Chapter 4:

Performing Art – What is it really about?

How much freedom, if any, does the performing artist have? If the notes and the performance directions are predetermined, the Zeitgeist and the composer’s personal style well-known – what options, then, are left to the performer? And what renders him or her an “artist,” if at all? Could it just be a fantasy of ours, narcissistic performers, to be considered artists? A fantasy divorced from reality?

I will try my best to provide answers, but it is important to consider that the act of raising such questions is meaningful in its own right. Reflecting on the performing artist’s role implies a critical approach that can help us appraise the performances we come across in greater depth. Where questions are asked, opportunities abound. Granted, many a wise man has said, “For in much wisdom is much grief.” Nevertheless, such an investigation could also bring much benefit, unveiling a realm of no small proportions that can enrich and enhance our listening experience.

As we learned in the ‘aperitif’ chapter, in addition to our spontaneous experience, over which we have (by and large) no control, we also observe the performance from afar when we listen to a musical piece, seeking to gain insight into it and to identify its different properties. As discussed by Professor Dalia Cohen, the terms “observation” and “experience” are contrasting elements that complete one other, and whose marriage provides a fuller listening experience.

Let us delve more deeply into the idea of observation. First, at the risk of being repetitive, music is a language. Acquiring proficiency in this language requires years of hard work. This process involves acquiring a wide variety of skills – technical, theoretical, cognitive, and emotional. It is difficult to differentiate between these skills as a whole and playing an instrument, for the two are closely interlinked. Along with the many pillars of knowledge amassed by classical musicians throughout their lives (this usually also implies a rich cultural legacy beyond pure musicianship, including literature, poetry, theater, history, and more), musicians must also be versed in different musical periods and styles. Professional musicians constantly debate, deliberate, and consider how to adjust their performance to the period in which the piece was written, as well as to its particular compositional style. This musical proficiency as a whole – technical, periodical, cultural, and stylistic – conjoins with the performer’s personal taste. All of this comes together to produce an informed, meticulous performance – which is, at the same time, individualistic.

What, therefore, is meant by “personal taste”? What accounts for the performing artist’s individual expression? That is the crux of the matter. Beyond the layers of knowledge gradually accumulated throughout a proficient musician’s life, there are personal choices undertaken by the performer, within the limits of what is “allowed.”

For example: there are, indeed, directions indicating the required volume at which different notes should be played. But when a composer writes *forte (f)*, how loud do they mean exactly? The direction does not specify decibels. Another example has to do with pace, such as slowing down in a performance. What should the deceleration curve be? This too is not specified.

This range of choice, which may appear petty and trivial to an onlooker, is vital to our craft. As mentioned, artists are sensitive creatures, attuned to nuance, and sophisticated art is founded, among other things, upon such sensitivities. To resort to a cliché – “God is in the details.” The manifestation of these “details,” these sensitivities, affects the experience of the listener, even if he or she is not made aware of them, which is precisely why they are so paramount.

This range of choice, along with specific emotional and aesthetic attributes of the performer, is referred to in professional jargon as “interpretation.” Interpretation is a central concept in classical music (as in other performing arts) and could justify an entire book on its own.

For our intents and purposes, I will divide the realm of interpretive choice in professional performance, i.e. interpretation, into three types. All three are either overt or covert. Some consist of parameters that are identifiable or measurable, while others… less so.

**…**

**The covert: a journey to the sublime**

The third and final type within the realm of interpretation pertains to music’s more enigmatic aspects. Even experts struggle to name these precisely, or to put their finger on them. They consist of many different elements, some conspicuous and some hidden to the naked eye – or ear, rather. The character, temperament, sensitivity, energy, education, cultural legacy, and of course personal taste of the performer, along with his or her emotional depth, are interwoven into the written notes. Beyond these there is also the question of how the performer’s soul connects to the language and inner world of the composer, through a deep familiarity with the piece. All of the above combine into a unique performance, one that will become engraved in our memories.

A fresh reading of the piece, an inquiry after its hidden meaning if you will, which has originality and allows us to see a familiar work of art in a new light, are what shapes a performance that emanates what we yearn for most – a kind of magic.

**An intimate triangle**

At this stage in our inquiry it would be beneficial to ponder the meaning of a “correct performance,” as opposed to a “good” or “moving” performance.

A “correct” or “appropriate” performance is one that respects tradition and the composer’s intentions, that is, the intention represented in the musical text and the conventional wisdom of the classical music tradition – together, of course, with skill and proficiency, as well as the other parameters I mentioned with reference to education and cultural breadth. This, as opposed to a performance oblivious to the spirit of the piece, the composer, or the period, and which does not live up to professional standards.

Before we can explain the experience of being moved, we must first turn to another aspect that will assist our understanding. I believe many underplay or altogether avoid discussing this aspect, namely the listener’s “role.” In addition to the enormous responsibility of the composer and performer, the audience or listener also hold the keys to a fuller experience.

The experience of the audience should be seen, like any artistic experience, as a form of active involvement. An audience is indispensable to any artistic event and necessarily has agency in their own ability to “experience.” For this reason, the listening experience comes with responsibility, which can be broken down into several elements, some of which are under our control – such as knowledge, learning, artistic legacy, a commitment to further develop oneself, and more. But it also requires mental availability, openness, intellectual integrity, and not least – the emotional capacity to open up to another’s world (in our case, the performer and the composer). This mental state of availability and dedication is necessary in order to absorb the piece in all its wealth. In some respect, and to use a somewhat erotic metaphor borrowed from the Kabbalah, the listener can be seen as a “female” entity actively absorbing the “male” abundance given to it by the performing entity (which, as mentioned, intermingles with the abundance of the composer), blending this rich offering with its own inner fountains (its personal longings – cognitive, intellectual, and emotional), to the effect of a complete, well-rounded listening experience (of course, “male” abundance is not necessarily endowed by a man. Within the configuration of *sefirot* in the Kabbalah, the concepts of “male” and “female” are far broader and deeper than their binary gender categorization).

In the chapter ‘Aperitif’ I mentioned the distinction between entertainment and art. As stated, the two share many properties and sometimes even overlap. But the difference between these two concepts lies, in part, with the active participation of the audience on the one hand, and the intention behind the piece on the other: entertainment (*bidur*, in Hebrew, with the root verb meaning to be or to become scattered) is often meant as a distraction, a means of forgetting ourselves and our desires. The entertainer strives to entertain, the audience to be entertained. In contrast, art implies the animation of the soul’s innermost elements. Its subtle longings are often hidden from us, as if yearning to merge with the artist’s intent, and, by means of this union, to “face” that which is more covert, laden with meaning, profound, or less “approachable” within the soul.

Ultimately, the listening experience amounts to a form of intimacy between all three: the composer, the performer, and the listener. Within this triangle, the listener is a side in his or her own right. What sort of triangle is this? An isosceles triangle? Equilateral? While this can be debated, I do have no doubt as to its being a triangle. David Grossman’s *Be my Knife* depicts a seemingly unrelated triangle, a love triangle. Does art qualify as love? Are the two entirely separate categories? To my mind, absolutely not – which is why I’ve chosen to quote the following lovely line: “A triangle is a rather stable form, Miriam once told me. And satisfying. And even enriching. On the condition that all sides know that they are sides in a triangle, she added.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Patterns and the excitement of breaking them**

Another important topic is patterns and deviations. According to Professor Dalia Cohen, excitement is often the product of a divergence from a pattern to which we have grown accustomed. Departing from the norm stimulates us. A sudden change or non-concurrence – such as an unexpectedly high-pitched note (a big leap to a high-pitched note, an upward “melodic interval” in professional jargon), or alternatively a high-pitched note played softly (*p*) in an overall loud area (*f*) – considering that we associate high pitch with loudness ­­– such instances cause surprise, and hence excitement. Diverging from the pattern, from our expectations, is what animates us. We are all “outsmarted” by our brains. The brain internalizes patterns and responds with excitement when they are broken, while we are left none the wiser. We have no control over our internalization of patterns, and accordingly we have no control over our excitement when these are broken. A significant part of our knowledge is unconscious, and the thrill we experience is often a direct result of this unconscious knowledge. A divergence can occur in terms of pitch or volume, as mentioned, but also in other parameters.

Professor Cohen’s important and fascinating study also illuminates the gap between the emotional responses of people from different cultures and demonstrates why some deviations thrill or move us while others go entirely unnoticed. There are two types of patterns: **natural patterns and internalized patterns.** Natural patterns are universal, which means deviating from them will provoke a reaction from any human being, irrespective of where they were born or the culture to which they belong. Such deviations, to use simple examples, fall under the category of sudden change. Thus, a sudden change in volume (dynamics), such as a sudden loudness or softness, deviates from a natural pattern and is effective across cultures.

In what, then, do we differ from one another? In our localized cultural norms. As these change from culture to culture and are acquired over the course of our childhood, Professor Cohen classified them as internalized patterns. Even when they are not actively learned, cultural affiliation from birth will suffice to have them internalized. These norms are embedded into our consciousness as children without us noticing. This is why deviations from an internalized pattern will move the listeners of a particular culture while having no effect on others.

Internalized patterns pertain mostly to keys and harmony (concepts on which I will not be able to elaborate given the limited scope of this book). Arabic music, for example, can make use of deviations that a Western ear will scarcely be able to discern. Even in the event that they manage to identify them, Western listeners will likely remain unaffected. A familiarity with the maqamat,[[2]](#footnote-2) the foundation of Arabic music, is needed in order to appreciate such deviations and be moved by them.[[3]](#footnote-3)

What do deviations have to do with musical performance? Performing artists are more attuned and sensitive to patterns and deviations and are able (as is expected of them) to choose how to best express them with the tools at their disposal, some of which are listed above. There are many different ways to highlight a deviation: to glorify it, bring it out, “build up” to it, or in some cases to minimize it, or, in the extreme, disregard it altogether. Musical intelligence is a term used by connoisseurs. It is in part “natural” (inborn) but undeniably matures throughout the performing artist’s personal development, and is, to my mind, inextricably linked to the issue at hand.

**The emotional impact of a powerful performance**

I promised to discuss what makes a performance moving to me, what makes it “powerful.” One could say that all of the components discussed above contribute to the performer’s ability to “touch” us. Yet I find that there are two other criteria needed for a truly moving performance. The first has to do with the performer’s personality. For me, in order to be moved, the performer I am listening to must have an interesting, compelling, fiery, colorful, vibrant personality, with a broad and well-development emotional range: a person who I feel has enough inner wealth in order to bridge between his or her vivid inner world and the artistic matter at hand.

The second criterion is nerve. As a performer, but also as a listener, I have come to recognize that the performances to have left the most lasting impression on me all involved quite a bit of nerve or courage. The nerve on the part of the performer to summon their innermost resources for the sake of connecting with the emotional and mental depths of the piece: the daring to expose and bring to light those inner, most personal reserves of the performing artist. There is a certain emotional generosity, and bravery, in a person’s willingness to “share” what they have, their inner, most secret longings, and to thus expose themselves in the deepest possible sense. An event of this kind, taking place in front of an audience, requires a willingness to expose oneself emotionally to no small extent, a vulnerable situation to be in by all accounts. That is why this sort of dedication requires an exceptional amount of nerve and candor, initially of the performer internally, and ultimately in their choice to run the “risk” of opening up to the audience.

When a vibrant person with a wealth of substance, who possesses the professional integrity and skill I specified earlier, is willing to open up emotionally – a certain, precious kind of connection with both the composer and the listener can occur: a focused kind of “intent.”

I once heard a renowned performing artist say that a musician who does not believe in God cannot be a musician. Without presuming to know precisely what that artist had meant, I take the liberty to speculate that he sees music-making as an act tied to God’s creation, as do I. The beauty and power of music are so sublime that even the utter atheists among us artists are moved to the core and cannot help but feel that God plays a role in this wonder. A role without which this reality would not be possible. Furthermore, I assume (and this could just be my personal interpretation) that this artist saw music-making as an act that without pure, focused intent, without becoming one with what lies “beyond,” is not true to its name and does not fulfill its purpose.

The act of performance, and not just composition, is an act of creation. Music-making is considered by many musicians as the work of God.

This suggests another perspective on the above-mentioned triangle: creating artist – performing artist – audience: the first side, the creating artist, contains the artistic-emotional content of the piece and the composer; the second side, the performing artist, contains the performer’s professional skill, his or her personality as a performing artist, the willingness to express it and to draw on it in order to communicate the spirit of the piece. When these two sides merge, their union is brought forth before the listener (audience), and the result is art in its most profound and powerful.

And yet… what makes a performance monumental? The way I see it, and notwithstanding the detailed discussion above, we have yet to crack the code. We have achieved an impressive understanding thus far, but it remains engulfed in impenetrable, magical mystery.

1. David Grossman, *Be my Knife*, trans. Vered Almog and Maya Gurantz (London: Picador, 2003), p.155. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Maqam is a kind of equivalent of the key in Arabic music but has additional features beyond a system of pitches. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For further reading on Professor Cohen’s research I recommend reading her manifold books, particularly *Contemplation and Experience*, and *East and West in Music,* both published by Magnes. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)