


"Beyond the Score: Music as Performance" by Nicholas Cook

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Book Review: Cook, Nicholas. *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. ISBN 978-0-19-935740-6.

Aron Edidin

Beyond the Score: Music as Performance is a very ambitious book. Nicholas Cook describes his goal as “rethinking musicology.” The book is motivated by “my longstanding belief that the study of music has from the beginning been skewed...by its orientation towards music as writing” (2). Noting that an explosion of recent work on performance suggests that this view is widely shared, he writes that “My aim in this book is to add what weight I can to this belief, underline its radical implications for this discipline, and bring together a wide range of concrete proposals for how we might study music as performance and what we might learn from it” (2).

So the book constitutes a sort of manifesto-with-examples. The first two chapters document and criticize the traditional orientation, and subsequent pairs of chapters present (both by description and exemplification) approaches to performance as an object of study in the sort of “rethought” musicology that Cook offers. This produces a fair degree of continuity and coherence among sections that can also be read independently. The entire book contributes to the articulation of Cook’s proposed rethinking of musicology. But a reader interested in, say, the performing and listening body as objects of musicological study can get a rich sense of possibilities in that domain from chapters nine and ten without worrying about the rest. Cook is chiefly concerned with “performance within the tradition of Western ‘art’ music (hereafter WAM)”; discussions of jazz improvisation and of visual gesture in rock performance are meant chiefly “to throw light on performance within the core WAM repertoires on which musicology has traditionally been based” (2). The material on jazz improvisation is, however, substantial and fascinating, and the discussion of Jimi Hendrix in chapter nine stands well on its own.

Cook’s criticism of the orientation of traditional musicology and music theory is most fully developed with regard to its orientation toward the relation of score to performance. Cook calls this traditional orientation the “page-to-stage” model. This model holds that although musical works are typically intended for performance, their most important characteristics are best revealed by analysis of scores. Performance is a way of exhibiting the written work. Analysis of the score reveals the characteristics that are pre-



sent to be exhibited in performance, so performance is to be judged by how well it exhibits the characteristics revealed by the best (most careful, most insightful, “deepest”) analysis. Cook documents the prevalence of this view among a wide range of musicologists, theorists, critics, and, indeed, musicians. Although variants of this view dominated articulate thinking about performance in the last century, Cook argues effectively that it fails both descriptively and prescriptively.

In this respect, then, Cook’s rethinking of musicology entails not only developing new ways of studying performance but repudiating claims made by earlier musicologists. It is much less clear to what extent the rethinking requires further repudiation of existing work. There are some hints. Cook writes that “it is only once you think of music as performance that you can start to make sense of scores” (1). But on the next page, he writes that “established theoretical approaches based on score analysis have a part to play in the study of music as performance, though they need to be placed in context and weaned from their traditional fixation with structure” (2). He later suggests that we “think of performers as creating meaning within the structural affordances of compositions” (68). Can traditional analyses be reinterpreted as accounts of structural affordances rather than of substantial structural properties? Cook does not say, and what he does say does not provide much guidance, though at least the vocabulary he introduces allows the question to be framed. Again, perhaps research into the way scores function to script the social activity of group performance (chapter eight) would reveal a dimension of their significance that can simply be added to the features studied in traditional analyses, or perhaps it has the potential to convict traditional musicology of more than incompleteness. Again, Cook does not say.

So it is somewhat unclear what must be given up in Cook’s proposed rethinking of musicology. Cook is much more concerned with presenting a wide range of possibilities (both in terms of methodology and on subject-matter) for the extension of musicology into the substantial study of performance. We get a much fuller picture of what a rethought musicology might add to the traditional version. Almost all of this involves the study of recordings¹ or living musicians or both, so the temporal scope of the research is limited to the last century or so.² But even within these limits, the picture can be bewildering in its extent and variety. Cook hopes “to convince you that working with as complex and slippery a phenomenon as music requires the deployment of a wide variety of analytical methods” (3), and his survey of issues and approaches certainly indicates

1. Aided by a companion website that contains relevant extracts from the recordings discussed.

2. The one exception is a discussion of the various ways that Corelli’s successors used the score of his Op. 5 as a component of a larger discussion of the role of compositions in a conception of performance as improvisation.

such a variety. Cook describes this work as a matter of early exploration of new directions in research and treats its results as suggestive rather than definitive.

Recordings play an important role in much of this research. In the research that Cook describes in chapters 3-6, they are used in various ways, with or without the aid of data-generating algorithms and computer-generated visualizations. Cook discusses a number of methodological concerns that he finds substantial but tractable. Later chapters introduce research that studies living performers in broadly ethnographic ways, using such methods as “observation, participant observation, interviews, and questionnaire-based approaches” (44n).

Topics of investigation include issues of style in performance, group performance as a kind of social activity, ways of interacting with scores to generate performances, issues concerning the performing (and listening) body, and the introduction and popularization of recordings as an alternative to live performance in WAM. All of these are related in Cook’s discussion to wider social, cultural, and historical issues and concerns.

The examples and directions that Cook introduces are divided into five separate two-chapter sections, which are largely independent of one another. This independence has clear advantages for readers who are chiefly interested in one or another of the sections. It obscures, however, potential connections and tensions among the sections, and some of these strike me as quite significant. For example, chapters three and four involve the study of early twentieth-century piano performance. Here, Cook develops a distinction between “structuralist” (or “modernist”) and “rhetorical” approaches, largely in terms of how variation of tempo and dynamics and the structural features of the works performed relate.³ These are presented as different ways of responding to the score and the events it contains or indicates. The same goes for Cook’s argument that phrase-arching constitutes a distinctive element of one version of modernist performance. But when Cook turns to issues of the performing and listening body, such issues of performing style have disappeared altogether. Chapter ten includes discussions of the body in the development and realization of interpretation in performance and of audience members’ bodily response to gestures conveyed by the performing body. The former discussion does not at all engage with issues of performing style. The latter focuses almost exclusively on visible gesture, and the idea that audible differences of performing style have anything to do with embodied gesture or response is not broached, though some attention is given to ways in which differences in visible gestural style contribute to the expression of different performing personae. Now, if we are to think of performing and listening as fundamentally embodied phenomena, we should expect the significance of an approach to per-

3. Cook’s distinction is developed in his discussion of styles of performance in recordings of twentieth-century pianists. He later refers to Harnoncourt’s well-known discussion of a conception prior to the French Revolution of music as rhetoric and of the significance of this conception for the performance of music composed before that watershed. This is evidently related to Cook’s concerns, but Cook’s distinction is not presented as an adaptation or version of Harnoncourt’s.

formance like Cook's "rhetorical" or "structural" ones, or of a performing device like phrase-arching, to be realized in the bodies of performers and listeners. Phrase-arching in particular would seem to lend itself especially readily to such an approach. Failure to note any potential connection diminishes both sections. The section on styles of piano performance (and especially its treatment of modernist performance) is left closer than need be to the page-to-stage paradigm, and the section on the performing and listening body is isolated from issues of "how the music goes" (58).

Another missed connection exacerbates a tension between Cook's use of recordings to study performance (and his methodological discussion of this use) and the section (chapters eleven and twelve) in which recording is discussed as a musical phenomenon in its own right. The use of sound recordings in chapters 3-6 and of video recordings in chapters nine and ten require that we use the recordings as a source of access to performances that were recorded. We hear and see what performers did by listening to and viewing recordings of their doings. For example, we can only draw the conclusions that Cook asserts in chapter ten if we can see, using the video recording to which Cook refers, Grigory Sokolov enacting the persona of "a virtuoso with distinctive characteristics" by way of "the elaborate and highly expressive choreography [that] is a central component of the Sokolov brand" (335). We reach the conclusion by seeing Sokolov perform the choreography, and we see Sokolov perform the choreography by viewing the recording.⁴ On the other hand, Cook's discussion of recording as a musical medium focuses on limitations of the idea that a recording reproduces a pre-existing "reality." Cook does not quite claim that recordings are not a medium through which absent listeners and viewers hear or see the earlier activity of performers, but it is hard to avoid drawing that conclusion: surely the performing activity *is* (or was) a pre-existing reality, and there does not seem to be much space between the claim that a recording *reproduces* a pre-existing reality and the claim that a recording *allows an audience to hear or see* a pre-existing reality. I suspect that in fact, there *is* enough space between the two claims to allow us to reject the first (at least in the respects that are central to chapters eleven and twelve) and accept the second (at least in the respects that are necessary for Cook's earlier use of recordings). Doing so would allow Cook to have it both ways, but it would also significantly extend and complicate the discussion of relations among recordings, audiences, and "pre-existing realities."⁵ It would also require an explicit connection between the two parts of the book.

4. This particular recording is not included in the companion website but is available on DVD.

5. Some of these issues are discussed in Aron Edidin, "Three Kinds of Recording and the Metaphysics of Music," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 39 (1999): 24-39, and "Listening to Musical Performers," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 13 (2015), <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=728>.

Some of these missed connections reflect a peculiar feature of Cook's take on music as performance (and also, perhaps, of the existing research in the area). The page-to-stage approach places performance in a three-term relation whose terms are the composition performed, the performance, and the audience. Similarly, the view of recording as reproduction places recording in a three-term relation among a performance, its recording, and an audience. For each, Cook makes a convincing case that the view in question mischaracterizes the relation, largely by underestimating the substantial significance of the second term and thus characterizing the relation as in essence a mediated relation between the first and the third. So the page-to-stage approach misleads in suggesting that performance simply presents compositions to audiences, enabling a mediated two-place relation between composition and audience. But the research that Cook describes, and Cook's discussion of it, also tends to dissolve the three-term relation, now into separate two-term relations between composition and performance on the one hand and between performance and audience on the other (or, in the case of recording, between performance and recording on the one hand and between recording and audience on the other). And the work on the relation of performance to score tends to focus on different features of the performance than the work on the relation of performance to audience. (The discussions of performance style and of performing and listening bodies exemplify this difference of focus). This certainly avoids the problem of treating performance as a simple mediator between composition and audience. But it neglects the fact that (at least in WAM) there *is* an important three-term relation in the picture. The performers' response to the score is a central part of what is presented to the audience (and live recording provides a way to present that response to absent audiences). We cannot understand WAM as performance without connecting the performance/score axis and the performance/audience axis in substantial ways. (And we cannot understand WAM recording, including multi-take studio recording, without thinking about how it does as well as how it does not connect performing activity to an absent listening or viewing audience.) A recurring theme of *Beyond the Score* is the idea that features of performance that are more commonly associated with other kinds of music (jazz, rock) are also important elements of performance in WAM. But an important part of what distinguishes performance in WAM is the character of the three-term relation, and in particular the role of the composition as an object of attention for both performer and audience.

The fact that in *Beyond the Score* Cook focuses separately on the performance/score axis and the performance/audience axis must be taken in the context of the nature of the book. The work that Cook describes represents an early stage of investigation and a relatively small sample of a much wider range of possibilities. There is no suggestion that, by itself, it exhibits the full contours of a rethought musicology of music-as-performance. The development of Cook's "rethought musicology" will require more studies of the kinds he describes, but also more work on the conceptualization of phenomena to be studied, prominently including relations among them. Meanwhile, *Beyond the Score* provides an immensely rich and thought-provoking presentation of a wide range of fascinating work in the service of a vision of music as performance that is eminently worth developing and pursuing. If readers emerge with ideas about ways of devel-

oping and pursuing the vision in directions neglected by this particular book, so much the better.