

PERSPECTIVES
OF

NEW
MUSIC

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NOTES ON THE PERFORMANCE OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

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DISCUSSIONS OF contemporary music which reach a sufficiently "practical" point to be concerned with performance usually emphasize the "extreme difficulty" of modern music and tend to regard its performers as "virtuosi" of the highest order, in whom an altruistic sense has been, additionally, developed to an abnormal degree. Implicit is the notion that the presumed difficulty is "inevitable," that it cannot be removed because of the directions that composers' concerns have taken over the past half-century, that these directions point toward a not far distant moment of strangulation where the tape recorder will replace the live player, and that meanwhile we had all better be grateful to those players who actually do suffer through the process of learning new music.

All this can be evaporated with the realization that new music is in fact not so difficult to perform as people think, and that the problems experienced by performers in dealing with it are the result of their having been trained in a tradition of no relevance to its performance requirements. Moreover, I have been emboldened by personal experience to conclude that even the most difficult new music is far from approaching the limits of human performance capacities: given sufficiently efficient instruments, anything that can be heard (in the sense of "musically perceived") can, I am convinced, be played. Beyond raising interesting side issues (for example, the conclusion that the virtues of the electronic medium must necessarily lie in other domains than that of mere capacity to "do" what human beings "cannot do"), this indicates that the present demands of most contemporary music are no more "impractical" than those of any virtuoso music of the past—less, in fact, than some. Indeed, it could hardly be otherwise, for composers can only conceive performance demands in terms of (at most) slight extensions of the going performance practice. "Unplayable" really means "unhearable," and can therefore be applied as accurately to the electronic medium as to the instrumental. And it may be said that this definition renders most old music "unplayable"—if the lack of comprehension demonstrated in this area by most players is taken into account.

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With respect to the supposed rhythmic difficulties of contemporary music (the area most often cited as the seat of unsolvable performance problems), two examples from the past seem relevant. Both have certain similarities to modern music; having participated in performances of both of them, I can attest that their demands are no less formidable than any made today. The first, part of *Le Greygnour Bien* of Matheus de Perusio (c. 1400), is hard enough to realize accurately when written in “modern” score form with all values referable to a bar line.



Ex. 1

But when one considers the analog in modern notation of this example as written in the 14th century,



Ex. 2

and further considers that there was no score, it becomes clear that the capacities of the Avignon musicians who performed it were in no way inferior to our own. (Incidentally, the musicological conceit—that this music, because of its “complexity,” is “decadent”—is based on the premise that the symmetries of music of the recent past constitute a norm against which everything else, old or new, is to be measured. This premise, among other things, assumes that periodicity, exact durational and articulative symmetry, and binary division of duration are “basic”—an assumption not only contrary to fact and logically unacceptable but also belied by its difficulty of realization in practice: if these divisions were basic, why would beginning students, and many professionals, find such particular difficulty in playing “even” note values?)

A second example, from Morley's *Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* (1597), is not even a piece of art music: as a teaching piece whose performance was supposed to enable students to cope with the going rhythmic demands, it demonstrates impressively that our conception of rhythmic difficulty must be based on our teaching. Presented first in modern form,



Ex. 3

and then in a modern analog of old notation (but still in a score form not provided in the original) (Ex. 4),



Ex. 4

this excerpt shows that its performance is difficult only if one plays the sevens or the fives *against* “basic” binary divisions of the beat; if, instead, one knows from one’s training how to divide a given quantity of time into any number of parts, as the old musicians did, i.e. how fast septuplets, etc., are in a given *unity*, there is no special problem of execution.

These examples clearly illustrate that the measurement of musical time is difficult only when incorrect or irrelevant definitions are applied to musical situations: rhythmic difficulties are “psychological.” It seems helpful, therefore, to offer a suggestion about the most profitable way for a performer to train himself to handle contemporary rhythmic situations. The proper execution of the so-called “irrational” divisions (quintuplets, septuplets, etc.) is problematic only because most players are unaware of the relation between their speeds and that of a “basic” binary-divided beat “against” which they are placed. Memorization of these relations is easily accomplished by practice, in which the largest common subdivision between the “irrational” and the “basic” beat is counted (e.g., quarter-note quintuplets practiced by counting quintuple subdivisions of the unaltered quarter note, with articulations every four counts). Such practice leads to the memorization of relations between given speeds, such that ultimately it becomes irrelevant to speak, say,

of "septuplets" in a given "tempo"; one really thinks of speeds related as 7:4, and plays accordingly. Such memorization is no more difficult than that which permits us to discover a speed related to a "basic tempo" as 2:1, e.g., to play 8th notes in 4/4. Indeed, the rigidity of binary-related speed-proportions renders their initial mastery far more difficult than is that of speeds related as 3:2, 5:4, 5:6, 7:4, 7:6, etc., where the proportions, while still superparticular, are nevertheless sufficiently complex to allow much greater real inaccuracy in their execution to be tolerable to a human auditor.

Only after "irrational" divisions have been memorized by a performer, thus enabling him to produce them without fuss, will he be in a position to ask a profounder question about contemporary rhythmic practice: what does a composer intend by a given "irrational" division? There are at least two possible interpretations of all such situations, and our notation unfortunately fails utterly to distinguish between them. The two are: (1) that the irrational group—this is especially likely when one such group occurs with a different other—is being used to assure an asymmetrical sequence of attacks; and (2) that the group is to represent the (perhaps local) establishment of a new speed, which in turn may be to set up a tension against either (a) the beat, or (b) the measure, phrase, or longer structural unit, or combinations of these. Clearly, much less literal accuracy in execution is required under (1) than under (2), and indeed, a wholly different manner of performance is implied. And since these two "basic" possible interpretations are in no way mutually exclusive, complex interpretative problems arise when the compositorial intent is not clarified with respect to this issue. Composers generally show too little awareness of these differences, but since the semantics of the notation they use is itself incapable of such niceties, they are hardly to be blamed for failing to express differentiations that exist outside the resources of this linguistic system. Nevertheless, a greater awareness on their part of such differences would eventually result in the development of a more precisely differentiated system of rhythmic representation.

Assuming players who have overcome individual rhythmic and articulative difficulties, we arrive at what is really a more crucial aspect of contemporary performance: the accurate realization of ensemble rhythm. Here the problem of accurate and meaningful realization (which are not always identical) seems very little related to degrees of "complexity" as they appear on paper.¹ Consider, for instance, this straightforward excerpt from Milton Babbitt's *Composition for Four Instruments* (Ex. 5),

¹If it were necessary, this alone would demonstrate the complete imbecility of the premises on which, for example, Stockhausen's *Klavierstück XI* is based.

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$\text{♩} = 120$

Cl. (in C) *mf* *ppp* *mf* *p* *ff*

Vn. *arco* *mf* *ppp* *ff*

Vc. *pizz.* *ppp* *arco* *p*

Ex. 5

which nevertheless is quite as demanding as the following from Stefan Wolpe's Quartet for oboe, cello, percussion, and piano, whose notated "complexities" appear much greater.

$\text{♩} = 144-152$

Oboe *mf* *piu f*

'Cello *arco* *p* *legg.* *mf*

Perc. *mf* etc.

Piano *pp* *pp* *mf*

Ex. 6

In both cases, meaningful representation is only possible if each player knows the total score, and therefore can "hear the piece." Given that, both are equally simple of realization. But only in performances rehearsed far beyond the minimal levels established by those "professional musicians" for whom the mere public approximation of works is sufficient can such issues be met.

In the realization of contemporary ensemble rhythms, a new "cham-

ber music style" must develop, and indeed already has.² Such a style is based on the transfer of that rubato which used to be the province of the individual player—and which is as necessary (though in new domains) in the performance of contemporary music as in any other—to the entire playing group: a "collective" rubato, unthinkable to musicians who view the art in terms of individual aggrandisement.

Speed of articulation in contemporary music presents major problems to some performers. Yet it cannot be said that any known music of today contains speeds in excess of those reached in the virtuoso writing of the past century; indeed, extreme speeds are by no means the exclusive province of the recent past. Returning to Morley, we find a passage,



Ex. 7

in which the tactus, transcribed here as a half note, may be assumed to proceed at about mm 48. At such a speed the 8th notes, here subdivided in 4, are at mm 192, a rate fast enough in itself, but even more extraordinary when one considers the (by modern standards) slow-speaking instruments that probably performed the piece. If, moreover, one takes literally Morley's instruction that the lower parts be *sung* to solmization syllables, the virtuosity required becomes altogether staggering. We must therefore put down this difficulty, as we do complaints about the difficulty of "disjunct" motion, to the intransigence of habits acquired by most players in their training. It is this, rather, that we must criticize.

Considering the irrelevance of the musical materials by which players are taught to "master" their instruments today, it is really a marvel that performances of contemporary music are possible at all. Quite apart from the fact that to teach playing by the use of binary-tonal music unjustifiably elevates that music to the status of a norm, and

²The performances of the Group for Contemporary Music at Columbia University are based on this premise, and have already begun to show—albeit sporadically—the fruits of such an approach.

thereby makes it difficult to comprehend music composed in other systems, current training inadequately prepares performers to cope with the most common problems of performance today. In general, the musical language of the present moment avoids binary symmetry and interrelates its pitches in more specific and detailed ways than does the music in which most players are trained. It would certainly be profitable then, to acquaint players from the start of their education with other common kinds of pitch and temporal articulation. When one suggests this, however, it is objected that other situations are less "basic" than the binary-conjunct, and that their investigation must be therefore deferred to a more "advanced" stage. This is absurd, as any consideration of the past beyond the most recent 200 years will demonstrate. For instance, the introduction of duple rhythm into the art music of medieval Europe met with great resistance, apparently because the musical minds of that time had been so trained in a rhythmic system built of longs and shorts (hence, an entirely ternary system) that the idea of a succession of short even pulses was quite inconceivable. Magister Lambert (c. 1240) remarks:

From this it appears that an imperfect longa can be executed only in connection with a following or preceding brevis, since a longa and a brevis . . . together always complete a perfection. Therefore, if someone were to ask whether a mode or a natural song can be formed by imperfect longae exclusively just in the same way as it can be formed by perfect longae, the approved answer is: no, since nobody can sing a succession of pure imperfect longae.³

Or, in other words, a succession of articulations in binary proportion—such as is now called "basic" by music teachers—was simply "unplayable" in the conceptual-practical terms of the 13th-century musician.

I hope to be forgiven for the banality of remarking that no significant, or even accurate, performance is possible without the performers' perception of the structure which their performance realizes. Needless to say, the "analysis" that makes good performance possible may have no more relation to compositional intent than a comparably successful theoretic analysis,⁴ but in the one case as in the other, it is optimally

³ Willi Apel, *Notation of Polyphonic Music*, pub. by The Medieval Academy of America.

⁴ A proper use of the word "analysis" would restrict its application to explications of significantly "heard" structure. Unfortunately, however, there are many purely descriptive treatments of pieces (or of their notation) that call themselves analyses—and it is to these that I refer. The relation of all this to performance is further clouded by the fact that there are other discussions of particular pieces which, while they may not demonstrate the contextual functioning of relations within a work, nevertheless elucidate general procedures of which particular works being discussed are instances; it is this kind of theoretical generalizing—also often misnamed analysis—that seems to me "valuable outside of rehearsal," since it acquaints the performer with the general procedural framework within which the piece he is playing functions.

desirable to digest those intentions of the composer, and those opinions he has about the nature of his piece, that are not already indicated in his score—and hence can only be received from him in person. Since most of our musical life is spent in trying to unravel ambiguities resulting from the fact that no score or performance ever represents the complete intent of its creator, it is interesting to reflect on what would happen to performance if musical notation could be rendered even as unambiguous as verbal language.

In any event, it is extremely difficult to say just what goes into the kind of “analysis” necessary for informed performance. It is possible to observe, however, that the type of analysis generally presumed to have value in “theoretical” explication is often useless in the preparation of a performance. The theoretic kind of analysis is usually devoted to displaying relationships that are sufficiently unobvious as to require that they be pointed at by other than aural means in order to be perceived. (This should not be taken as any criticism of such relations: it has been observed that any relation once exhibited can be heard, and in any case it is usually not the most apparent relations that are the most significant.) From the performer’s point of view, such conventional analyses, while of course generally useful to him outside of rehearsal, nevertheless fail to motivate his manner of playing, since their major part is most often devoted to translating the information presented in a work into another (usually verbal) linguistic medium. The performer, however, needs not translation but direction and focusing. Suppose, for instance, that he is presented with two successive tones to be articulated, registrally separated and unconnected by any slur or similar mark. Given knowledge of the basic premises of the composition, he may know not to associate these two tones into a phrase, since their registral separation may indicate, say, association with different set segments. But suppose the same two tones occur later in the same registral relationship, but this time as a simple adjacency. Here, the performer cannot be blamed for failing to “get” the pun unless the composer indicates (for example by a slur) that this time the tones *are* to be associated; the composer will have failed in notating the piece if such an ambiguity remains. Whether or not the performer, in such a situation, should still be able to make the distinction is not a question I propose to consider, since it can only arise when the composer has not been sufficiently professional in doing *his* job.

It is of utmost importance, for example, to know that the plucked piano notes in Donald Martino’s Trio for violin, clarinet, and piano are present not for “coloristic” reasons, but to differentiate elements of structure.⁵ It is not of crucial necessity to a successful performance of

⁵ But it is equally essential to recognize that Martino did not pick pizzicato piano as a timbre because he *disliked* its sound.

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this work, however, to know precisely which set segments are being presented through this particular form of articulation—apparently because given this knowledge, there is very little one can do in the moment of performance to project it—beyond putting on a knowing, rather than an exotic, expression.

A different situation exists with Peter Westergaard's *Variations for Six Players*, written for, and recently performed by, the Group for Contemporary Music. Here the remarks made above about Martino's piano-plucking apply not only to the timbrally differentiated articulations in the piano, but to "special" sounds required of all the other instruments (Ex. 8).

Var. 2 (a 4)

$\text{♩} = \text{ca } 105$
8

9

10

Cl. (match Pf. ord. and Vn. non vib.) (match Timp. and Pf. deadened) gentle attack, fast finger vib. (match Vb. and Vn. vib.)

Vn. gentle attack, fast vib. (match Vb. and Cl. vib.) sharp attack (match Pf. ord. and Cl. non vib.) non vib. (match Pf. ord. and Cl. non vib.)

Perc. soft stick, motor on, fast vib. (match Vn. and Cl. vib.)

Timp. soft stick (match Cl. > and Pf. deadened)

Pf. (match Cl. and Vn. harmonics) (match Cl. and Vn. non vib.)
R.H. strikes key
L.H. on node in middle of string
R.H. strikes key
L.H. deadens string (match Timp. and Cl. >)

Ex. 8

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11 12 13 14

Cl. (match Pf. ord. and Vn. non vib.) (match Timp. and Pf. deadened) gentle attack, fast finger vib. (match Vb. and Vn. vib.)

Vn. fast vib., gentle attack (match Vb. and Cl. vib.) sharp attack (match Gl. and Pf. harmonics) non vib.

Gl. (match Pf. and Vn. harmonics) (match Pf. ord. and Cl. non vib.) (match Pf. and Vn. harmonics)

Perc. *p* wooden stick or other end of Vb. stick Vb. (match Vn. and Cl. vib.)

Timp. (match Cl. > and Pf. deadened)

Pf. (match Cl. and Vn. non vib.) ord. R.H. strike key L.H. deaden string (match Timp. and Cl. >)

Detailed description of the musical score: The score is for a chamber ensemble. It consists of six staves: Clarinet (Cl.), Violin (Vn.), Glass (Gl.), Percussion (Perc.), Timpani (Timp.), and Piano (Pf.). The music is divided into four measures, numbered 11 to 14. Measure 11: Cl. has a whole rest; Vn. has a whole rest; Gl. has a whole rest; Perc. has a whole rest; Timp. has a whole rest; Pf. has a whole rest. Measure 12: Cl. has a half note G4 (p), then a half note A4 (p), then a half note B4 (p); Vn. has a half note G4 (p), then a half note A4 (p), then a half note B4 (p); Gl. has a whole rest; Perc. has a whole rest; Timp. has a whole rest; Pf. has a whole rest. Measure 13: Cl. has a whole rest; Vn. has a whole rest; Gl. has a whole rest; Perc. has a whole rest; Timp. has a whole rest; Pf. has a whole rest. Measure 14: Cl. has a half note G4 (p), then a half note A4 (p), then a half note B4 (p); Vn. has a half note G4 (p), then a half note A4 (p), then a half note B4 (p); Gl. has a whole rest; Perc. has a whole rest; Timp. has a whole rest; Pf. has a whole rest.

Ex. 8 (cont.)

It is necessary to know that the timbral differentiations in this excerpt all have structural function. But here a more detailed knowledge than is needed in the Martino is useful, because it can be projected in performance. Each register proceeds in half-aggregates, while the totality of registers does so as well, and the diversity of timbres and articulations required from each instrument serves, within the ambitus covered by each, to mark off the registers. An intelligent performance is not possible unless the players know these matters and can therefore match the several types of articulation they must each produce to similar types in similar registers in other instruments. Moreover, intelligent players will perceive that in this excerpt, their individual parts have the same hexachordal content as the registral collections and the four total

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collections: they will therefore attempt internal linear continuity in their individual parts as well. In other words, at least this much "analytic" information is needed about the excerpt before a performance can even begin to attempt to project its elegant three-way continuity.

For the implementation and validation of the various suggestions I have made, the only requisite is the willingness of performers to expend the necessary time on preparation of contemporary music. It is regrettable that the structure of the "professional" musical world is such as to make such expenditure of time difficult. Yet, just as a given status quo has never prevented composers from willing change into being, so the existence of a particular set of circumstances in the "professional" world should never be adduced as a "reason" for not devoting adequate time to preparing new music for performance. It is only when, in this most mundane domain, basic circumstances are questioned, as they are in the acts of composition and performance themselves, that we can approach representations of music (both modern and ancient) worthy of the compositional efforts that have called the music into being. And the present activities of various groups and individuals who manifest such a questioning attitude already show how vast and fruitful a field lies before us.