

Power, agency, deference and difference
Examining the politics of composer–performer relationships in the wake of recent innovations

John Aulich
Email: john.aulich@hud.ac.uk

Abstract

With a view to uncovering the political implications of notational, technological and musical innovation in composer–performer relationships within Western art music, this paper examines three disparate works: Christian Wolff's *Duo for Pianists II* (1958); Brian Ferneyhough's *Unity Capsule* (1975); and Georg Hajdu's *Schwer... unheimlich Schwer* (2009). By first exploring two innovative 20th century works, *Duo for Pianists II* and *Unity Capsule*, the paper establishes a framework for a discussion of the political and ethical dimensions of composer–performer relationships in relation to the 21st century innovation manifest in *Schwer... unheimlich Schwer* (2009). This multidimensional examination draws on Warren's (2014) examination of the relationships between ethics and music, Godlovitch's (1998) philosophy of performance, and research carried out by practitioners such as Couroux (2002), Schick (2006) and Eigenfeldt (2011; 2014). The paper concludes that all three pieces demonstrate the potential for notation to have strong political implications, and that composers are ultimately responsible for the political implications of the performance experience.

Keywords: Ferneyhough; Wolff; Hajdu; politics; ethics; performer–composer; composer–performer; agency; deference; difference.

Introduction

It is my contention that music, like all other expressions of culture, is a social practice. Such a Marxist reading, if that is indeed what it is, carries with it the inference that music is produced by dynamic structures of power activated and informed by the late capitalist social conditions and divisions of labour in which we currently find ourselves. It is from this vantage point, on the shoulders of the giants of critical theory, among them Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Pierre Bourdieu, Janet Wolff and Terry Eagleton, that I will go some small way towards showing that such power relationships strongly influence the creative possibilities available to all those who engage in Western art music. My hope is that readers see the following analysis as being of an ultimately musical question, not only of that which is of consequence to current musical practice, but of what is possible now and what might be possible in a transformed society.

The paradigms and frameworks shaping Western art music offer uniquely fertile grounds for overt expressions of power in the creative endeavour. To name a few, these include the division of labour between composers, performers and audiences (Jamason, 2012, p. 105); a strong, pedagogically received tradition of practice privileging inherently hierarchical modes of engagement (Godlovitch, 1998, p. 4); and music notation as a central medium of communication between composers and performers (Godlovitch, 1998, p. 7). Gradually changing perceptions of the function of the score (Cook, 2013, p. 24), the criteria for judgement of performance proficiency (Dyck, 2014, p. 31), and recent advances in technology that enable composers to easily communicate information-rich decisions to performers on the fly (Hajdu, Niggemann, Siska, & Szigetvári, 2010, pp. 39–41), draw my attention to the composer–performer relationship in particular as a rapidly evolving space with a direct impact on creative agency.

Analysing the politics of composer–performer relationships in two aesthetically and contextually divergent works, Christian Wolff's *Duo for Pianists II* (1962) and Brian Ferneyhough's *Unity Capsule* (1975), establishes a comparative framework for the discussion of more recent work made possible by technological advancement, namely, Georg Hajdu's *Schwer... unheimlich Schwer* (2009). Examining at what junctures a performer is afforded agency, and the extent to which their decision-making processes are tied to historical and/or authorial deference, uncovers the power relationships inherent in each case. With those in hand, the implications of such relationships on what Boyce-Tillman (2012) refers to as the 'dignity of difference', the performers' ability to express themselves as collaborative agents through meaningful interpretative decisions, can be scrutinised. While Boyce-Tillman's (2012) work in relation to 'dignity of difference' is centred around that which might allow for difference on a cross-cultural scale, I apply it here in recognition of the smaller-scale differences between performers according to their habitus ('embodied history' manifesting itself as knowledge (Buchanan, 2010)) within the relatively highly codified field of cultural production they occupy (Yoshihara, 2007, pp. 157–158).¹

Duo for Pianists II

The politics of performance

Although it is a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of Western art music as a whole, the division of labour between composer and performer became increasingly prevalent throughout the 20th century, and served to '[remove the performer] from a creative position' (Couroux, 2002, p. 56). Indeed, 'a new manner of performance was demanded by modern music... [requiring] a greater degree of accuracy in all domains' (Cox, 2002, p. 72, cited in Duncan, 2010, p. 151). In opposition to less quantifiable criteria of judgement, such as the sensitivity of interpretative decisions, this objectively testable means (Cox, 2002, p. 72, cited in Duncan, 2010, p. 152) essentially reduced performances to displays of 'virtuosity [and] heroism' (Couroux, 2002, p. 56). Further, as outlined by Schick (2006, p. 95), an over-riding point of reference for interpretative decisions made by performers in general is often embedded in 'the first few performances' (Schick, 2006, p. 95), conferring a questionable degree of responsibility for interpretative decisions on the first few performers, an observation made significantly more pertinent by the recent proliferation of recorded music.

Christian Wolff's *Duo for Pianists II* foreshadowed his later move towards increasingly democratic performance experiences, beginning in the mid-1960s and best exemplified by *Burdocks* (1970–71) (Ryan, 2010, p. 151). In these works, as in *Duo for Pianists II*, there is no demarcated lead role in the ensemble, and no possibility for a lead role to be assumed; Wolff's elaborate cueing systems give all players equal agency to change the sonic direction of the piece (Beal, 2010, pp. 25–28). Wolff's reluctance to state his preferred manner of interpretation (Gresser, 2010, p. 197; Thomas, 2010b, p. 212) evidences his desire to relinquish any authority over creative decisions beyond the possibilities embedded in the score.

Wolff's deliberate obfuscation of his intentions parallels his work's unclear relationship with pre-existing performance practice, founded in the relative ahistoricism of his experimental contemporaries. When the 'New York School' and associated experimentalists did not actively avoid situating themselves in relation to the Western art music canon, they certainly distanced themselves from any supposed historical imperative (Beal, 2010, p. 24). At the time *Duo for Pianists II* was written, the performance practice that is arguably formulating around experimental music (Thomas, 2007, pp. 138–139) had yet to emerge. In this sense, the performer is, or at least was, discouraged from deferring to bodies of composer-foregrounding 'knowledge', which pertain to various interpretive decisions in Western art music more generally (Gresser, 2010, p. 197). However, the Webern-inspired, pointillist performance approaches of early players of Wolff's work, such as David Tudor (Ryan, 2010, p. 54), were prompted by a foreknowledge of Wolff's preference for Webernian sonorities resulting from their engagement with earlier pieces (Thomas, 2010a, p. 82), his sparse notational style, and their own backgrounds in Western art music.

Relatively recent research (for a summary, see Cook, 2013, pp. 9–32) has problematised the notion of the musical score as the embodiment of a work within which all characteristics pertinent to surrounding discourse are embedded. If the score is, instead, recast primarily as a conduit for communication (Barrett, 2014, p. 61), with all the sociocultural debris that such a designation implies, then it also

constitutes a more direct vehicle for the expression of power and resistance between composer and performer. In outlining the ethical dimensions of this relationship, Warren (2014, pp. 162–164) invokes Levinas' concept of the trace, later developed by Derrida: the accumulating debris left by a subject's interaction with the world and, by extension, each other. Participants, therefore, share an ethical responsibility to each other as a result of the traces they leave in the wake of an interaction with a score as a volatile communicative medium (Warren, 2014, p. 164).

Agency and spontaneity

Duo for Pianists II features a development of Wolff's *time-neume* notation, and was his first work to contain 'aural cues' (Hicks & Asplund, 2012, pp. 23–24, p. 26). The 'extraordinarily difficult to manage' (Hicks & Asplund, 2012, p. 24) *time-neume* notation consists of groups of pitches marked with ratios specifying the duration of the event, and how many pitches should be played within it (Hicks & Asplund, 2012, pp. 23–24). There is little doubt that Wolff's extensive collaborations with David Tudor informed the addition of 'aural cueing'. In the moment of performance, each performer must choose from delineated sections of material, based on what they have heard from the other. The inherent indeterminacy of performative interaction leads to a series of ephemeral formal relationships as the music unfolds. For as long as it was viable to do so, Tudor would fix open decisions and conventionally notate *time-neume* works prior to performance (Hicks & Asplund, 2012, p. 25). According to Rzewski, doing otherwise would leave 'no time to think', which led to 'mechanical operations' (Rzewski, 1959, cited in Hicks & Asplund, 2012, p. 29) as a result of the volume of possible pitches and extremely short and specific durations. Wolff later remarked that 'the main criterion of any notation which is unconventional is that it produces an effect which cannot be produced by existing conventional notations' (Wolff, 1972, cited in Beal, 2010, p. 27). For as long as Tudor could re-rotate the works according to convention, and execute a valid performance, Wolff's own notation was failing to produce such an effect.

The cueing system featured in *Duo for Pianists II* is confusing and can lead to dead ends, where, without overstepping the boundaries of the piece, one or other of the players is left endlessly repeating 'no cue' material (Thomas, 2010b, p. 216). In this way, Wolff serves as an '*agent provocateur*', encouraging creative approaches to performance (Thomas, 2010b, p. 216). In part, 'the role of the work is to prevent preparation' (Godlovitch, 1998, p. 121). To Godlovitch (1998, p. 122), far from liberating the performer, 'indeterminacy [of this kind] confounds the player's discretion itself in the interest of spontaneity'. Significant creative agency is, however, conferred on the performer in the midst of realisation. Given that the rules are designed to allow for circumstances to occur such that it is most faithful to the *spirit* of the piece that they be broken, performers are prevented from 'a straightforward playing of the game' (Thomas, 2010b, p. 216). Wolff must place his trust in a performer to remain faithful to a piece open to subversion, an approach he would later call 'the honour system' (Beal, 2010, p. 27), and accept the validity of decisions he left open, regardless of his personal taste. Further, rather than being spontaneous as such, 'confusion takes time' (Thomas, 2010b, p. 215); the decision-making process can lead to long, awkward, pauses (Thomas, 2010b, p. 215).

The unpredictability of this approach has been characterised as 'unnerving' (Hicks & Asplund, 2012, p. 26). The work demands that performers 'stay alert for the piece's

constant mutations' (Hicks & Asplund, 2012, p. 26), an observation congruent with Wolff's desire to create coherent works that 'engage and perhaps surprise performers' (Wolff, 2009, p. 435). 'Surprise to all concerned; performer, composers [and] listeners' (Wolff, 1970, cited in Hicks & Asplund, 2012, p. 46) is central to Wolff's treatment of his music as an ongoing experiment. The possibility that any given performance of Wolff's work might surprise him, either in specific sounding events, or in the particular approach performers have taken to a work, draws striking parallels with the similarly auto-didactic, although entirely different, approach of Brian Ferneyhough.

Through deliberate obfuscation of his intent, nullification of intra-performance hierarchies and formulation of rules that lead to situations that must be creatively navigated and complemented by a call for highly attentive, real-time decision-making processes, Wolff's *Duo for Pianos II* requires a high degree of creative agency on the part of a faithful performer. As such, the 'dignity of difference' is inherent to the work, relatively free from deference to the composer or any particular paradigm of performance practice. Considering Ferneyhough's explicit ties to historical tradition (Fitch, 2013, p. 8), unforgivingly complex notation (Fitch, 2013, p. 31), and the multitude of cryptic writings he has introduced to the discourse surrounding his music (Fitch, 2013, p. 346), I would sympathise with readers who might suspect that the parallels I am to draw between Wolff and Ferneyhough in relation to composer-performer relationships are tenuous at best. Both *Unity Capsule* and *Duo for Pianists II*, however, share commonalities in relation to the degree of creative agency afforded to performers, author de-centring tendencies, and problematic interfaces with notions of tradition, albeit through radically different means.

Unity Capsule

Notions of accuracy

Ferneyhough's *Unity Capsule* (1975) for solo flute is one of his first solo works that can be retrospectively characterised as an expression of the 'interference form' he discusses in relation to later works (Fitch, 2013, p. 67). Through what he terms a 'fictional polyphony' (Ferneyhough, Boros, & Toop, 1995, p. 135), multiple strands of linear parametric data, such as the juxtaposition of vocalisation and playing the instrument at the same time, conflict and interfere with each other. The resulting negotiation of the multiple levels of instructions the performer must undertake to realise the work has been described as a 'dialogue between performer and notation' (Paddison & Deliège, 2010, p. 218). To Richard Taruskin (2005, pp. 475–476), the kind of highly detailed notation exhibited in *Unity Capsule* was a brazenly modernist attempt to 'progress' the notational mannerisms of Ferneyhough's Darmstadt predecessors and contemporaries (see below) to ever more specific, demanding and inflexible heights 'presented with infinite precision' (Taruskin, 2005, p. 475).

In Taruskin's view, Ferneyhough's work advances the late modernist conception of a performer as a skilled worker to be judged on their level of effective subjugation to a composer's intentions. From this perspective, *Unity Capsule* appears to typify the unequal power relationships prevalent in the division of labour between composers and performers. In light of Brian Ferneyhough's longstanding association with Darmstadt (Fitch, 2013, p. 231), an undeserving focal point for the ire of postmodern critics towards institutionalised modernism in music (Attinello, 2007, pp. 25–26), Taruskin's analysis might at first appear unproblematic. However, a key difference

between the performative reality of *Unity Capsule* and the ideological underpinnings that Taruskin sees in it is hinted at in Ferneyhough's own criteria of judgement by means of fidelity as opposed to exactitude (Fitch, 2013, pp. 35–39). Given the futility of an accurate rendering of all the parameters in every dimension, a successful performance rests in a faithful, rather than an accurate, attempt at realisation (Ferneyhough et al., 1995, p. 67), mediated through the physical and mental limitations of the performer (Ponce, 2007, p. 9). In this sense, *Unity Capsule*'s flirtations with the edge of possibility (Fitch, 2013, p. 345) serve to remove the composer from his 'creative monopoly... over the performer' (Couroux, 2002, p. 55).

The performing body

While *Unity Capsule* unarguably requires mastery of instrumental technique, and, indeed, conveys such mastery to the musically literate audience member (Fitch, 2013, p. 7), the performer is bestowed with creative agency paralleling that seen in *Duo for Pianists II*. The performer is tasked with selecting, according to their own hierarchies of parametric material, from a dense field of possibilities embedded in the score. Such a field of possibilities can be reimagined through Gibson's Theory of Affordances, as applied to music by Mooney (2011), and Windsor and de Bézenac (2012). Affordances are the possible actions allowed by a given framework, or a number of interacting frameworks (Mooney, 2011, pp. 5–6). In our case, the overlapping conceptual and literal aspects of score, instrument and performing body. *Unity Capsule* offers no universal paths of least resistance in the act of faithful performance. Rather, it casts light on the 'unique set of affordances available' (Windsor & de Bézenac, 2012, p. 110) to individual performers and their instruments within the 'framework' laid out by the notation (Mooney, 2011, p. 5–6). In contrast to Wolff, this kind of agency exists in dialectic with, though nonetheless quite apart from, a coexistent trace of author-centred interpretive agency typically informed by bodies of knowledge in relation to performance practice (Fitch, 2013, p.7).

In further contrast to *Duo for Pianists II*, the interpretative yardstick set by previous performances is weakened by the coupling of those decisions to the performing body, effectively liberating the performer from a further avenue of explicit deference. To Ferneyhough, the constant state of parametric flux in *Unity Capsule*, particularly with regard to rhythmic density, maintains a kind of 'performative surprise' (Ferneyhough et al., 1995, p. 327). In the immediate performance context, the performer is unable to 'remember very far ahead' (Fitch, 2013, p. 45). The act of negotiation and decision-making, resulting in fixity, has occurred in the many hours of rehearsal required for a faithful performance. The performance specifics are largely predetermined and pre-agreed, even if the nature of the score goes some way to prevent recall from one moment to the next, placing the work in disparity with the potential for literal surprise that is manifest in *Duo for Pianists II* and *Schwer... unheimlich Schwer*. As further examination will make clear, *Schwer... unheimlich Schwer* moves beyond *Duo for Pianists II* in that it opens the potential for performative surprise beyond the formal to the exact nature of the work's constituent material itself.

Notation and technology: An examination of *Schwer... unheimlich Schwer*
Schwer... unheimlich Schwer [difficult... very difficult], for bass clarinet, viola and percussion, is part of the body of research that has accumulated around the *Quintet.net* project, a piece of software designed by Hajdu to send music notation, as

it is generated, across computer networks to multiple players simultaneously (Hajdu et al., 2010, p. 39). Although the music is generated by a series of algorithms that are pre-programmed by the composer, it is possible for conductors and/or composers to adjust any parameters on the fly, from large-scale structure to minute details, depending on the affordances the composer has built into the algorithm to suit their needs (Hajdu et al., 2010, p. 39).

The core building block for *Schwer... unheimlich Schwer* is a rhythm and pitch transcription of parts of an interview given by Ulrike Meinhof, and the two contrasting characters she presented as an assertive Red Faction activist and doubtful mother (Hajdu et al., 2010, p. 50). Aside from the numerous technological and notational issues Hajdu outlines (Hajdu & Didkovsky, 2009, pp. 400–401; Hajdu et al., 2010, p. 51), arising as the software is increasingly used in different situations, a number of performative challenges have wider political implications with regard to agency and the composer–performer relationship. As we have seen in the cases of *Duo for Pianists II* and *Unity Capsule*, the performer makes a preconsidered synthesis of their own habitus, the work’s various affordances, and the composer’s stated or implicit intentions, where applicable to make; the performance situation itself is outside of the composer’s immediate control.

In the case of *Schwer... unheimlich Schwer*, the politics of the performance situation are doubly complicated. Firstly, by introducing the agency of the composer directly into the immediate performance situation, even in an arrangement capacity (Hajdu et al., 2010, p. 50), the division of labour between composer and performer is intensified as the work is inescapably chained to authorial intent; real-time notation in general allows for ‘new possibilities of control’ (Winkler, 2004, p. 5). Although Arne Eigenfeldt (2011, pp. 145–153) suggests that real-time composition brings the composer into the performative ecosystem, breaking the traditional notation of composition as separate from its presentation, he also, rather tellingly, cites an interest ‘in the potential for compositional control... during performance’² (Eigenfeldt, 2011, p. 145).

Secondly, Godlovitch’s (1998, p. 121–122) criticism of performative indeterminacy holds truer here than it does for *Duo for Pianists II*; as the performers must play material as it appears on their screens, there is little time to consider and apply anything but the most intuitive interpretive discretion. As in *Duo for Pianists II*, performers cannot familiarise themselves with the form in advance. *Schwer... unheimlich Schwer* goes further in that the material itself is unknowable until the time of performance. Hajdu’s employment of relatively specific conventional notation invokes notions of Western performance tradition that the material itself does little to problematise, compared to that seen in *Unity Capsule*. As a result of the limitations imposed by sight-readability, the material must be idiomatic and straightforward to execute. If a performer has little time to apply their interpretive agency, and the notation and material invite a reading based on conventional knowledge, interpretive decisions are rapidly reduced to a series of familiar defaults.

Eigenfeldt (2014, p. 283), whose recent generative work *An Unnatural Selection* (2014) is presented to performers in a similar notational style, remarked of an ‘awkward moment in the first rehearsal, when one musician asked if they were supposed to play “musically”’. While Eigenfeldt attributed the question to an incorrect

assumption about how generative music ought to be played in comparison to traditional music, it might be pertinent to entertain the thought that the performer was asking whether to interface with conventional wisdom with regard to interpretation, or whether to read the music as literally as possible, as though the performer was simply rendering the output as part of the wider generative mechanism.

Conclusion

By its generative nature, no two performances of *Schwer... unheimlich Schwer* can be the same. Although a general approach might be deduced, the interpretative specifics of a recorded performance cannot be straightforwardly deferred to by performers. Regardless, a performer's 'dignity of difference' is undermined by the necessity for spontaneous interpretation combined with the composer's ability to assert their agency in the midst of the performance itself. In comparison to the liberating potential of *Duo for Pianists II* and *Unity Capsule*, *Schwer... unheimlich Schwer* does not merely *reinforce* but actively *enforces* the dual composer-tradition points of deference manifest in Western art music as a result.

With the increasing possibilities that real-time generative composition offers, I have little doubt of its potential to open new possibilities in affording creative agency to all parties. Technologies are currently being explored that include performer-to-computer feedback systems (Eigenfeldt, 2012; Kim-Boyle, 2014). Pieces have been written that allow for explicit decision-making on the part of performers and/or audiences as well as composers, through feedback systems or open notation (Freeman, 2008, pp. 27–34; Kim-Boyle, 2014). *Duo for Pianists II*, *Unity Capsule* and *Schwer... unheimlich Schwer* all demonstrate the political potency of notational innovation, for better or worse. A composer's ability to open out and close off the various means through which a performer might express their individuality gives them the ultimate responsibility over the performance experience, either as a collaborative, humanising endeavour, or as an act of subjugation to the creative will of another by skilled labourers.

Endnotes

¹ For an overview of the role of habitus in relation to social authorship in Music, see Toynebee (2012).

² In the interests of avoiding misrepresentation, Eigenfeldt refers, in this paper, largely to a series of real-time compositional systems that allow compositional decisions to be made directly or indirectly through performer-to-software feedback systems, where many of his assertions in relation to the composer–performer relationship hold true, but are not applicable to *Schwer... unheimlich Schwer*, nor to his own later work, *An Unnatural Selection*, which is briefly discussed below.

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