

Matins de la philosophie

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Art et authenticité

Arguments over the use and presentation of art are nowhere more prominent than in music performance. This is owing to the general structure of Western, notated music, in which the creation of the work of art is a two-stage process, unlike painting and other plastic arts. Stand in front of Leonardo's *Ginevra de' Benci* in the National Gallery in Washington, and you have before you Leonardo's own handiwork. However much the paint may have been altered by time and the degenerative chemistry of pigments, however different the surroundings of the museum are from the painting's originally intended place of presentation, at least, beneath the shatterproof non-reflective glass you gaze at the very artefact itself, in its faded, singular glory. No such direct encounter is available with a performance of an old musical work. The original work is specified by a score, essentially a set of instructions, which are realized aurally by performers, normally for the pleasure of audiences. Because a score underdetermines the exact sound of any particular realization, correct performances may differ markedly.

With a painting, therefore, there normally exists an original, nominally authentic object that can be identified as “the” original; nothing corresponds to this in music. Even a composer’s own performance of an instrumental score — say, Rachmaninoff playing his piano concertos, or Stravinsky conducting *The Rite of Spring* — cannot fully constrain the interpretive choices of other performers or define for ever “the” authentic performance. (In any event, composer/performers interpret their music differently on different occasions.) Stephen Davies argues that a striving towards authenticity in musical performance does not entail that there is one authentic ideal of performance, still less that this would be a work’s first performance or whatever a composer might have heard in his head while composing the piece. The very idea of a performance art permits performers a degree of interpretive freedom consistent with conventions that govern what counts as properly following the score.

Nevertheless, the twentieth-century witnessed the development of an active movement to try to understand better the original sounds especially of seventeenth-and eighteenth-century European music. This has encouraged attempts to perform such music on instruments characteristic of the time, in line with reconstructions of the past conventions that governed musical notation and performance. This concern with authenticity can be justified by the general, though not inviolable, principle which holds that “a commitment to authenticity is integral to the enterprise that takes delivery of the composer’s work as its goal. If we are interested in performances as of the works they are of, then authenticity must be valued for its own sake”. This interest can take many forms — playing Scarlatti sonatas on harpsichords of a kind Scarlatti would have played, instead of the modern piano; (...) performing Haydn symphonies with orchestras cut down from the late Romantic, 100-player ensembles used by Brahms or Mahler. These practices are justified by taking us back in time to an earlier performing tradition and, in theory, closer to the work itself.

In this way of thinking, the purpose of reconstructing an historically authentic performance is to create an occasion in which it sounds roughly as it would have sounded to the composer, had the composer had expert, well equipped musicians at his disposal. Enthusiasm for this idea has led some exponents of the early music movement to imagine that they have a kind of moral or intellectual monopoly on the correct way to play music of the past. In one famous put-down, the harpsichordist Wanda Landowska is said to have told a pianist, "You play Bach your way, I'll play him his way." The question for aesthetic theory remains: *What is Bach's way?* If the question is framed as purely about instrumentation, then the answer is trivially easy: the Bach keyboard *Partitas* are authentically played in public only on a harpsichord of a kind Bach might have used. But there are other ways in which the music of Bach can be authentically rendered. For instance, Bach's keyboard writing includes interweaved musical voices which, under the hands of a skilled pianist such as Glenn Gould, can often be revealed more clearly on a modern concert grand than on a harpsichord. In general, the dynamic range and gradation of the piano are an advantage for all music performed on it, in contrast with the harpsichord, though the older instrument displays some exquisite qualities in which Bach too can sound glorious. (Its lack of sustaining power, for example, required harpsichord composers to introduce trills and ornamentation which became part of the Baroque style.)

However, if an authentic performance of a piece of music is understood as one in which the aesthetic potential of the score is most fully realized, historic authenticity may not be the best way to achieve it. We would not go back to productions of Shakespeare plays with boys taking the female roles simply because that was the way it was done in Shakespeare's time. We regard the dramatic potential of those roles as ideally requiring the mature talents of actresses, and write off the Elizabethan practice of boy actors as an historic accident of the moral climate of Shakespeare's age. We assume, in other words, that Shakespeare would have chosen women to play these parts had he had the option.

Similarly, the Beethoven piano sonatas were written for the biggest, loudest pianos Beethoven could find; there is little doubt that he would have favored the modern concert grand, if he had had a choice. (Davies points out, however, that the appeal and point of some of Beethoven's piano writing, for instance with the *Appassionata Sonata*, is that it pushes to the limit, and beyond, the capabilities of Beethoven's instruments: on a modern grand, the sense of instrumental challenge in the power *Appassionata* is lost, or in any event reduced.) The best attitude towards authenticity in music performance is that in which careful attention is paid to the historic conventions and limitations of a composer's age, but where one also tries to determine the larger artistic potential of a musical work, including implicit meanings that go beyond the understanding that the composer's age might have derived from it. In this respect, understanding music historically is not in principle different from an historically informed critical understanding of other arts, such as literature or painting.

In contrast to nominal authenticity, there is another fundamental sense of the concept indicated by two definitions of “authenticity” mentioned in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “possessing original or inherent authority,” and, connected to this, “acting of itself, self-originated.” This is the meaning of “authenticity” as the word shows up in existential philosophy, where an authentic life is one lived with critical and independent sovereignty over one’s choices and values; the word is often used in a similar sense in aesthetic and critical discourse. In his discussion of authenticity of musical performance, Peter Kivy points out that, while the term usually refers to historical authenticity, there is another current sense of the term: performance authenticity as “faithfulness to the performer’s own self, original, not derivative or aping of someone else’s way of playing”. Here authenticity is seen as committed, personal expression, being true musically to one’s artistic self, rather than true to an historical tradition. From nominal authenticity, which refers to the empirical facts concerning the origins of an art object — what is usually referred to as provenance — we come now to another sense of the concept, which refers less to cut-and-dried fact and more to an emergent value possessed by works of art. I refer to this second, problematic sense of authenticity as *expressive authenticity*.

Tolstoy claimed that cosmopolitan European art of his time had given up trying to communicate anything meaningful to its audience in favour of amusement and careerist manipulation. While he may have been wrong in so dismissing all the art of his age, the extent to which his bitter, cynical descriptions of the art world of his time apply to both popular and high art of our own media-driven age is surprising. Where and how Tolstoy drew the line between art that is falsely sentimental and manipulative on the one hand, and sincerely expressive on the other, has been hotly disputed. But it is impossible that these categories could be entirely dispensed with, at least in the critical and conceptual vocabulary we apply to Western art.

As one Kominimung carver told Smidt, “A woodcarver must concentrate, think well and be inspired. You must think hard which motif you want to cut into the wood. And you must feel this inside, in your heart.” For the Kominimung, good carving is a matter of technical mastery, of feeling, and of *meaning it*.

(...) the idea of expressive authenticity is not exclusively Western. Varieties of formalism in aesthetics have at various times attempted to discount its significance, but if it is possible for art ever to express anything whatsoever, then questions of sincerity, genuineness of expression, and moral passion, are in principle relevant to it. Expressive authenticity is a permanent part of the conceptual topography of our understanding of art.

While deeply sympathetic to Huichol culture, Shelton regards the development of a commercial market for Huichol work as having given birth to a meretricious form of art, something that is not an authentic Huichol cultural expression. (...) The two most significant aspects of Shelton's critique of Huichol art involve issues of *continuity* and *audience*. While Shelton says there has been a tendency for outsiders and dealers to regard the yarn *tablas* as "either a traditional artform or as having evolved from a traditional form," he rejects them as part of a continuous tradition. (...) Shelton says that, with regard to the yarn constructions, he has been unable to trace any organic principle of evolution suggesting any kind of direct development from older forms. Shelton lists ways in which the *tablas* must be set apart from traditional Huichol art. The *tablas*' brightly dyed commercial yarns on plywood or fibreboard, dense with elaborate color depictions, present something quite unlike sparingly decorated traditional votive objects. Furthermore, the context of production for the modern objects is not the sierra — they are made by Huichol people living in Guadalajara or Mexico City — and such objects, while illustrative of traditional mythologies, have no indigenous religious use.

Shelton notes that the flamboyance of the *tablas* makes them, in the view of Huichol people, items of “conspicuous consumption.” In this way, the values they embody “are foreign to the Huichol themselves, and conflict with their emphasis on humility and religious introspection.” Consequently, the *tablas* would never be purchased by traditional Huichols. The *tablas* have the overall effect of alienating Huichol people from their own culture. It is in these respect that it is legitimate to call Huichol *tablas* “inauthentic.”

Shelton criticizes Huichol yarn construction for its failure to be continuously linked to historic Huichol artforms by what he calls an “organic principle of evolution.” Continuity here means persistent presence of external form, and there is little doubt that this is an adequate criterion for authenticity in some contexts. But concentration on perceptible form ignores the more important issue at stake in assessing the expressive authenticity of art. Authenticity often implies that the original indigenous audience for an art is still intact; inauthenticity that the original audience is gone, or has no interest in the art, and that the art is now being created for a different audience, perhaps for foreign consumption. The authenticity question for Huichol yarn products does not depend on whether beeswax and/or yarn, commercially dyed or not, has been used in the past. The issue is that the yarn constructions have no part in the present religious economy or other aspects of traditional Huichol society, and therefore are not addressed to the people themselves, their fears, dreams, loves, tastes, obsessions. Nor are they subjected to criticism in terms of the values of an indigenous audience: they do not express anything about Huichol life to Huichol people. They are inauthentic in these respects.

A Pacific Island dancer was once asked about his native culture. “Culture?” he responded. “That’s what we do for the tourists.” But if it is only for the tourists, who have neither the knowledge nor the time to learn and apply a probing canon of criticism to an artform, there can be no reason to expect that the artform will develop the complex expressive possibilities we observe in the great established art traditions of the world.

Why, then, do critics and historians of art, music, and literature, private collectors, curators, and enthusiasts of every stripe invest so much time and effort in trying to establish the provenance, origins, and proper identity — the nominal authenticity — of artistic objects? It is sometimes cynically suggested that the reason is nothing more than money, collectors' investment values — forms of fetishizing, commodification — that drives these interests. Such cynicism is not justified by facts. The nominal authenticity of a purported Rembrandt or a supposedly old Easter Island carving may be keenly defended by its owners (collectors, museum directors), but the vast majority of articles and books that investigate the provenance of art works are written by people with no personal stake in the genuineness of individual objects. Moreover, when this comes into question, issues of nominal authenticity are as hotly debated for novels and musical works in the public domain as they are for physical art objects with a specific commodity value.

Establishing nominal authenticity serves purposes more important than maintaining the market value of an art object: it enables us to understand the practice and history of art as an intelligible history of the expression of values, beliefs, and ideas, both for artists and their audiences — and herein lies its link to expressive authenticity. Works of art, besides often being formally attractive to us, are manifestations of both individual and collective values, in virtually every conceivable relative weighting and combination.

This explains why aesthetic theories that hold that works of art are just aesthetically appealing objects — to be enjoyed without regard to any notion of their origins — are unsatisfactory. If works of art appealed only to our formal or decorative aesthetic sense, there would indeed be little point in establishing their human contexts by tracing their development, or even in distinguishing them from similarly appealing natural objects — flowers or seashells. But works of art of all societies express and embody both cultural beliefs general to a people and personal character and feeling specific to an individual. Moreover, this fact accounts for a large part, though not all, of our interest in works of art. To deny this would be implicitly to endorse precisely the concept of the eighteenth-century curiosity cabinet, in which Assyrian shards, tropical seashells, a piece of Olmec jade, geodes, netsuke, an Attic oil lamp, bird of paradise feathers, and a Maori patu might lay side by side in indifferent splendour. The propriety of the curiosity cabinet approach to art has been rejected in contemporary thought in favour of a desire to establish provenance and cultural meaning precisely because intra- and inter-cultural relationships among artworks help to constitute their meaning and identity.