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Beyond Reproduction: Semiotic Perspectives On Musical Performance*

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Abstract

The traditional musicological conception of performance is as the reproduction of pre-existing texts. This makes no allowance for the extent to which meaning emerges from the act of performance, and from the interactions between the various participants in performance events. A broadly semiotic approach focusses attention on such issues, and in this article I illustrate such an approach in terms of the communicative function of the mazurka 'script' and the role of performance gesture in conditioning musical meaning. I argue that, instead of thinking in terms of the reproduction of works, it is better to borrow Jeff Pressing's term and think in terms of performances referencing scores, traditions, and other pre-existing entities: this way it is possible to conceptualise performances that range from the *Werktreue* ideology or tribute bands to parody or burlesque. Discourses of the relationship between works and performances are mirrored by those between performances and recordings, and consideration of the latter helps to clarify features shared by both: creativity, collaboration, and semiosis.

Key words

performance, semiosis, reproduction, reference, creativity

I am concerned here with semiotics not as an established scientific discipline with its own competing theoretical frameworks and jargons, but rather as a common-sense approach to musical performance that asks: what is being communicated by who to whom, and how? These simple but fundamental questions are of value because of powerful, entrenched assumptions that bedevil thinking about performance on the one hand, and a persistent methodological vagueness on the other.

To take these in reverse order, one of the significant developments in recent decades has been the growth in empirical studies of recorded performances, an approach that began within psychology and mu-

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sicology but is increasingly becoming part of mainstream ethnomusicology. Such work involves making connections between objective properties of recorded performances, for instance tempo profiles, and features considered significant from a musicological or music-theoretical point of view, generally involving structural aspects of the music. My own study of the relationship between Wilhelm Furtwängler's performances and Heinrich Schenker's analysis of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (Cook 1995), for instance, was based on comparison between how Furtwängler shaped tempo and how Schenker broke the music down into connected sections. But musicologists working in this area rarely articulate well-developed principles for making such connections, and I was no exception. Though I never set them out explicitly, the assumptions underlying that study might be summarised as follows: first, accents can be created by lengthening notes; second, sections can be articulated by *rallentandi* or caesurae, and unified by more or less consistent arch-shaped profiles; and third, tempo change contributes to music's tensional morphology, which itself relates in some poorly understood manner to what Suzanne Langer (1957: 228) called the 'inner life' ("there are certain aspects of the so-called 'inner life' – physical or mental – which have formal properties similar to those of music – patterns of motion and rest, of tension and release, of agreement and disagreement, preparation, fulfilment, excitation, sudden change, etc.").

The methodological vagueness which this illustrates is perhaps less of a problem for the development of a musicology of performance than the entrenched assumptions to which I referred. For reasons to do with its nineteenth-century origins, musicology has traditionally been based on the written texts of music, and to the extent that it has been concerned with the interpretation of meaning, it has seen that meaning as in some sense inherent in the musical text. In one version, music is assumed to be a process of communication *from* the composer whose intentions are embodied in the work *to* the listener whose task it is to understand the music in light of those intentions. Music theory offers a more positivistic spin on the same assumption: meaning is identified with the structure defined by the musical text, and the listener's task is to understand that structure, to reconstruct it within his or her own experience. Given the hierarchical nature of music theory in virtually all its dominant forms, what this amounts to is the perception of moment-to-moment aspects of music in light of the larger structures from which they derive their significance, and the result is a model strikingly similar to what Eric Clarke (2005: 11)

calls the ‘information-processing’ approach of cognitive psychology: music is understood as a process of communication whereby a hierarchy of percepts is transmitted through the temporal sequence of performance and reconstructed by the listener.

And what is characteristic of such approaches is the way they leapfrog the performer, whose role is seen as one of reproducing a pre-existing meaning: the performer is thought of as an intermediary rather than an originator, a creator of meaning. Yet the key lesson of inter-disciplinary performance studies – the study of performance in the theatre, in dance, or in religion – is that meaning is crucially generated in the act of performance, that it is in this sense emergent. What might be described as the specifically performative dimension of musical performance is under-represented in both music theory and psychology. Patrik Juslin’s (2001: 324) ‘lens’ model of musical communication seeks to rectify the leapfrogging of the performer to which I referred, starting instead with the performer’s ‘expressive intentions’ and ending with the listener’s ‘judgement’, yet this is arguably more a relocation than a rethinking of the traditional communication model: meaning is ‘encoded’ into expressive cues by the performer and ‘decoded’ by the listener, rather than being seen as negotiated between performer and listener in the course of performance. I hope to show in this paper that a commonsense semiotic approach – an approach based on asking what is being communicated by who to whom, and how – can suggest ways of doing better justice to the creative dimension of performance, provided that we resist the temptation to think of what performance communicates in terms of what I shall call the reproduction model of musical meaning. And I shall do this less through theoretical argumentation than through a series of specific case studies.

Jimi Hendrix’s last performance of *Foxy Lady* took place at the Isle of Wight Festival in 1970, just three weeks before his death. Figure 1 is taken from his performance of the opening riff, where his physical movements on stage articulate the different rhythmic levels of the groove: his steps are timed to the beats and weakly grouped in fours, while he flexes his knees in a two-bar pattern that emphasizes the backbeats. At the same time a series of individual gestures underscore particular moments of the music, ranging from nodding the head or swivelling the hips to the cuing gestures which Hendrix sometimes addressed to the audience as much as to the other players (Figure 2). The effect of the stage choreography during this riff is to engage the audience as attentive listeners, drawing them within the



Figure 1. Jimi Hendrix playing the first riff from *Foxy Lady* at the Isle of Wight, 31 August 1970. (Figures 1–5 are taken from Murray Lerner's film 'Blue Wild Angel: Jimi Hendrix Live at the Isle of Wight', MCA 113080-9)



Figure 2. Hendrix's cuing gesture



Figure 3. *Foxy Lady*, first improvisation

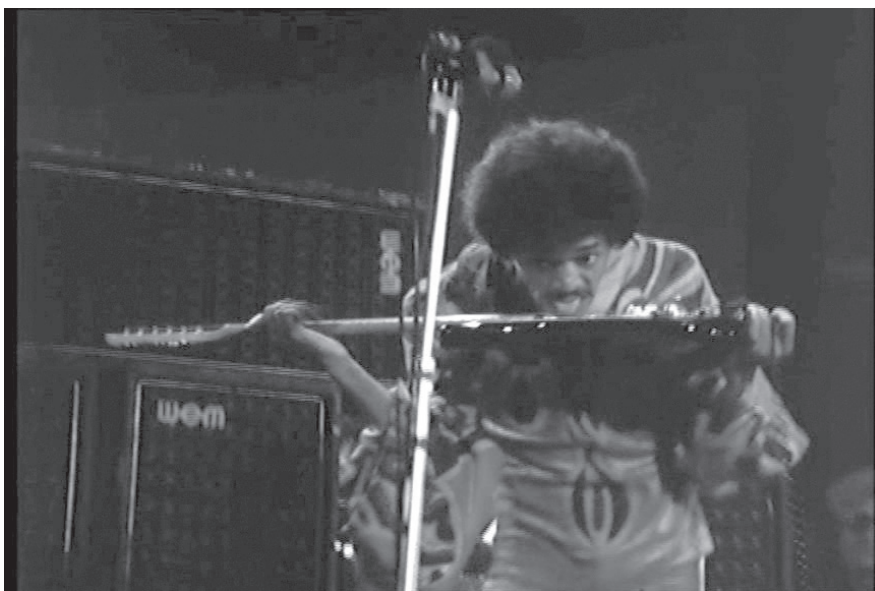


Figure 4. *Foxy Lady*, second improvisation

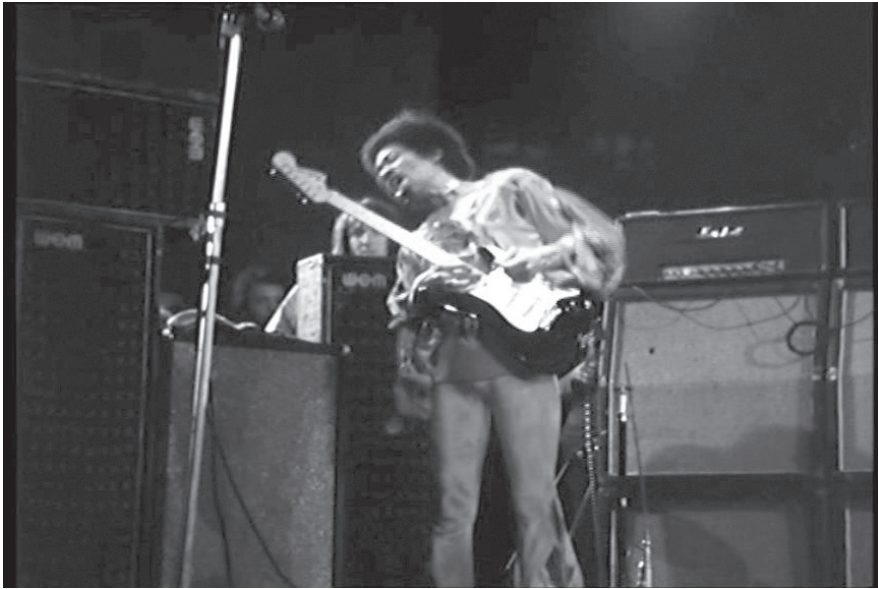


Figure 5. *Foxy Lady*, ending

rhythmic patterning and temporal unfolding of the music: Hendrix is performing with his body as much as with his guitar or his voice. But elsewhere his performance choreography is quite different. He performs the first extended passage of improvisation as what one might term pure music: his closed eyes are the classic signifier of musical interiority, an invitation for the listener/viewer to go with the music (Figure 3). In the second improvisation, by contrast, he makes a perhaps half-hearted show of the party tricks he picked up on the club circuit, for example playing the guitar with his teeth (Figure 4): film clips of such episodes show audience members on edge, sometimes wide-eyed, wondering what Hendrix is going to do next. And at the end of the song Hendrix goes through a strange routine in which he flips his head from side to side, like a rag doll (Figure 5). The golliwog connotation evokes the racial stereotypes of the blackface tradition and, at least for the white listener/viewer, some of the cultural unease that goes with it; as one of the first black superstars to play before predominantly white mass audiences, Hendrix's stage appearances always raised troubling questions of what exactly he was performing – questions to which 'the song' is clearly not a sufficient answer.

In short, Hendrix used his body on stage to position the audience in relation to his performance and, in this and other ways, to condition the meaning that emerged from it. All this, however, would be

lost on someone who was listening to the performance on CD. Truncated, reduced to sound, music retains some of its meanings: if it did not there would be no record industry. Yet there are essential dimensions of the meaning generated through the act of performance which cannot be inscribed on a sound recording, and so long as we are talking about music as performed I see no rationale for the traditional distinction between 'musical' and 'extramusical' meaning, with the latter regarded as in some sense subordinate or even beneath notice. Music presents itself in performance, and signifies, as a totality, an embodied practice that is received as much through the eyes as the ears. And if this is self-evidently true of rock-musical performance, it applies to the Western classical tradition as well: like Hendrix, classical pianists use their bodies in ways that position their listeners and condition the emergence of meaning. A 1962 television broadcast of Arturo Michelangeli playing Chopin's Mazurka Op. 33 No. 4 shows the maestro wiping the keyboard and then his cheeks with a handkerchief before laying it down; he rubs his hands, places them on his lap, and then with a continuous, measured motion brings his right hand down towards the keyboard to play the first note. The performance has begun long before that first note; the extended preparations create a sense of ritual, their extravagant stylization communicating the tantalisingly detached persona that Michelangeli cultivated with such success. Again, in a film performance of Chopin's Mazurka Op. 63 No. 3 (recorded on 4 November 2002 in the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris), Grigory Sokolov's hand repeatedly flies up after playing a note he wants to particularly accentuate, while at other times he seems to shape notes by the twisting motion of his hand after he has depressed the key. His highly characteristic gestures in this performance add up to a sustained and elaborately choreographed rendition that is as much a performance of virtuosity as it is of Op. 63 No. 3, as much a performance of Sokolov as of Chopin.

But although I see no rationale for describing such aspects of performance as 'extramusical', my argument that meaning is created in the very act of performance may be more convincing when it is made in what would on any reckoning be seen as 'musical' terms, and again Chopin provides convenient examples. One of the few contributions to the study of performance from a music-theoretical and psychological perspective that specifically adopts a semiotic approach is a study by Eric Clarke of performances of the Prelude in E minor, Op. 28 No. 4. In it Clarke (1995: 28) claims that "a whole performance ideology may be connoted by one or two local performance features". His point

refers to historically informed performance: there are characteristic patterns of timing, dynamic change, and non-vibrato, he says, that immediately locate a performance within that tradition. But he makes a similar point in relation to structural interpretation, identifying two distinct traditions of interpretation applicable to this Prelude: there is a small number of specific features, he argues, that serve to signal the one or the other. Seen this way, the extended information-processing hierarchy that is assumed by the traditional communication model is short-circuited. Meaning is generated through the referencing of tradition, and there is an asymmetrical or even arbitrary relationship between the complex of structural meaning that is signified, and the particular feature or features that signify it. It is through this relationship that performance is identified as a specifically semiotic practice.



Figure 6. The mazaruka ‘script’ in recordings of Chopin’s Op. 17 No. 4

A further Chopin example arises from my own work on what I term the mazaruka ‘script’. Though it might be best seen in the broadest terms as a way of playing, this is normally thought of as a characteristic rhythmic pattern in which the first beat is played shorter and so de-emphasised in relation to the others; as a signifier it references a range of signifieds, varying according to circumstances from the mazaruka genre to folk tradition or Polishness. My concern here, however, is with the selective way in which pianists apply the mazaruka script. Performers of the Mazurka Op. 17 No. 4, for example, do not simply play in mazaruka rhythm throughout. Not only do they give some sections a heavier mazaruka quality than others, but there is also

a general tendency to give the beginning of sections a much stronger mazurka coloration than what follows. Figure 6, created by Craig Sapp, provides a visual representation of this. In the upper chart each row represents a different recording, while each column represents a bar: strong mazurka characterisation, as defined in terms of the relative length of beats, is indicated by grey. The lower chart represents the same information, but a smoothing function makes it easier to see how the overall distribution corresponds to the sectional structure of the piece. Section B makes the point: virtually everybody gives it a strong mazurka coloration, but the effect is strongest in bars 1–3 and 5 of this 8-bar section. In this way the first few bars of the section as a whole, and the first bar of its second four-bar phrase, are most strongly marked, with subsequent bars being more weakly colored. The effect is rather similar to the way late eighteenth-century composers used themes to mark the beginning of structural sections in sonatas: the melodies typically lapse into developing variation or passage-work after a few bars, once their burden of formal signification is exhausted, and exactly the same applies to pianists' use of mazurka coloration as a formal marker.

In this way the mazurka script is not, or at least is not simply, an element within a metrical hierarchy: it is a sign in its own right, and as such requires to be analysed in semiotic terms. In performance as in composition, then, a semiotically informed approach has the potential to shortcut conventional hierarchical conceptions, substituting for a highly abstract theoretical model an analysis based on what is communicated by who to whom. But it does more than that. In contrast to the reproduction model of musical communication, it acknowledges that meaning is generated in the act of performance by virtue of decisions made voluntarily on the performer's part (voluntarily because, as Figure 6 makes clear, individual decisions are not prescribed by the composition). And because signs are by definition socially conditioned, the semiotic approach also brings the audience into play in a way that the reproduction model does not: meaning arises through the construction of what the pianist does as meaningful by listeners. The analysis is accordingly displaced from the composer's and even the performer's intentions to the community within which signs are interpreted, a community that encompasses both performers and listeners, and that is always geographically and historically situated.

And looked at from this point of view, there perhaps wasn't so much wrong with my approach to Furtwängler's performance of Bee-

thoven's Ninth Symphony after all, despite the vagueness of its theoretical underpinnings. Furtwängler's characteristic arch-shaped tempo profiles, sometimes extending over vast sections of the music, can be seen as a transference to a formal level of the practice of phrase arching (playing faster and louder as you go into a phrase, and slower and softer as you come out of it). Psychological studies of phrase arching, such as by Neil Todd (1985, 1992), have represented this as a basic condition of expressive performance, possibly to be explained in terms of general mechanisms underlying the perception of self-motion. My own study of phrase arching in recordings of the Mazurka Op. 63 No. 3 from 1923 to the present day, however, indicates that this is a historically and even to some extent geographically specific practice: the kind of phrase arching Todd describes, in which tempo, dynamics, and composed phrase structure are all coordinated with one another, seems to have first appeared in the aftermath of the Second World War, and is particularly associated with Russian or Russian-trained pianists (Cook 2009). This means that while the large arch-shaped profiles found in Furtwängler's recordings from the same period may be linked to a structural conception of the music that he shared with Schenker, that is not a sufficient explanation of their expressive effect. If for listeners they connoted an act of improvisation on an epic scale coupled to a powerful emotional insight somehow associated with the experience of the war years, that is, a strictly historical phenomenon built on community consensus. Both music theory and psychology under-emphasise this dimension, seeking theoretical explanations for irreducibly historical phenomena – and semiotics, with its unremitting focus on processes of meaning production, can help to counteract this.

I have commented repeatedly on the inability of the reproduction model of communication to do justice to either the semiotic complexity or the creativity of performance, but what is the alternative? It would of course be absurd to deny that there is a dimension of reproduction – most broadly, the presentation within the performance event of a pre-existing entity of some kind – within virtually all musical performance (or literally all, if one recognizes that even 'free' improvisation is always improvisation on something). But the extent to which performance can be characterised as reproduction varies, as is evident from the most extreme exemplar of the reproduction model: the *Werktreue* ideology, according to which the performer's duty to the work demands the same kind of self-effacement that is, or was, associated with English butlers and waiters at high-class restaurants. Of course it would be silly to think of *Werktreue* as the description

of an actual state of affairs rather than an aesthetic ideal, but the essential point is that this most fully fledged version of the reproduction model represents merely one position within a broad spectrum of possibilities for performative signification.

Theoretically informed performance pedagogy attempts to compensate for the shortcomings of the reproduction model by qualification: performance is seen as not just reproducing but interpreting, inflecting, or on occasion subverting the musical work. But a better solution is to reconceive the musical work in such a way that the broad spectrum of possibilities for performance to which I referred is built into it. And it seems to me that a good candidate for this reconception – one which moreover is intrinsically semiotic in nature – is Jeff Pressing's notion of the 'referent'. Pressing (1988) coined the term to designate the pre-existing plans, tunes, or chord sequences on which jazz improvisations are based (the jazz 'standard' being the most obvious example). But, as I have argued elsewhere (Cook 2004), its scope can readily be extended, in particular by using it to designate features that are not piece-specific, and by applying it to other musical traditions, among them that of Western classical music. It is striking how closely Pressing's description of chord voicing in jazz standards matches the practices of continuo performance in baroque music, demonstrating how similar processes of reference are in operation in both cases, but the point is a more general one: classical works function as referents for performance in essentially the same manner that jazz standards function as referents for improvisation. And the advantage of this conception is its inherent flexibility. Asking how a work is reproduced in performance effectively closes off the possibility of a productive answer, but the concept of the referent does the opposite: we might ask how reference to the work organises the performance in different ways and at different levels, which elements of the work and which parameters of the performance are and are not involved in this, and about the semantic frame of the reference, which may be anything from the reverence definitive of *Werktreue* (or tribute bands for that matter) at one extreme to critique, parody, or burlesque at the other. The concept of reference accommodates any degree of what Serge Lacasse (2000) calls 'transstylization', that is to say the degree of transformation involved in any intertextual practice, and for this reason it serves to open up discourse on performance in a way that the reproduction model does not.

At this point a parallel might usefully be drawn with recording. It's striking how closely discourse on the relationship between mu-

sical works and performances is mirrored by that on the relationship between performances and recordings: to take an obvious example, the concept of *Werktreue* – of fidelity to the work – is replicated in the language of hi-fi sound reproduction. But even as applied to recordings, where its appropriateness might seem self-evident, the term ‘reproduction’ proves to be highly problematic. The relationship between a performance and a recording of it might be described as one of massive iconicity. But iconicity is still a semiotic category, which means that it is historical, based on codes shared between producer and receiver: this implies that, just as photographs have to be ‘read’, so some kind of aural ‘literacy’ is involved in the perception of recorded sound. And indeed it is clear that the complex layering and spatial techniques employed in contemporary studio production have stimulated what might be called a production-oriented style of listening, which is typically more highly developed in the predominantly iPod-wearing generation than in an older generation more accustomed to loudspeakers. (It is too bad that school curricula are not overhauled to build on the aural skills that students have today). There is moreover every reason to believe that similar issues of aural literacy were involved in the transition from a generation whose listening practices were moulded by live music to one conditioned by mechanically reproduced sound. At least, I see no other way to understand the ‘tone tests’ held in the late 1910s and early 1920s by gramophone companies for purposes of publicity: as illustrated in a famous photograph made by the Edison Company (accessible at the time of writing at <http://www.npr.org/programs/lnfsound/gallery/edison/3.html>), blindfolded listeners were invited to tell the difference between a live singer and a recording, and proved incapable of doing so. Their failure seems incredible, given how recordings from the 1920s sound to us today. The explanation must lie in changes in aural literacy between then and now, and the basic point this demonstrates – that what is too readily thought of as simple reproduction is in fact a historically contingent process of semiosis – is the same point I made about the connotations of Furtwängler’s performances of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, and Clarke made about the E minor Prelude.

There is another respect in which the relationship between recordings and performances resembles that between performances and works, and again it underlines the inadequacy of the reproduction model. Studio-produced pop recordings are the traces of multiple, superimposed events, ranging from successive real-time performances (as in multi-track recording) to on- or off-line digi-

tal processing: in a way it is misleading to call them recordings at all. Taken together, they do not reproduce real performance events, but rather construct virtual or fictive ones: they signify, or reference, performances that never actually existed, or maybe it is better to say that they redefine the concept of performance such that its grounding in real time becomes an attribute of reception rather than necessarily of production. And this change in music's ontology is not a consequence of the development of digital recording but goes back much further. The film-like transformation and reconstruction of production time that was first made possible through the use of magnetic tape is merely the most obvious way in which recordings do something essentially other than reproduce performances, or at least such performances as might be heard in concert hall or salon. From the earliest days, music was truncated or performance speeded up to fit on two- or three-minute cylinders and discs; scores were rearranged and seating plans reconfigured to accommodate the limitations of acoustic recording technology. Performance for the horn or microphone developed as a practice substantially distinct from that of concert performance, with its own specialists – though according to scholars such as Robert Philip (1992), the two traditions of performance converged again in the second half of the twentieth century, as concert performances came to be modelled more and more closely on recordings.

Recordings, then, represent performances, just as performances represent musical works, but in both cases the representation involved is of a complex, culturally embedded nature. If this is reproduction, then it is reproduction in the equally complex sense in which the reproduction of religious ritual involves not simple repetition but rather a performance of belief and subsumption in tradition that is always enacted as it were for the first time. And there is a further feature that is obvious in studio-produced pop but applies to both recording and performance in general: its creativity. Digital recording and post-production techniques have fragmented authorship to the point that stable distinctions between the acts of composition, performance, production, and engineering can hardly be maintained. Creativity is distributed across a musical practice that is irreducibly collaborative. Again this is not just a phenomenon of the late twentieth century: musicology underestimates the creative role of classical producers such as John Culshaw just as, in the sphere of composition, it underestimates such figures as August Jaeger, without whom the works of Elgar could hardly have come into being.

As for performance, it is largely creativity that I have been talking about in this paper, even though I have hardly used the word. Pianists create their own idiosyncratic styles over the top, so to speak, of Chopin's composition, and as a result are received by their publics as co-authors: there is something very true about Amazon's ostensibly clumsy listing of, for example, "Chopin – Piano Works by Murray Perahia and Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin". Sokolov and Hendrix perform qualities (such as virtuosity or blackness) and position their subjects in ways that are by no means inherent in the works they are performing: there is nothing in the words or music of *Foxy Lady* to specify the different subject positions that Hendrix created in his Isle of Wight performance. One might say that performers realize a potential for meaning that is inherent in the works they perform, but it is the potential rather than the meaning that is inherent in them: works mediate or condition the production of meaning in the act of performance. And because this production of meaning is socially embedded, intertextual, and emergent, the language of reference holds the promise of articulating the creative dimension of performance in a way that the traditional language of reproduction cannot.

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ВИШЕ ОД РЕПРОДУКЦИЈЕ: СЕМИОТИЧКЕ ПЕРСПЕКТИВЕ МУЗИЧКОГ ИЗВОЂЕЊА

(Резиме)

Традиционално музиколошко схватање извођења подразумева репродуковање већ постојећих текстова. Тиме се не узима у обзир мера у којој значење произлази из чина извођења, као и из интеракције између различитих учесника у извођачким догађајима: резултат је да су и извођачи и публика у написима изостављени из музичке културе. С обзиром на размере у којима је текстуалистичка парадигма уграђена у етаблиране академске приступе извођењу, нарочито у област музичке теорије, продуктивно би било да се уместо њих усвоји семиотички приступ – под којим не подразумевам било какав постојећи модел музичке семиотике, већ радије један здраворазумски приступ који се бави основним питањем о томе ко, шта, с ким и како размеђује.

Ослањајући се на низ кратких студија случаја од Шопена и Фуртвенглера до Џимија Хендрикса, у овом раду такав приступ примењујем у суочавању са извесним проблемима на које се наилази при проучавању музичког извођења. При томе нарочиту пажњу обраћам на то како оно о чему се традиционално размишља као о репродукцији може да се адекватније поима у оквиру сложенијег, интринсички семиотичког концепта репрезентације. Док се, на пример, извођење из музичкотеоријске перспективе схвата као комуникација структура, семиотички приступ сугерише начине на које одређене карактеристике извођења могу да укажу на специфичне традиције интерпретације. Извођачки гестови ослањају се на културне конотације и стварају позиције субјекта за слушаоце, на начине који се могу тумачити у оквиру семиотике, док их модел репродукције игнорише. Слично томе, везе између снимања и извођења обично се сагледавају у оквиру репродукције – то чини академска публика, али и обичан слушалац, као и музичка индустрија – али се тачније могу разумети као репрезентација. То се у раду приказује на примеру неких феномена који се не могу другачије објаснити, као што је био јавни „тонски тест”, који су приредили Компанија Едисон и други у периоду око 1920. године.

Моја главна тврдња јесте да семиотички приступ омогућава позиционирање извођача у центар музичке културе, као и разумевање односа између

дела и извођења, на флексибилнији начин него што то чини традиционални модел заснован на репродукцији текста. Идеја референце – коју преузимам од Цефа Пресинга, проширујући је од специфичног случаја импровизације ка извођењу у општијем смислу – омогућује нам да концептуализујемо извођења у распону од идеологије *Werktreue* (верности оригиналу) или *tribute bands*, до пародије или бурлеске. Пребацујући тежиште са штампане странице на чин извођења, идеја референце омогућује нам да на одговарајући начин вреднујемо оне особности музичке културе које традиционални приступи занемарују: креативност, сарадњу и *семиозис*.

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