The Notion of *Performance* in Popular Music: Social and Analytical Implications  
Dario Martinelli (University of Helsinki)

A rather widespread tendency in musicology, when speaking about performance, is that of equalling straightaway the concept to the (very) general notion of “music-making”. In the attempt of circumscribing the field a bit, such scholars like the Lithuanian musicologist Donatas Katkus suggest the existence of a plan, or at least a draft (as in improvisation) behind the music-making, and this aspect, although not able to “demist” the vagueness of the concept, does at least its best to reduce its size:

[...] in embarking the act of musicianship, something is indeed performed, that is, a certain predetermined idea is put into action, or a certain musical structure – like a song, a dance, a chant, or a symphony – is repeated. The term “to perform” has replaced the previously-used “to sing”, “to play”, “to make music” etc., in order to name the concrete act of musicianship and its nature - Katkus, Donatas (2006). *Muzikos Atlikimas*. Vilnius: Lietuvos Muziku Sajunga: 14, transl. court. of Lina Navickaite.

Possibly, we cannot make the concept smaller than this. For the purposes of this paper, that means: a) Katkus’ definition is the one we shall bear in mind; b) I will not attempt a new definition of musical performance; and therefore c) the present paper shall not focus on the generally semantic aspects of the issue, but – along with the pragmatic and syntactic ones – only on topics specifically related to the meaning that case by case the notion acquires.

The goal of this presentation is to work on and around an operative concept of musical performance, i.e., in relation to its components and articulation, to the way it functions within popular music, and to its role and action as a social fact.

If an acceptably circumscribed definition of musical performance seems quite hard to achieve, not so prohibitive is the task of pointing out what are the necessary and sufficient conditions that make a musical performance possible. However trivial the next list may read, a musical performance exists if four constitutive elements operate at the same time:

- a **performer**, i.e., a human source that generates a musical piece in a given context;
- an **opus** (or work), i.e. the actual musical object, on the basis of which the previously-planned job mentioned by Katkus is organised;

- an **event**, i.e., a context, an occasion that functions as the not-necessarily-physical place where the performance happens and reaches an audience;

- Finally, of course, an **action**, i.e., the very execution of the opus by a performer in a given event, with its modes, its stylistic features, and so forth. Of the mentioned elements, the action is the most unstable variable. If the event/s, the performer/s and the opus/es may in principle remain constant, even if all the other elements (alone or together) change in one or more parts, the action is the only one that will never be twice the same if any of the other elements are subject to an even minimal change.

A second point concerns the role of the performance within the context of popular music, and here we have already a relevant impact at the social level. It is my belief, indeed, that the entire social discourse around popular music revolves around general or specific performances related to the musical work (or performer) in question. And that applies to all the degrees of competence involved, from the not-musically-experts fans of a rock-band to the most meticulous rock-musicologists. In order to explain this aspect to my students in a popular music studies course, I came up with the expression *discourse-currency*, which I shall use here too.

The performance is the currency that the most diverse categories of people use in order to share each other’s *encyclopaedia*¹ on popular music, when the actual focus is the music or the musician/s. To make one example among many, an amateur talk about a given song or band is (almost) always a talk about a given performance, i.e., what these people discuss is a number of occurrences that belong directly to the field of performance.

There is another, fundamental, distinction that needs to be made, when talking about performance, i.e., the distinction between an **opus-oriented** performance, and an **event-oriented** one. The former is the kind of performance whose goal is the construction of an opus/work, here meant as a text (a song, an album, a medley…), as a significant and autonomous entity. In other words, this is the moment where the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic parameters of a text are established, and a prototype of it is created. In these cases, every component of the performance focuses on a

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¹ And of course, I mean *encyclopaedia* in the sense meant by Umberto Eco.
rendition of the work that is highly efficient as text. For instance, the singer will keep a carefully planned distance from the microphone, will keep his/her body in a convenient position for a better exploitation of his/her vocal resources, will wear comfortable clothes, will interrupt the performance if s/he, or the producer, do not consider it good enough, etc.

The situation is somehow turned upside down in the case of an event-oriented performance. Here, the prototype exists already (again: not always, but in most of the cases), and all the constitutive elements of the performance move their focus from the work to the event. In fact, they are now arranged to serve the purposes of the event: here the singer will perform movements that may (and normally do) reduce the quality of his/her singing, but that are more into the idea of the show; s/he will wear clothes that are not necessarily comfortable, but that are specifically designed for the event, or at least are considered elegant/cool/sexy/alternative/outrageous enough; and will very hardly dare interrupting the performance.

We might easily say that the opus-oriented performance tends towards the dimension of the contents, while the event-oriented performance to the dimension of the expression.

The paper will also discuss a few further notions, which I have no room but to mention them, here. One is a classification of performance in terms of diachronic and synchronic variables, i.e. the relation between performance and (individual and historical) temporal aspects.

Further, more attention will be devoted to the relation between performance and text, with stress on the syntagmatic and paradigmatic aspects and the semiotic functions in the Jakobsonian sense.