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Mediating from within: metaxical amplification as an alternative sonic environment for classical music performance

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Conclusion

You don't have to play structure.
(Daniel Leech-Wilkinson)

This research has had two main objectives. Firstly, to understand the importance of a silent background for the performance and reception of classical music. Secondly, to challenge the custom of performing in silent environments, and to investigate the artistic and aesthetic potential of performing classical music in a non-silent environment. I have explored these issues through the close observation of my practice as a performer of classical and contemporary music, testimonies by other musicians, literature and examples from a variety of disciplines including music performance, media theory, musicology, music sociology, philosophy, anthropology, the visual arts and theatre, as well as through the creation of experimental performances.

This methodology has given rise to a number of concepts. *Metaxical amplification* refers to the sound amplification of the sonic environment of a classical music performance, including sounds produced by the action of the piano, the bodies of performer and audience, the concert hall and its surroundings and so on. *Grounded performances* are concerts that are metaxically amplified, and where the sonic environment of the performance is actively integrated into the musical performance, as opposed to an ideally silent environment for the interpretation of musical works. A central affordance of grounded performances is that sounds emerging from the amplification decentre attention, preventing the usual dominance of the musical work over the sonic landscape of the performance. In this reconfigured environment attention is reoriented from the musical work to a larger environment of which the work is 'only' a part. This reorientation becomes an invitation to think of musical performance beyond the conventional idea of interpreting a musical work. Instead of considering the sounds emerging from the performance in evaluative terms, i.e., in terms of how they correspond to what one would like to hear or what the score and performance conventions tell the performer to hear and play, one becomes receptive and reactive to the agency of the environment. Music-making, in this sense, is transitive rather than purely interpretive: the performer acts in direct reference to and in contact with the surrounding objects and events, interacting and improvising with them, even if this means deviating from prefabricated performances of a musical work. The work, inscribed in an environment that is fundamentally unpredictable, becomes a pre-text to listening and performing in an expanded sense: as a relational, reactive and contextual practice that develops in the interplay between traces of the past, represented by the work, and fluctuations of the physical present.

Furthermore, the research has also made evident that silence is not by definition or always necessary to make musical performances possible or successful. It is necessary if one aims at an intimate and exclusive relationship between music and listener, where one's inner transformation can become paramount. However, unless this transformation

is anchored in a wider sonic environment, it will not be grounded. A grounded musical performance is like real life: full of distractions and imperfections; it is like a work-in-progress, where the challenge is to find energy and poetry within this less perfect and more messy reality. If a musical performance is to be grounded, one needs to learn to accept imperfections and to consider musical works as unfinished, as ‘entangled and worldly’, to use an expression by Donna Haraway (2016, 4). Silence, then, acquires a different meaning. It is no longer there because it has always been there, or because it must be there, but because it has a value, and because it enables a particular kind of musical experience, one among many possible others. It becomes an element, not of tradition, but of choice.

Such insights raise questions and possibilities that are not sufficiently addressed or explored in this study. One of them is what would happen if metaxical amplification was used *outside* of the concert hall. There are several reasons why I decided to conduct my experiments in the concert hall and a historical library located within a music centre. The first has to do with expectations. One of my leading questions concerned the capacity to abstract oneself from everything but the object being focused on. In public spaces such as streets, train stations, parks, or similar, there is no pre-defined focal object of attention. When one hears someone playing the piano at a noisy airport lounge, the music appears as a bonus for music lovers, or an addition to an already noisy environment. It is not the situation's intended focal event, but rather something that enriches and/or modifies our experience of the space. The expectations towards listening or towards what is played are therefore different from the expectations of the concertgoer, who attends a concert primarily in order to experience the music. The nature of these expectations, in turn, define the relationship between music and environmental sounds, which will be more tense in the concert hall, where non-musical sounds are usually unwanted. I was interested in exploring precisely the tension arising when the aspirations towards an autonomous form of listening are contradicted. Even in *Interferences*, where the emerging sounds consisted of street noise, the tension was present and reinforced by the estrangement caused by these foreign sounds in the hall as played back through loudspeakers rather than through open doors or windows. In non-musical spaces, this tension would not be there, or at least not so markedly, and the starting point for the musical experience and the performance would be totally different. In terms of performance, I would probably behave differently as well. The concert hall is the environment in which I am used to enact certain ideals such as fidelity to the work, the composer and/or the score. Playing outside of the concert hall in whatever situation tends to create a distance from these ideals and makes them seem less binding. My interaction with the environment would have a playful rather than a conflictual or liberating character. However, although I have chosen here to focus on the tension and disorientation created by the unwantedness of noise in the concert hall, I am aware that seriously exploring the possibilities of the metaxical amplification in open public environment might lead to interesting results, albeit of a different nature than the ones proposed here. These results might yield new answers to the relevance of classical music in contemporary culture, including a more extreme understanding of performance as a

transitive activity. Yet is important to realize that engaging with such spaces comes with other questions, one of the most important being *why* classical music should be performed there. A second reason for performing in more conventional concert venues, especially *touchez des yeux*, was my curiosity to explore specific types of noise, in particular those generated by playing an instrument. Outside spaces are obviously noisy, whereas the noise of the concert hall is more subtle, and part of it is derived from the act of playing. I was interested in exploring this auditory split between tonal sounds and the mechanical sounds and acoustic reverberations accompanying these sounds. Finally, the institutional nature of the concert hall attracted me as an exemplary laboratory for a type of experiment that could eventually be transposed to similar spaces, for example for other art forms. Concert halls exist as secluded spaces, and they will not cease to exist very soon. One of my concerns was how to open up these spaces from within, showing multiple and contrasting layers of tradition and meaning, pointing at structural disbalances and sedimented rituals but also at the possibility of rediscovering and reconfiguring a space so familiar and loaded with tradition, as ways of encouraging a similar reconfiguration in other secluded and institutionalised places.

This research focused on my solo performances. A next step would be to expand my solitary experiments with metaxical amplification to a chamber music context, in order to see if it can also affect the practice of other musicians. In the concert that concludes this research project, I plan to break beyond the solo playing by playing with musician-colleagues from the Ensemble neoN to explore together the environmental sounds emerging during the performance of a Mozart piano sonata. Ensemble neoN has already started working in this direction. In a performance in March 2022, abandoning the score altogether, this classically trained ensemble improvised and developed new musical material for three hours based on 'noise' alone, together with noise musicians from the Far East Network (FEN) ensemble and Lasse Marhaug. The idea of this concluding performance is that the musicians should become 'living' microphones and speakers, imitating and amplifying the environmental sounds, but they should also be free to improvise with Mozart's composition, with each other and with me. During the rehearsals, I have conceived exercises to train our listening, and making ourselves as a group more attuned to the 'noisy' content of the concert hall. I expect this chamber music project to raise new questions such as how to coordinate (or not) our reactions to the emergent sounds, or whether to come back together to the musical score or to follow individual paths all the way through the performance.

On a more personal tone, looking back at what I have achieved vis-à-vis my research questions, I see further perspectives for my own practice. At the start of this research, I was in a strange place, deeply entrapped by performance traditions and at the same time rebelling against them. My discomfort with tradition had been accompanying me for a long time. Having started to play the piano early, by the time I was about ten, I started working with an inspiring teacher who knew how to light up my imagination, connecting classical music to books, painting, travels, emotions, history, nature. The growing

interest in music coincided with some traumatic events in my early adolescence. I found refuge in the piano and in the fantasies evoked by the music, as well as in the life stories of the composers whose music I admired. My teacher was, like me, imbued with respect and fascination for a musical past that she made sound so important. Recognising in me a certain potential, she convinced me and herself that I had a certain vocation and that it was my 'mission' to disseminate music and this past. By the time I was twelve I was practicing for several hours every day, taking part in competitions, and moving firmly towards a musical career. With this came the constraints: although I enjoyed the daily discipline required to succeed, the pressure of doing well, and the fact of being constantly exposed – 'put on view' – to be appreciated by a critical audience of classical lovers were sometimes too heavy to bear. I remember feigning sickness a few times to avoid meeting the gaze and expectations. In order to perform, I had to create a protective shield around myself when playing. There came to be two of me: one that was passionate about the music and the other that hated this music, because it made me feel like I was never good enough. Studying both early music and contemporary music during my bachelor studies liberated me from this tense condition. My passion for music gained some freedom. Learning, for example, that harpsichordists are encouraged to ornament and define their own articulations, for the first time I began to play notes that were not specified in the score. I also began working closely with composers who did not have all the answers about how to realise their music. This was illuminating because, having grown up with Beethoven's bust on my family's piano among other deifying traditions, until then I had treated all composers as omniscient beings, whose authority I could not defy. After this, I began experimenting, and it was a golden time. Yet, although these experiences helped me find my way in my professional life, my relationship with classical music remained strained.

This whole trajectory has represented for me a way to reconnect with classical music. Delving into the complexities of my 'conventional' practice as a classical performer, I have begun to appreciate it and respect it more. This newfound freedom has removed the resentment that was formed around this tradition. At the same time, I have become less afraid to deviate from it since I now better understand the depth of the classical music tradition and I feel more ownership of my own musical choices. There have also been changes in practical terms. Analysing my experiences at the piano, in particular the processes underlying the construction and realisation of a musical interpretation and of temporally shaping a musical work, has given me new authority and more flexibility when performing these works in a conventional sense. I believe that formulating these processes was instrumental in this sense. More than just recording my experiences, it has also helped to consolidate my practice, making me better able to make conscious and informed decisions regarding how, why and in which conditions I would like to play. Also, before this research I had learned and known a great deal about music history, but this concerned mainly the life and ideas of composers or the evolution of musical styles. How I should perform, in which environments and according to which rituals and customs, were a given, as so many other aspects of the performance practice. I now realise much more clearly how my relationship to the musical work, as well as

the way and the environment in which usually I perform and listen to classical but also contemporary music are richly steeped in a wider sociohistorical context. This realisation has opened the path for a reflection on how contemporary ideals, unconscious biases and acquired habits (such as the way we are used to pay attention), might affect my practice, and possibly also this research. It makes me feel responsible for how my practice and the choices that I make within it might contribute to reinforce and transform these ideals, biases and habits. But it also makes me understand how I, when being aware of these elements in the shaping of my practice, can impose on this practice my own ideas and visions, and express concerns and curiosities that go beyond musical questions and issues. By developing my own performance environment, for instance, I have found a new space for myself where performance is not about how the piece should be played, but about using music to explore a space and to investigate how perception unfolds within this space.

Beyond these realisations and experiences, this research has been important for redefining what it means for me to be a musician. Under the umbrella of artistic research, I could connect various activities and interests, as well as knowledge from various fields, such as the curatorial, media theory, performance studies, theatre and performance art, sociology and so on. I have also had the occasion to develop my writing skills and to publish articles and essays related to my research topics in various publications dedicated to music curatorship and to the relationship between contemporary musical practice and the classical music tradition. In the online journal *OnCurating* (Amaral 2020b), I have discussed the role of the contemporary performer as a ‘producer of situations’; in the book *Traces of Vang: Suspended Spring* (Amaral 2020a), I have analysed how contemporary artists deal with the musical archive; in *Impossible Situations: Concerts in The Making* (Amaral, Hellqvist and Hannesdóttir 2021), I have, together with my duo partner Karin Hellqvist, described our experiments with curating performances on various stages and in collaboration with artists from other disciplines; and in the anthology *Contemporary Piano Music: Performance and Creativity* (Amaral 2021a), I have presented my own practice in the light of performance history.

As Lucia D'Errico stated in a lecture entitled 'What Can Artistic Research Do?', unlike pure musical performance, artistic research gives importance to the theoretical insights of the musician, who becomes more than their musical skills. While excellence in traditional music performance is not simple, from a research perspective it is at the same time ‘all too easy’ she says, because it relies almost solely on the deployment of pre-constituted postures and prefigured competences. Artistic research on the other hand, because it emphasises the interplay between practice and theory, represents an arena for the performer to develop and integrate their musical practice, varied skills, interests and knowledge that go beyond the purely musical or the purely practical. My practice now expands beyond the mastery of an instrument: I cannot think of performing without considering the environment and the context in which I perform, and how these may inform or influence the artistic, perceptual and aesthetic experience. Preparing a performance does not only mean learning to play the music but also shaping an

environment and engaging with its contextual aspects. To be able to engage with these aspects even more actively in the future (for this research is but a beginning), I will need to deepen my research, which will be different each time, and which will each time offer an opportunity to expand my practice to yet other domains and fields of interest.

These personal insights make me reflect on the positive results that could arise from including, early in one's musical education, some of the topics discussed in this dissertation, as well as its general methodology, based on a combination of reflection and artistic experimentation. It could for instance prepare students to make more active and informed choices. Over the last decade, one can notice a tendency towards training musicians to be 'makers' in a wider sense: they should be able to conceive and produce their own projects, and to adapt to and work in a variety of circumstances. However, more can be done, particularly in terms of making them mindful of the why's of this 'makership' and in general, in the development of critical reflection and experimental tools such as those provided by artistic research. In teaching activities undertaken during this research, I have noticed how thirsty students are to better understand the fundamentals of their practice and to include elements from other discourses and disciplines. In writing about the course *With and Beyond Music* which I currently teach at the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague (Amaral, 2021b), I have claimed that students are 'yearning to connect', even if this involves distancing themselves from traditional moulds. Like me before them, these students have had little or no education on curatorial issues such as why we play in a silent environment or why we relate to the musical score in a certain way. Neither have they been encouraged to challenge these and other givens of the musical tradition. Yet confronting the why's and how's of their practice, although it often involves an initial moment of crisis or resistance, unleashes their creativity and willingness to take risks. Courses like *With and Beyond Music* have the potential of speaking directly to the yearning to connect among students. It has been my experience, shared by a significant majority of my students, that this type of education has the possibility to enhance reflexivity and encourage students to experiment beyond their usual practices. However, this curatorial approach is yet to find home in academic institutions.

The same can be said of unorthodox improvisational practices. Improvisation has always been important in musical performance and education. During the Baroque period, it was usual to flourish melodies with spontaneous ornamentations and to define the accompaniment of a thoroughbass or create one's own cadenzas on the spot. Until late into the 19th century, classical musicians used to improvise in public performances, and even to compete about who would do it better and in the most virtuosic manner. Even though this has now partly fallen into disuse, this practice is still taught in most music conservatoires. It is, however, always taught in relation to a melody, to harmonic or rhythmical progressions and other elements likely to be found in the score. By contrast, this research encourages a form of improvisation based upon noise. In my view, to practice this kind of improvisation, based upon all sorts of elements external to both the score and/or the usual language of classical music (a space, an image or abstract

ideas), would better develop a student's imagination and creative skills, sonic or otherwise.

There is always the fear, with such innovations, that tradition would somehow get lost. I do not believe this to be so. The question is not to reject the old but to create more elastic spaces where old and new can coexist. In interrogating and deviating from their usual practice, performers might well feel empowered to explore unorthodox avenues and choose for new musical paths altogether. On this journey, certain aspects of the tradition might become less relevant or important. However, those choosing to pursue classical performance in a traditional sense would be operating more consciously and in an informed way, which would in turn produce more convincing interpretations, performed with more ownership. Whether or not this will come to pass, time will tell. As the painter Kazimir Malévich (cf. Groys 2013, n.p.) used to say, it is important to be able to let go of the past as well. 'Life knows what it is doing', he once wrote about the excessive zeal in preserving art, 'and if it is striving to destroy, one must not interfere, since by hindering we are blocking the path to a new conception of life that is born within us'.