AUTHENTICITY IN PERFORMANCE - A REPLY TO JAMES O. YOUNG

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"Authenticity in Performance: A Reply to James O. Young"

In 'The Concept of Authentic Performance' (in this issue of The British Journal of Aesthetics), James O. Young criticises a view which he correctly attributes to me (see 'Authenticity in Musical Performance', The British Journal of Aesthetics, 27, 1987, 39-50), according to which an authentic musical performance '...makes a piece sound as it would have sounded at the period of its composition, had conditions been ideal.' In this reply I wish to consider his reasons for rejecting this characterisation of authenticity in musical performance.

Young observes that what one hears depends to a large extent upon what one believes. The beliefs of contemporary listeners differ from those of the listeners of past periods. Accordingly, contemporary listeners cannot hear what past listeners heard, even if they were to hear exactly the same notes, timbres, etc.. Young's point is not one about our ignorance of the beliefs of past listeners. Of course we can often come to know what they believed. Rather his point is one about the way in which the experience of a musical work is shaped by one's beliefs. Even if we know what past listeners believed, our beliefs are not their beliefs, in which case our experience of the music must differ from theirs. So the definition of authenticity offered above characterises no more than an unattainable goal.

Of course, not all of a person's beliefs will affect his or her experience of the sound of a musical work. The beliefs that are relevant are likely to be beliefs about music, its theory and practice,
but Young also thinks that a great many other beliefs about society and the world might be involved. He mentions three (types of) examples - (a) major thirds were experienced as dissonant by a mediaeval listener, but to us sound concordant; (b) certain sorts of bagpipe and flute music would have had rustic associations for an eighteenth century listener which they do not have for us; (c) some early listeners sometimes judged works to be poor (such as Handel's late operas) and so heard them as lacking in grace, invention and the like, whereas we now hear them '...as full of every captivating requisite'.

Now, there is a sense in which no two listeners ever hear exactly the same sounds - two listeners at the same performance no doubt hear slightly different things as a result of their different locations within the auditorium. But notwithstanding such differences, we allow that listeners might arrive at judgements which are judgements not just about their idiosyncratic experiences, but about the performance itself. We further allow that judgements might be made about the work which are not judgements about any particular performance of it. The possibility of such inter-personal judgements presupposes, of course, that there is much in common between the experiences of different listeners (and between different performances recognisable as performances of a single work). Claims about the authenticity of a performance are claims about the performance rather than about any particular listener's experience of it. So Young's argument works only if it shows that the experience of the modern listener is different from the experience of the work's contemporary listener to a degree which renders impossible inter-personal judgements of the relevant sort between the two groups of listeners. Indeed, his argument must go yet further: He must show not only that the differences are as great as this, but also that they cannot be overcome - for example, by the modern listeners' immersing themselves in works in the style of some previous age and in the musical theory and history of that age.

Young acknowledges the above points indirectly in allowing, for example, that a listener familiar with western music might acquire an understanding of oriental music and so come to experience such music in a way which is similar enough to the way in which it is
heard by those who make it for that listener to share their judgements about the music. But Young also takes his argument to be convincing and so presumably believes that the differences in the beliefs of westerners and orientals is by no means so great, or is somehow more easily overcome, than is the difference in beliefs of a modern European, say, and an eighteenth century European. I find this idea implausible. If Young is right in this, then the work of historians really must be bunk; history, as an academic discipline, must be impossible, even if anthropology is not.

Young supposes that someone who has been 'subject' to twentieth century European classical music cannot experience major thirds as dissonant in mediaeval music; he even doubts that such a person can hear the dissonances in nineteenth century music as dissonances. Simply, this seems to me to be false. If it were true, no listener could fully appreciate music in a style other than that with which he or she was most familiar.

I suggest the following by way of reply: Amongst the elements which characterise a musical style are the two-note intervals available for use within that style, the relative frequency of their various successions, and the relative frequency of the use of any given interval. Ten two-note intervals are possible within the octave (excluding micro-tonal intervals). But within most musical styles, not all of these intervals are available for use and, of those available for use, not all are equally likely to be used at any given point and not all are used with the same overall frequency. Dissonant intervals are relatively unstable intervals which invite resolution to more stable intervals. Which intervals are dissonant within any given style will be a complex function of the range of intervals available for use within the style and of their relative frequency of use in any given intervallic context.

Two views on the dissonance of intervals are possible: (1) It may be that dissonance is a natural (and hence cross-cultural) phenomenon in that octaves are always more concordant fifths, fifths more concordant than thirds, sixths more concordant than major sevenths, and so on. Allowing this, it is also obvious that this natural ordering is subject to musical conventions in that, within a given style
or genre, what is or is not a dissonance will depend upon which other intervals are available for use. Whether major thirds are dissonances will depend upon whether major sevenths are stylistically employable, or whether, instead, octaves, fourths and fifths are the only standard alternatives. 1

(2) On the other hand, musical conventions might be arbitrary not just in the sense allowed above (as specifying divisions within a naturally ordered continuum), but in the more radical sense of specifying a category of elements which display no natural ranking. In that case, the dissonance of any interval will depend solely upon its stability as governed by its relative frequency of use within the selection of intervalllic elements characteristic of the given style. Dissonant intervals (if any qualify as such) will be those intervals which precede and lead to more frequently used and/or more strongly affirmed intervals.

Of these two views I prefer the first. But whichever account is favoured, one is committed to the view that the dissonance of an interval is style-relative. To know a musical style will be to know what is and what is not dissonant within it. To be familiar with a style will be to experience the dissonances within it as dissonances; that is, it will be to adjust one's expectations to match those which reflect the use of elements within the style.

On Young’s view, a listener familiar with one style (perhaps the currently pervasive style) of music will be unable to adjust his or her expectations when approaching music in one of the styles prevalent in previous epochs, although he or she might know what listeners familiar with those styles would expect by way of the use of its elements. By contrast, my view is that many listeners are able to make the appropriate adjustment in expectations and so come to experience music in different styles as anyone familiar with them would do, whether or not that "anyone" is their contemporary as a listener. I believe that familiarity with one style is no insuperable barrier to familiarity with other styles, and that this is testified to by the experiences of many listeners. A listener familiar with twentieth century music might, with the appropriate adjustment of expectations, experience the dissonance of major thirds in medieval music.
So much for Young's first example. What of the other two types of example? It is possible, I think, to deal with them in a similar manner, but not in fact necessary to do so. The argument, remember, is one about the authenticity of musical performances. Not every feature of one's experience of a musical work is relevant to an assessment of the authenticity of a performance of the work. On the view for which I argued in my original paper, a performance is authentic if it produces that which is determinatively indicated by the composer, where the composer's determinative intentions are governed by the conventions of performance practice which held at the time. On this account, listeners who have different associations with respect to a musical work are not thereby debarred from assessing the authenticity of its performance. (Perhaps, because your now much-loathed ex-lover adored Wagner's music, hearing The Ring evokes in you quite different associations from those which hearing The Ring evokes in me, but that difference between our experience of the work would not count against the possibility of our correctly judging the authenticity of the performance, and doing so on the same objective grounds.) Nor need differing evaluations of a work provide an obstacle to compatible evaluations of the authenticity or otherwise of its performances.

A further point: Young holds that any theory pursuing authenticity in musical performance '...suggests that there is an ideal performance of every composition', and he denies that there can be such a thing as a single, ideal performance of a work. But in my original paper I made quite clear that different-sounding performances might be equally and ideally authentic, because that which a composer can determine in his or her specification of a work plainly under-determines the sound of any performance of it.

Finally: Young questions the desirability of authenticity in performance. Now, the matter of whether or not authenticity is attainable differs from that of whether it is desirable that authenticity be attained. The desirability of authentic performance in general derives from our concern to discover what composers have "to say", authentic performances providing the most direct route to this. However, I also allowed the possibility that authentic performances of some works (or even of whole genres of works) might reveal them not to be worth listening to. Now, it is
always possible that a work will be the better for being performed inauthentically. But it would be surprising if this were common, in the way that it would be surprising (though not impossible) if misprints regularly improved poems.

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NOTE

1. In a similar way, yellow might naturally be brighter than green and green brighter than purple. In a particular painting one will know if green is a bright colour only if one knows which range of colours is available for use, where the range of colours available for use is determined by the style or genre of the painting.