

Subjectivity in Musical Performance

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Abstract

This article explores subjectivity in musical performance from historical and philosophical perspectives by using concepts introduced by Eero Tarasti in his *existential semiotic* theory (2000). Subjectivity in musical performance is analyzed through the relationship between the performer's individuality and the idea of *Werktreue*. By exploring from the existential semiotic point of view the significance of the performer's subjectivity to the study of music in general, a new dimension is opened for the musicological research and musical performance studies.

Key words: Art musical performance, subjectivity, *Werktreue*, *existential semiotics*.

Introduction: The Performer and the Work or The Two Dimensions of Subjectivity

During the process of creating a sonic musical work the Western art music performer usually approaches the composer's musical ideas through the score. However, the moment of real (physical and sonic) connection of the performer with a musical composition takes place by imagining the sonic possibilities of the work and realizing them via her body. During this process the performer experiences periods of introspection exploring the work accompanied by her instrument. And, it is in that moment that the sonic work is touched, formed and created by the performer. This experience can be defined as subjective. However, for Naomi Cumming, who has elaborated the subjectivity in musical performance in the context of semiotics, the subjectivity in performance does not refer to performer's individual experiences only. Cumming (2000: 13) claims that the signs of subjectivity in performance, for instance the expressions of the performer's body or gestures, emerge from an emotional individual experience, but also are shaped, learned and influenced by cultural and social aspects of art music. The question of subjectivity in musical performance is indeed a complex one.

My approach to musical performance follows Cumming's and others' basic conception of subjectivity in performance as both individual and social. In this article, I explore these two dimensions of the performer's subjectivity and their interaction in Western art music by applying the existential-semiotic model of subjectivity developed by Eero Tarasti (2007). In addition to a more general theoretical examination, I explore the subjectivity of the musical performer as related to the idea of *Werktreue* (see, e.g. Goehr 2007, Savage 2004). Savage (2004) defines *Werktreue* as "faithfulness to an original intent." *Werktreue* is here understood as an ideological concept greatly determining how the relationship of a musical work and its performance has been understood in Western classical music, especially since the Romanticism. In practical terms for the performer, *Werktreue* means that the composer's musical idea written in the score is thought to be the main priority for her sonic creation. Lydia Goehr (2007) explains that the concept *Werktreue* appeared in nineteenth century and its philosophical origins are linked to objectivity. Indeed, the concept of *Werktreue* represents the central ideals of Western art music in general and is underlined by the theological ideas of the Romantic art.

In Western art music, the performer's individuality is thus not in absolute freedom but rather is constrained by the rules of art music that are deeply connected with *Werktreue*. And, behind the ontological relationship between the work and the performance, a battle takes place between the individual subject and the ideals of *Werktreue*. This situation is a consequence of the nineteenth century's concept of art and the socio-cultural values involved in it.

From the theoretical point of view, the relationship between the performer and *Werktreue* can be defined in terms of negotiation. Moreover, the relationship between a performer's individuality and *Werktreue* is paradoxical: On the one hand, art music performers confront in conscious or unconscious manner the rules of *Werktreue*, but on the other, these rules are part of their subjectivities, for instance, via the ideals of art music and the performer's bodies that are trained for achieving perfect musical works. The rules of *Werktreue* are alien to the performer's *nature*. However when he enters the world of art music they become a component of his subjectivity. Therefore I suggest that the subjectivity of the performer is compounded by the individual aspects of subject and *Werktreue*. This situation is similar for the composers and listeners of art music. In the following sections, I attempt to solve such a complexity and aim to answer to the following questions: How the battle between *Werktreue* and the subjectivity of a musical performer can be understood from the perspective of musicology and semiotics? What is the role of these two forces in

art music, especially as related to the question of music and subjectivity? Why is the musical performer's subjectivity essential to music as a concrete art form unfolding sonically in time and place, and why it is important to take into account in music research?

1. An *Existential Semiotic Approach to Musical Performance*

Under the light of *existential semiotics*, the subject is not isolated from his social environment neither from her relationships with others; and, signs and meanings are thought of as created by the subject's individuality. Tarasti's (2007: 16) *existential semiotic* model encompasses four dimensions of the individuality of the subject: *M1* embraces the realm of the body "chora and desire"; *M2* refers to the subject's "consciousness, individual organization of the inner kinetic energy, self awareness of it-self." *S1* is a transcendental category that refers to norms, ideas and values which are purely conceptual and virtual, these are potentialities of a subject. *S2* is a "social coded, external activity" in which "norms, ideas and values as realized by the conduct of a subject in his *Dasein* [...]. The concepts *Moi* and *Soi*—created by Ricoeur and applied by Fontanille in his work—are also part of Tarasti's model. *Moi* embraces particular aspects of the subject's body and psyche (*M1* and *M2*). *Soi* refers to the social sphere in which also the *symbolic level* and communication processes can be included. *Soi* is composed by *S1* and *S2*. *Moi* and *Soi* are embraced by Uexküll's concept *Ich-tone*. Tarasti's model of performer's individuality appears as follows (see Figure 1):

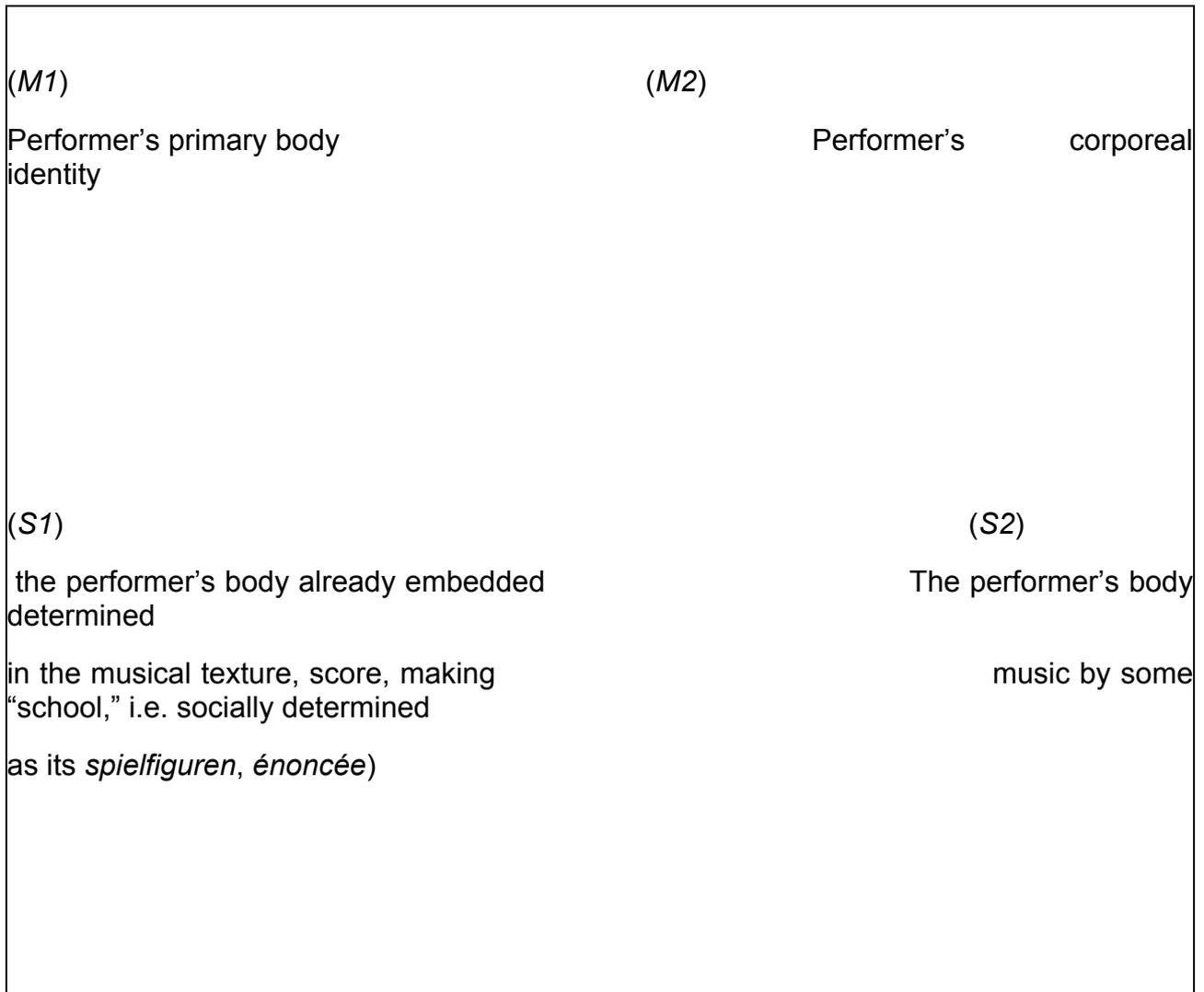


Fig.1 Tarasti's model of subjectivity of a musical performer outlined on the basis of Greimasian semiotic square. (2007: 26)

Tarasti presented the model above in his article *A theory of Subject* (2007). In my application¹ of Tarasti's model, S1 refers to the concept *Werktreue*, since *Werktreue* crossed the limits of the theoretical world and was inserted in the social everyday life of art music community of nineteenth century. The performer's aims were directed towards the musical work and his body was trained in order to achieve objective musical works, therefore I consider that *Werktreue* is part of the subjectivity of the romantic and modern performers of art music.

¹ (Macdonel, 2009).

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|---|--|
| <p>Moi</p> <p><i>M1</i></p> <p>Performer's body as such, its own physical characteristics and emotions (unconscious level) and <i>chora</i>.</p> | <p><i>M2</i></p> <p>Performer's body and identity (consciousness)</p> |
| <p>Soi</p> <p><i>S1</i></p> <p>Aesthetic values in art music after the nineteenth century encompassed in <i>Werktreue</i>.</p> | <p><i>S2</i></p> <p>Performer' school and technique</p> |

Fig2. An Existential-Semiotic Model of the Subjectivity of an Art Music Performer, (Macdonel, 2009: 81)

Werktreue has a double function in performance: First, it represents the ideals that the performer either achieves or not. And second, *Werktreue* is an authoritarian figure that in real life represents the limits for the performer's individuality.

Even though *Werktreue* has a powerful presence in the performance practices of all Western countries around the world and touches the individuality of performers via aesthetic values, norms and ideals of art music, I am not claiming that *Werktreue* nullifies the presence of the performer's individuality, since eventually through the history of art music the performer's *Moi* has been stronger than *Soi*. Thus I suggest that the *Moi* of the performer is equal important than *Werktreue* in art music.

2. Historical Perspective on the Relationship between the Art Work and Subjectivity in Musical Performance

The conceptions concerning the role of the performer in music has changed during the history of Western art music. In the writings of the composers of the 17th century, such as Frescobladi ([1614]; see Dolmetsch 1916: 6) for instance, the performer's role is an active one:

In the Partite, when you find rapid divisions and expressive passages. [...] Those without divisions may be played a little more quickly, *and it is left to the good taste and fine*

judgment of the player to regulate the Tempo, in which consist the spirit and perfection of this style and manner of playing. [...].

Frescobaldi provided freedom for the performer by finding a proper regulation of the tempo of the piece, challenging the performer's knowledge on the style; and in this way, enabling the performer's subjectivity to appear through the sonic work. Nevertheless in nineteenth century the attitudes of composers turned completely in a different direction. As in the case of Beethoven (see in Goehr 2007: 225) "[...] It is almost impossible not to preserve the *tempi ordinary*; instead, the performer must now obey the ideas of the unfettered genius."

In both cases the composers consider their works as important. However, Frescobaldi considered the performer's input as part of the work; and Beethoven demanded obedience to the genius composer. As Goehr (2007) has shown, such a radical shift of the composer's position in relation to the performance originated due to nineteenth century's concept of art work.

In Western cultures, the philosophical ideas and concepts of art of each historical period have influenced the status and importance of the art work. The art work reached its highest hierarchical status in nineteenth century. Goehr (ibid.:170) explains that in Romanticism, the most important feature of the romantic art work was its autonomy from ordinary human issues. The theoretical practical and social levels of art were impregnated by these ideas and appear a radical hierarchical view of art that separated the work from its mediums.

The ontological distinction between the work and the performance, as well as that between the composer-genius and the performer-transmitter were based upon a theological concept of artistic creativity.

The matter of music that is composed by sound and its temporal dimension was not the best ground for the consolidation of the work as objective since it cannot remain permanently static. As Goehr (ibid.: 285) claims, theorists were concerned about how to keep musical works "in a form appropriate to a temporal art of sound, and how they could be preserved to match the romantic aesthetic beliefs that had come associated with [the musical work]" Furthermore, the concept of autonomy of the work was also in constant danger due to the presence of the subjectivity of the performer acting upon the sonic works.

Hegel in his (1975: 955) *Aesthetics Lectures on Fine Art* presented a theory on art music that divided the musical works in two kinds: *objective* (or epic) works and composer's free works. For Hegel the performance was not considered an autonomous activity and his theory attempted to standardize the performances of each works that presented the composer's ideas as he conceived: the *objective* performance was restricted to the composer's indications written in the score and the performer of *free works* had certain liberties. In Hegel's rules transcendence in performance was not via the contribution to the work, but by being obedient to the composer's ideas. I suggest that Hegel's theory of performance had a utilitarian view of the subjectivity of the performer that can be defined in terms of what Merleau-Ponty (2004 [1945] called the "objectivity thought [...] unaware of the subject of perception." The objectivity concept of art was present at the heart of the theoretical studies of art music of nineteenth and twentieth century that dismiss the role of subjectivity as transmission process.

At the practical level of performance this idea of subjectivity as *means to an end* and objective musical works landed on the real performance practice as standardized instrumental and stylistic techniques learned in the conservatoire.

3. Historical Encounter of *Werktreue* and the Performer's *Moi*: The Case of Cadenza Practice

Turk's treatise ([1789], see in Badura and V. Jones D.G) shows that cadenza practices had a system of rules. However by comparing the pre-romantic cadenza practices with the modern cadenza interpretation it is possible to observe that in pre-romantic era the performer's *Moi* had more presence compared with the modern cadenza performer.

| Pre-romantic cadenza | | Modern cadenza interpretation | |
|-----------------------|----|-------------------------------|----|
| M1 | M2 | M1 | M2 |
| S1 | S2 | S1 | S2 |
| Moi and S2 dominating | | Werktreue dominating | |

Fig.3 Moi and Soi in Cadenza in Distinct Historical Contexts

The elimination of the extempore cadenza in nineteenth century is related with the emerging idea of the unity of the work in that time, since the presence of two subjectivities within one work could trouble the ideals of works as objective. The composer-performers were affected by the concept of objective works. Goehr (2007: 233) claims that in order to face the restrictions imposed by the written musical works Liszt created two kinds of performances: “first, performances committed to faithful renditions of works, and second, virtuoso performances devoted to the art of extemporization and the show of impressive performances technique.” Such a situation shows that the romantic ideals transformed the current traditions of performance at the time. Even more that corroborates the power of *Werktreue* in art music after nineteenth century.

4. *Werktreue* as an Ideal during the Avant-garde Era: The Case of Rautavaara’s Double bass Concerto *Angel of Dusk*

During the Avant-garde era the hierarchies between composing and performing were already established: the avant-garde composers thought of themselves as creators, the concept of musical work was consolidated; and composers and performers assumed their roles at the social and practical level of art music. In other words, during the avant-garde era the ideals of *Werktreue* were a concrete reality. However, the performers of art music left in the past their role as passive transmitters of works and they played an active role in creative process of avant-garde music: the performers became collaborators of the composers. This situation was remarkable for the repertoire of all musical instruments such as the double bass. The new trends in compositional techniques of the time motivated the double bass performers to experiment with their instrument and to create works for double bass, as in the case of Steffano Scodanibbio (1956) and Jöelle Léandre (1951). This situation was more a consequence of the historical and radical separation and specialization of composing and performing music as two separated careers.

During the creation of the concert for double bass *Angel of Dusk* (1980) Rautavaara (1928-) personally experimented with a double bass, but also the Finnish double bass player Olli Kosonen contributed in Rautavaara’s (1981) work: “*The Monologue is a large*

*cadenza in which Olli Kosonen was an irreplaceable help with the instrumental innovations.*²

Angel of Dusk—as well as other avant-garde works—can be thought to be characterized by the presence of two subjectivities: the composer's imagination and his ideals, and the performer's world. In the avant-garde period, the traditional idea of creativity in art music as a linear process in which the composer is the only creator and the performer as a transmitter was a romantic ideal than a reality. Moreover, *Werktreue* remain valid at the level of ideals of performance and composition practices, but at the real creativity level lose its power.

Conclusions

Werktreue is part of the reality of modern musical practices and the modern performer of art music cannot easily escape the embrace of *Werktreue*. Nevertheless, as it was shown, the performers' subjectivity cannot be totally eclipsed by *Werktreue*. To follow the rules of *Werktreue* or to follow the *Will* is an individual and an existential choice of the performers. As Cumming (2000: 297) pointed out: "Where there is choice, there is individuality, not mere determination." Furthermore, *Werktreue* reaches its limits when it encounters the *Moi* of the performer.

The conflict between the performer and *Werktreue* reminds of de Beauvoir's ideas about the power relationship between the *I* and the *Other* (See Bergoffen 2004). As de Beauvoir argued the real causes of struggle between two entities—subjects—is that both are able to enter into the space of the other. From this perspective it can be argued that the struggle between performers and *Werktreue* is triggered by the fact that *Werktreue* breaks up the subjectivity of the performer when it attempts to keep under control the performer's *Moi*. But also the objectivity of the work is endangered by the subjectivity of the performer which is present in the sonic and temporal dimensions of the work. As de Beauvoir (see Bergoffen: 2004) argues: "We can never directly touch the other in the heart of their free subjectivity."

The forces of both the performer's subjectivity (as individuality) and *Werktreue* dwell at the heart of art music.

² Rautavaara (1981): "*Monologi* on laaja kadenssi, jonka soittimellisessa keksinnässä Olli Kosonen oli korvaamattomaksi avuksi."

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Author's biography

I am a doctoral student in Musicology (2010) at Helsinki University. The main topic of interest of research is musical performance in art music from musicological, philosophical and *existential semiotic* point of views. I studied double bass (art music) at UNAM (Mexico). The double bass and double bass' performers are some of the main objects of study in my research. My doctoral thesis is directed by Professor Eero Tarasti, Adjunct Professor Susanna Välimäki and Principal Investigator Pirkko Moisala.