Listening to Musical Performers

Aron Edidin
New College of Florida, edidin@ncf.edu

Listening to Musical Performers

Aron Edidin

Abstract
In the philosophy of music and in musicology, apart from ethnomusicology, there is a long tradition of focus on musical compositions as objects of inquiry. But in both disciplines, a body of recent work focuses on the place of performance in the making of music. Most of this work, however, still takes for granted that compositions, at least in Western art music, are the primary objects of aesthetic attention.

In this paper I focus on aesthetic attention to the performing activity itself. I begin by roughly characterizing what is involved in attending to the performing activity of musical performers. I then argue that such attention is essential to the full appreciation of the central compositions of the Western art music canon. Finally, I argue that, often enough, recordings provide a suitable vehicle for this sort of attention; listeners to recordings can use them to listen to musical performance.

Key Words
music, performance, recording, Western art music (WAM)

1. Introduction

With good reason music is classified among the performing arts. The domain of music most subject to academic study, Western art music (WAM[1]), features written musical texts in the form of compositions. These compositions are what are typically called musical works. But music is an art of the audible, and the compositions at the core of WAM are audible only in the sounds made by performers.

In both the philosophy of music and in musicology, apart from ethnomusicology, there is a long tradition of focusing on musical compositions as objects of inquiry. But in both disciplines, a body of recent work aims to do greater justice to the place of performance in the making of music.[2] In philosophy, we now have extended discussions of the concept of historical authenticity in musical performance,[3] of the relation of performances to recordings,[4] and of the nature of musical performance itself.[5] Most of this work, however, still takes for granted that compositions (at least in WAM) are the primary objects of aesthetic attention. David Davies describes what he calls the "classical paradigm:" works of art for performance are multiply realizable, performances of those works are their realizations, and the artistic role of performers is that of interpreters whose efforts "manifest different qualities of the performable work."[6] In John Rink's anthology, *Musical Performance: A Guide to Understanding*, Peter Walls endorses this view: "We value imagination and originality in performers, but recognize that (normally) this serves the music they perform, helping to illuminate its character or make palpable its emotional content."[7]

This might seem to entail that there is not much to be said about performance as an object of musical listening, or of aesthetic attention. Within the classical paradigm, the proper primary object of attention for listeners is supposed to be the work performed. But even for performance outside the classical paradigm, one could argue that there is no need to take performance in and of itself as an object of musical attention. In typical cases, listening to music just *is* listening to performance, since it is in performance that music is typically heard, so any account of listening to music might equally count as an account of listening to musical performance. This could be reinforced by the sense that what makes something a *musical performance* is exclusively a matter of the musical sounds produced by the performing, so that attention to the performing activity, in and of itself, is not really part of *musical* listening, even of musical listening to musical performance.

A version of this approach in the context of the classical paradigm and its emphasis on the distinction of works from performances, is to take "listening to performances" to be "listening to what is distinctive about individual performances, i.e., what distinguishes one performance of a given work from others of the same work." And, indeed, this is the exclusive focus of the chapter on "Listening to performance," in Rink's anthology.[8] Each performance yields a somewhat distinctive pattern of musical sounds, and listeners can attend to the differences as well as the similarities among these patterns. Of course, the same basic point could be made for patterns of musical sound created by performances outside of the classical paradigm.

But this does not yield an adequate account of what is involved in listening to musical performance. For this, we need to move from a focus on the sound-patterns produced by performing activity to the activity itself, and to ask what it means to include this activity as an object of aesthetic attention in its own right.

In what follows, I begin by roughly characterizing what is involved in attending to the performing activity of musical performers, with particular attention to broadly epistemic considerations. I then argue that such attention is essential to the full appreciation of the central compositions of the WAM canon. (I focus here on WAM because it is the domain to which the classical paradigm is paradigmatically applied.) Finally, I use the considerations I have developed to argue that, often enough, recordings provide a suitable vehicle for this sort of attention, and that listeners to recordings can use them to listen to musical performance.

2. Listening to somebody do something

What is the difference between listening to a musician performing and listening to a musical sound-pattern that I know is the product of a musician performing? Let's start with a homelier example. If I am in the next room washing the dishes, you can listen to me wash them, rinse them, and stack them in the drainer. Alternatively, you can listen to a sequence of sounds, such as clattering, susurration, and such, that is an audible product of my activity. In the first case (listening to me washing the dishes) you are following my

activity through the sounds, while in the second case you are just following the sounds themselves. (Although, in the first case you may *also* be following the sounds, and in the second you may incidentally draw inferences about what I am doing; the difference is one of the focus of attention).

The first mode of attention is clearly tied to the fact that listening to people doing things is, like watching them, a way of perceiving what they're up to. Indeed, listening in the second way, attending to the sounds of human activity as sounds rather than listening to what's going on in a more full-bodied sense, is likely to require the deliberate choice to do so.[9]

3. Listening to somebody perform music

Suppose that you are in the next room singing. (For simplicity's sake, suppose you're singing wordlessly). I can listen to you singing or, alternatively, I can listen just to the melody, the pattern of sounds you happen to be making. I can do the latter even though I know perfectly well that you are making the sounds by singing. I might do this, for example, if I am trying to memorize the melody or recognize it or analyze it. When I listen to *you singing*, I am following *what you are doing* through the sounds you are making. On the other hand, and in contrast to the dishwashing example, the activity I am following is just the vocal making of that pattern of sounds, that is, the singing of that melody, so listening to the melody is an essential part of listening to your singing. If I am listening to you sing the melody, I am aurally following *both* the melody and your singing.

I can instead listen to your tone production, perhaps on the lookout for flaws, without listening to the melody. But in that case, while I am listening to something that you are doing – producing tones – I am not, in the relevant sense, listening to you sing the melody. To listen to you sing the melody, I must also listen to the melody itself, that is, to the musical sounds you are making, rather than *just* listening *through* the sounds to the activity. And this means that listening to a sequence of musical sounds and listening to music-making activity are not mutually exclusive; the latter entails the former.

There are, then, three different types of listening:

> (1) Listening to someone do something, and using the sounds made by the activity to follow the activity, to which the sound-making is incidental. (Silent dishwashing is still dishwashing.);
>
> (2) Listening to the sounds made by someone doing something, without attending to how the sounds are produced; and
>
> (3) Listening to someone do something, where the activity to which one attends is the activity of producing a certain sequence of sounds in a certain way, such as, the activity of singing a melody. Listening to music-performing activity is an example of this third kind.

4. Epistemic considerations

In the relevant sense, listening to somebody doing something requires that the listener hear what the other is doing. This means that whether someone is listening to what somebody is doing reflects both the beliefs of the listener and their accuracy. I am not, in this sense, listening to someone play a violin unless I believe that I am hearing someone play a violin, but neither am I listening to someone play the violin unless someone's violin-playing is actually audible to me.

On the other hand, the relevant sense of listening, and the correlative sense of hearing, do not entail that we can distinguish what we're hearing from any possible impostor. I can listen to, and hear, Perlman playing the violin even if there are circumstances and/or phrases in which I cannot distinguish Perlman's playing from Zuckerman's, or from a sufficiently cunning synthesizer. Similarly, I can listen to you washing the dishes even if I could be fooled by just the right combination of rain splashing from the roof and squirrels romping in the garbage or, perhaps more plausibly, by the dishwasher being emptied while the sink is being filled. When I listen to what you are doing, I follow what you are doing aurally, but I may be able to do this only because I also have other sources of information about what I am hearing. The possibility of error does not automatically prevent the relevant sort of listening.

To summarize, in listening to someone performing music, I am listening to the activity of making certain musically-patterned sounds in certain ways. This involves attending aurally to both the sound-pattern and the ways the sounds are being made (singing, fiddling, etc.). This, in turn, requires that I be in a position to use the sounds as a source of information about the activity. It does not require that I be in a position to do so infallibly, or in the absence of information in addition to what I get "purely" from the sounds themselves.

5. What to listen to in Western art music

Having described some of what's involved in listening to performing activity, I can now consider the question of how such listening ought to figure in the aural reception of performed music. There is no reason to expect the same answer for every kind of music and performance, so in what follows, I will focus on the central repertory of WAM. This is the home ground of Davies' classical paradigm, which conceives performance as directed to the exhibition and illumination of compositions. WAM is perhaps the domain in which we might expect the very least role for attention to performance as such.

When I listen to music, I am attending aurally to certain features of what is going on. Which audible features of a performance are musically relevant? An extreme abstract sound-centered position might limit relevance to features shared by anything that sounds just like a correct performance of the composition. However, if compositions are just sound-sequences, as Kivy suggests, this come to the same thing as attending to the composition.[10] But one might also claim that the idiosyncratic sound-details of particular performances are relevant, adding that the only relevant features are the sounds produced. This suggests focusing attention on what

Kivy calls performed "versions" of compositions.[11] On neither of these views is *the sound-producing activity* of any musical relevance. We are not listening to performing activity at all, just to a sequence of sounds. We listen to Bach-sonata-sounds that Perlman is making, or maybe to Perlman-version-of-Bach-sonata-sounds, but not to *Perlman making* Bach-sonata-sounds, or to *Perlman playing* a Bach sonata on a violin, much less playing a series of double stops to imitate the sounds of several violins playing at once, or arpeggiating chords that can't be played as written on a violin. We are to attend to the sounds made by someone playing the violin, but not to the violin-playing.

Some compositions seem to invite this kind of listening. Bach's *Art of Fugue* was published in open score, apparently in part to emphasize its status as a work of "learned counterpoint," that is, a certain kind of abstract sound-structure.[12] This suggests that even if it was meant as a set of pieces for keyboard, as Leonhardt and others have argued,[13] the purpose of playing it on, say, a harpsichord would be to sound the structure, and listeners should ideally attend to the fugal structures as opposed to the harpsichord-playing activity.

6. Beyond abstraction

But other music directs listeners' attention in other ways. It is possible, of course, in a performance of a Chopin étude, to attend solely to the sound-structure, and one of Chopin's triumphs in these pieces was to write études that reward such listening. But here, clearly enough, the piano-playing, as such, is not beside the point.

The same goes for any composition that, whatever else it might do, is also meant to display the virtuosity of performers.[14] When a Paganini violin caprice is performed, it would just be perverse for the audience to neglect the violin-playing, as such, attending instead only to the pattern sounds being produced.[15] Now it is common enough to distinguish between empty pyrotechnical display and musical substance, and between virtuosity for its own sake and virtuosity in the service of the music. The latter phrase suggests that the significance of virtuosity should be limited to its role in facilitating the production of musically valuable sound-patterns. On this view, instrument-playing or singing should not call attention to itself, and listeners should attend to the music performed rather than to the performance. Compositions like Paganini's, for which this sort of listening would be perverse, are for that reason decidedly second-class.

But there is an enormous class of compositions that can't be dismissed as empty display-pieces but that invite or even demand attention to the performing-means used to produce the sounds of their performance. Among them are Bach's sonatas and partitas for solo violin; the example above of attending to Perlman "making Bach-sonata-sounds" was meant to seem incongruous. Part of what matters in these pieces is that Bach has devised ways to produce or suggest certain kinds of contrapuntal sound-patterns by playing just one violin. And this feature of the performing activity interacts with the sound as sound in the object of musical attention:

> …the D minor Chaconne for solo violin by Bach … is undeniably one of the most noble and profound utterances for solo violin in the history of music, and a remarkable study in implied harmony. Its effect of titanic strain, as of a giant Atlas, bearing the burden of the world's great sadness, is inseparable from the way in which the performer must stretch across the four strings of the instrument, to provide as many voices as can be produced by it, and to imply as many more. The performer's effort must be heard in the music, but heard too as part of the music. The brilliance of Bach's writing was precisely to achieve that effect: to make the difficulty of the piece into a quality of the music, rather than a matter of virtuosity.[16]

Concertos are especially apt to be derided as empty display pieces, but concertos by Bach and Mozart and Beethoven and Brahms are central to the category of "first-class" classics. And the very idea of the concerto involves the distinction between solo or solo group and tutti. To paraphrase Lee Brown's related point about jazz, someone who approached a concerto as if it were merely an interplay of timbrally-contrasted sound-patterns would not be in a position to respond to it in an aesthetically fully informed way.[17] While it can be valuable and rewarding to focus on the timbral contrast between solo and tutti passages in a concerto, such a focus of attention emphasizes one feature of the musical contrast while neglecting other genuine features. And although concertos typically require virtuoso performance, the solo-tutti contrast invites attention to who is doing what in a way that is quite independent of the degree of virtuosity demanded by the solo part. To hear the full contrast between solo and tutti is to hear the soloist as a single performer *and* to hear the orchestra as a collective; attending to who is playing when is necessary for both.

Along with concertos, the genre of WAM that most clearly demands attention to the activity of performers is probably opera. It's no accident that opera and concerto are the genres whose history includes the strongest emphasis on performer, rather than composition-centering, and the attendant notion that the function of the composition is to serve the performer and not vice-versa. The operatic show includes musical sound-patterns, such as melodies, harmonies, and so on, and drama, but *singing* is certainly also part of the show. Someone who approached an operatic number as merely an abstract sound-pattern, or even as a part of an audio-visual narrative presentation, neglecting the special kinds of human vocalizing that constitute operatic singing, could not fully "get" the art. The nature of the performance as singing "gnaws into the very essence of the (operatic) aesthetic object."[18]

7. Non-virtuoso examples

The lore of chamber music places it at the opposite pole from virtuoso display-pieces, although plenty of chamber music makes great demands on the technique of its players. But here, too, in a very different way, attention to the activity of performers is necessary to fully "get" what's going on. Unlike

orchestral music or opera, chamber music is often written for the use of performers. It is sometimes described as music written in the first instance to be played rather than for listening by a nonplaying audience. But if that is so, then to appreciate the music *as* chamber music requires that we hear the musical sounds as the product of an activity of collective music-making. To fail to do so is to miss something essential.

Again, "songfulness" can stand in contrast to the characteristic busy-ness of virtuosity. Lieder can often enough demand virtuoso performance, but the more direct communication of lied-singing is characteristically contrasted to the artificial virtuosity of operatic vocal display. Still, the significance of the human voice as the medium of musical communication doesn't go away. Quite the contrary. And in instrumental music that is meant to emulate the characteristics of song (for example, Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words*), the very nature of the musical task involves the production of song-like effects by other performing means, and an appreciation of the musical result requires attending to the fact that somebody is, as it were, singing with a piano rather than a voice. To attend only to the sounds themselves is to miss some of the musical substance.[19]

8. Symphonies

What these examples indicate is that listening to performing activity has an essential place in the world of WAM, and one that is not limited to a peripheral, second-class realm of empty display. But it is not yet clear whether that place extends to the very heart of WAM. The compositions at the very center of the practice of Western classical music are symphonies. To find a need to listen to performing activity at the heart of WAM, we shall have to find it in the canonical great symphonies of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms. Here, the performing activity of players and conductor realizes sound-structures of a richness that suggests the structures' self-sufficiency as objects of attention, without the systematic solo-tutti patterns of the concerto, the striking disproportion of performing resources and musical outcome of Bach's solo violin music, the performer-directedness of chamber music, or a central role for the singing voice.

I can think of four sets of considerations that nonetheless suggest that the performing activity is an essential object of attention in symphonic music. These concern respectively significant patterns of performing activity, the collective nature of symphonic performance, the gestural role of the playing required by some passages, and appreciation of the gap between score and sound.

First of all, then, there is in symphonic music a variety of less persistent and systematic analogues to the solo-tutti contrast in concertos. Symphonies do contain solo passages, and their significance goes beyond the reduced sonority or the isolation of a timbral strand otherwise included in a larger sound,though these are of course also important elements. It seems also important that these are passages in which just one instrumental voice is heard.[20] Similarly, the contrast between passages played by different sections of the orchestra should be understood, at least in part, in terms of the fact that

it is trumpets playing this time rather than strings, and so on. Again, timbral contrast will be part of the picture but will not exhaust the significance of what is going on. Full appreciation of musical patterns that include these contrasts requires some attention to performing activity that is producing the sound. Is it one musician playing or many? Is it trumpets or violins?[21]

A second set of considerations is closely related to the first. The variety of contrasts I have mentioned is possible because an orchestra includes many players playing a variety of instruments in various instrumental families, and cooperating, under the leadership of a conductor, in the performance of symphonic scores. Just as appreciation of solo-tutti and sectional contrasts is part of the appreciation of symphonic music, so, too, is cognizance of the fact that the symphonic sounds one hears are made by the organized and coordinated activity of a large group of musicians playing together. There are many contrasts between a symphony by Beethoven and its piano-reduction by Liszt, but the most obvious one is that the reduction is performed by a single pianist whereas the symphony mobilizes the efforts of an entire orchestra. There is a sense in which a good enough performance of the piano reduction will contain more of the symphony than a bad enough performance of the full score, but there is also a sense in which it will not. Davies describes the similarity between transcriptions and orignals by saying that transcriptions preserve the musical content of the original. But, in this sense of "musical content," there is more to the *music* than just its musical content. Davies recognizes this in his insistence that transcriptions are different musical works than their originals.[22] Again, the difference is partly but not entirely a matter of issues like timbral variety. Symphonic music is a kind of orchestral music, and orchestral music is music played by an orchestra. To hear it as such is to listen not just to patterns of sound but to the sound-making of performers.

A third set of considerations, emphasized by Levinson, is that many aesthetic qualities of instrumental passages are closely tied not just to the timbral qualities of passages when played on the specified instruments but to the playing of the actual instruments themselves. Levinson's many examples range from the sublime cragginess of the close of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* sonata to the honking quality of the opening of Mozart's wind serenade K.375, and from the specifically saxophonic suave sliminess of the sixth section of Vaughan Williams's *Job* to the gestural percussiveness of the timpani in the scherzo of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and of the snare drum in the first movement of Nielsen's Fifth.[23] Levinson's discussion strongly suggests that appreciating the qualities in question requires appreciation of relevant features of the performing activity in question.

Finally, full appreciation of symphonic compositions requires appreciation of the gap between score and sound. A symphony is a certain kind of scored work *for performance*. What one hears is the product of the musical artistry of both composer and performer, including the artistry proper to performance that controls details "on the fly," exercised, in this case, by the conductor and players.[24] As Kivy's category of "personal authenticity" in performance suggests,

the style and originality of composer and performers may both be engaged, and while the former predominates, still one's experience would be impoverished by excluding the latter altogether.[25]

This last consideration, of course, applies not just to symphonic music but to any composition played from a score. It suffices to make at least a *prima facie* case that, even apart from opera, concertos, and like works of virtuosity, WAM demands attention to performing activity. Such activity is part of the art on display to engage the attention of discerning listeners. The performance as an aesthetic object, the musical end-product presented to listeners, includes elements of patterned human action.

As the examples suggest, how exactly this proceeds will vary from genre to genre and from composition to composition. As with respect to features of the sound-pattern produced by the performance, different elements will be most salient for different compositions, and performing activity itself will be more salient for some than for others. And just as different performances of a given composition might bring out and emphasize different features of the sound-pattern, so might they bring out and emphasize different features of performing activity and feature different degrees of emphasis on performing activity overall.[26]

9. Listening to performers in recordings

Of the recent flurry of work on performance in philosophy and musicology, quite a lot concerns the relation of performances to recordings. Much of the work concerns the question of whether the key aesthetic objects enjoyed by live musical audiences are perceptually available to listeners to recordings. This is sometimes, and especially in philosophical work, put as a matter of transparency. Can I hear a performance *through* a recording of it?[27] And it is sometimes, and especially in musicological work, put in terms of reproduction. Does a recording *reproduce*, or, instead, only *represent*, a pre-existing reality?[28] The issue is complicated by the fact that only some recordings are straightforward recordings of pre-existing performances at all.[29]

The concern here seems importantly related to the idea that performing activity is an appropriate object of musical attention. If truly musical attention is directed exclusively to a disembodied sound-sequence, it shouldn't matter whether or not I am hearing the sequence in its original acoustic tokening. The *music* I hear will be the same either way. So the crucial question here seems to be, "Can recordings make musically relevant performing activity available to the listening attention of an auditor?" or, conversely, "Can a listener to a recording listen in the appropriate way to the musically relevant activities of performers?"

Let's return to the example of listening to somebody washing the dishes. I distinguished earlier between listening to what somebody is doing (washing, rinsing, stacking dishes in the drainer) and just listening to the sounds they are making (clattering, susurration). Suppose that in a fit of narcissistic self-documentation I make a sound recording of my dishwashing. These two modes of attention will be available to

listeners to the recording in just the same way they are available to you as you listen "live" from the other room. We could, for example, instruct a listener to adopt one or the other mode, and the listener could follow the instruction while listening to the recording.

To shift to a musical example, suppose I am present at a performance of Beethoven's Violin Concerto. To follow the concerto, I must among other things follow the alternating sequence of passages played by the soloist and passages played by the orchestra. That is, I follow who is playing and who is not, and certain patterns of performing activity, that is, certain aspects of who is doing what, in addition to strictly acoustic patterns. The alternation of such passages is highly salient, and I follow it more or less automatically, without deliberate effort. But the same thing happens when I listen to a recording of the performance. Listening to the recording, I effortlessly follow the sequence of orchestra, soloist, soloist accompanied by orchestra, and, less frequently, orchestra accompanied by soloist.

In the case of a performance that was reasonably well recorded as it occurred, I think the answer is clear. Listening to such a recording, I can listen to the performers' activities. The character and object of my attention can be the same whether I'm listening to the performance live or by way of the recording. There is nothing about listening to recordings in themselves that is incompatible with directing one's aural attention to what the performers are or were doing.

10. Studio recordings

Matters get more complicated in connection with other kinds of recording. Consider first a typical studio recording of a WAM composition. This may be made from many takes, that is, recorded performances of temporal segments of the composition. The segments may be long or short, and may or may not be recorded in the order in which they appear in the composition. Each segment may have been recorded several times. The recording is assembled by splicing together one take of each segment in compositional order. Listening to such a recording of a concerto, I can still attend to such factors as whether, at a given moment, the soloist is playing or the orchestra, and, in this sense, I can attend to a sequence of changes in performing activity involving soloist and orchestra. This will allow me to hear the concerto as a concerto. In general, features of performing activity that are audible in short enough temporal spans can be tracked when listening to such a recording. I can attend to who is playing or singing, to how a pianist is articulating individual chords, and to momentary features of timbral production, in short, to any audible features of performance activity that can be safely assumed to be exemplified within a single take, appearing between adjacent splices in the recording.

But I cannot aurally follow features of performing activity that are likely to be interrupted by boundaries between takes. If I am listening to a live performance, I can sometimes listen to a soloist pick up a subtlety of phrasing from the preceding tutti and emulate, modify, or play against it. But if I am listening to a studio recording and I don't know whether the tutti or the solo was recorded first, this mode of listening is no longer

available to me. Even if the soloist is, in fact, responding to the phrasing of the tutti, that is not something I am in position to follow in my listening.

The issue is not just that I might be fooled by what sounds like a response in the recording. I *might* be fooled by what sounds to me like a response in a performance that is taking place in my presence. For example, what I hear as a response might have been the soloist's customary phrasing, used no matter what had preceded it. Listening to performing activity, like following almost any process or activity in any sensory modality, is a fallible matter. But I can only follow a given feature of the activity aurally if the auditory signals available to me are generally reliable for tracking that feature. For example, if I know that a studio recording has been made in long takes, I might be able to follow temporally extended features of performing activity, but I might be fooled now and then by take-boundaries or error-correcting patches. The nature of multi-take studio recording can interfere with my following of such features in two different ways. (1) The length and recording-order of the takes can prevent the occurrence of certain temporally extended performing processes. For example, if the solo is recorded before the preceding tutti, the soloist *cannot* respond to the special features of that take of the tutti. (2) Common recording practices might frequently produce illusory semblances of the processes, which I cannot distinguish from genuine instances.

11. Multi-track recordings

Recording in rock and related kinds of music creates further complications and limitations. Here, the pieces from which the whole is assembled are not just temporal but instrumental.[30] For example, performers typically record their parts, or segments of their parts, separately. Sometimes a performer can hear the previously recorded parts as he or she records, and sometimes not. So the characteristic activities of ensemble performance, involving listening and mutual adjustment, are largely removed from the process. The character of the recording process prevents the occurrence of such performing activity. Even here, though, a listener can follow some important elements of the performing activity. For example, one can often tell whether one is listening to singing, guitar playing, drumming, and so on. Moreover, these activities figure in patterns that can be important, for example, how the vocals relate to the rest. As with the solo-tutti patterns in concertos, there is a timbral element to such a pattern but it seems also to matter, at least sometimes, that the vocal is *vocal*, that is, a person singing, even if the sound of the singing is in significantly modified by electronic processing. And, of course, vocal and instrumental virtuosity can figure importantly in rock and related recordings.

All the kinds of recording I have mentioned are made substantially from larger or smaller recorded bits of individual or corporate performing activity, and all of them afford listeners some significant scope for listening to that activity, as well as to its sonic output.[31] And in some cases, like those involving well-made recordings of full performances, listeners to the recordings will be able to follow aurally the musical performing activity in ways that are very close indeed to those

available to live audiences.

12. Recording and pretense

That brings me to the end of the main argument that recordings can provide a way of listening to performing activity. But one final concern needs to be addressed. The argument rests on the claim that the different modes of attention that can be chosen when listening "live" to someone doing something, such as washing the dishes, or singing, or whatever, can be chosen in just the same way as when listening to recordings that have been made of the dishwashing, singing, and so on. It might seem that this establishes altogether too much. Suppose I am listening to a radio sketch, say on *Prairie Home Companion*, in which Tom Keith is vocalizing the sound-effects for a scene of dishwashing. Surely the very same modes of attention are available to me here in that I can attend to the activity portrayed by the sound-effects (washing, rinsing, stacking in the drainer), or just to the sounds themselves. But here nobody *is* (or, if the sketch is recorded, was) washing dishes, so the mode of attention cannot amount to listening to someone wash dishes. The fact that the mode is available to listeners of recordings cannot show that such listening includes listening to the musical activities of the recorded performers.

We can begin to sort this out by noting that the vocal sound-effects *portray* the activity of dishwashing. They are instances of representational art. Following Kendall Walton, we might say that engaging with the representational character of the passage is a matter of *pretending* that we're listening to actual dishwashing.[32] And make-believe listening-to-someone-washing-dishes, particularly in the presence of appropriate sonic props, is very much like actually listening to someone washing dishes.

This raises the question of whether recordings allow genuine or only make-believe listening-to-performers. Indeed, concerns about the relation of performances to recordings are sometimes expressed by wondering whether recordings reproduce performances or only represent them.

There can, in fact, often be an element of make-believe in the experience of listening to recordings. While listening to a highly constructed rock recording, I might imagine that I am listening to the band playing. And, while listening to a recording of a symphony concert, I might imagine that I am present in the concert hall.[33]

This element of make-believe, though, is quite consistent with actually listening to the performing activity in question. In the sound-effects case, the make-believe attaches to the very activity of listening to someone doing something, whereas in the others, it attaches to some further qualifying detail of that activity or my relation to it. In typical cases of make-believe, part of the content of the pretense is actually true. Consider a child pretending she is a spy who is listening to her neighbors talking in order to uncover a dastardly plot. She may really be listening to them talk, even though her listening has this further element of pretense. The key here is the idea that listening to people doing things is a way of finding out what they are doing. The "spy" might pretend that she is finding

out about a plot that her neighbors are hatching, but meanwhile she really is finding out what they are saying.

Similarly, when I pretend I am present in the hall as I listen to a recording of a concert, I might still be listening to what the performers are (or were) doing. I am just pretending that I am doing that one way, as part of a live audience, when in fact I am doing it another way. My mode of attention is one that is suitable for aurally informing myself about the performers' doings. Even if the recording is familiar to me, my listening puts me in position to find out about previously unnoticed features of the playing or singing.

Matters are a bit more complicated when I listen to a rock recording and pretend I am listening to the band playing, but the essential phenomenon is the same. I pretend that I am registering the details of a group performance and, in fact, I really do register information about individual singing, drumming, and so forth.

In contrast to the sound-effects case, pretense in listening to recorded music does not generally interfere with the main point, that studio recordings of WAM compositions typically do allow listeners to follow the crucial actions,[34] and even more highly constructed recordings can allow a substantial measure of listening engagement with the musical doings of their makers, along with the sonic results of those doings. And, as I have argued above, that combination is part of what makes musical listening the kind of vivid listening that it is.

Aron Edidin
edidin@ncf.edu

Aron Edidin is Professor of Philosophy at New College of Florida, where he writes and teaches widely in analytic philosophy. His most recent work has focused on thinking philosophically about musical performance.

Published on November 24, 2015.

Endnotes

---

[1] That is, what is casually known in Europe and America as "classical music." The term and acronym are commonly used by musicologists for this musical domain in order to avoid confusion with the use of 'classical' to designate a period, and also in light of the existence of "classical" traditions in other musical cultures. The use of 'WAM' invites its own confusions, notably in the suggestion that other Western musical domains, including, as examples, jazz and rock, do not produce musical art.

[2] The traditional focus on WAM in both disciplines remains in this work, though not without important exceptions.

[3] Peter Kivy, *Authenticities* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Stephen Davies, *Musical Works and Performances* (Oxford: OUP, 2001); Roland Dipert, "The Composer's

Intentions: An Examination of their Relevance to Performance," *Musical Quarterly* 66 (1980), 205-218; Stan Godlovitch, "Authentic Performance," *Monist* 71 (1988), 258-277; Aron Edidin, "Look What They've Done to my Song: Historical Authenticity and the Aesthetics of Musical Performance," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 16 (1991), 394-420; "Playing Bach His Way: Historical Authenticity, Personal Authenticity, and the Performance of Classical Music," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 32 (1998), 24-39; "Consequentialism Concerning Historical Authenticity," *Performance Practice Review* 13 (2008), http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1218&context=ppr.

[4] Aron Edidin, "Three Kinds of Recording and the Metaphysics of Music," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 39 (1999) 24-39. Christy Mag Uidhir, "Recordings as Performances," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 47 (2007), 298-314; Andrew Kania, "Musical Recordings," *Philosophy Compass* 4 (2009), http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2008.00194.x/full; Theodore Gracyk, "Listening to Music: Performances and Recordings," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1997), 139-150; Mine Dogantan-Dack (ed.), *Recorded Music: Philosophical and Critical Reflections* (London: Middlesex University Press, 2008).

[5] Stan Godlovitch, *Musical Performance: A Philosophical Study* (London: Routledge, 1998) and Aron Edidin, `Artistry in Classical Musical Performance', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40 (2000), 317-325.

[6] David Davies, *Philosophy of the Performing Arts* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 29.

[7] Peter Walls, "Historical Performance and the Modern Performer," in *Musical Performance: A Guide to Understanding*, ed. John Rink (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,2002), pp.17-34. ref. on p. 17.

[8] Eric Clarke, "Listening to Music" in Rink, *Musical Performance*, pp.185-196.

[9] cf. Rob van Gerwen, "Hearing Musicians Making Music: A Critique of Roger Scruton on Acousmatic Experience," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2012), 223-230, at 223-226.

[10] Peter Kivy, *The Fine Art of Repetition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 35-58, 75-94.

[11] Kivy, *Authenticities*, pp. 133-134.

[12] Davitt Moroney, "The Art of Fugue" (notes to Harmonia Mundi CD HMX2908084.90, 1999), 33.

[13] Moroney, 36.

[14] cf. David Clowney and Robert Rawlins, "Pushing the Limits: Risk and Accomplishment in Musical Performance," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 12 (2014), http://contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=702.

[15] See Jerrold Levinson, *Music, Art, and Metaphysics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 77.

[16] Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), p. 452. Scruton's emphasis on the importance to music of what he calls 'acousmatic hearing,' which is a hearing of sounds without regard to their sources, must be understood in combination with passages such as this one.

[17] Lee B. Brown, "Musical Works, Improvisation, and the Principle of Continuity," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (1996), 353-369, at 360.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] I am grateful to an anonymous *Contemporary Aesthetics* reviewer for emphasizing the importance of non-virtuoso examples to my discussion.

[20] Note, for example, the interplay between solo and group passages in the openings of Mahler's 3rd, 5th, and 7th symphonies.

[21] Levinson makes a parallel point about the dialogic quality of exchanges between the soloists in Bach's concerto for two violins. See Levinson, p. 77.

[22] Stephen Davies, "Transcription, Authenticity, and Performance," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 27 (1998), 216-227.

[23] Levinson, pp. 215-263.

[24] Cf. van Gerwen, "Hearing Musicians Making Music." Van Gerwen is particularly concerned with the appreciation of the instrument-playing skill that goes into performance in WAM and elsewhere.

[25] Kivy, *Authenticities*, pp. 260-286 and Edidin, "Artistry in Classical Musical Performance."

[26] It is in this last sort of variation that we might find a home for the concept of "letting the music speak for itself."

[27] For example, Kania, "Musical Recordings."

[28] For example, Nicholas Cook, *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), pp. 337-413.

[29] Edidin, "Three Kinds of Recording and the Metaphysics of Music."

[30] Counting the human voice as an instrument.

[31] Remember that the activities in question are ones of making certain sounds in certain ways, so listening to the sonic output will always be included in listening to the musical doings.

[32] Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[33] cf. Cook, *Beyond the Score*, 374-375.

[34] Edidin, "Three Kinds of Recording," 30-36 and Kania, "Musical Recordings," 29-32.