

Performances Compared. Sequential replication of the same music piece on an audiovisual file

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New audiovisual media are often thought to transform our ways of perceiving and experiencing music by varying both the conditions of fruition and certain qualitative features which inhere in music itself: elements such as figures, symbols, words, images can alter the original effect or better yet the emotions conveyed by the very same music piece executed in a traditional way¹. The new context in which music is offered to the audience is generally that of a kind of facilitation aiming to increase its potential of consumption, provided that streaming music is first of all a type of business – “we’re all tools of the tech industry”, says Josh Indar (2014)] – which directly collocates producers and consumers into the flows of capital. This is made possible, I believe, by the fact that economic dynamics have a sociological basis, since web platforms clearly influence human interaction on an individual and community level, as well as on a larger societal level, while the worlds of online and offline are increasingly interpenetrating. Nonetheless I will take into consideration a particular case which has little of the characteristics normally attributed to streaming music and allows in my opinion a ‘special fruition’ which would otherwise not take place. Namely the case of sequential reproduction of different interpretations of the same piece. I’ll give the example of a classical piece, but it is theoretically possible to reach the same conclusions when taking into account other music genres.

¹ As Kramer writes: «Digital media project a model of mind drastically different from the model that has informed classical music for more than two centuries. The music acts through time and depth; digital media act through space and surface. As the digital model becomes the norm, classical music approaches an impasse. Either it finds a rapprochement with new-media culture, or it resigns itself to becoming outdated, a fading postcard from a fading past» (Kramer [2013]: 39).

1. Roman Ingarden and the Identity of a Musical Work

A YouTube user posted Domenico Scarlatti's *Sonata in B Minor K 27* (we might of course replace this piece with any of the hundreds of similar compilations realized with different classical compositions) played by ten different interpreters: "10 pianists in comparison"². The video does not show any of the pianists during their performances, it just presents pictures of several paintings. It is clear that the intention of the user is stimulating an evaluation of the different performances given by the various listeners, who are in turn invited to give either a technical judgment or simply express their preference – based on taste or even on superficial impressions – for one of the interpreters. In both cases the aesthetic outcome of this operation seems to be relevant, since it allows to shed new light on some issues about the status of a musical work: what its identity is, which qualities it must have, what its purpose is, how it is perceived, and so on. With respect to this, statements like «aesthetics is no longer an issue of human knowledge by the senses, but really a question of computational power and modes of rendering» (Kane [2007]: 64) do not apply here, because we have a sequence which we listen to with extreme attention, ready to grasp the smallest nuances among various executions, no matter what the 'computational power' supporting the musical content is. I will return on this point later.

One of the most important issues of the aesthetics of music has been the identity of the musical work, a problem analyzed in all its depth by Roman Ingarden (Ingarden [1986]). A central passage about the relationship between a musical work and its different executions reads as follows:

Every specific musical work [...] is absolutely unique. This at once rules out its identity with the performances. In consequence, it lies outside all those differences that necessarily occur between particular performances. Or to put it another way: just because these sorts of differences cannot appear in the musical work itself [...] it is clear that the work is not identical with its performances and is an individual, while any number of performances of it are possible. (Ingarden [1986]: 20-21)

Ingarden's view seems to give little importance to executions, at least with respect to the determination of the identity of a musical work. The practice of streaming in this particular context, on the other side, seems to stress the nature of a music piece as an entity founded on continuous differentiation and comparison, a fluid entity as well as a relational practice representing temporal and technological mediations. Users who

² Accessed on September 9, 2015.

choose to visualize the ten performances of Scarlatti are from the beginning in the disposition of 'being in search' of their preferred version³. This suggests that, in their view, it is as if there were no original or 'true' model for this sonata and that it must, in a sense, be 'built' (if at all) by the experience of the listener through continuous research and attention to a number of renditions at his/her disposal. It's the deleuzian sense of *différence* which emerges here, whereby difference is thought to be prior to identity, and becoming prior to essence. Deleuze says that «difference is the state in which one can speak of determination *as such*» (Deleuze [1994]: 28), and explains that we should «imagine something which distinguishes itself – and yet that from which it distinguishes itself does not distinguish itself from it. Lightning, for example, distinguishes itself from the black sky but must also trail it behind, as though it were distinguishing itself from that which does not distinguish itself from it» (Deleuze [1994]: 28). It seems to me that this is exactly the way different executions relate to *the Sonata k 27 in B Minor* in itself: there is *something* common to all the performances of it, namely the notes written by Scarlatti, with respect to which the renditions of the ten pianists are, so to speak, moving images which keep emerging and differentiating themselves on this background. They all together reveal this continuous presence of the subsistent formal wholeness of the composition, necessarily immanent to every empirical manifestation of itself.

The musical piece may obtain its configuration in the mind of the listener by reciprocal convergence of the different planes of executions, although it will still be a provisional configuration, always capable of being integrated or modified by new elements taken from other executions. But it is a 'fluid' one, it can always be replaced by a new one. According to Richardson, Gorbman, and Vernallis ([2013]: 18) «You Tube [...] offers the potential to subtract from as well as to add to the content that is currently in circulation as well to reconfigure it into new compound forms». The sequence of the ten Scarlatti's performances causes a shift from music as a text – as a passive bearer of qualities – to re-activating and engaging music in differentiating temporal processes and relations. The definite form sought by the listener (such as *jubilanti15*) is only actualized 'in-between', in the middle of the various performances, despite not being contained by any of them in particular. In aesthetic zones where the fruition of these performances

³ As the user named *jubilati15* comments: «What a wonderful initiative of yours: 10 pianists in comparison – Scarlatti – Sonata in B minor, K 27 – Thank you so much !! I am listening to them all now – BLIND i.e. without seeing who is playing, without reading any commentaries, and I am excited to discover which version I love the most !».

occurs there is always a kind of asymmetrical exchange in which something that belongs to one passes onto another one⁴.

But the sequential order of the ten interpreters on a unique file causes another relevant change in the conception of the musical work, namely a change in the rigid definition of a beginning and an end. Since *we know* that after the first performance another will immediately come afterwards, we live in the expectation of *the next one*, and it is quite a relevant expectation because what we are looking for – the preferred rendition, or the simple idea how the piece should be executed – essentially depends on the listening of *all* the ten performances. This is why Ingarden, for example, was so sure that “each phase except the last of a musical work contains a ‘future’ with respect to further phases of the work” and that “no ‘afterward’ is possible once the musical work has come to an end” (Ingarden [1986]: 77). But indeed, as I have tried to explain, the audiovisual file on YouTube *has* an ‘afterward’ of that kind – which is, obviously, not the ‘afterward’ of the last note written by Scarlatti, but that of our auditory experience as the fundamental element of our search for the would-be ideal (or the ‘as complete as possible’ idea of the) B Minor Sonata. It would definitely be interesting to further inquire *why* and *if* the ‘as complete as possible idea’ of it has to be found on such an empirical level like that one of different interpretations, but I cannot go through this question here.

2. Walter Benjamin and the Primacy of the Original

What I’ll try to show in this discussion is that the sequence of performances of Scarlatti’s Sonata somehow escapes Benjamin’s criticism of the loss of aura and presents, instead, features which lead to a motivated evaluation of the reproduced artwork.

Benjamin maintains that «changed circumstances may leave the artwork’s other properties untouched, but they certainly devalue the here and now of the artwork”, and that “what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object, the weight it derives from tradition» (Benjamin [2002]: 103). I have doubts about the fact that this is what actually happens in the case I am proposing to analysis. What is the ‘here and now’ of the artwork [*sein Hier und Jetzt*] in this case? I cannot think of anything else than the first execution ever made (by Scarlatti himself, most likely) of that Sonata. True that Benjamin is probably also pointing to the *historical atmosphere* in which the author wrote the Sonata, but I don't see why a change of the

⁴ Borio ([2015a]: 7) notices that «the performing arts differ from their visual counterparts inasmuch as the identity of the work is not contained in a specific object, but is created and renewed in the continuous articulation of the relationship between medium and performance».

historical time should entail a 'devaluation' [*Entwertung*] of the composition. I understand that if we sensibly considered the autographed *manuscript* of B Minor Sonata as a valuable testimony and an artwork in itself, then it would be easy to accept that we are just dealing with much depreciated copies of it – namely with all the printed scores made available to us nowadays. But I guess we are essentially talking about the music, not about its papery support, as valuable as it may be. Is the streaming reproduction of the Sonata really less authoritative than the original (whatever it may be)? When Benjamin says that listening to a piece of music in a private room involves the withering of its aura he means that "the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition" (Benjamin [2002]: 104-105), tradition and ritual are key concepts in understanding 'aura'.

Unquestionably, watching and listening to the Sonata on YouTube detaches the piece from its tradition (whereby tradition here must indicate any typical concert hall, not necessarily a *salon* of the early 18th century), but the point I would like to emphasize is that this does not entail any 'devaluation'. Quite the opposite, let us think of the users' attitude toward the file: they are intent on capturing artistic features and nuances of the interpreters, as their comments below the video clearly show⁵. They seem neither passive nor superficial in the evaluation of what they are listening to, indeed their expertise potential is enhanced by the peculiar content of the file and the order of the executions in the streaming sequence. Its author seems to have thought: "Here I give you ten examples of how this piece can be played, go look for all the nice details and make your own idea of the nature of this sonata". Eric Clarke is very clear about this point. «There are, of course, circumstances in which listeners engage with music in that concentrated manner that the term 'musical listening' has been taken to imply. [...] The particular focus on sound that the acousmatic character of recordings affords, as well as its abstraction from the circumstances of live performance, makes the most intensely solitary listening possible. By contrast with people's pragmatic and fluctuating engagement with music embedded in everyday reality, the abstract solitariness of acousmatic listening can engage a reflective or contemplative kind of consciousness,

⁵ The user *Fabian Ströbele*, for example, lists the ten pianists ascribing a particular interpretative character to each of them: "Casadeus: Scarlati singing. Meyer: ecstasy. Tipo: systole – diastole. Gilels: sloooooow. Michelangeli: fast, very fast – all tones at one level. Komarov: harmony. Pletnev: the chimes of the church bell. Zhu Xiao-Mei: echo. Akselrod: enervating. Sudbin: staccato".

rather than the instrumental consciousness of the everyday perception-action cycle» (Clarke [2015]: 37) .

One could object that only connoisseurs could perceive artistic characteristics and differences among the ten pianists, but it seems to me that it is the video author's choice of putting the ten pieces one after another that addresses such an 'expert' audience in the first place. In the end it seems awkward to affirm that we are in front of a kind of 'devaluation' of this musical artwork, since there is a qualitative gain (both in its comprehension and in the cultural formation) of the users-listeners who get the opportunity to refine their aesthetic perceptions and their musical taste. After all, Benjamin himself distinguishes between distracted and concentrated fruition, ascribing the former to the masses and the latter to the art lovers: "the masses are criticized for seeking distraction in the work of art, whereas the art lover supposedly approaches it with concentration" (Benjamin [2002]: 119). Technical reproducibility takes music everywhere («the choral work performed in an auditorium or in the open air is enjoyed in a private room» - Benjamin [2002]: 103]). Yet, in our special case it allows for aesthetic experiences which cannot take place in the original context (where usually there is only *one* pianist – not ten – performing each piece of the concert program just once!).

On the ground of these considerations, we cannot say that reproducibility of music always entails its massification and its status of consumption product,⁶ for the reason that, as we have seen, even if a medium like YouTube makes music assimilable by anyone, yet it makes it also possible for recipients to access a refined critical dimension through which what gets evaluated is precisely the uniqueness of a performance and its special characteristics by comparison with other performances. This way music accesses a cultural plane of interchange among quasi-experts which does not have much to do with immediate feeling or affective qualities anymore. As Carol Vernallis writes: «music is often said to create the sense that it's immediately affective; [...] it goes 'directly to the heart' without explanation. But in a contradictory fashion, music in an audiovisual context seems 'cultural'» (Vernallis [2013a]: 460). The audiovisual context often opens up a *social* dimension where each participant tries to mark his/her area of intervention by delimiting his critical position with respect to the others in a spirit of a meaningful confrontation often leading to interesting results. As to the warning that "the world of digitality threatens to produce a continuous flow of autonomous data, indifferent to its

⁶ "Desire of the present-day masses to 'get closer' to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction" (Benjamin [2002]:105).

interface with humans” (Kane [2007]: 64), we may say that it is the particular YouTube’s interface that gives room for comments below the uploaded video. Previous comments are regularly taken into consideration by new users willing to participate in the discussion and to add new data and information about the composer, the musical piece or the interpreter.

I am also inclined to think that the lack of any image of the ten performing pianists is irrelevant to the aesthetic evaluation given by the recipients. Although this may sound obvious to many, there has been profound discussion on how the image or the physical presence of the interpreter qualifies the aesthetic fruition of music. Godlovitch, for example, says that «whatever we hear on a recording is not itself sufficient to ground judgments of the player’s real role and true merit» (Godlovitch [1998]: 26). It is reasonable to admit that with images it would have probably been a different *experience*, but it would have changed very little as to *musical* judgment of each execution⁷. It seems true that «our experience of music today can take on a broad range of forms, depending on the amount of attention we are willing to give to the music to which we happen to be listening» (Arbo [2015]: 55). But it is my opinion that, in the specific case we are considering, YouTube’s interface, in its visual function, cannot modify individual capabilities of judgment in any relevant way, although it can substantially act upon the conditions in which this judgment is formulated, namely by making a sequence of performances of the same music piece available and immediately comparable. The exact timing of each performance indicated below the video, and the possibility to click on it, allows to promptly reproduce the performance we want to listen to, apart from the original sequence set by the file’s author: we could decide for instance to skip from Gilels’ execution at 10:13 to Pletnev’s at 21:20 without passing through Michelangeli (15:00) and Komarov (17:46). This particular form of ‘control’ on the file not only gives the user a sense of satisfaction, but also enhances his/her fruitful tendency to analytically compare nuances of the different performances. It increases her immersion and draws her full attention to keep track of the details.

⁷ This is the topic of the so called ‘acousmatic’ sound, i.e. sounds that one hears without seeing their source. Auslander points out that the «idea that the audial and the visual dimensions of musical performance are distinguishable ‘tracks’, and the question of how the relationship between these tracks should be understood and configured in performance, has come up in many different contexts at least since recording technology made it possible to experience sound apart from vision» (Auslander [2013]: 606). For a complete treatment of the topic see the recently published monograph of Kane (2014).

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