Review of “Musical Performance: A Philosophical Study”

Luke Purshouse
University of Cambridge

The majority of philosophical writing on music has focused on the ontology of musical works, their capacities for expression, and their phenomenological effects on listeners. In this superbly clear and thought-provoking book, Godlovitch suggests that such discussions have overlooked an important feature of music as we know it; namely, the phenomenon of musical performance and the value it is assigned. He begins with an analysis of the nature of musical performance, as it is traditionally understood. This involves identifying a number of necessary features (see p.49). There must be an intentional production of sound by a human agent, caused by that agent through an exercise of skilled activity. There must also be an attentive audience, for whom the performance is intended and to whom it is presented in its entirety. A performance, moreover, is usually an instance of some identifiable musical work and is intended as such; its success depends in part on its adhering to certain musical constraints set by the content of this work, as conceived by its composer. However, a performance is more than a means of making a composed work manifest; it is an autonomous artwork in its own right (p.50f.).

This straightforward statement of criteria is followed by an analysis of the institutions within which conventional performers operate. Godlovitch argues that these institutions follow what he terms a ‘Guild tradition’; in other words, they are akin to exclusive clubs with specific requirements for membership – in this case, requirements of musical skill. They seek to maintain certain conventions and practices, for example by promoting standards of education and evaluation of achievement, identifying a canonical repertoire, organising events and disseminating a literature aimed at the musical specialist.

Godlovitch affords particular emphasis to one aspect of performance Guilds’ conservatism, namely the control they exercise over the design and technology of musical instruments, which is intended to keep in place the skills and challenges traditionally associated with practical musicianship (p.61ff.). In particular, performance Guilds are hostile to recent developments such as the synthesiser, which facilitate the production of musical sound by removing the handicaps imposed by conventional acoustic instruments, thus increasing the number of people able to perform certain musical works. Guilds are by nature hierarchical, and pyramidically structured so that only a select few of the proficient musicians allowed entry to a Guild progress to be masters, and still fewer achieve the highest rank of virtuoso. Insofar as facilitating technology threatens such hierarchies of perceived musical accomplishment, it is unacceptable to much of the performance establishment.
Godlovitch offers, with this discussion, a compelling and plausible account of the attitudes and practices of much of the existing musical art-world. It is not entirely clear, however, what valuable purpose performance Guilds are supposed to serve. It is fair to say that the difficulties imposed by conventional musical instruments present a challenge for human beings, the overcoming of which may be both admirable and provide an outstanding exhibition for audiences (p.71ff.). If music making becomes too easy, one of our usual bases for valuing it – the admiration of human talent and accomplishment – is lost. But this alone does not explain the need for specifically hierarchical organisations. In a revealing passage (pp.73-4), Godlovitch suggests that whereas in professional medicine, for example, equal brilliance among all practitioners would be almost universally desired, in professional music such a state of affairs would be resisted, to the point of setting standards so high as to make it impossible. The aim here is to preserve to pyramid structure outlined above, in which the highest levels of accomplishment are restricted to a small minority. But it is surely questionable what, ultimately, is gained by such a structure. In other words, why is it important, in a musical context, to have a tiered community with just a few leading exponents, rather than welcoming the conditions for all to excel? No doubt a satisfactory answer to this would require appeal to a range of sociological and psychological notions. Without it, however, Godlovitch’s Guilds risk the accusation of doing little more than service the interests and egos of their most powerful members.

The second section of the book examines what Godlovitch regards as challenges to the traditional understanding of performance and its role in music. He begins by questioning whether performance is strictly necessary to the appreciation of a musical work; asking, for example, whether it is possible for silent reading of a musical score to provide a similarly valuable aesthetic experience (p.90ff.). The answer Godlovitch gives, rather plausibly, is ‘no’. Musical scores significantly underdetermine their performances, in the sense that a considerable amount of aesthetic leeway is given to the performer to offer an individual interpretation of a composed work. Godlovitch compares the performer to a storyteller working with an outline plot or theme. The details of how the story is told – what particular nuances are drawn out, what exact words are used, what vocal inflections are adopted, and so on – are to a considerable extent within the storyteller’s domain, and in controlling these features he or she can exercise the skills specific to the storytelling craft, and add aesthetic value to the story itself. Similarly, performances of musical works will, if successful, contain features of aesthetic interest that are not present in the work’s original score. In another of Godlovitch’s interesting metaphors (p.91), the musical work is deemed the ‘capital’ with which the performer invests, seeking to profit by the creation of an independent performance artwork.

The second challenge Godlovitch considers is that posed by certain avant-garde strands in contemporary music, which call into question traditional concepts of musical skill, notation, evaluation and performance practice, by radically flouting convention in these various respects. These range from experiments with so-called ‘found sound’, such as George Brecht’s Drip Music, which involves water falling into an empty vessel (p.112ff.); to radically improvisatory pieces like Rzeweski’s Les Moutons de Panurge, whose score instructs the participants simply to make any sound they wish, preferably loudly, and if possible with percussive or other instruments (p.119ff.). Godlovitch argues that neither of these pieces, nor any of the other bizarre musical experiments he discusses, succeeds in undermining traditional models of performance and the criteria for its evaluation. In some cases, he suggests, this is because the works do not involve genuine performances at all; the person who sets up the apparatus in Drip Music, for example, bears insufficient relation to the sound produced to count as a performer (p.114ff). In other cases, such as those of ‘fancy-free’ improvisation, the performance is sufficiently conventional to be
construed and evaluated in terms of the traditional model. Insofar as the participants in *Les Mouton de Panurge* use conventional instruments and play as an ensemble, it is possible to assess how well they do these things, and hence questions of their musical skill can reasonably be asked. Where they lack conventional training, however, needless to say they will fare very badly in such assessments (p.122ff.).

Godlovitch’s argument in this section is imaginative, and beautifully illustrated with amusing examples of avant-garde music. There is a slight sense, however, of conservative sympathies. It might be argued that the point of works such as Rzeweski’s is, not to make meaningful evaluation of performances impossible, but rather to challenge our understanding of what performance is for, and thereby question the sorts of qualities we appreciate in performers. By eschewing conventional notation and techniques, such works aim to downplay traditional performance virtues such as accuracy, dexterity, and sensitivity to scoring; emphasising instead spontaneity, emotional involvement, and the capacity to communicate with and engage an audience. Of course, many trained performers of conventional repertoire might well possess the latter qualities in addition to the former. But the question of which qualities are more important in a musician is a legitimate issue raised by the avant-garde, and its answer surely depends on what teleology of musical performance is presupposed. The valuation of technique over and above expression and entertainment, as propagated for instance by some traditional examining methods, should not be accepted without query.

The issue of the function of musical performance also crops up in Godlovitch’s final chapter, in which he argues (mainly) against the view that a sophisticated computer program could in principle perform music. Godlovitch expounds a view he calls *personalism*, which holds that part of what is important in a performance presupposes the performer’s personhood. Insofar as a computer program cannot, for instance, bring its emotional states to bear on its playing; imbue the music with its own experiences and life history; admire, envy or learn from others’ interpretations of works; or engage its audience in an act of interpersonal communication, it cannot perform in the same way that a human being can (p.138ff.). On the other hand, Godlovitch acknowledges some doubt over the precise sense in which the ‘inner states’ of a performer are important to our appreciation of his output. We would not necessarily revise our assessment that a performance showed feeling and sensitivity upon subsequently learning that the performer was bored or disaffected with the piece played (p.127). This suggests that the evincement of occurrent emotion is, at least, not a necessary condition for expressive quality.

It is, in fact, entirely plausible that there should be doubts and disagreements over the criteria for assessing performance quality. From an analytic perspective, though, one theme that Godlovitch might perhaps have developed is that of *communication* in performance. Insofar as the performer essentially performs to an audience, it might well be hypothesised that one of his roles is to convey something to those listening. But what, exactly, is he meant to communicate through his music? His own thoughts or feelings? Or some idea intrinsic to the work itself? Or possibly something connected with the composer? Most likely, a good performance could put across any selection or combination of these things, but it would be an interesting philosophical project to map out the various alternatives.

Other questions, too, emerge from Godlovitch’s discussion. His theory of personalism, with its emphasis on individualistic expression by the performer, seems ideally fitted to solo performance. He mentions ensembles only briefly (pp.12, 141), but one might sensibly ask what qualities or virtues group performances should pursue. Is it possible for a quartet, orchestra or opera company to express or communicate in the same way as an individual musician, and should such groups even attempt to do so? Finally, on a more general note, one might wonder to what extent Godlovitch’s analysis of the nature and
evaluation of musical performance also applies to performances of other kinds: for example, in theatre, film, dance, or lecturing.

Insofar as Godlovitch successfully brings these and other questions to mind, his book must be considered a more than worthwhile achievement. He identifies a number of fertile areas for philosophical debate, many of them linked to recent developments in musical styles and technologies, and there is no doubt he has opened a new and relevant avenue for musical aestheticians to explore. There is perhaps an overall sense that his analysis is somewhat introductory, and that many details remain to be filled out, by himself and others, in more depth. Nevertheless, if such work also inspires professional musicians to reflect upon some of their assumptions and practices, there is even greater reason to value its production.

Luke Purshouse
University of Cambridge