

Musical Interpretation: Between the Artistic and the Scientific

Jernej Weiss

University of Ljubljana | University of Maribor

The monograph *Musical Interpretation: Between the Artistic and the Scientific* focuses on the diversity and specifics of individual interpretative practices in connection with some recent artistic/performance-related and research-based findings in the field of musical interpretation.

We know from the extraordinarily diverse history of performance practice that up until the nineteenth century most music performed was contemporary music, with the result that there were no significant divergences between musical scores as written and the sound and performance contexts. Such divergences began to emerge in the nineteenth century with the emergence of the so-called standard repertoire, when the oeuvres of certain composers who were universally acclaimed even in their own day, above all *Beethoven und andere Götter*, to borrow part of the title of a recent monograph by our esteemed colleague Helmut Loos,¹ became a permanent fixture in musical life. As sound and performance conventions changed, divergences from the performance and sound contexts of the period in which these works were composed necessarily began to occur, while awareness of the resulting differences inevitably led to questions about how to interpret these works.

Discussions about musical interpretation are particularly relevant when previously forgotten music is revived. Increasingly in-depth research

¹ Helmut Loos, *E-Musik – Kunstreligion der Moderne. Beethoven und andere Götter* (Kassel: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 2017).

into the actual musical life of past periods has led to the discovery of more and more details of the sound worlds of the past and to the concept of historically correct, historically authentic interpretation. Research of this kind mainly focuses on specific details of interpretation. These include the acoustics of historical performance venues, the composition of ensembles, questions of tuning, playing and singing techniques, and more specific questions of performance, for example the characteristics of bowing, phrasing and ornamentation in a given environment.² The aim of all this primarily music-historiographical research, the findings of which enable the reading of musical scores in their original sound and performance contexts, is to achieve a reconstruction of music as it actually sounded in the past in a manner that is as historically authentic as possible.

Performances based on such premises can today be heard in the case of individual conductors, performers and ensembles specialising in the historical repertoire. In today's predominantly digital environment, where in just a few clicks one can access the music of the most diverse historical periods, environments, types and genres, awareness of the diversity of interpretative approaches is greater than ever before. On the other hand, it is possible to find individual more or less influential "celebrity" conductors and soloists who are followed by many others around the world who adopt similar interpretative solutions. It is worth pointing out some of the pitfalls of such models, which can lead to often utterly unrealistic comparisons of live concerts with technically faultless studio recordings or performances.

Unquestionably one of the most significant changes in the interpretative field has occurred with the reinforcement of the image of the performer as a supernaturally skilful, almost demonic interpreter capable of thrilling the audience (one need only remember the famous depictions of Tartini's *Devil's Trill Sonata* or the image of Paganini as a demonic virtuoso).³ In *Musikalische Interpretation*, a survey of interpretative practices in different periods, Siegfried Mauser attributes the most important role in the development of this type of artistic approach to pianists.⁴ The latter greatly popularised individual symphonic and operatic works through their paraphrases or reductions, something that according to Carl Dahlhaus forever changed

2 Jurij Snoj, "Glasbeno delo in njegove interpretacije," *Muzikološki zbornik* 38 (2002): 8.

3 Mai Kawabata, *Paganini: The "Demonic" Virtuoso* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013).

4 Siegfried Mauser, "Virtuososen versus Interpreten," in *Musikalische Interpretation*, *Neues Handbuch der Musikwissenschaft*, Band 11, ed. Herman Danuser (Ljubljana: Laaber-Verlag, 1992), 394–400.

the role of the previously autonomous creation of the composer.⁵ This theatrically based approach to performance, which with its self-referential, frequently narcissistic characteristics is founded less on musical postulates than on the principle of performance, is mainly typical of popular music (*U-Musik*). In what way this approach has affected the image of classical music can be seen in extreme form at concerts by performers such as Vanessa-Mae, André Rieu and many other “interpreters” existing in a kind of grey area between *U-Musik* and *E-Musik*. That one of the principal factors motivating such “entertainers” is commercial surely goes without saying.

With the denial of the musically autonomous and the gradual permeation of capital into every pore of cultural and social life, aesthetic and other interpretative criteria are often entirely subordinated to the criterion of popularity, which unfortunately is increasingly becoming the only truly relevant criterion. Yet as the American music theorist Wallace Berry, the founding vice president and later president of the *Society for Music Theory*, shows in his book *Musical Structure and Performance*, the structural and technical complexity of classical repertoire is still able to limit such appetites to a certain extent.⁶

Another, less commercial interpretative approach, one that is largely focused on musical principles, is essentially centred on the specific characteristics of the musical idea. According to Nicholas Cook, this approach is based on a Platonic/positivist dualism.⁷ If the Platonic concept is based on exploring symbolic, philosophical and metaphysical meanings, the positivist concept focuses above all on analysis of structural and also interpretative circumstances. In the foreground of both is the aesthetics of *Werktreue*, in other words faithfulness to the composer’s idea or to the music itself. Stravinsky talks about the great principle of “submission”⁸ of performer to composer. As an example of the latter, so called “Toscanini’s interpretive approach,” in which there is supposedly no space for individuality, should be mentioned. In Adorno’s opinion Toscanini’s performances, structurally

5 Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth Century Music*, transl. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 137–42.

6 Wallace Berry, “Questions Arising in the Relations of Analysis to Performance,” in: Wallace Berry, *Musical Structure and Performance* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1989), 7–44.

7 Nicholas Cook, “Between Art and Science: Music as Performance,” *Journal of the British Academy* 2 (2014): 1–25.

8 Igor Stravinsky, “The Performance of Music,” in *Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons*, transl. Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947), 127.

considered down to the smallest detail, utterly crushed the essence of a symphonic work. As a result of his false “objectivity” (*Sachlichkeit*), in other words pedantically predetermined dynamics and phrasing and a general “protective focus” on the work, without taking into account performance and interpretation traditions, Toscanini, according to Adorno, “*prevented the music from coming to life*” in his performances.⁹ Of course, Adorno’s views on Toscanini have been questioned from many sides.¹⁰

Such constantly recurring ideological antagonisms between the composer’s intention on the one hand and the subjectivity of the interpreter on the other were particularly pronounced in the interwar period, when the divisions between Toscanini’s camp and Furtwängler’s camp deepened in the early 1930s.¹¹ In contrast to Toscanini’s approach, the great German conductor belonged to the rubato tradition and, in his interpretations of Beethoven, Wagner, Bruckner and other giants, dominated the most important concert venues in the German-speaking world. It may be true that Toscanini’s interpretations, frequently based on *Urtext* editions, have more mechanical features than expressive ones, yet is not every interpretation unique, no matter how meticulously structured in advance, in that it is based, to a greater or lesser extent, on the performer’s subjective decisions? There is always an interweaving of the scientific and artistic approaches to the musical material or the interpretative act itself. Thus in questions regarding the artistic and the scientific in music, these are never two absolute categories. On the contrary, the coexistence of the artistic and the scientific points to two complementary faces of the same whole. In the end, the greatness of an individual musical work and its interpretation lies in its many-layered nature, which in its always imperfect approximation, like a fleeting vision of the eternal, can occasionally be glimpsed in individual performances. It seems that it is only this interweaving that defines a true work of art and makes it immortal.

This monograph in the *Studia Musicologica Labacensia* collection includes a range of papers on a variety of topics, beginning with a keynote

9 Theodor W. Adorno, “Die Meisterschaft des Maestro,” in *Musikalische Schriften* I–III, Band 16 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982), 66.

10 These include works by Bernard H. Haggin, Deryck Cooke, Gustav-Hans Falke etc. I.e. Gustav-Hans H. Falke, “Warum Adorno Toscanini nicht verstanden hat,” *Musik & Ästhetik* 26 (2022): 53–7.

11 Herman Danuser, “Wilhelm Furtwängler versus Arturo Toscanini,” in *Musikalische Interpretation*, Neues Handbuch der Musikwissenschaft, Band 11 (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1992), 40–3.

paper by professor Clemens Hellsberg, violinist and long-serving president of the executive committee of the Vienna Philharmonic, entitled *Die Wiener Philharmoniker: Geschichte und Struktur*, in which the author presents some of the milestones in the extraordinarily rich history of the orchestra and its experiences with some outstanding interpreters, devoting particular attention to some of the most important conductors of the recent past and the contemporary era.

This is followed by a paper by Helmut Loos entitled *Der Dirigent. Anspruch und Wirkung*, a presentation of certain aspects of Elias Canetti's key philosophical work *Masse und Macht* (1960), in which Canetti describes the role of the conductor as that of an absolute leader, an individual who has the power to decide about "life and death" (*über Leben und Tod*).¹² Hartmut Krones's paper *Die Aufführungslehre der Wiener Schule als historische Aufführungspraxis* looks at how the performance doctrine of the Vienna School pursued exactly the same goals as historically informed performance. The Vienna-based Ukrainian musicologist Lidia Melnyk also sheds light on the work of some of the pupils of the Vienna School in her paper *Die etwas andere „Wiener Schule“: Eduard Steuermann und seine Lemberger Schüler*. Her research focuses on three pianists from Lviv (Lwów/Lemberg) – Jakob Gimpel, Artur Hermelin and Leopold Münzer, all of whom were students of Schoenberg's pianist Eduard Steuermann – and, in two cases, on their tragic fates. In his paper *Musical Interpretation – Specifics of Working with Textual Statements and Other Aspects*, Viktor Velek highlights the dualism between two types of evaluation of musical performance: written reflection and reviews of recordings. Luba Kyanowska's paper *Die ukrainische Opernsängerin Solomia Kruschelnytska in Prozess der künstlerischen Emanzipation des späten 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts* looks at the remarkable career of the Ukrainian soprano Solomiya Krushelnytska, who is remembered in European musical history above all for her interpretation of the title role in Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly*. Light is shed on a unique compositional career by the excellent Croatian researchers Vjera Katalinić and Lucija Konfic in their paper (*Vittorio Radeaglia and His Sérénade aux Etoiles in the Modern Composers' Series Competition*) dedicated to the *Sérénade aux étoiles* by Vittorio Radeaglia, a little-known composer of Dalmatian origin. In 1913 Radeaglia won first prize in the Modern Composers' Series Prize Competition organised by the Art Publication Society

12 Elias Canetti, *Masse und Macht: Wesentliche Zusammenhänge zum Verständnis unseres Zeitalters* (Hamburg: Claassen Verlag, 1960), 264.

of St Louis, Missouri. Among the contributions certain to attract interest by virtue of their highly topical content is Wolfgang Marx's paper *AI and Musical Interpretation*.

This is followed by a paper from Darja Koter on the significant contribution of the conductor Lovro von Matačić to musical interpretation in Slovenia (*An Attempt at an Analysis of the Factors Influencing a Conductor's Artistic Interpretation: Lovro von Matačić in Slovenia*) and a paper by the Vienna-based Slovene conductor Jera Petriček Hrastnik on the remarkable conducting career of Gertrud Herliczka (*The Conductor Gertrud Herliczka*), who between 1927 and 1939 conducted several hundred concerts by professional orchestras on some of the most important concert platforms in Europe and the USA. In his paper *Recent Slovene Music and Its Interpreters*, Niall O'Loughlin offers an account of the remarkable development of interpretational skills that has been evident in Slovenia in the three decades since independence. The first part of the publication is rounded off by Tjaša Ribizel Popič's paper *Exploring Musicological Discourses: A Preliminary Meta-Analysis of Slovenian Scholarly Articles*, in which, with the help of a meta-analysis of the musicological literature produced in Slovenia over the last two decades, the author presents important patterns and shifts in focus and sheds light on the changing roles and perceptions of composers, performers and ensembles.

The second half of the monograph is enriched by contributions from younger researchers: Jakob Barbo (*Selecting the Tempo of Mozart's Works – Traversing the Historical Sources Minefield*) sheds light in an original way on the causes of some erroneous notions about tempo in Mozart's works; Urban Stanič (*Taking into account historical context while composing cadenzas for Mozart's piano concertos*) presents some of the sound peculiarities and differences in interpretation of Mozart piano concertos at the time they were written and today; Pavle Krstić (*Analyse des Rhythmus als Mittel der Interpretation in der Musik von Chopin*) describes the ways in which musical analysis can contribute to the process of interpretation, with the author focusing on some of Chopin's piano works; and Naja Mohorič (*The role of harmonic-form analysis in the compositions of Ivo Petrić (1931–2018) and Alojz Srebotnjak (1931–2010) for solo harp in the development of own interpretative solutions*) looks at possible connections between the analytical and interpretative approaches in Petrić and Srebotnjak's compositions for solo harp.

The present monograph also contains some of the latest research findings by the younger generation of doctoral students in musicology and individual artistic fields, where their artistic findings are logically complemented by musicological research. The connection of these two poles can undoubtedly contribute to a deeper and more complete understanding of the always exceptionally complex field of musical interpretation.