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

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Summary

Informed by my experience as curator and performing musician, this research is an exploration of classical music performance from a curatorial perspective. It reflects upon, but also challenges through artistic creation, the configuration of traditional performance environments and, more specifically, the conventional practice of performing classical works in silent environments. My motivation for undertaking this research was twofold: to better understand this little-discussed yet dominant practice, and also to problematise this practice: enveloping musical works in silence is in many ways similar to how objects are displayed in museums. While displaying artworks thusly protects and preserves them from detrimental environmental effects, placing them in vitrines renders them untouchable and, also in the case of musical works, rigidifies the relationship artists and audiences might forge with them, and with each other.

At the beginning of the research stands the question of why we perform and listen to classical music in silent environments and how this situation came to be. I trace this practice back to the Romantic era, and the emergence of a performance culture centred around the interpretation of musical works and aimed at the establishment of an intimate and even spiritual relationship between these works and listeners – a relationship detached from any worldly or material conditions. Within this culture, musical works are thought of as closed, ideal, and abstract objects that pre-exist their performance, and that are given material shape through performance. Complementing these historical considerations with observations from my own practice as a classical music performer, testimonies from renowned musicians and pedagogues, and theoretical notions such as Adorno's 'structural hearing', I conceptualise how we play and hear classical music as a form of reconstructing these abstract objects in time and space. This reconstruction process involves the creation of mental representations based on the musical score, the performance of these representations, and the synthesis of musical fragments into a coherent whole, as well as many other tasks requiring total attention to the music and facilitated by an environment where no sounds extraneous to the music can interrupt or interfere with either the performance or the experience of the listener. For these reasons, the evolution of both the classical concert and, later, the recording industry, have been marked by tireless efforts to cleanse the acoustic environment of classical performance. This has meant removing or minimising all sounds extraneous to the music, including mechanical sounds emanating from instruments, audience noises, and the hum of lighting and ventilation systems. Within this background of silence, music can shine undisturbed. This form of mediation echoes similar attitudes and rituals found in other art disciplines, such as theatre and museum practices, based upon the notion of the 'excluded middle': a principle stemming from communication and media theory, which assumes that materialities should disappear during the act of communication in order to establish a direct contact between message and receiver, or, in the case of classical performance, between the musical work and listener.

In addition to tracing the development of these new aesthetic preferences and listening habits, I also contextualise these practices in light of broader social concerns for productivity in the

increasingly industrialised and rationalised world of the 19th century. Here, too, attention played a key role. Focusing one's attention on a single object, to the exclusion of all other perceptual stimuli, was considered necessary for the establishment of a productive relationship with that object. Forming these productive relationships was important because the harnessing and mastering of objects resulted in the accumulation of knowledge and cultural capital, leading to personal, economic, and social growth. I then ponder how these wider social currents permeated emerging attitudes towards musical works and performances. Far from being necessary for the appreciation of music, I suggest that the establishment of silent performance environments, free from extra-musical interruptions and interferences, was part of a larger social construct: one that can be challenged, leading to other kinds of aesthetic experiences, in different circumstances, and in different times.

Next, I turn to my experience as a performer within the field of contemporary music, where many of the works that I perform are composed of sounds that are generally unwanted and considered as noise in classical music contexts. Looking back at musical composition since the early 1900s, I examine how noise – often prosaic, unexpected, and not totally controllable – has been used by Edgard Varèse, Pierre Schaeffer and John Cage, and more recently by Helmut Lachenmann, Catherine Lamb and Marina Rosenfeld, among others. Noise has represented a form of resistance to the Romantic demarcation between art and the everyday. It made art more lifelike, expanded our sonic horizons beyond tonal material, and it reoriented our attention towards the physical and environmental situatedness of performance, and thus away from the ideal universe of the musical work. As I further argue, engaging with these sounds leads performers to question aspects of their practice and to move out of their comfort zones. Noise challenges their need for technical control and their concern for shaping a perfect and finite object, while also making them more receptive to the fluctuations of the moment of performance, the agency of the environment in which they perform, and the value of improvisation. The experience of performing with noise in contemporary musical works has made me reflect upon how I might transport the performative affordances of noise to the performance of classical music. I have done this by developing performances of classical works using what I call 'metaxical amplification', inspired by the notion of *metaxy* – that which is in-between. Metaxical amplification is thus the amplification, by electronic or other means, of that which is between the musical work and the perception of the work: the sonic environment of the performance. Aristotle used the term *metaxy* to indicate the richness of the field of perception, which is the medium between the perceiving sense and the object of perception. Translated in musical terms, the environment of the performance can be a rich and important medium for the shaping of artistic experiences.

During this research I have developed two performances for solo piano and metaxical amplification, *touchez des yeux* (2018) and *Interferences* (2019). I describe in detail the challenges that marked my creative processes, which might be useful for others interested conceiving similar performances – particularly with regards to the correspondences and compromises to be made between conceptual stringency and practical realisation. Far from suppressing or maintaining certain elements of the performance environment as peripheral or neutral, metaxically-amplified performances focus on these elements and their potential

influence on the perception, realisation, and conception of musical works. Noise becomes performative in these performances because it includes the environment in the perception of the musical work; said differently, the work is perceived not for itself only but as part of this environment. In this way, metaxical amplification proposes a reconfiguration of the performance environment and the ways in which attention unfolds within that environment. It also challenges traditional notions of musical interpretation and a work-centred performance culture, since the performance mode emerging from this form of amplification is not oriented towards the interpretation of musical works, but rather to the sonic exploration of musical environments through these works. More broadly, metaxical amplification propels the development of a practice in which musical interpretation, improvisation, and curatorial thinking are tightly interwoven. Here, I am no longer responsible only for performing musical works, but also for designing the environment in which I perform these works, defining what to amplify, and how. I may also at times deviate from the conventional interpretation of a musical work as I react to the sounds emerging from amplification and improvise with them.

I review these and other findings in the final chapters of this dissertation in close dialogue with literature from various fields, including anthropology, philosophy, psychology, and media theory, as well as through related examples from the fields of musical performance and composition, theatre, and the visual arts. Engaging in such wide-ranging dialogues generates theoretical and artistic insights that may prove useful for other performers, curators, and teachers in the fields of classical and contemporary music and beyond. From anthropologist Anna Tsing, for instance, I develop the notion of ‘multiphonic attention’. In contrast with classical definitions of attention, like that proposed by psychologist William James, where attention is seen as the intentional act of detaching an object from its context in order to better examine its individual properties, multiphonic attention encourages an open-ended form of listening that covers a sonic landscape broader than that of the musical work. From music philosopher Marcel Cobussen and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, I examine concepts of musical improvisation and ‘bricolage’ as useful ways of conceptualising the kind of improvisation that occurs in my metaxically-amplified performances. Understood here as a form of bricolage, improvisation presents an occasion for the classical performer to reinvent their playing abilities beyond traditional piano techniques and the score, and in direct reference to and in contact with surrounding objects; reacting and playing with environmental noise rather than only delivering a predetermined interpretation. Finally, I explore performances by MusicExperiment21, Lucia D’Errico and the Ictus Ensemble, as well as Ari Benjamin Meyers’s *Kunsthalle for Music*, and the experimental staging of classical texts in theatre, in order to contextualise my own artistic work within a growing tendency to approach musical works as pretexts for differentiated aesthetic and perceptual experiences, rather than as the sole and final purpose of performance. This tendency implies a renewed attitude toward musical tradition, which I discuss in the broader light of a musician’s responsibility for, and positioning within, the relationship between present and past.