

Ideal performance

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[Abstract: Based on a conception that a musical composition is constituted by normative properties, it is argued that every such composition has one ideal performance – a performance that fulfils all the aesthetic-normative properties that the composition determines. A performance is conceived of (and evaluated) as inherently and essentially “intentionalistic” – being, by its very nature, a performance **of** a certain composition. This conception allows for various different performances, none of which is preferable over the others. The properties concerned are conceived of broadly as comprising not only the tones themselves and various “theoretical” features like thematic relations, harmonic progressions, rhythmical structures, but also descriptive, emotive and “rhetorical” properties, which are “objective” properties of the composition. It is further claimed that these are indicated in the score when properly understood in the light, inter alia, of pertinent conventions, which are the business of theoreticians and musicologists to determine. The main significance of the result lies both in highlighting some important implications of the intentionalistic character of a performance, and in the style of conceptual connection it indicates between a musical composition, its aesthetic-normative properties, and features of performance or ways of fulfilling them.]

Most of us are repelled by the idea of an ideal performance of a piece of music, which seems opposed to reasonable and commonly held positions. We are used to hearing pieces of music performed in different ways, many of which we deem excellent. We often find it difficult to determine which performance we prefer, and even when we can, our preference seems to be a matter of personal taste, a taste which can even change over time or according to circumstances for the same person. This point seems to be true of both the amateur and the professional – professional musicians, and sometimes even the composer himself, usually recognize the possibilities for different performances of the same piece, without being able to say anything hard and fast about one being preferable over the others. Furthermore, it may well be claimed that this is one of the great things about music: every great composition allows for different performances, different readings, different standpoints and different interpretations, all of which are correct and “legitimate” to the same extent. Herein, one may say, lies the greatness of the work of art and of art itself, and sometimes it may even be added that this very multiplicity of possibilities, this fundamental openness to varying interpretations, is that which marks a great piece of art: the “greater” it is, the more aspects it will present to people and approaches. This multiplicity and variety of possibilities, and the creativity and originality expressed by them, seem to be opposed to the idea that every musical composition has an ideal performance.

All this seems so common and familiar, so reasonable and clear, that any questioning or wondering about it is liable to appear the result of dogmatism and the lack of any musical imagination or skill, or overly sophisticated defiance in the face of such an

expressly clear truth.¹ And indeed, I too am not sure that this position is mistaken, and my natural tendency, like most of us, I suppose, is to adopt it. However, nor am I sure that it is correct, and I am even unsure that I understand exactly what it says, for it involves complex conceptions regarding what a musical composition is and the relation between it and its performance. In terms of presenting the challenge and clarifying the problem I would like to propose some considerations that support a certain version, or at least a certain aspect, of the disparaged position, namely that every musical composition has an ideal or ultimate performance. I say “a certain version or aspect” for there are different versions, and the various elements of the position must be distinguished: I think, for example, that there is much justice in the claim that there need not be a preference with regard different performances, including different excellent performances, of a composition. But this does not mean that it does not have an ideal or ultimate performance. It could be that confusion between these two issues is one of the (incorrect) reasons for opposing the claim of ideal performance. Thus, there are those who believe that it follows from the claim that a composition has an ideal performance that, given any two performances, one must be preferred over the other. This, though, is erroneous: the claim that every composition has an ideal performance does not in and of itself imply any ranking of all the performances of that piece, and does not exclude the possibility that there are different performances of which no one is preferable over others.

A few comments before entering into the heart of the issue:

A. I shall only talk about western, classical, written music. I do not use the word “classical” to mean a defined style (as opposed to baroque or romantic music, for example), but rather to give a general idea of the type of music to be discussed – Bach, Haydn, Beethoven, Mahler, Bartok, Shostakovitch, and so on – as opposed to pop music, jazz, folk music, certain types of electronic, serial, and aleatoric music, and so on. Of course this distinction is not sharp and precise, but I do not need a clear definition here – it is enough that we understand the following with reference to a Mozart concerto or Schumann quartet or Bartok sonata. Indeed, there is a certain vagueness at the edges, and certain border cases can cause troubles and difficulties, but to me they seem marginal to the main issue. Similar qualifications also apply to the terms “western” and “written”, yet the examples above certainly provide a clear enough idea of what is at hand. Of course, beyond the vagueness of the terms themselves, there is much western classical music that is not written, much western music that is not classical, and much music that is not western – I will not talk about these, at least not directly. I am aware that this is a serious restriction. One of the

more important implications is that I shall only talk about the field in which we have a clear conception of *the work* or *the composition* under discussion, and in which we conceive of it as a musical piece of art. Recently, the number of challenges to the pertinence of these terms to music has multiplied, but I think that this assumption is admissible in reference to my topic here.

B. As will become clearer later, it must be pointed out from the outset that the problems discussed here are philosophical and not musical. Obviously one must know something about music to understand the discussion, but the professional musician, as such, has no decisive advantage here. He must avail himself of patience and treat with understanding and forgiveness the “chutzpa” of philosophers for crudely barging into his sphere, for they are not actually invading his territory at all, but rather concerning themselves with their own, with a problem that is fundamentally philosophical.

C. The case in favor of an ideal performance that I shall present is not an epistemic one: there is no assumption here that we, or anyone, knows what the ideal performance of a certain piece is, or that we may judge given performances in the light of such knowledge or ideal. I don't even assume that we *can* know it (though the idea of the ideal can direct our efforts – about which more later). From this point of view, the fact that even a sensitive and knowledgeable musician will refuse to declare one performance to be preferable over others, or even to treat the question seriously, is neither here nor there.

D. The conception of ideality to be discussed here is a normative one, and refers to what is worthy and correct, and not to what someone or other prefers (as a psychological fact), or to what he enjoys at a certain time. It could very well be that we will often prefer the non-ideal, or the far from ideal, the less correct or the less worthy. It could very well be that innovation, originality and freshness will “do it” for us (at a given time and under certain circumstances) more than the correct and worthy ideal (though I believe in the Aristotelian position that, ultimately, the essence of culture and education is that we shall bring ourselves to prefer the worthy and enjoy the preferable...).

Assumptions

Our argument is based on three fundamental assumptions:

1. The intentionality of performance (the assumption of intentionality) – a performance is always a performance *of* a certain composition.

In talking about a performance, we are referring to a performance *of* a certain composition; that is, for any performance there is a particular composition whose performance it is. This

assumption is not as naïve and self-evident as it might appear. There are those who see a performance as an independent musical entity, with its own aesthetic qualities, perceived and evaluated in and of itself, unlinked to its being a performance of a certain composition, and probably without any independent knowledge of the composition at hand.² This can be called the “autonomous” conception of performance. There is a large difference between such a conception and the intentionalistic one we assume. Between them lies a conception that can be termed descriptive (or adjectival). This conception recognizes that a performance is *of* a particular composition, but does not construe it as an intentionalistic relationship between the performance and the composition, rather simply as a description of the performance, similarly to the way we say “a picture of a lion” meaning “lion-picture”, and not a picture of a specific lion.³ As mentioned, we shall assume here (rather than argue for) the intentionalistic character of the concept of performance – that for every performance, there necessarily is a composition of which it is a performance. A performance, according to our assumption, is not an independent entity, such that its being a performance of a certain composition may, at best, be one of its properties, but not one that is essential for grasping the performance as such. According to our assumption, a performance is by its very nature a performance of a specific composition; this is constitutive of its very identity, and it is conceived of and evaluated as such. The claim about ideal performance, for which we shall argue below, means that the composition determines its ideal performance uniquely. However, there are or can be many different performances of the same musical composition. There could be, for instance (to take an extreme case), a performance of composition X without a single correct note. This would clearly be a bad or erroneous performance, but it would be so *as a performance of that composition*. It cannot be said (though this mistake is widespread) that it could be a good performance of another composition, Y, for then it would no longer be what it is – a performance of X. We can already see how complex and loaded the concept of performance is. A performance is no mere acoustic phenomenon, conceivable of now as a “performance” of X and now as a “performance” of Y. A performance in the sense we shall use (which is a common one) is an intentionalistic entity from the start, and is conceived as a performance of one particular composition as an essential ingredient of its very identity.

In order to sharpen this point it can perhaps be compared (in the relevant respects) to translating from one language to another. A translation of a poem, for instance, is essentially conceived in relation to the poem (the original text) of which it is a translation,

and it is thus evaluated. The aesthetic properties of the poem (pertaining both to meaning and to features like rhythm, rhyme, metaphor, register) will (at least partially) determine the aesthetic evaluation of the translation as such. Of course, one can appreciate the translation as an independent work, as an autonomous poem (in its own language), without referring to its being a translation, and maybe without even knowing that it is. This could well be the approach adopted by a large part of those who read translations, as they do not usually know the source language. Yet this approach fails to relate to the translation as such, as a translation of a particular work. I do not intend to go into the glut of problems that the concept of translation gives rise to. There are obviously large differences between the performance of a composition and a translation. The purpose of the example is merely to sharpen somewhat the sense in which I talk of the intentionalistic nature of the concept of performance as assumed here; in *this* way it is comparable to translation.

What makes a certain performance what it is – a performance (even if a bad one) of a specific composition? The intentions of the performer? What is written in the concert program? What the announcer on a radio broadcast declares? Perhaps some causal relationship between the composition and the performance? Or maybe the question is meaningless, and the attempt to locate the factors that “make a performance what it is” is futile? These are noteworthy questions, with well-known parallels in other fields of philosophy (what makes a name the name of something?, what makes a thought a thought about something?, and so on), but this is not the place to discuss them.⁴

2. The aesthetic normativity of differences and preferences (the assumption of normativity) – judgments of preference between performances are aesthetic-normative judgments concerning aesthetic properties of the performances as performances of a certain composition.

One can see a performance as an entity, an event, or a certain phenomenon that bears many properties of different types, and that can be distinguished and evaluated on different grounds. A “short-tempered” listener might prefer a speedy performance in that it saves him time, while a tired listener might rather hear a slow performance that will allow him to doze off.⁵ However, in what follows we shall not treat the performance in that manner. It shall always and only be discussed (and judged) in terms of its aesthetic qualities as a performance of a certain composition. Thus, for instance, there are many properties and features that do not interest us in the slightest in our judging a certain performance – such as the time and place in which it takes place, the make of the instrument, the year of its production, the age of the musician, his gender and the size of his

family (as well as much of the information held worthy of note in concert programs, record notes, and radio shows, where the performances they cover are presented and “explained”). However, in truth all of these are simply not to be considered as identifying conditions of the performance at all.

We can talk of two tokens being the same performance despite their taking place at different times and in different places, and maybe even performed by different musicians (consider an instance in which you do not know that there were two different musicians, and you were convinced that you heard the same performance twice; or, would you find it critical that in two incredibly similar tokens of Bruckner’s Fourth performed by the Munich Philharmonic conducted by Celibidache the second clarinet and three of the violinists were different?). In order to see how abstract our concept of performance is, and how it is constituted by aesthetic-normative properties,⁶ let us point out that two tokens can differ from one another in every note (as well in terms of time and place, and so on) and yet still be tokens of the same performance; for instance, when their absolute pitch is slightly different. What is truly important for us with regard performance – that which constitutes its defining conditions, according to which we shall judge whether we are faced with two tokens of “the same performance” – are musical properties which bear aesthetic-normative meaning, in other words, its properties as a correct performance of the certain composition it is a performance of.

3. The coherence of the composition’s aesthetic-normative properties (the assumption of coherence) – in addition to those two fundamental assumptions regarding the concept of performance, we also make tacit assumptions concerning the nature of a musical composition. However, particularly important for our purposes is the assumption of coherence, which says that the aesthetic-normative properties of a musical composition are coherent in the sense that they are (objective) properties of the composition itself, and that they do not conflict with one another within a certain composition: if a composition, or a particular part of it, has a certain normative property, it does not have a conflicting one (in the same place). It is not easy to define the nature of the opposition or conflict under discussion here. To speak generally, and not entirely accurately, we can say that two properties conflict when, in a certain place, if the composition has one of them, it cannot have the other in the same place. We can even say, I believe, that two such properties conflict when a performance cannot realize both of them simultaneously. Having only a C in a certain place and having only a D in the same place are conflicting properties; and each one of them also conflicts with having C and D together in the same place. A crescendo

and diminuendo in the same place are also opposing properties (though in a multi-vocal piece, of course, one voice can become louder while another softens), as are significant differences in tempo and time signature, and so on.

There are further properties for which the nature of their opposition is perhaps even less clear, such as emotional and “rhetorical” properties, and the like. Are fear and sadness opposing properties? Can a certain phrase be both frightening and saddening? Perhaps. But I presume that in general the situation is similar to the one described above: when two (or more) such properties are expressed together, it gives rise to a property different from the separate expression of each one of them, and in this sense each one opposes the other two. Our conclusion would be the same regarding more abstract, “analytical” properties that express aspects of structure, harmonic progression, the diatonic standing of a note, and so on. Thus, being a transitional phrase (a “bridge”) is a different and opposing property to being the second subject in a sonata-form movement, for instance. Also, perceiving an instance of a chord as an anticipation or prolongation of a nearby chord is to perceive a property that is opposed to seeing it as functional to a harmonic progression; understanding a certain phrase as an *appoggiatura* is opposed to seeing it as chromatic, and so on.

With regard some of the properties and oppositions, I suppose that there are those who will claim that the issue is only one of different modes of description that we use to describe music (for different purposes), and is not about any real properties of the composition. Accordingly, they will go on to argue that we are surely not talking about properties whose conflict finds expression in performance – in the impossibility of realizing them both in a single performance. I beg to differ, and believe, as mentioned, that every aesthetic-normative property finds expression in performance, but I do not intend to argue for this position here. For the purposes of our argument it is enough that we restrict ourselves to those properties and conflicts that are expressed in performance, for differences between performances is what concerns us here.

These assumptions are clearly made against the background of some fundamental questions in the philosophy of music: I have already mentioned that the assumption that in talking about music we are first and foremost talking about *compositions* and their performances has been doubted. There are those who claim that when we observe the range of musical activities from a broad historical and cultural perspective, it would appear that the very concept of musical composition is a far too arbitrary simplification of dubious usefulness. Even within the framework of classical music it is sometimes hard to distinguish between the various incarnations of a song, dance, religious hymnal,

improvisation or other kinds of ceremonial musical activities and the “works” that developed from or are based upon them. Even if we acknowledge (as I assume here) the importance (and maybe even primacy) of the concept of composition in music, we still face difficult problems concerning the nature of a musical composition. The ontological status of a musical composition, for instance, still causes trouble for many. It would appear that we usually understand the ontological nature of a painting or sculpture: it is that piece of material stained with oil colors, it is that lump of stone or metal. They are objects that are defined in space, that preserve their identity over time, and so on. But what is a musical composition? What is its ontological status, and what are its identifying conditions? Is it the staves on the paper written on by the composer? The intentions and ideas in his mind? Perhaps the acoustic phenomenon produced by its performance? Or maybe a set of its performances? Or a kind that defines a set of its performances? And what is a performance of a musical composition? Is it an acoustical phenomenon that is describable in physical terms? What is the nature of the relationship between the composition and the performance? Are these two distinct entities that are related by a specifiable relation, or is it rather that we cannot conceive of the one but in terms of the other? And beyond all these issues, what is the nature of the aesthetic judgment of a musical composition? Are the considerations in judging and evaluating the performance different from those used with regard the composition itself?

I do not intend (nor am I able) to discuss the swathe of issues connected to these and related questions, but it is important to understand that any standpoint concerning our question about an ideal performance is inextricably linked to them – and this is no small deal. I shall make just one comment on the concept of aesthetic-normative properties as I have used it above and shall continue to use it in what follows. As will be spelled out in more detail below, the position I shall present connects a composition and performance in such a way that the one is conceived of in terms of the other. A musical composition is constituted by certain normative properties, whose meaning lies in the ways of performance they determine. On the other hand, a performance is conceived of as essentially a performance of a particular composition, which determines the normative properties it is to fulfill.

Aesthetic-Normative Properties (A-N Properties)

A musical composition is constituted by normative properties – properties that determine how it should sound, and which must be realized in performance. However, music as art is

characterized by the fact that (at least a large part of) the aesthetic properties of a musical composition – those properties relevant to its aesthetic evaluation and conception – are, in this sense, normative. For this reason, I talk about aesthetic-normative (A-N) properties. This might appear suspiciously circular: an A-N property of a performance is a property it has *as a correct performance* of the composition of which it is a performance; a correct performance of a composition is one that realizes the A-N properties determined by it, in other words, those properties that a performance must realize. These characterizations might appear to be circular: on the one hand, we are defining (or characterizing) an A-N property on the basis of the concept of a correct performance, and on the other we are defining a correct performance on the basis of the concept of A-N properties.

Is this not a vicious circle that empties the above concepts of all content (as well as the assertions that are to be grounded in them)? Can we find a way out of this circularity?

One can say much about A-N properties without being tainted by the circularity under discussion (at least on the face of it): A-N properties are the properties conceived of in understanding a composition (as a musical piece of art). They are the properties relevant in aesthetically evaluating and understanding a composition, and for conceiving of it as it is. We would all agree that the very notes themselves (starting with a D-eighth and moving onto a G-quarter), as well as harmonic structures and progressions, bridges between motifs and themes, contrapuntal progressions, structural-formal elements, registration and orchestration are A-N properties of a musical composition. However, fine shades of phrasing (the construction of a musical sentence), shades and sub-shades of rhythmic structure, tempo and the composition's internal dynamic – all these and more are also to be counted among the composition's A-N properties. Those properties – and the relations between them – are properties that a skilled and sensitive musician will try to uncover and understand when studying a composition in depth (and his ability will determine his understanding, the limits of which cannot be known in advance). There are other properties – such as the nature of the emotion or mood expressed by the composition (or a part of it), the extent of its emotional validity or persuasiveness, its “rhetorical” or “dramatic” character, and so on – which musicians sometimes steer away from talking about as elements involved in understanding a composition. I believe though (but will not argue for here) that such properties are to be counted among the composition's A-N properties, and that recognizing them, being open to them and understanding them are also part of aesthetically evaluating and conceiving of the composition.⁷

So far we have explained and demonstrated what A-N properties are without referring to the issue of performance (at least that is how it appears), and so it would seem that we have not fallen foul to the circularity mentioned above. However, I believe that the concepts involved in conceiving of a piece of music and evaluating it are ultimately connected with the concept of performance, and so, in the end, we accept that there is circularity, but deny that it is problematic. This circularity merely expresses a deep and important internal connection between the concepts of understanding, conceiving of and evaluating a musical composition on the one hand, and performances and their evaluation, on the other, in that the concepts acquire their meaning through modes of performance. I am just stating this position, which seems to me of great importance, and cannot argue for it in this article. However, it is not crucial for the case I am making here. For, as we have seen, whoever does not accept this position, and thinks we can grasp these concepts independently of notions of modes of performance, need not be bothered by the question of circularity anyway.

It does not follow from these fundamental assumptions⁸ – the assumptions of intentionality, normativity and coherence – that preference with regard performances with respect to every property determines a general ranking among them; for, obviously, performance A could be preferable over B in terms of certain properties, while B could be preferable in terms of others. But it does follow that a composition has an ideal performance. In the main step towards establishing this we shall determine that it follows from the relation of aesthetic difference between performances of the same composition that *either* they are both wrong, *or* that with respect to each of the relevant properties in which they differ, one is preferable to the other. To this end it can help to distinguish between two types of a composition's (or performance's) A-N properties: there are "absolute" properties, such as the composition's opening with a D-major chord, for instance. There could, of course, be two different and unsuccessful performances in that one opens with a C and the other with an E. They are obviously different, for we are talking about an A-N property, but in this case the difference does not give rise to a preferential order – they are both equally wrong. Such absolute properties do not interest us, for in this instance the "ideal" is clear – a performance that realizes the composition's absolute properties.

In contrast, there are "gradual" properties: the rate of *accelerando*, for instance, or the strength of a certain note or entire passage in relation to its surroundings, balance between different voices and their relative freedom, and so on. It is these properties that

are usually important in judging a performance, and it is they that fuel our feeling that there is no ideal performance – that there can be different performances, utterly good and correct, of which no one is preferable over the others. These properties are complex and hard to explain; they are often dependent on other properties and determined by their relation to them (thus, for instance, the “correct” volume of a note is dependent on the surrounding volume). These complexities do not change the crux of our argument, and I shall ignore them here (and shall discuss an objection shortly). Performances that differ in these properties can be considered different performances of a composition only if the composition determine these properties as well. Hence, (and apart from cases of extreme failure), one of the performances will usually be preferable over the others in terms of the property under scrutiny (in other words, it will be more “correct”). We can summarize, then, that apart from cases of failure with regard absolute properties, in two different performances of the same composition there will be at least one A-N property that makes one preferable over the other. However, with respect to each A-N property of the work, if two performances differ in fulfilling it, at most one of them can fulfill it correctly. The ideal performance is that one which fulfills correctly all of the composition’s A-N properties. From the above considerations, it follows that it is unique.

It could be objected that the way we are presenting gradual properties assumes what we are trying to prove, and misses the main thrust of the opposition to the idea of an ideal performance, for they are presented as such that differences in realizing them are to be measured in terms of their proximity to the “correct”, and we thus assume that there is one “correct” realization of the property. In fact, the objection will continue, we have cancelled out the difference between absolute and gradual properties, and made the gradual ones absolute, and this, of course, is exactly what is contested. For the main thrust of the opposition to the idea of an ideal performance is that there is no one “correct” performance of many of those of the composition’s properties that are considered important in judging different performances, but there can rather be several “correct” offerings, especially when taking the mutual dependency of various gradual properties into account (the strength and tempo of a certain section, the strength of one passage compared to the following one, and so on).

Aesthetic-Normative Difference

Let us examine that objection. Let’s assume that two performances of the same composition differ in the way they amplify a crescendo in a certain passage. According to

the assertion under scrutiny, there is no one correct crescendo against which the performances can be judged, and they could both be completely good and correct, or at least to the same degree. However, why should we then say that the two performances are aesthetically different from one another? Their crescendos differ, and so it is clear that the two performances are acoustically distinguishable, but, as we have seen, in and of itself this is not enough: we are not concerned with merely differentiating between them (in terms of acoustics, and so on), but rather with differentiating between them *as performances of the same composition* (the assumption of intentionality). After all, we have seen that their identifying conditions as performances of a certain composition are not affected by every difference and in relation to every property in which they may differ as acoustic events. Such a difference would have to refer to an A-N property constitutive of the composition (the assumption of normativity). Whichever way you look at it, either the extent of the crescendo is not such a property, in which case the performances cannot be aesthetically-normatively differentiated, meaning that they are not (normatively) different performances of the same composition, or it is such a property, in which case it follows from the assumption of coherence that at least one of the performances does not realize it (for it realizes a conflicting one – a different crescendo).

In other words, if all that this compositional property demands is a crescendo or change in tempo in a certain passage (without determining the extent), then the two performances are both good and correct (in this regard). However, this does not constitute a difference in their relevant identifying conditions as performances of the composition, for, by the assumption, differences in the extent of the crescendo within a permissible range in that passage have no A-N meaning in relation to the composition. According to our assumptions, we should re-emphasize, it would be wrong to say that the performances differ because of significantly different crescendos, because, as we have already stressed, a performance is a performance *of* a certain composition, and its A-N properties, like its identifying conditions (and its difference from other performances), are derivative of this.

One might think that even if the crescendo is one of the composition's normative properties, there are still a large number of ways of realizing it, and subtle differences between crescendos could be enough to distinguish between performances. Such differences – according to this argument – are more “subtle” than the property we are calling a crescendo, and indeed are more “subtle” than any “property” that can be expressed in a score.⁹ I do not think that there is much in this claim. The normative

properties in the score (on a correct reading of it – see below) are as subtle as the relevant differences in performance, and for every degree of a property’s subtlety we shall find ourselves back at the above dilemma: either the subtlety is an A-N property of the composition, in which case at most one of the performances will correctly realize it, or it is not, in which case the two performances will not be differentiable as performances of that composition (with regard this specific property).

Perhaps this could be compared to obeying an order. Let’s assume that Smith is standing by a chair, and is ordered to sit. He can obey this command – perform it – in a number of ways: he can sit down immediately, or after a second; he can sink right down into the chair, or perch on the edge of it; he can sit with his left arm on the armrest, or his right arm; and so on. As physical events these different ways of performing the order are absolutely different from one another, but they are all completely correct performances of the order to sit down, *and as such* are not different from one another. As a performance of the order to sit down there is no difference between your backside coming into contact with a certain surface area of the chair or it touching one square centimeter less, or your leaning to your left or your right as you sit, and so on. We have a certain concept of “sitting down” (in certain conditions) according to which I can sit down in a number of different ways, and, physical differences notwithstanding, as performances of the instruction to sit there is no difference between them, and we cannot say that one is more correct than any other. In other words, the properties that differentiate them are irrelevant (to say nothing of unimportant) in evaluating them as performances of the command (of course there can be marginal cases, in which we do not even know whether the command was properly fulfilled or not).

It goes without saying that there are large differences between performing an order and performing music, and I do not want to base my argument on the use of the word “performance” in both cases, but the comparison can teach us that there is a concept of normative difference (and preference) that is weaker than simple difference, and is utterly dependent on what we see as the relevant normative properties in each situation.

The nature of our concept of performance – as essentially abstract and intentionalistic – stems from these considerations. In its essence, a performance is of a certain composition, which already defines the properties that determine its identity.¹⁰ We can see a performance as an equivalence class of tokens (“performance-tokens”) that are not distinguished in terms of the composition’s normative properties, in terms of the properties relevant in

evaluating them as performances of the composition. Since, in general, the system of A-N properties of a composition is so rich and complex, many performance-types are instantiated, in practice, by only one token. This concept of intentionalistic performance, according to which the identity of a performance (as a performance of a certain composition) is defined by the A-N properties that the composition determines, also determines the relevant concept of difference between performances, which we can call “aesthetic-normative difference”.

From this it follows that if two performances of a composition are to be distinguished as performances of the same composition, then it will be on the basis of at least one A-N property, concerning which at least one performance is incorrect. In other words, if they are different, at least one of them is incorrect in relation to one of the normative properties that constitute the composition (both of them, of course, could be incorrect). From this it would appear to follow that there is one ideal performance of a composition – that which realizes all its A-N properties. If we assume two such performances, they will not be differentiable in any A-N property, and so should be considered the same performance.

Perhaps this is still not enough. Maybe there could be two performances that realize all of the composition’s A-N properties, but which are still distinguishable on the basis of additional properties which only one of them has. This, perhaps, is the alleged “added value” of “great” performances – that they have aesthetically meaningful properties in addition to the composition’s A-N properties. I do not deny this, but would claim that this reflects seeing the performance as an independent artistic act, and not as a performance of the composition (according to the assumption of intentionality). If the properties that express this added value are meaningful in evaluating the performance *as a performance of* the composition under discussion, then it follows from the assumption of coherence that it does not realize all of the composition’s A-N properties. The alternative is to say that the properties which differentiate the performances are not A-N properties of the composition at all. Then, though, they are indistinguishable as performances of the same composition.

Ideal Performance and Judgments of Preference

One could assert that even if we are right in everything we have said up to this point, our conclusion is not that interesting. Suppose that a piece of music does have an ideal performance – a performance that does in fact constitute its identity. We earlier emphasized that this concept is not epistemic: it may be that we do not know what the ideal

performance is (which, in my opinion, is usually the case). I stated earlier that the concept of ideal performance does not give rise to an order of preference between different performances of a composition. I also argued that the claim that a composition has an ideal performance should not be confused with the claim that we know what it is, and does not imply that in every given situation we will prefer the ideal over the non-ideal as a subjective empirical fact. There is a danger that this position will take the concept of the ideal performance into “Platonic” realms that are beyond what is accessible and important to us in our conception of music, and how we perform, understand and evaluate it. This Platonic conception, which is detached from actual evaluations and expressions of preference, is liable to seem pointless, uninteresting, and maybe even incomprehensible. From this point of view, the argument I am defending here might seem (at best) uninteresting. As people more or less involved with and interested in music, we are not interested in evaluating, understanding, and deciding which *ideal* performance is preferable; rather, we are interested in considerations that are epistemologically accessible to us, and in those which can lead us to an understanding and evaluation of a composition *in practice*.

My response to this is two-fold: firstly, my conclusion regarding the conception of a performance’s relation to the composition, and concerning the identifying conditions of a musical composition is of fundamental, philosophical-conceptual importance. The concept of the ideal performance of a composition indicates or suggests a certain type of connection between a composition and its performances in a way that is important both in understanding the nature and identifying conditions of a composition, and in understanding the intentionalistic nature of performance. The nature of this relationship was hinted at earlier in what I said about the internal relationship between the concept of A-N properties that constitute a piece of music and determine its nature and identity, and the correct way of performing it: these properties receive their “meaning” in that they determine what a correct performance or realization of them is, no less than the justification they give to evaluations and judgments of preference regarding different performances.

Secondly, from the concession that we cannot usually know what an ideal performance of a given composition is, it does not follow that we are using a “Platonic”, metaphysical expression that is completely beyond our reach: through analytical, interpretive and performative hard work we can refine and improve our conceptions regarding the different aspects of a composition and its ideal performance – we can get closer and closer to it. It is

indeed correct that we are liable to err at every stage, and to think that a certain aspect belongs to the ideal, even though after deeper thought we might decide that it does not. However, this is no argument against our conception – we cannot expect to be immune from mistakes, and the possibility of erring is inherent whenever we research or claim anything.

The concept of an ideal performance and the characterization of a musical composition in terms of its ideal performance ought to and are able to guide us in making judgments of understanding, of performance and preference, even when we do not know what the ideal performance of the composition is from the outset. Indeed, evaluations and judgments acquire an objective dimension in that we see them as constrained by reasons and justifications. When conceived of in terms of what constitutes its ideal performance or what is relevant to it, a proper understanding of a piece of music (or a certain aspect of it, or even a certain aspect of a certain passage) requires a conception of an objective connection between judgments of preference regarding performances, instructions, intentions and ideas of the way in which the composition should be performed, and a correct understanding and conception of the composition.¹¹ In other words, preferring one mode of performance over another, as well as the position that the composition should be performed in a certain way, become claims and positions that demand reasoning and justifying in terms of that which constitutes understanding the composition and conceiving of it correctly, namely identifying and exposing the A-N properties that constitute it.

On the other hand, the very same consideration also determines a particular way of conceiving of the nature of those properties, and of the concepts that constitute an understanding the musical composition – they must be concepts and properties that can be manifested or expressed in a performance of the composition; they are also concepts and properties which guide what we will see as a correct performance of the composition, and what we see as directing our evaluations and preferences.

Accordingly, the importance of the concept of ideal performance may not so much lie within itself, as in the idea it stems from: that there is an intimate connection between understanding a composition, being aware and making sense of the A-N properties that constitute it, on the one hand, and aspects of its performances and of judgments about them, on the other. And note – the connection is not merely that one needs to understand in order to judge; what is not less important is that this understanding is constituted by concepts of performance – concepts that are realized, or can be realized in performance.

The Score and Knowing How to Read It – Why Musicology is Important to Music

There are those who see the score as the be all and end all, and to a large degree they are right – but sometimes for the wrong reasons.¹² In the type of music we are dealing with, that which is written in the score usually expresses (or determines) the composition's A-N properties. Many people, including some great composers, have claimed that the score can never fully express the composer's intentions.¹³ This may well be so, but I doubt whether it is relevant here, for the question at hand is whether these intentions (which are allegedly impossible to articulate in the score) determine A-N properties of the composition. In this context, many have also argued that the score (in western classical musical notation) is "inexact".¹⁴ This assertion is also unclear: compared to what, or in relation to what is it inexact? Does anyone think he can write out Beethoven's opus 111 more accurately than Beethoven himself did? Why should we consider the outcome as the same composition?

But what is written in the score? It seems to me that this issue is also shot through with problems. One must know how to read a score (like any text written in any notational system).¹⁵ What is the nature of this knowledge, and what are its limitations? We answer: everything that is relevant in evaluating a performance of a composition as it appears in the score, and in determining its A-N properties. If we were to answer otherwise, where would we say those properties come from, and how do we know them? What access do we have to a composition and its normative properties beyond the score? When we say that one must know how to read a score, we are saying that one must know how to read it in light, *inter alia*, of the conventions (historical, cultural and individual) according to which it was written. These conventions express a system of concepts that are embedded in the composition and constitute the style in which it is composed. Knowledge of these conventions is, of course, a matter for musicological research, and, of its nature, is often doubtful, contested by different scholars, and extremely partial. This knowledge obviously includes most of the elements of musical theory (harmony, counterpoint, forms, and so on), which is in fact a systematic description of some of the conventions by which the composition was written. However, it also includes more than this. Understanding the score, or the ability to read it correctly, finds expression in the conception of a correct performance of it. This is the case with respect to playing the notes themselves, to choosing the tempo and rhythmic structure, with regard balance and the creation of harmonic tension, as well as transparency and voice-leading, and in relation to the most

subtle rhythmic and dynamic variations. In playing a Chopin mazurka, for instance, such rhythmic variations are in the score no less than the notes themselves, even if they are not represented by a specific symbol. They appear in the score in that it was written according to certain conventions (some more subtle and sophisticated, some less), the knowledge of which is a condition for correctly reading and understanding the score. Should you disagree with this, on what basis will you argue that these variations are properties of the “composition”, and that they should be expressed in a correct performance of it?

“Everything a learned student will disclose to his Rabbi has already been delivered to Moses at Sinai”, said the Jewish sages, on which we can make the following variation: “Whatever a master will teach his student regarding the correct and appropriate performance of a composition is already in the score”.¹⁶

This position also touches on the nature of the relationship between the score and performance. Goodman, for instance, sees it as a semantic-symbolic relation – which is the basis for his entire conception. However, from what has already been said here, a different picture emerges, one that sees the relationship as intentionalistic-causal. A performance is not an independent entity, which is deemed to be a performance of a particular score because, semantically speaking, it satisfies conditions that make it belong to its “compliance class”, but rather because of causal and intentionalistic circumstances: the composition and the intention to perform it are conspicuous causes for the performance, and a necessary framework for its identification and evaluation. Similar problems are familiar in other fields of philosophy, and philosophers have gone to great lengths to describe and explain the circumstances that determine, for instance, that a thought is about so and so, that a name is the name of so and so, or that a picture is a picture of this or that. On the one hand, certain approaches see the relationship between a name and its subject as causally determined (crudely speaking, the subject is the cause of the use of the name); on the other, it is seen as intentionalistic (a name is used in speech with the intention of talking about the subject, where this is regarded as constitutive of the thought and its identity, and where the subject and its properties determine the truth conditions for statements including the name). Similarly, albeit partially and not entirely accurately, one can talk about the relationship between a picture and its subject, about that which makes a picture a picture of so and so. Clearly, these are broad subjects, which I cannot go into here.¹⁷

I am making these analogies because, even in this embryonic and schematic form, they can help locate the problem of the relationship between composition and performance in a general and fruitful context of much-ruminated philosophical problems, and also

because they point to the general way in which the relationship should be understood. The fact that the composition and the intention to perform it are the causes of the performance's coming into being, and defining factors of its identity express the causal aspect. The intentionalistic aspect is expressed in that the performance is by its very nature a performance *of* the composition under discussion, and as such is evaluated according to the normative properties that the composition determines.

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Notes

1. One could quote endlessly on this. Goldstein, for instance, in a concluding chapter of a book in which she conducts a meticulous comparison of three performances of Beethoven's Sonata op. 111, says:

“The idea of one authoritative or ideal performance of any work is illusory. No single interpretation can completely present all of the expressive possibilities in a musical composition” (J. Goldstein: *A Beethoven Enigma*, P. Lang, 1988, p. 262).

The two sentences are entirely unconnected. The second is correct (and trivial). The first does not follow from it, and is what I shall examine here.

2. The concept of independent knowledge itself raises a plethora of problems. I assume there are a number of ways of acquiring such knowledge, primarily by studying the score (when one exists). Are there other ways in which the composition itself is accessible, such that they are independent of a certain performance of it? I suppose that most people would affirm that there are, and many would even affirm that there must be (after all, most concert goers and music listeners do not know how to read music, and even those who do know, often feel that not having read the score is no obstacle to offering a critique or evaluation of the performance). What are such approaches to the work, or ways in which it is accessible? Some would say “via other performances”, for instance, or even by “guessing” the composition, or reconstructing it from the performance itself. See: M. Grossman, ‘Performance and Obligation’ in P. Alperson (ed.): *What Is Music?*, Penn State University, 1987, pp. 258-9; F. Sparshott: ‘Aesthetics of Music’, in Alperson: *ibid.* pp. 82-4.

I believe that such partial reconstructions are possible, mainly with regard to compositions in familiar styles. However, the assumption that a complete reconstruction of the work is thus possible – with all its aesthetic and normative qualities – is extremely problematic. Not only is reconstruction extremely difficult in practice once the composition surpasses a certain level of complexity, but it also poses a problem of principle: how can one know whether something in the performance is an error or mistake (when the mistake is not an extreme exception from the accepted norms for such types of composition)? Sparshott (*ibid.*) emphasizes that the performer can use the score as well as previous performances of the composition in different ways and for different needs. This is obviously correct,

but not relevant to our concern here, which is focused on the intentionality of the conception of a performance as a performance of a certain composition.

3. This distinction is Goodman's. Each of these three conceptions has a hold in both everyday and academic speech about performance, and each has significant philosophical consequences. Their nature and interrelationships demand a detailed discussion which I cannot enter into here.
4. The position taken by Goodman, for instance, is well known, according to which a performance of a composition is that which belongs to the score's defining "compliance class". Such a compliance class is an equivalence class defined in a unique way by the score (if it is a notational system. Goodman formulated five demands that the score must meet in order for this condition to be met). Thus, as Goodman emphasizes, there are no erroneous performances of a composition – a performance that is not utterly loyal to the score is not a performance of the composition. Of course, this does not negate the possibility that there will be differences between performances, and that some will be better and some worse. However, the quality of the performance – its being better or worse than others – is in no way related to its being a performance of that composition, and it is not clear what its meaning is according to this system. See: N. Goodman: *Languages of Art*, Hackett, 1976, chs, IV –V.
 This position of Goodman's (and of the many who have followed in his footsteps) is opposed to that presented in the body of this text. As will be clarified later, the root of the dispute is connected both to understanding the score and to the very concept of performance. In my opinion, the question of the quality of the performance and the question of its being a performance of the specific composition it is in fact a performance of should not be thus sharply separated.
5. It is told of Richard Strauss that towards the end of concerts he himself was conducting he would glance at his watch, and then increase the tempo so as to make it to his card game...
6. For an understanding of a work as defined by normative characteristics, and their connection with a correct performance of the piece, see: N. Wolterstorff: *Worlds and Works of Art*, Oxford, 1980, Part Two, sections IV-VII.
7. This issue is argued over not just between philosophers, but also between musicians and analysts: on the one hand, there are those who narrow their range and only see technical-theoretical properties as belonging to the composition's "objective"

properties, and on the other there are those who emphasize its emotional, dramatic and rhetorical properties (and so on). Let it be noted, by the way, that in the writings of many great composers (like Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Mahler, and others) special importance is attributed to the latter set of properties, both as they explain their intentions in their compositions, and as they pass criticism on other pieces.

- 8 I say “fundamental” to remind us that in establishing my claim regarding the idea of an ideal performance I clearly require many additional assumptions, but that those referred to in the text seem to me especially important.
9. This is the mainstay of Goodman’s claim that properties such as “crescendo” and the signs representing them (as well as words like “crescendo”, “diminuendo”, and so on) are not part of the score (to the extent that it is a “notational system”), and are not constitutive of the composition’s identity: they disobey the rules of “semantic disjointment”, and of “finite differentiation” (ibid. 148-154).
10. To me, this conception of a performance, and especially its intentionalistic element – its being essentially a performance *of* a certain composition – seem intuitive enough for this discussion. But it is, apparently, easy to miss the full extent of its meaning. Peter Kivy, for instance, writes:

“Yet, *by and large*, for the most part, we can understand the evaluation of a performance in terms of its presenting, to the highest degree possible, those features of the work performed that tend to make it a good work and presenting, to the lowest degree possible, those that may tend to make it a bad one” (P. Kivy: *Authenticities*, Cornell University Press. 1995, p.160).

From the context of this excerpt it might appear that Kivy recognizes that a performance is essentially a performance of a certain composition, but in fact the opposite standpoint is presented. It seems here as if the composition and its performance are two independent musical entities, each with aesthetically positive and negative traits. Let us temporarily assume that we accept this division into positive and negative aspects. A “good” and preferable performance, says Kivy, minimizes the negative aspects of the composition it is a performance of. However, since they are some of the composition’s constitutive properties, by praising the way the performance plasters over them Kivy is clearly not judging the performance as a performance *of* that composition, but rather as an independent musical entity.

11. By saying “correct understanding” I mean to express my opposition to the commonly held view, according to which a musical composition, and a performance of it, are

objects in and of themselves, with no aesthetic-normative properties, which only arise out of a certain way of seeing a composition (“the aesthetic attitude”). See, for instance, S. Davies: ‘The Evaluation of Music’, in: P. Alperson (ed.) *ibid.*, 303-27.

To me this looks wrong. The composition is what it is on account of all its properties, including its aesthetic-normative ones. And on the other hand, the critic, who because of his “aesthetic attitude” attributes properties to it that it does not have, does so erroneously.

12. Again, see Goodman’s position, and that of many who have followed his lead.

13. For instance, Liszt wrote:

“Notation in spite of painstaking conscientiousness, can never fully suffice... I do not mean to conceal the fact that certain features – and among them the most important ones – cannot be put down in writing. Thorough-going effects can be achieved only through sympathetic, lofty reproduction...” (F. Dorian: *The History of Music in Performance*, W.W. Norton, 1942, p. 259).

Many others would agree. To cite one more, Copland, for example, writes:

“The Written score can only be an approximation of the composer’s ideas” (A. Copland: *Music and Imagination*, Harvard University Press, 1959, p. 50).

14. A characteristic formulation is found at the beginning of Goldstein’s book (*ibid.*):

“A significant problem in musical performance is that music notation is inexact.” (p. 1).

15. Think about common “complaints” that a certain way of writing – French, for instance – is “inexact”: they write *Champs Elysee*, and say “Shanz Elise”, or they write *beaucoup*, and say “bocoo”... This, of course, is nonsense. If you know how to read French, you know you are reading exactly what is written. It would be incorrect to say that something else is written, and that the Frenchman knows how to read it on the basis on some “external” knowledge (conventions). Similarly in music: if you know how to read one of Chopin’s mazurkas, you know that the emphases and articulation, the rubati and dynamics, are written exactly as they should be performed, otherwise, how would you know how they should be performed? And how would you know what to add or change to make the score “exact”? You might say: “on the basis of conventions”. But are those conventions “external” to what is written in the score? Knowing that the score is a mazurka by Chopin, with all the conventions and tradition within which it was written, is an integral part of knowing how to read it,

just like knowing a certain phrase is written in French, with all the conventions and tradition involved in reading it correctly.

16. The claim made in this section is different from but connected to the claim concerning the link between properties that constitute the ontological status of musical notes (the functional nature of a note or chord, enharmonic exchanges, and so on), in short, the ontological status of music, and between the properties of the notation in which the composition was written. On this see: G. Bar-Elli: 'A Note On the Substitutivity of Notes', *Analysis*, 41/1, 1981.
17. For a discussion of some of them, see G. Bar-Elli: *The Sense of Reference*, Walter De Gruyter, 1996, especially chapters 1 and 7.