innovations" (Bowen, 1993, p. 139) and form a tradition that attaches itself to a work, changing it over time, located specifically in performer 'expression'. The tradition of expression is a consciously applied subset of the more embedded 'musicality' learnt through the conservatoire apprentice model of teaching that builds on a more fundamental sensitivity to musical sound and organization. This expressive tradition is based on performance practices originating from the techniques and idiosyncrasies of specific performers at any time in musical history.⁵ These are consolidated over time and apply just as much in contemporary art music as in earlier styles.

Composers, as was always the case, often come into contact with exceptional players. The resulting works can extend the technical boundaries, with both the composer making demands that at first may seem impossible to execute (but soon, with the next generation of players, begin to come within reach), and the player encouraging composers with what Ferneyhough has called their 'box of tricks' (Boros & Toop, 1998, p. 370). There is nothing new here: Spohr's clarinet concertos required his favourite player Hermstedt to add keys to his instrument to be able to execute certain otherwise unplayable passages, and Weber might have been the first to use multiphonics at the end of the cadenza in his 1806 Concertino for French horn⁶ (Op. 45, 1806, rev. 1815) – although still earlier the bassoonist Franz Anton Pfeiffer (1752-87) was noted for a kind of three-part harmony, presumably an early multiphonic effect also using voice. But there are significant differences in and changes to the composer/performer relationship in the twentieth century. What might be seen as new from the mid-century onward are composers writing for particular players and specialist ensembles with talents in technical and sonic experimentation, musicians excited by the possibilities of their instruments beyond accepted idiomatic writing. These are players whose technical 'toolbox' goes beyond the usual tonal concert repertory of Bach to Shostakovich. The composers associated with Darmstadt in the 1950s and 1960s began to

⁴ See numerous contributions in N. Cook & M. Everist (Eds.), *Rethinking music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁵ See Bowen (1999).

⁶ This is actually two-part writing, playing and singing, rather than multiphonics as such: by singing, a third harmonic often results.

extend instrumental resources in those early years, but more importantly they also extended traditional technique in terms of rhythmic asymmetry, range, the quick succession of widely spaced pitches, fast changes of extreme dynamics, and the sheer quantity of non-adjacent, non-stepwise pitch collections. The *Klavierstücke* of Stockhausen, for example, required the extraordinary technique of pianists such as David Tudor, Paul Jacobs and Frederic Rzewski.

What has happened in the second half of the twentieth century is the surprising demise of the string quartet as the standard-bearer of all that is new and experimental, and the subsequent rise of the small ensemble (despite the sterling work of the Arditti Quartet). The majority of new music since the Second World War has been written for ensembles of either one-of-each-instrument chamber orchestra size, or smaller groups whose model is the instrumentation for *Pierrot Lunaire*. Friedrich Cerha and Kurt Schwertsik's Ensemble Die Reihe, founded in Vienna in 1958, is one of the first of the larger groups formed initially to play music of the Second Viennese School. A few years earlier Boulez was organizing and conducting his own Parisian *Domaines musicales* concerts.⁷ The Darmstadt Internationales Kammerensemble was an *ad hoc* ensemble made up of the instrumental teachers at the Summer Courses from its inception in 1946. Later groups such as the London Sinfonietta (formed in 1968), the Pierrot Players (formed in 1967, later becoming The Fires of London) and groups in the USA such as Speculum Musicae (formed in 1971) were all based to a certain extent on their continental forebears. Boulez's own Ensemble Intercontemporain (formed in 1976) was itself modelled on the London Sinfonietta. Their players are often soloists who have not trained to be orchestral musicians or indeed have never played in an orchestra,⁸ and it is unsurprising that many of these players during the 1970s and 1980s were also part of the early music 'boom', experimenting in the equally uncharted territories of boxwood, valve-less/natural, gut string and the rest.⁹ Many of these players have particular technical skills beyond speed and accuracy, such as a variety of tonal resources, a command of the *altissimo* register or circular breathing. Instrumental experimentation comes to the fore, making an instrument do things it was not designed to do, and introducing an idea of collaboration with composers where players can lead the way. This new relationship with technique allows for works to be created that exist in a dimension apart from the concerns of traditional sound production and idiomatic writing. Here the phenomenon of the specialist has developed further, one not far removed from earlier composer/performer travelling virtuosos, certainly with the technique to cope with the new demands but also with a musical personality where the music is often crafted to the strengths and the mannerisms or idiosyncrasies of that performer: players such as bass clarinetist Harry Sparnaay, violinist Irvine Arditti, flautist Pierre Yves Artaud and oboist Heinz Holliger are instantly recognizable. Certain players have a curiously powerful and individual way of delivering material which almost appropriates the music for their own

⁷ For a detailed discussion of the beginnings of this society and concerts see Hill & Simeone (2007, pp. 12-19).

⁸ However, the Die Reihe and London Sinfonietta ensembles recruited almost entirely from interested orchestral musicians.

⁹ Among the clarinetists are Hans Deinzer, who gave the first performance of Boulez's *Domaines*; Alan Hacker, who was Birtwistle's and Maxwell Davies's clarinetist; and Antony Pay, who played in the London Sinfonietta – Henze's *Le Miracle de la Rose* was written for him. All three have actually held positions in symphony orchestras.

purpose. They create themselves in the music, projecting a style which can develop into something more tangible as composers write in ways that absorb their performance styles, thereby creating a performance practice, a tradition.

A player coming to a piece of twentieth- or twenty-first-century music for the first time, especially if they don't have access to the composer, needs to start with some preliminary areas of study depending on the piece. For a student player, certainly the area of 'performance history' is the most enticing and attractive where recordings, however good or bad they are, can be used for 'fast-track' learning. But it is unwise to assume that the first performance or recording of a piece, even when endorsed by the composer, is the definitive authentic statement. Pieces that have received multiple recordings by a number of performers – all endorsed by composers – reveal how different these performances can be: recordings of Tippett's piano sonatas are a good example of this. The problem for the performer of new music is that where a tradition already exists, either generically stylistic or specific to a particular piece and performer, does one use this to inform one's own interpretation? In modernist music do notation's descriptive and prescriptive signs provide sufficient information for a satisfactory rendition? Does accurate observation of the signs lead to the most appropriate expression? Is there an interpretative gap in this repertory between fidelity to the text and the composer's intentions?

In relation to music analysis and performance, or the issue of whether or not performers should or do analyse the music they perform, there are numerous examples of the cut-off point between the soundless preparatory analytical processes that a performer may pursue and the actual realization of the work in sound. Players may have a deeper understanding of structure, in the tradition of Wallace Berry or Eugene Narmour and others who insist on a determinedly structural reading of pieces, but in reality a performer's musical 'instinct' kicks in. Anecdotally we hear that the process of practising and rehearsing towards a performance is firstly to deal with technique and the right notes and rhythms, and then to add expression; this may be the case with student performers, but not necessarily with experienced players. John Rink (Rink, 2004, p. 28) gives us a possible alternative analytical model for approaching and preparing the performance of a piece that, as a preamble to the technical issues (the actual physicality of the instrument and learning the notes), addresses five areas: genre, performing history, notational idiosyncrasies, compositional style and structure as shape. Rink reminds us that, "While playing the performer engages in a continual dialogue between the comprehensive architecture and the 'here-and-now', between some kind of goal-directed impulse at the uppermost hierarchical level and subsidiary motions extending down to the beat or sub-beat level" (Rink, 1999, p. 218). Experimental music psychology too has recently given us much evidence that this is what players do – both conscious and subconscious practices for the transmission of expression and hence emotion. A significant experiment now carried out a number of times is to ask expert performers to play a short piece without expression. Robert Woody reports from both his current research and a review of earlier experiments that "advanced musicians ... are unable to produce expressionless 'deadpan' performances. [Their performances] retain reduced instances of expressive performance conventions" (Woody, 2003, p. 52).

Rink's five areas of analytical study, together with the sixth (physicality), are, he suggests, filtered through a final process: "These factors – and no doubt many more – feed

into an interpretation when filtered through a kind of ‘prism’ defined by the performer’s artistic prerogatives [which then leads to a] performance conception” (Rink, 2004, p. 46). This ‘process of refraction’ synthesizing the previous analytical study and, crucially, the performing history (the ‘tradition’) is the final intangible process where the performer’s ‘musicality’ (both innate and learned, perhaps, but certainly ingrained and irrepressible) comes into play. In this final process, Rink’s “artistic prerogatives” combine the subconscious, the intuitive, the spontaneous and the accidental, producing what Peter Kivy has called a “personal authenticity” (Kivy, 1995, p. 108), which is “the unique product of a unique individual” (Kivy, 1995, p. 123). It is important to try to separate out these two powerful aspects of what we call an interpretation: firstly stylistic tradition – the influence of other players on our own performance conception together with the current generic fashion or style for this music; and secondly our own personal tradition, born of years of instruction combined with musical personality, as applied subconsciously to everything we play across our entire repertory.

Two solo works from the clarinet repertory have been chosen here as case studies to illustrate some of these issues: *GRA* (1993) by Elliott Carter (*GRA* is the Polish for “game”; the piece was dedicated to Lutosławski on his eightieth birthday) and *Domaines* (1969) by Pierre Boulez. Both pieces are quite well known to clarinetists; the Carter particularly is often played by advanced student players. Among the modernist clarinet war-horses of the twentieth century – Berio’s *Sequenza*, Donatoni’s *Clair*, Stockhausen’s *In Freundschaft*, and even Berg’s Op. 5 pieces with piano – *GRA* is surprisingly approachable from the player’s point of view. It is conventionally notated and features only one extended technique (a multiphonic on the final page), no flutter-tonguing and no particularly high notes. As a consequence it can, despite some tricky passages, be sight-read without the kind of preparation, pencil in hand, that is often required. Although almost forty years older than *GRA*, the Boulez is more radical – full of novel sounds and, because of its aleatoric nature, needing attention to a certain amount of map-reading before one gets the instrument out of its box. *Domaines*, for all its initial notational intricacies, is very well written for the instrument with the quick flurries of notes mostly falling quite well under the fingers. The sketches show that both composers worked at concert pitch, only transposing up a tone for the B flat instrument at the first draft fair-copy version. Some of Carter’s sketches are in the alto clef, a nod perhaps towards the viola/clarinet alliance, but probably more to do with avoiding ledger lines. In the short programme note in the preface to the score Carter says the piece is “frequently-changing and playful in character (yet based on the same material throughout)”.

The pitch material, as is usual with Carter, is built from a limited number of related collections of three to six notes – in this case constructed entirely from one set, the all-interval hexachord (0,1,2,4,7,8),¹⁰ itself derived from the first six notes of a 12-note collection at fixed registers. The sketches,¹¹ twenty pages in all, show a great deal of exploration of pitch and little work on rhythm. There are sections of the drafts which are very close to the finished score including detailed articulation but without dynamics, and there are a few complete drafts with only minor changes to dynamics. At quite a late stage

¹⁰ 0 = C, 1 = C sharp, and so on.

¹¹ Sketches for the Carter and Boulez pieces are held in the Paul Sacher Stiftung, Basel.

Carter changed the metronome mark, slowing the piece down a little from crotchet equals 120 to 116. This is a short piece of around four minutes, its 105 bars marked *Ghiribizzoso* (caprice, fancy) at the opening, and later *leggiero* and *giocososo*. Carter writes *espressivo* no fewer than twenty times throughout the piece, but if one listened only to the nine recordings currently in the catalogue without recourse to the score, the stylistic approach is today's generic, modernist tradition with paramount attention to pitch and rhythmic accuracy. What results is not a light, fanciful confection but rather music full of aggressive jerkiness, both neurotic and unstable. Clarinetists are generally quite good at differentiating dynamics at *mezzo piano* and quieter, something the instrument does very well, but in most of these performances *mezzo forte* to *fortissimo* blur into a generic 'loud'. The received tradition that these players employ is twofold: firstly the over-exaggeration of *fortepiano* and accents; and secondly a rigorous attention to rhythmic accuracy which, despite the hints of 'utility musicality', doesn't allow for micro-rubato in the *espressivo* phrases where there are problems with phrasing and legato playing. What seems to be happening here is still an emphasis on what has been called the *pointilliste* style (Day, 2000, p. 178; Leech-Wilkinson, 2009a, p. 250; Leech-Wilkinson, 2009b, p. 793), a term relating to the emphasis on the individual note rather than "melodic continuity" (Leech-Wilkinson, 2010, p. 58). Both Day and Leech-Wilkinson point out that the performing style in Webern across the last century has gradually become more expressive as the concerns and techniques of the modernist composers have changed from a more fragmentary to a continuous style, seen most clearly in the performances and music of Boulez.

As is typical with Boulez, *Domaines* (1969) had a long period of composition. The first ideas date back to 1959 when the piece had the provisional title *Concert* or *Labyrinthe* and already embraced the idea of 'six-ness' and the spatial distribution of players. During the early 1960s Boulez was working on a theatre piece (a kind of opera provisionally entitled *Marges* – margin, marginalia – which he never completed) and a Cantata for baritone and small instrumental group. This latter piece was to be premiered in the concert series in Ulm in September 1968, but *Domaines* was substituted at the last minute. The sketches show that much of the *Domaines* material relates to the Cantata and *Marges*, with some of the solo clarinet lines in sketch form having text underlaid. These fragments of text are from the e. e. cummings poem that Boulez later used for the 1969 chorus and orchestra piece *Cummings ist der Dichter*. *Domaines* exists in both a solo version and a version with six instrumental groups that Boulez has always considered unfinished or in the process of revision. After Hans Deinzer first performed the solo version in Ulm, Boulez requested that he did not play it again until revisions were complete, which never happened. A kind of 'revision' is the piece for clarinet and electronics *Dialogue de l'ombre double* (1982-85), which takes material from the ensemble music of *Domaines* but not from the solo part. Universal Edition published the solo part in 1970, and it has since been reprinted (though still with errors).

Domaines is all about the number six – six *cahiers originales*, six *miroirs* (almost the exact retrograde of the material), six fragments of material on each page which can be played in one of two ways, and so on. The piece is serial in that rather opaque Boulezian way, and the sketches show his integral serialist techniques: 12x12 matrices for rhythm and dynamics, and a hierarchical structuring of material often using three different colours. The sketches and first drafts clearly show that, as in the Carter piece, the pitch, rhythm and

articulation are present in early versions, dynamics appearing later and all the 'extended techniques' only in the final drafts. *Domaines* is also all about colour and the clarinet: there is no question that this is a clarinet piece.¹² The notation demands a different and careful approach from the player where, rather than simply being concerned with the mechanics of notes and rhythms, there is an immediate concern with colour: the player explores each fragment and carefully places it in space, judging continuity and pauses. This may be fragmentary music but it is not *pointilliste* in that there is always a sense of the larger structure, the way in which the player travels from material to material and from page to page giving a sense of expressive and coherent continuity. The notation begins to look the way the music sounds (in the same manner as the Ferneyhough example) in terms of the groupings and the placing and spacing on the page, but more significantly it requires the player to 'interpret' in respect of the relative freedom of expressive timing and placing. It is the radical nature of this notation in Boulez and Ferneyhough, unlike that of Carter, which militates against the lazy employment of tradition or ingrained 'musicality'; by its very nature it asks of performers an interpretation without preconceptions, without history and without tradition, but simply in response to the text.

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¹² In contrast, Carter's *GRA* also exists in a version for trombone.

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