

Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

Volume 12 *Volume 12 (2014)*

Article 8

2014

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Recommended Citation

Neufeld, Jonathan A. (2014) "Musical Ontology: Critical, not Metaphysical," *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)*: Vol. 12 , Article 8.

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Musical Ontology: Critical, not Metaphysical

Jonathan A. Neufeld

Abstract

The ontology of musical works often sets the boundaries within which evaluation of musical works and performances takes place. Questions of ontology are therefore often taken to be prior to and apart from the evaluative questions considered by either performers as they present works to audiences or an audience's critical reflection on a performance. In this paper I argue that, while the ontology of musical works may well set the boundaries of legitimate evaluation, ontological questions should not be considered as prior to or apart from critical evaluation. Rather, ontological claims are a type of critical evaluation made within musical practices. I argue that philosophers of music might learn from the debate in political philosophy about the difficulty of setting the limits of public reason in a way that remains open to a plurality of legitimate evaluative perspectives. Just as pre-political or metaphysical identification of the boundaries of public reason fail to accommodate the fact of pluralism in contemporary democratic politics, so too does a metaphysical identification of the boundaries of legitimate evaluation of musical works and performances fail to accommodate the fact of pluralism in contemporary musical practices. I apply John Rawls's formulation of political liberalism, arguing that musical ontology should be critical, not metaphysical.

Key Words

comprehensive liberalism, Stephen Davies, deliberation, Lydia Goehr, Jürgen Habermas, Andrew Kania, Jerrold Levinson, music, music criticism, musical ontology, musical performance, political liberalism, public sphere, John Rawls.

1. Introduction: ontology in criticism

A few years ago I attended a performance in New York by a string quartet which played selections from Bach's *The Art of Fugue*. As the subject of one of the fugues was passed from one instrument to another, each member of the quartet played it in a markedly different style. The first violin played with a relatively wide and almost lush vibrato, occasionally sliding a bit between notes. The second violin and cello played in a style that was closer to historically informed performance practice: they vibrated less frequently and more narrowly; their articulation was slightly shorter with their modern bows grabbing the string less than the first violin's, which resulted in a tone that was less rich and full. The violist played quite brightly and angularly, with a faster and narrower vibrato than that of the first violinist but vibrating more frequently than the second violin and cello. He played with no slides; his style was quite modern. When they finished, I looked at my companion and commented favorably, "That was interesting." She replied with a bit of contempt, "It wasn't really Bach."

My companion, whom I'll call Rachel, did not mean to point out that the ensemble had simply played badly. One might

imagine hearing a performance of four extremely incompetent or perhaps inebriated players muddling their way through a work and wondering to oneself whether *that* would really qualify as a performance *of* the work. The case with the performance of *The Art of Fugue* was quite different. The players were excellent, sober, and played exactly as they had intended. Rachel's critical comment was meant to condemn what they had set out to do: they executed their plan well, but the plan itself was flawed. They claimed it to be a performance of Bach, but it ended up falling short of that or perhaps going well beyond that—I am not sure the distinction matters in the end. What mattered to Rachel was that to her it *was not Bach*. Moreover, her critical expression was neither formulated as, nor meant as, I think, an expression of preference or of mere taste. Rachel stated that what we had heard, far from being a good performance of Bach, as I thought it was, did not present us with the work of Bach at all. To Rachel, despite the quartet's members playing the sounds well, they had failed, in a deep way, to perform Bach.

While one should not be too quick to draw deep philosophical conclusions from a casual bit of conversation after a concert, this sort of claim is made with surprising frequency in music criticism. In one recent example, the essayist and music critic Rip Rense argued against *Los Angeles Times* music critic Mark Swed's favorable review of the Los Angeles Opera's new version of Wagner's *Ring*, staged in 2009 by Achim Freyer. "Swed remarks casually, 'this is not. . . a singer's *Ring*.' Isn't singing rather central to the proceedings here? Isn't singing the main point of opera? Because this "*Ring*" seemed less concerned with the singing, or in highlighting the singing, Swed wrote that this would be upsetting only to 'traditionalists.' Isn't this a bit like saying that a football game without a ball might upset old-school fans?"^[1]

Note the ground to which this sort of comment moves a critical discussion about a performance. Rachel and I (or Rense and Swed) might have talked about what we liked and disliked about the performance as one often does in polite musical company. Instead, we talked about what the work we heard was *really* like relative to what the composer wrote, and the various ways in which this ought to bind performers. Our discussion, under a cloud of judgment prompted because the apparently descriptive statements were said with contempt, touched on fundamental questions about the nature of music, the nature of performance, and the nature of musical works-- in short, questions pertinent to the ontology of music.

2. Musical ontology and comprehensive liberalism

In *Art and its Objects*, Richard Wollheim writes, "The artist has built an arena, within which we are free, but whose boundaries we must not overstep."^[2] That is, when interpreting or evaluating works, our freedom is bound by the limits of the works themselves. This statement about overstepping the limits of a work itself takes on a particular urgency when addressing musical performers. After all, performance gives more than a critical reflection on a work: it is only through performance that musical works sound in public at all. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that philosophers of music have been particularly keen to determine precisely what the limits

of a work are that the performer must not overstep. Many recent philosophers of music have understood this question of boundary-setting metaphysically and thus would have it that determination of these limits is not part of the practice of interpretation, performance, and evaluation, but more a matter of pre-practical ontological identification.

If determining how our freedom is bound by the works themselves is a matter of metaphysics, then my conversation with Rachel was one that involved finding the right description.

The performance we heard could then be judged according to whether it overstepped the boundaries that the metaphysics of musical works set for it. If this is correct, then the answer to the philosophical question raised by our conversation was logically prior to the critical judgment. Rachel's contempt--the implied *and so it was bad* embedded in her statement "It wasn't Bach"--would only make sense against a particular metaphysical backdrop, "in a particular arena," to use Wollheim's words. Our conversation was in part aimed at discovering the particular arena in which we were playing. The metaphysics of music is therefore especially important in the chain of critical argumentation; it is a sort of gatekeeper of both *criticism* and *performance*—the two major modes of deliberation in the musical public sphere.

I use the language of public spheres deliberately to draw attention to what I take to be an illuminating parallel between philosophy of music and political philosophy. Both liberal political philosophy and the philosophy of music as considered here are concerned with the criteria of legitimate deliberation and evaluation in their respective spheres of discourse. Each allows for the plurality of evaluative perspectives at play in a relatively diverse audience, what John Rawls calls the "fact of pluralism."^[3]

The fact of pluralism compelled Rawls and others to develop a *political*, as opposed to a *comprehensive*, liberalism. Political liberalism attempts, though not always successfully, to avoid relying on metaphysical or comprehensive philosophical commitments when setting the limits of legitimate political deliberation. By contrast, arguments in the philosophy of music highlighting the limits of legitimate musical deliberation often quite directly and explicitly depend on robust metaphysical or ontological commitments. These theories in what Andrew Kania has called the *fundamentalist debate* are analogs to foundational, comprehensive or metaphysical liberalism.^[4]

The comprehensive liberal's pursuit of sharp "pre-political"^[5] conceptual boundaries to the public sphere has been called into question on a number of fronts, including from within liberalism itself. There are concrete political consequences to this sort of boundary setting that a variety of political theorists continue to explore. Robert P. George, an advocate of natural law theory, captures the core problem well: "[Public reason] almost always has the effect of making the liberal position the winner in morally charged political controversies. It does this, in effect, by ruling out of bounds substantive moral argument on behalf of non-liberal positions."^[6] Pluralism is taken to be so deep and wide that commitment to any fixed foundational conception of the limits of public discourse would be

unacceptably exclusionary or anti-democratic. As a result, deliberative democrats, radical democrats, agonistic democrats, republicans, and communitarians, among others, have aimed to reconceive questions of political legitimacy in ways that avoid the kind of exclusion generated by the comprehensive liberal account of public reason and to bring even these foundational questions into the arena of critical deliberation.

I suggest that, just as the boundary-setting of comprehensive liberalism in political philosophy fails to satisfy its own demand of taking the fact of pluralism seriously, so too the ontological boundary setting in the philosophy of music fails to appreciate the consequences of taking the dynamic pluralism of the modern musical public seriously. I am concerned that the supposedly neutral, metaphysical characterization of musical works serves as a veiled, and sometimes not so veiled, normative constraint on musical practice. What causes me concern is not the normativity of the constraints^[7] but rather that the sources of the normativity supposedly lie beyond the contentious give and take of public musical practice.

Ontological constraints on musical performance should be embraced, if at all, as normative claims from within the musical public sphere rather than as metaphysical constraints imposed from without. While there has been some movement toward a musical ontology that tethers itself more closely to musical practice,^[8] the active and normative role—the critical role—of setting the boundaries of musical works has still been overlooked. To echo John Rawls's formulation that liberalism should be political, not metaphysical, claims of musical ontology should be taken to be critical, not metaphysical.

3. The limits of legitimate listening

Jerrold Levinson's influential philosophy of music provides a particularly clear example of the consequences of the musical analog of the comprehensive metaphysical liberal position. Levinson argues that there is a distinction among the musical work itself, an instance of the work, and a performance of the work. The work itself is an initiated type comprising a sound and performance means structure as indicated by a composer at a particular time. "Instances of the work are a subclass of the set of performances of a work. A performance of a musical work *W* is a sound event that is intended to instantiate *W*--i.e., represents an attempt to exemplify *W*'s S/PM [sound and performance means] structure in accordance with the composer's indication of it—and which succeeds to a reasonable degree."^[9] All instances are performances, but not all performances are instances. For example, dropping three notes of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* Sonata disqualifies an act as an instance of the work for Levinson, who follows Nelson Goodman's stringent criteria for performances.^[10] Breaking from Goodman, Levinson argues that a non-instance can count as a performance, and possibly even a great one since "...that [it is] strictly incorrect by no means entails that [it is] bad."^[11]

On the one hand, Levinson has done well to distinguish between instance and performance by showing that modern audiences, critics, and performers are not in general concerned with perfect instantiation of a score when listening to a

performance. This is a sensible acknowledgement of and departure from what is generally regarded as Goodman's conceptually consistent but overly rigid account of performance. On the other hand, it is not at all clear that judgments concerning the identity of the performance, especially in difficult cases that challenge the "to a reasonable degree" requirement, do not bleed straight away into aesthetic judgments. The supposedly non-aesthetic, non-normative commitment to certain identity criteria of performance either is in itself aesthetic or at least directly requires certain normative commitments at the level of performance practice.^[12]

The resonance of this interpretation with liberal political philosophy comes out clearly in Levinson's argument for the "perspective relativity of evaluation of performance," that there is no single best performance of any given work, because each performance can be heard from a number of distinct legitimate perspectives. He argues that an experienced listener will evaluate a performance differently from how a neophyte, a performer, a professional critic, a composer, or a musicologist would, because each perspective presupposes different interests and capacities. Levinson thus calls our attention to the fact of pluralism in musical audiences. Though the array of possible evaluative perspectives and their corresponding interests appears to be fairly diverse, Levinson sensibly points out that not just any perspective or set of interests may be given a valid voice in evaluations of performances. At the very least, the perspective must be appropriate to the domain and should not merely flout the conventions of the practice. Levinson thus calls attention to the need to identify a reasonable pluralism of perspectives.

One can immediately identify several easy cases of unreasonable perspectives: a singing drunk's or an earplug-wearer's interest in loud performances, for example, would clearly not be legitimate. But there are more difficult and more interesting cases that put the particular characteristics of Levinson's musical public sphere in sharper relief. Consider his treatment of Wendy Carlos's *Switched on Bach*, an album recorded in 1968 containing versions of works by J.S. Bach played on a Moog synthesizer. It is worth quoting at length:

Certainly these have their appeal. Is there, then, a musical perspective or listener whom they address, whose gratification is thus a justification for regarding them as good? The answer is yes and no. They do address a certain kind of audience, but (a) addressing that audience is not a legitimate musical objective, and (b) in addressing that audience Bach's music is unduly distorted and transmogrified. The Moog Bach provides an engaging musical experience to a certain kind of listener which ordinary Bach, apparently, cannot. But this is a dull, lazy, unpracticed listener, one who needs constant highlighting, gratuitous regular changes, impossibly rapid tempos, and a realm of sounds not too far removed of contemporary popular music. Enveloping a work in alien sonic dress,

submerging and obscuring its basic identity, is no service to it and meets the needs of no listeners deserving consideration. The falsification of Bach's works represented by these pseudoperformances is not redeemed by the supposed end of enabling or facilitating musical appreciation 'down the line.' For the nature of the appreciation these caricatures lay the groundwork for is precisely in question. Extreme violence to a musical tradition seems a very suspect method of insuring its ultimate survival or preservation. One is reminded of having to destroy villages in order to save them.^[13]

The problem with *Switched on Bach*, according to this remarkable piece of criticism, is that it submerges and obscures the "basic identity of the work." It is not a *bad* performance of Bach; it is not a performance of Bach at all, though it claims to be one. This is a very strong claim, an elaborated form of Rachel's response described at the beginning of this paper. Where one might contest the line between good and bad performance within the historical confines of the musical practice it is up to the members of the music critic community to argue it out. The line between performance and non-performance, the central criterion for *falsification*, is established by Levinson as a matter of ontology. It is not a matter for the musical public to decide; it is a matter of metaphysics and as such is prior to and apart from critically engaged reason-giving within the musical public sphere.

This is achieved by allowing the work, as determined by ontology, to have a unique position of authority within the musical public sphere. The work places conceptual constraints on the identity of a performance which are prior to the performance's evaluation; that is, they preempt or trump consideration of other interests. This effectively removes what we might think of as the work's interests from at least a certain sort of criticism from within the musical public sphere.

Yet claims based on the work's authority are made against the interests of particular audiences within the practice (by metaphysicians of music who have discovered these interests).

The description of Carlos's *Switched on Bach* as something that is not an actual performance serves as a club to be wielded against a particular drift within the practice of Western art music or "classical music." Levinson's shift to talk of what counts at all for a performance precludes a need to argue normatively against "pseudo-performances." It simply takes them off the table of evaluation with one hand while rendering a rather devastating criticism of them with the other. If *falsification* is taken seriously, the ontological characterization of what it is to be a performance preempts a number of evaluative judgments and stakes out the arena in which first order conflict will take place, stacking the deck in favor of particular evaluations within the practice, in essence prejudging that the practice ought to develop in a particular direction and not another.

While I have no desire to defend or attack Carlos's *Switched on Bach* as a good or a bad performance of Bach, I do want to defend the possibility of allowing the diverse members of

music practice to determine whether it is. In some circumstances (not all that uncommon, it would seem), such musical practice results in a confrontation about whether it is a *performance* at all. But if I am right, this ontological dispute emerges from arguments within critical practice.

4. Ontological pluralism and descriptivism

One might think that the problem as I've described it so far is really just a problem of insensitivity to the complexity of musical practices and tastes. In response, one might multiply kinds of musical works, making for an even more deeply pluralistic ontology of performances and works. Stephen Davies has been ambitious in this regard, identifying six types of musical work and performance. Each type emerges from an historical practice. Works created for electronic production or for recording, for example, emerges from the ontological possibilities created by modern technology. This pluralistic conception of musical ontology (there is not just one thing called a musical work, but many) best accounts for "the criteria on which we base our understanding and evaluation."^[14] Despite this welcome nod to context and a richer engagement with music history, the same metaphysical, comprehensive view is present here although in a more disguised form. "To enjoy music, one must be able to locate the relevant object and apply to it the appropriate mode of appreciation."^[15] Davies's discussion of the moral responsibilities of performers to perform works authentically makes vivid the point that ontological identification of the relevant object is still prior to normative public engagement.

Where musical works exist and where audiences attend performances in order to hear those works, the first aim of the activity of performance is to deliver the work in question to the audience (and a crucial further aim is to do so well). To meet these aims the performer must exercise his or her creative talents within bounds prescribed both by the composer and by the wider conventions of the composers' day which governed the performance of works of the type in question. Performers and audiences come together on the basis of an understanding of the point of the activity in which they are jointly involved.^[16]

The fact that works of various types came into existence at various times and have various conditions of identification doesn't change the fact that the most fundamental relationship between a work, its performance, and legitimate criticism is a matter of metaphysical specification. That is, ontology's authoritative determination of legitimacy, though allowing for more categories of performance, is no less authoritative and determinative. This determination, as Davies makes clear, is prior to the audience and performer coming together in the context of a performance. They have agreed in advance on the point of the activity in which they are jointly involved: the performance is not a space to work out, reflect on, or deliberate about that activity.

More recently, Andrew Kania has argued that the ontology of music ought to be more closely tethered to practice, and philosophers should engage in a descriptive metaphysics (a term Kania takes from Peter Strawson). Such a descriptive metaphysics of music would pick out and rationally reflect on

the existing norms of musical practices and the intuitions of participants in the practice. Clarifying them would involve achieving a reflective equilibrium between more refined philosophical modal intuitions and the probably somewhat messy state of musical practice.^[17] While this is a much more promising methodology for musical ontology, since the source of normativity is now the practice itself, Kania's account of "musical practice," like Levinson's, encompasses our performance and our critical practices but not, apparently, philosophy. Descriptive metaphysics stands outside of the musical practices it describes and quietistically leaves them as they are.

Descriptive metaphysics would achieve this by describing the "actual structure of our thoughts about the world," according to Kania.^[18] A philosophical account might, of course, differ from our pre-theoretical thoughts about the actual structure of thoughts about the world. That is, one might be surprised by the rational reconstruction of some practice or other. Or it might present our thoughts to us for the first time, so to speak, in its rational reconstruction of our previously unreconstructed thoughts. "*We think that?*" we might ask. It is worth considering our reactions to philosophical arguments about music. Broadly, there are two ways one might react to, or even dispute, the findings of a descriptive metaphysician.

One might find counterevidence for the description in existing practice and so engage in descriptive metaphysics on its own ground. That is, one might simply do more philosophy in response. But there is another possible response that is not uncommon in critical practice: one can produce counterevidence for the description of existing practice. One can make music differently, either as a composer or as a performer. A description of a way of *thinking* (of our settled intuitions, in this case) often provokes widespread reconsideration of *doing* when we are concerned with matters of thoughts about artistic practice. Does a descriptive metaphysics, then, really leave the world as it is? In many cases, it might. The practical ramifications of reporting a rational reconstruction of how we treat "existence" or "being" in musical practice might well be minimal. More detailed, and more specific reconstructions and descriptions of the way we treat musical works and performances have been shown, again and again in history, to be capable of having serious practical consequences. Such consequences, in turn, result in a change in the data the description has set out to rationally reconstruct.

Let us consider an example that I have greatly simplified for the sake of brevity: Schopenhauer's metaphysics of music was taken quite seriously by Wagner and it influenced his composition. Schopenhauer argued that music is different from all of the other arts, and that it had a special connection with the world as it truly is. While the other arts were able to access eternal Ideas, the most basic universal and eternal representations of the world in itself, the world as will, they were still once removed from the reality of the world in itself. Music, on the other hand, was a direct representation of the world as it is in itself. This world as will, always moving, is expressed in the world of representation as striving, suffering, longing, growth, and dissolution. In response, as an attempt to compose in accord with Schopenhauer's philosophical

account of music, Wagner broke down both genre boundaries and formal expressive boundaries in music. One can also trace the influence of Feuerbach on Wagner's conception and attempted creation of *The Artwork of the Future*.[\[19\]](#)

Nineteenth-century critic, musicologist, and philosopher Eduard Hanslick's deep disagreement with Wagner and Schopenhauer about what music in itself can express (and thus what constitutes a musical work and what counts as a proper performance of it) was expressed philosophically in *On the Musically Beautiful*, in his critical writings, and in his advocacy for the compositions of Brahms.[\[20\]](#) Wagner, famously, responded to Hanslick both in print and in music. Wagner aimed a musical broadside at Hanslick when he created the pedantic, rule-bound, error-making character, Beckmesser (named Veit Hanslich in an earlier draft), in his opera *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. While my history here is extremely simplified, it illustrates how philosophical accounts, especially of controversial, difficult, or transitional works, are often inextricably woven into the very practices they explain. The work the ontology of music does, and the kinds of actions (performances, composing works, doing philosophy) that might count as responses to it, are quite varied.[\[21\]](#)

It is telling, then, that the philosopher of music is absent from Levinson's list of "some of the points of view for evaluating performances," though the musicologist, music theorist, and other composers are included. The same absence, perhaps more puzzlingly, plagues Kania's descriptive metaphysics. To describe the norms and intuitions actually operating in musical practice is, in part, to describe the philosophical arguments that helped make the practice what it is. To engage in the philosophy of music as a form of descriptive metaphysics should bring one to notice that the philosophy of music plays more than a merely descriptive role in musical practice. This was true of the philosophy of music in the past (I briefly mentioned the middle of the nineteenth century, but could have mentioned numerous other periods), and I can see no plausible way to exempt current philosophy of music, at least conceptually, from this active role.

5. Conclusion: making a problem of the musical work

Two claims emerge from what I've argued so far: first, that many arguments concerning the metaphysics of music, the ontology of performances and non-performances, are not merely descriptive or conceptual claims *about* musical practices; and second, that philosophers ought not try to pretend that they are and should self-consciously situate their arguments within critical public practice. The first claim is more philosophically substantive and points toward what I take to be the practical role of philosophy in the musical public sphere. If I am right, philosophy already takes an active role in practical musical debates but often stands apart from them, mediating them from the outside. This is not to be corrected by making more carefully descriptive, non-normative claims about the concept of the musical work.[\[22\]](#) Even if it were possible to remove philosophical description from the direct critical engagement of practice, it is not clear why we would want to do so. It seems to me that there are at least strong

prima facie reasons not to argue for the complete practical detachment of one's theories from the cultural practices they explain.

If musical ontology is removed from a precritical metaphysics and folded into music's broader critical practice, then ontological arguments can be viewed as arguments for a certain sort of limitation on the kinds of evaluative reasons that can legitimately be offered with reference to a performance of musical works. Ontological arguments can be viewed as of a piece with critical evaluation of musical practices. This, to me, seems the most natural reading of Levinson's criticism of *Switched on Bach*, in spite of its placement as an example for a metaphysics of music and its relationship to evaluation. I think this is also the most natural reading of Hanslick's *On the Musically Beautiful*, especially when one takes his extensive public criticism into account.

Bringing ontological arguments within the sphere of ordinary critical argumentation opens the very structure of the musical public sphere more directly to public deliberation. It also opens musical works and performances to precisely the sort of unreflective criticism that worries Levinson in the *Switched on Bach* example. It is what Roger Scruton derisively identifies as democratic or democratizing criticism.^[23] The central worry about democratic music criticism, as both Levinson and Scruton point out, is that it threatens the integrity of musical works that are generally accepted to be of great value. Once musical practice is opened to every sort of contestation and participation, everyone would have an equal right to make any sort of claim about every performance in the musical tradition.

This is true in theory but not something to worry too much about in practice. Assume for the moment that the audiences addressed by Carlos's *Switched on Bach* really are "dull, lazy, and unpracticed." This ought to make addressing them by articulating other, sharp, industrious, and well-practiced interests particularly easy, almost as easy as dismissing the earplug-wearer's request for a loud performance. The key, though, is that the performance traditions challenged by *Switched on Bach*, or any number of boundary-pushing performances, must constantly be revisited, re-examined and re-justified in light of an ever-shifting practice.

An advocate of a comprehensive liberalism, in the spirit of John Stuart Mill perhaps,^[24] might respond that I am overly optimistic and that, in fact, responding to the challenging interests expressed by democratizing criticism is not so easy. Moreover, there may be a real danger of the musical public becoming dominated by a sort of tyrannical yet dull, lazy and unpracticed (DLU) majority. This is a legitimate worry but attempting to build a wall around the concept of the musical work and simply to define unsavory interests as illegitimate is both futile and counterproductive. Instead, philosophical critics should make explicit their judgments about the direction and structure of musical performance practice. Arguments ruling certain performances out of court should explicitly involve engaging in public criticism. Levinson's worries about the interests served by *Switched on Bach* might be fleshed out as a worry about what sort of relationship the audience should have with Western classical music—or, more broadly, what role and what character audiences should have in the musical

public sphere. A dull, lazy, and unpracticed audience is unable or unwilling critically to participate reflectively and critically in the musical public sphere.^[25] Using the language of Rawls's political liberalism, such an audience is not an unreasonable one, but one in which reasonableness is a matter of openness to critical participation in musical practice. It is this very openness that makes the disputed expression of interests possible in the first place and that maintains the productive and creative movement of public musical practices. When considered in this light, the problem of music and the DLU listener is clearly a kind of political problem, not to be solved by even the most careful ontological arguments, unless these arguments are themselves taken to be normative commitments within the musical public sphere.

This is not to say that there are no performance traditions involving authoritative reference to works that can be quite formally identified, or that all such traditions should be overturned. In fact, pursuing a critical ontology might often look very much like pursuing a metaphysical ontology. I am not objecting to seeking out, clarifying, or practically calling attention to the basic building blocks of musical practice. I am objecting to taking these gestures as independent of, and without effect on, those basic building blocks and musical practices.^[26] Habermas argues, referring to political deliberation and law, that the crucial question is not whether formalized or routinized patterns of performance exist, but "how the latter can be changed. This in turn depends on whether the settled routines remain open to renovative impulses" from all corners of the public, especially from the "periphery" that might not ordinarily be noticed or heard. This sort of reflexive performance practice open to change is characterized by "a heightened public attention, an intensified search for solution, in short, by problematization."^[27] This thought is remarkably close to one of Adorno's characterizations of music performance. "Adequate performance requires the formulation of the work as a problem, the recognition of the irreconcilable demands, arising from the relation of the content [Gehalt] of the work to its appearance, that confront the performer."^[28] Such critical interventions into the very question of what is public, or what is a musical work, are precisely what the metaphysical conceptions of political or musical performance rule out.

All members of the musical public sphere—composers, performers, audiences, musicologists, and philosophers—ought to be conceived as engaging in just this sort of problematization. For the ontology of music, even pluralistic and descriptivist ontologies, the central demands of the musical work cannot be problematized in this sense; they can only be analysed and described. However, in a modern performance practice, no metaphysical account of music can or should constitute a yardstick against which a given performance, composition, or interpretation is measured. Rather, musical ontology may, at best, play a role in particular arguments within an historically grounded deliberation within the musical public sphere. Music, for better or worse, is in our hands.^[29]

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Published on October 7, 2014.

Endnotes

[1] Mark Swed, "A Carnival of Light. L.A. Opera Goes for the Marvels in a Flawed yet Spectacular," *Los Angeles Times* (September 28, 2009); Rip Rense, "Rense Rebutts Swed's 'Siegfried' Review," in *The Rip Post* (October 5, 2009), accessed January 13, 2014 (<http://riprense.com/renserebutsswed.htm>).

[2] Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 102.

[3] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 1st ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. xix.

[4] Andrew Kania, "New Waves in Musical Ontology," in Kathleen Stock and Katherine Thomson-Jones (eds.), *New Waves in Aesthetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 20. Nothing in particular rests on the choice of name. Rawls uses "metaphysical," while "comprehensive" and, to a lesser extent, "foundationalist" are more general and have become more widespread.

[5] Jurgen Habermas, "Reconciliation through the Public Use of Reason," *Journal of Philosophy*, 92.3 (1995), 129.

[6] R. P. George and C. Wolfe, eds., *Natural Law and Public Reason* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000), p. 1.

[7] For an account of the ineliminability of normativity in musical ontology, see Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) and Aaron Ridley, "Against Musical Ontology," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 100.4 (2003).

[8] Andrew Kania, "The Methodology of Musical Ontology: Descriptivism and Its Implications," *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 48.4 (2008), 426-444, and David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

[9] Jerrold Levinson, *Music, Art, and Metaphysics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 86.

[10] Nelson Goodman, *The Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1968), Chapters 4-5.

[11] Levinson, *Music, Art, and Metaphysics*, p. 87.

[12] See Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, Chapter 3 and Ridley, "Against Musical Ontology," pp. 209ff.

[13] Levinson, *Music, Art, and Metaphysics*, p. 384

[14] Stephen Davies, *Musical Works and Performance: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 9.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] Stephen Davies, "The Ontology of Musical Works and the Authenticity of Their Performances," *Noûs*, 25.1 (1991), 24.

[17] Note that "reflective equilibrium" is a method named and brought to prominence by Rawls in his comprehensive liberal tract *A Theory of Justice*. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971)

[18] Kania, "The Methodology of Musical Ontology: Descriptivism and Its Implications," p. 434, citing Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1963), p. xiii.

[19] Wagner, *The Artwork of the Future and Other Works*, trans. William Ashton Ellis, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).

[20] Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, trans. George Payzant, Eighth, 1891 ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986), Eduard Hanslick, *Hanslick's Music Criticisms*, trans. Henry Pleasants (New York: Dover Publications, 1988).

[21] That performances can play a role in criticism, see my "Critical Performances," *teorema*, Volume XXXI/3, (Autumn, 2012), 89-104.

[22] See Goehr and Ridley, *op cit.*

[23] Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), Chapter 15.

[24] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, (Indianapolis: Hackett 1978).

[25] Adorno might point out myriad social and political conditions that make this kind of audience all but inevitable. See, for example, "Perennial Fashion: On Jazz," in Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981).

[26] I thank an anonymous referee at *Contemporary Aesthetics* for pressing me on this point.

[27] Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 357.

[28] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 106.

[29] I would like to thank Hanne Appelqvist, Lydia Goehr, Gregg Horowitz, Jennifer C. Lena, Mathew Rabon, Tiger Roholt, Brian Soucek, Robert Talisse and an anonymous referee for this journal for their conversations and comments as I developed the arguments presented in this paper.

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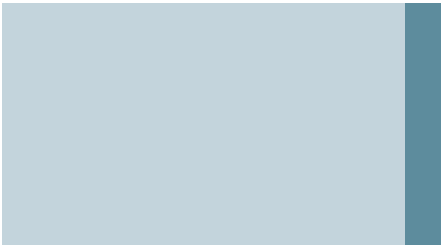
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