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## **Performing Musical Works Authentically: A Response to Dodd**

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### Abstract

Julian Dodd has recently discussed a kind of musical authenticity that he thinks has been neglected. Interpretive authenticity, as he calls it, displays an insightful understanding of the work and, as such, is faithful to the work. Dodd distinguishes this kind of authenticity from score compliance authenticity, a view I have defended, because it can sometimes involve deliberate departures from the score. He offers four examples in favor of this hypothesis. I argue that none is uncontroversial. I am much more doubtful than Dodd that performance insight is likely to be demonstrated via wholesale departures from the composer's work specification and that such performances can be represented unproblematically as instancing all aspects of the composer's work.

## Performing Musical Works Authentically: A Response to Dodd

Julian Dodd has recently discussed a kind of musical authenticity that he thinks has been neglected.<sup>1</sup> Interpretive authenticity, as he calls it, displays an insightful understanding of the work and, as such, is faithful to the work. Dodd distinguishes this kind of authenticity from score compliance authenticity because it can sometimes involve deliberate departures from the score.

Dodd contrasts his view with what he describes as my "hard line" score compliance account of authentic performance for notated Western classical works. In summary, my view is this: ideal authenticity involves following the composer's work-determinative instructions. Some of these instructions are implicit in the performance practice assumed by the composer. Many of them are recorded in the work's score. It should be noted, however, that not all that is in the score is to be read literally and the score frequently also contains recommendations and other materials that are not work constitutive.

There is much that Dodd and I agree on: that some interpretations are more insightful than others; that a performer must execute a fair number of the composer's work-determinative instructions if the performance is to be recognizably of the work; and that there are performance values other than score compliance. We also agree that, at least sometimes, a deliberate departure from what is mandated in the score could contribute to the insightfulness of a performance. We disagree, however, about how likely this is and whether the interpretive search for understanding results in a kind of authenticity that goes beyond what is needed simply to deliver the work.

Dodd defends his case with reference to four examples. The first is from the conductor Sir John Barbirolli, who said that there is only one climax in each Mahler symphony, though there are many high points. Let us suppose that an interpretation that represents Mahler's Fourth Symphony in this fashion does indeed reveal insight into the work.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Performing Musical Works Authentically', *European Journal of Philosophy*, DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-0378.2012.00546.x, accessed June 13, 2012.

A first observation is that Barbirolli was *not* advocating a departure from what is mandated in the score, but was rather trying to work out how to plot his way through the work in a way that revealed an understanding of it. So the example illustrates a claim on which Dodd and I concur: that an interpretation can be valuable for demonstrating a way of understanding the work. Does it also show that the interpretation achieves a kind of authenticity absent from other interpretations? I doubt this. Consider a rendition of the symphony by Leonard Bernstein in which every high point is invested with full-blooded passion. It is possible, I think, that his performance might also display insight, though into a different aspect of the music. And in any event, I see no reason to think his performance is less authentic than Barbirolli's.<sup>2</sup>

Dodd's second example quotes the views of the pianist Alfred Brendel in favor of the claim that the metronome tempos indicated for Beethoven's late piano sonatas are inappropriately fast. The composer's instruction here should be ignored.

This example is not a strong one, however. In general, metronome markings convey a misleading impression of precision. The performance practice treats them as a guide only, as both performers and composers are aware, allowing deviation to accommodate the acoustic of the performance venue, the instruments or instrumentation used, and so on. More particularly, their status in Beethoven's music is questioned. They are widely regarded as unreliable, due to printing and other errors.<sup>3</sup> And Beethoven's notational markings are sometimes eccentric. For instance, in the autograph version of his 26<sup>th</sup> piano sonata, Op. 81a (*Les Adieux*), the fourth to last measure of the first movement contains a sustained chord that is marked as *crescendo*, which is, of course, impossible to execute on a piano.

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<sup>2</sup> I have previously made a similar comparison between Klemperer's and Toscanini's interpretations of Beethoven symphonies – see 'Authenticity in Musical Performance', *BJA* 27 (1987), 39–50 at pp. 44–5.

<sup>3</sup> See P. Stadlen, 'Beethoven and the Metronome', *Music and Letters* 48 (1967), 330–57. But for qualifications, see also R. Kolisch, 'Tempo and Character in Beethoven's Music', *Musical Quarterly* 77 (1993), 90–131 & 268–342.

In any case, if piano rolls and recordings are accurate guides, an earlier generation of pianists took the sonatas at a brisker tempo without sounding rushed. There is a 1908 piano roll of the 32<sup>nd</sup> piano sonata, Op. 111, by Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler that takes 21 minutes and an LP by Wilhelm Backhaus (1961) also takes 21 minutes. By contrast, a 1967 recording by Rudolf Serkin takes 27 minutes, Brendel in the 1970s takes 26 minutes, Vladimir Ashkenazy in the 1970s takes more than 27 minutes, and Claudio Arrau (1965) is just short of 29 minutes. Also there's a recording of the 30<sup>th</sup> piano sonata by Alfred Cortot (1927) that takes 14 minutes, and another by Backhaus of 17 minutes, as against Serkin's 20 minutes, Brendel's 20 minutes, and Ashkenazy's more than 20 minutes. Moreover, many late twentieth century pianists have successfully emulated the faster tempos.<sup>4</sup>

In the third example, Dodd notes that valved horns are often substituted nowadays for the notated bassoons for a short passage in the recapitulation of the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The passage is first played by horns in the exposition, but the unvalved horns at Beethoven's disposal could not handle its later statement. Dodd suggests that the bassoons do not have the weight to bring off the necessary effect. 'Although the work's score specifies that bassoons should be used, many conductors feel that the piece's internal logic imposes a contrary demand. As they see things, a performance should be thoroughly faithful to the motif's evident purpose, and this requires performers to contravene one of Beethoven's explicit instructions'.<sup>5</sup>

Matters are not so straightforward, however. Many contemporary conductors prefer the bassoons and a Wikipedia author argues that their use reveals a better understanding of the music. 'The structure of the movement posits a programmatic alteration of light and darkness, represented by major and minor. Within this framework, the topically heroic transitional theme dispels the darkness of the minor first theme group and ushers in the major second theme group. However, in the development section, Beethoven systematically

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<sup>4</sup> C. Brown, 'Historical Performance, Metronome Marks and Tempo in Beethoven's Symphonies', *Early Music*, 19 (1991), 247–58.

<sup>5</sup> Op. cit., p. 10

fragments and dismembers this heroic theme in bars 180–210. Thus he may have rescored its return in the recapitulation for a weaker sound to foreshadow the essential expositional closure in the minor.<sup>6</sup>

Now, I allow that substitutions of instruments and the anachronistic use of valved horns are comparatively minor departures from authenticity.<sup>7</sup> They might be justified purely for the sake of convenience or to make an interpretive point. And I have suggested that only prissy puritans would hold that inauthenticity in musical performance is always egregious.<sup>8</sup> So, Dodd and I might not be so far apart as regards his second and third examples. But it is worth noting that these cases are a long way from the deeply insightful interpretations that Dodd emphasizes earlier. Both the adoption of a slower than indicated tempo in the piano sonatas and the substitution of horns for bassoons in the symphony are compatible with mundane performances that reveal no special understanding of the works in question.

The fourth example is the crucial one for Dodd's case, and he concedes how controversial it is. In playing the last movement (*Rondo alla turca*) of Mozart's 11<sup>th</sup> piano sonata K. 331, Andreas Staier departs significantly from Mozart's score. Dodd writes: 'Here we have an interpretation of the piece that is rich in theatricality and playfulness: so much so, that it contains not just huge amounts of embellishment and ornamentation of the music as written, but a good many alterations of it. At times, Staier moves the melody to the bass line, at others he improvises counter-melodies that take our attention away from the main theme'.<sup>9</sup> Dodd holds that this exaggeration of the movement's cartooning of an ethnic style involves interpretive authenticity, 'given the *Rondo's* ubiquity in

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[wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony\\_No.\\_5\\_\(Beethoven\)#Reassigning\\_bassoon\\_notes\\_to\\_the\\_horns](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._5_(Beethoven)#Reassigning_bassoon_notes_to_the_horns), accessed June 15, 2012

7 *Musical Works and Performances*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2001), see pp. 221-2, 248

8 Op. cit., p. 248 and *Musical Understandings and Other Essays on the Philosophy of Music*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), see p. 109.

9 Op. cit., p. 10.

modern culture'.<sup>10</sup>

I allow that an audience's familiarity with a piece can license a freer treatment from the performer.<sup>11</sup> As it were, some of the current player's obligations for authentic performance have been discharged by earlier performers. So, I do not regard Staier's performance as objectionable, "given the *Rondo's* ubiquity in modern culture." Moreover, embellishing the melodic line and interpolating a cadenza, as Staier does, are practices fully consistent with the authentic rendition of the piece, so these departures from an inappropriately literal reading of the score do not result in inauthenticity.

What is questionable is Staier's deliberate rewriting of other aspects of the piece; his moving the melody to the bass and adding new counter-melodies. These interventions make it doubtful that the performance can be sincerely represented as being a fully authentic rendition of Mozart's sonata. His practice here is nearer that of Lisztian transcription. As such, it offers a view on the original and in that sense an interpretation of it, but transcriptions typically count as autonomous but derivative works, not as genuine instances of the original.<sup>12</sup>

I am also deeply skeptical that a well-informed listener will take away from the performance a new and deeper understanding of the movement. Staier's alterations do not come across as freely improvised and may seem over-written. But in any case, even if the performance is revelatory, it could be so without succeeding in instancing the work in question. A performance of Beethoven's Hammerklavier in which the player departs wildly from the score and ends up pounding the piano with his fists could provide an insightful and

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<sup>10</sup> Op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> See *Musical Works and Performances*, pp. 242–5. Here I follow Jerrold Levinson, 'Evaluating Musical Performance', *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 21 (1) (1987), 75–88.

<sup>12</sup> See my 'Transcription, Authenticity, and Performance', *BJA* 28 (1987), 216–27 and Paul Thom, *The Musician as Interpreter*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007)

thought-provoking view of the piece without thereby succeeding as a performance of it.

I have written that authenticity is an ontological requirement, not an interpretive option.<sup>13</sup> By this I mean that a performer who is keen to play the composer's work must be committed to meeting the composer's work-determinative prescriptions, with the result that authenticity is a performance value that cannot easily be traded off against other performance values. It is true that the target work can remain recognizable in a performance that fails to meet much of what is required by the composer. But I think that performers should and typically do aim well above this minimal level of authentic rendition. Where the point of performance is to deliver the composer's work, deliberate departures from his work-constitutive specifications should be minimal. Lying behind my view, of course, is the assumption that composers typically know best what they are trying to bring off and usually have the skill to do it, so that significant departures from their specifications are often detrimental to the work or the performance. And if we did not make authenticity a founding value, composers would not have the same reasons to try to do what they do.

By contrast, Dodd believes that significant, intentional departures from what is prescribed by the composer not only are commonly adopted but also that they can often better reveal the work's nature, while also succeeding in instancing it faithfully.

Dodd appears to think that I sell the performer and the interest of her interpretation short. He identifies my view as 'a conception that sees interpretation as called for solely to fill the gap between score and performance'.<sup>14</sup> I have expressed my view in such terms, though from the outset of the debate I have also been at pains to acknowledge the creativity that goes

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<sup>13</sup> Op. cit., p. 207.

<sup>14</sup> Op. cit., p. 12. Similar concerns about my position have been raised by Paul Thom op. cit. and 'Authentic Performance Practice', in T. Gracyk and A. Kania (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Music*, (London: Routledge, 2011), 91–100.



into performance.<sup>15</sup> In any case, my considered position is that the musician's interpretation is as much concerned with realizing what is work determinative as with making up the sonic detail that is underdetermined by the work's notational specification. Interpretation goes all the way down.

Like Dodd, I value many interpretations for the original perspective they adopt on the works they are of. I am much more doubtful than Dodd, however, that performance insight is likely to be demonstrated via wholesale departures from the composer's work specification and that such performances can be represented unproblematically as authentically instancing all aspects of the composer's work.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Authenticity in Musical Performance, pp. 47–8.

<sup>16</sup> I thank Andrew Kania, Paul Thom, and an anonymous referee for comments on drafts of this paper.