Classical Music
Contemporary Perspectives and Challenges

Edited by
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After the introduction of social distancing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was, for several months, no live performance in Europe and the United States. This essay aims to analyze the nature of what it was that we were missing so much in those months. When the BBC resumed the broadcast of live performance on 1 June 2020 from the Wigmore Hall in London, the pianist on that occasion, Stephen Hough, said in an interview with Jon Snow, “The audience is not just a passive thing when you’re going to a concert, it’s a very active involvement in the music. I think that a performer senses this [...] you feel an electricity there you cannot replicate”.

Virgil Thomson, the composer and music critic, wrote that we never enjoy a recorded performance in the same way as we enjoy a live performance (2014: 251). The same applies to live performance in the theatre and to attendance at a sports event, as opposed to seeing a performance or game on DVD or a TV recording. This difference is of great value to us. But why?

One point of difference lies in the lower level of quality of the reproduction. Much recorded music is heard through headphones from mp3 files. But this cannot be a full explanation of the difference. Listening even to lossless files through speakers connected to the most sensitive equipment remains a significantly different experience from that of hearing the same music live in a concert hall. So we should not succumb to the temptation to think that the only significant difference between

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1 We thank Paul Boghossian for advice, both expository and substantive.

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https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0242.02
live and recorded music lies in the quality of the auditory signal. Even when this difference is completely eradicated, there remains a special value in listening to a live performance. We suggest that this is so for several reasons.

When we sit in the concert hall or sports arena, we know from the very circumstances of our situation that we are experiencing the events for real. This is a crucial element of our experience. There is literally a world of difference between experiencing an event for real and experiencing a copy or simulacrum of the event; and this difference is of great value to us. We suggest that the difference is rooted in our deep need for authenticity and a relation to the very event or object produced by the performer or artist. Consider a similar case of viewing the real Mona Lisa versus a clever forgery. The one experience is far more valuable than the other. We might be willing to travel many miles to go to the Louvre for the one experience but unwilling to get out of our armchair for the other.

Another important aspect of live performance concerns joint awareness. In live performance, the performers and the audience are present to one another, and not merely in the sense of occupying the same place. Each is aware of and responsive to the other. The performer intends the audience to hear the music in a certain way; the audience is aware of and responsive to this intention; and the performer, in his or her turn, is aware of—and, in many cases, responsive to—the audience’s response; and so on. There is in this way an ongoing and symbiotic link between the two, of which both sides are at some level aware. One might say that the listener is not a mere participant. Rather, both musician and listener contribute in their own way to the musical performance.

Joint awareness and activity of this sort pervades many aspects of our life. It is present from the moments we share with family or friends to our participation in the culture or society at large. This sharing—the act of our doing these things together—is a large part of what gives these activities meaning and makes them so enjoyable to us. Indeed, as noted by such neuroscientists as Mona Chanda and Daniel Levitin (2013), they are correlated with raised levels of the hormone, oxytocin.

This joint awareness is also something from which the audience and the performers, separately, can benefit. Consider an audience in a cinema watching a “Live in HD” broadcast from an opera house. The audience in this case will not be involved in joint activity and awareness
with the performers. But they will be involved in a joint activity with one another. This is a shared experience of some value, one from which they can learn. Seeing how the rest of the audience reacts to the various elements of the opera, they can begin to appreciate how they themselves might react.

Many performers (though not all) also value and benefit from the presence of an audience. Alfred Brendel described the experience of playing in the recording studio as performing “as in a tomb” (1990: 202). Wilhelm Furtwängler is reported to have been reluctant to record Beethoven’s 9th Symphony under studio conditions (Cook, 1995). Recording experts such as Michael Haas speak of “‘the great arc’ that mysteriously disappears in takes, sapping all force from once-animated performances” (2009: 61).

Herbert von Karajan (Thielemann, 2015), Daniel Barenboim (2002), and Christian Thielemann (2015) have all spoken of the importance of spontaneity in live performance. Spontaneity has several dimensions, but one aspect of it is the feeling that “This is it!”—that what is done cannot be undone or redone. That feeling could, of course, be present in the recording studio in which there is a requirement to record in a single take. But live performance seems to bring out other, perhaps even more important, aspects of spontaneity.

For any performance may be adjusted in the light of the context in which it takes place. Even the background awareness that an audience is perceiving the performance in real time can enhance the performer’s awareness of the possibilities for adjusting the current performance. This adds to the level of excitement and engagement when even the smallest adjustment in timing, volume, or phrasing can produce utterly different results. Barenboim writes, “No performance should be allowed to pass without the performer having gained some degree of further understanding” (2002: 218). That may be a little strong. But any performance, be it musical, theatrical, sporting, or even academic, that is done before an audience will involve an element of felt uncertainty and the possibility of a new or renewed understanding of what is being performed. Indeed, the ability to produce a spontaneous performance is a kind of socially embedded skill, whose exercise is best produced only in the presence of an audience.
By listening with others, we become better listeners and by performing with, and to, others we become better performers. It is hard to see how a musical performer could flourish if he or she never played before a live audience. It is also hard to believe that a musical listener could flourish without ever having attended a live performance. The very vitality of our musical traditions rests upon the continued role of live performance.

We have so far emphasized the auditory qualities of music. However, an important part of our enjoyment of a musical performance is visual. When a pianist makes a leap in the left hand in the opening notes of Beethoven’s Hammerklavier Sonata, we literally see his or her virtuosity, something that could not be appreciated from the sounds themselves. But the visual aspects of performance may be far more pervasive than we ever expected. Experiments by Chia-Jung Tsay (2013) show that even expert musicians were much better at judging which contestants were winners of music competitions when given video of the performance in addition to sound. The visual aspects were adding, in a significant way, to their whole musical experience.

The total visual context can also matter. The experience of hearing a Josquin motet is enhanced by hearing it in a cathedral rather than a concert hall, even if the concert hall is adjusted to reproduce the acoustic effects of the cathedral. Of course, a recording may also provide video as well as audio information. The subjects in Tsay’s experiments were provided with video. But it is unlikely that we will ever successfully reproduce the fully rounded experience which combines elements of both; and even though virtual reality may make our total experience more realistic, it can never make it real.

Another important part of our enjoyment of a musical performance is its social or cultural role. The music we listen to belongs to a long and distinguished tradition. In attending live performances that offer new works or provide new insights into existing works, we experience and contribute to the renewal and extension of our cultural heritage. Attendance is, in this way, an affirmation of our common culture. This is something that could hardly be done from our own home or the confines of a listening booth.

Another important part of music’s social role is its role as a unifier. By bringing people together musically in a public context we bring
them together in other ways as well. Under apartheid in South Africa, young blacks said that, for them, the songs of struggle of the period “broke the sense of non-belonging” (Mohare, 2017). It was presumably for this reason that the songs were banned from broadcasts by the nationalist South African government in the time of apartheid. The freedom anthems of the civil rights movement in the United States had the same powerful effect. A live performer expressing the emotions involved in these anthems engages the empathy of the audience all the more directly. Martin Luther King was well aware of the power in public performance of Nina Simone singing “I wish I know how it would feel to be free”. Another well-known example is provided by the performance of Shostakovich’s 7th Symphony during the siege of Leningrad. In all of these cases, it is the public and political aspects of the performance that are paramount. But even when politics are not in question, shared musical experience can still play an important role in shaping our shared values and interests.

None of these points is meant to denigrate or to detract from the value of recorded music. There are respects in which recorded music has its own advantage. Sometimes a recording can bring out features that it would be hard or impossible to bring out under conditions of live performance. In multiple takes, one can achieve a level of perfection that would be generally impossible in a live performance; and, of course, a recording is, by its very nature, reproducible at very little cost. Recordings can provide a practically indispensable stepping stone to the appreciation of live performance.

Nonetheless, recorded music can never be a substitute for the real thing. Not only is live performance of great value as a musical experience in itself, it is also of great benefit to musicians and listeners alike; and not only does it play an important musical role, it also plays a broader cultural and social role. Without it, we and the society to which we belong would be much poorer.
References


Additional Reading

The importance of experiencing the relation to the performer in live music is brought out vividly by those suffering from what is usually called “depersonalization syndrome”. These subjects accurately perceive the world around them, but say that it does not seem real to them. The sense of reality that is, by contrast, present in healthy subjects is a necessary condition for appreciating the relations enjoyed in live
performance. Any account that omits this is missing a crucial component of the phenomenology of live music. For discussion of the philosophical interest of depersonalization syndrome, see:


On the significance of live performance in the theatre, see:
