

This is a reflection about our endeavor in the field of historically informed performance, and all the paradoxical discourse that it arises.

February 13, 2025

Despite all our Herculean efforts, the Past remains a *foreign country*.^[1] No matter how hard we try to remember, no matter how many different memory devices we deploy, a veil keeps dividing us from the bygone times. Since the beginning of History, generations of humans have faced the intrinsic impossibility of preserving their past. Libraries have been raised and lost, and our modern technology is sharing an equivalent, even more pronounced, fragility.

The same fate will be shared by FAAM, no doubt about it. It is ironic, because the aim of the project was to preserve and provide a new voice for forgotten musical annotations, made by musicians from the *long 19th century*. Jozef was right in the end: why should we in the first place have such a necromantic ambition? Where does this obsession about the past stem from? Even if we would be able to speak with the dead, would they still agree on their choices? Will the future *belong to ghosts*?^[2]

Impressions from my visit to Jozef De Beenhouwer

June 20, 2024

“Why would you take the train, if you can bike all the way to his house?” she said. Even after almost ten years of living in Belgium, I easily lose my enthusiasm when it comes to biking. They say the journey is more important than the destination, but I was extremely relieved when I finally saw Jozef’s place.

We talked for hours, and again my professional deformation let me record all of it. He is one of the last firsthand witnesses, who met “the old man” at the sunset of his career. The almost religious reverence for Marinus De Jong, highly considered by many of my colleagues, was shared by Jozef, who considered him to have played a fundamental role in the shaping of his artistic identity.

The artistic legacy of Marinus, who influenced the performance of generations of students at the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp, fascinates me. Until today, I had always been proud of not belonging to any specific “school”. As artists, we focus so much on building our own legacy, championing our originality and independence, while forgetting the value of belonging.

Engaging Anna in the project. The importance of artistic legacies for a pianist's identity.

November 17, 2023

After many failed attempts, I have finally managed to commit a professional musician to engage with FAAM. Anna is not only a proficient pianist, but a critical thinker willing to meaningfully interact in an imaginary conversation with Marinus through his annotated scores.

During our first informal talk, we both realized that analysis of performance annotations is somehow discouraged in our modern-day artistic pedagogy. The historical awareness of the last century has given priority to the *urtext*, with all the paradoxes that followed it.^[3] Why would we seek traces of performers’ interpretations if we can rely on the *work* as intended by the composer themselves?

I have the feeling that this project will not only lead to a dialectical exchange between two individual agents, namely Anna and Marinus’ annotated scores, but also initiate a discourse between artistic traditions tracing their legacies back to the early 19th century with illustrious ancestors of the stature of Czerny, Liszt and Brahms.

Me collecting and annotating metadata concerning Marinus' scores.

3 March, 2024

While studying and providing metadata of Marinus De Jong’s annotated music, I could not suppress my regard (and envy) to keyboard players. Their art requires a super-human effort, at least from the perspective of a clumsy layman, in order to process the insane amount of information encoded in those two (or three) staves. An impeccable level of coordination is required in order to control ten independent fingers and all sorts of pedals. I have the impression that Marinus’ scores made a successful attempt in echoing by symbols on paper the intricate totality of events that we call music performance.

The granularity of information encoded on a single page has required me at least an hour to tag all the pixel regions of the digital scan to be considered “handwritten annotations”. So far, the spotting of these marks has to be done manually, requiring an insane amount of labor. This is probably the reason why my research project is so novel: nobody is so fool to dare such venture.

But there is hope! One day my colleagues at the Computer Science department of Ghent will finally devise an algorithm for the automatic, or at least supervised, classification of those regions. Nothing tangible so far, but I am positive that FAAM could play a key role as validation and training dataset for this Computer Vision challenge.

Recording sessions with Anna: Day 1

July 17, 2024

First day of recording is already behind us, still two to go. It took us some time to test the cameras and microphones in the concert hall of Orpheus Institute, with myself pretending to be a sound engineer. The modern artistic researcher is asked to be a jack of all trades: performer, scholar, musicologist and web developer are surely not an exhaustive list to define our ambitious discipline. Our profession requires to us a pluralistic approach, both on practical and conceptual level. This project has shown me how the immutability of a work of art is an unachievable claim. Rather than that, we should embrace the artwork as a complex assemblage of entities and relations, intertwined together to generate a living ecosystem.^[4]

Recording sessions with Anna: Day 2

July 22, 2024

I finally had the time to carefully listen to my interview with Jozef. Borrowing Umberto Eco's terminology, a performance is a form of *open work*, ever-changing according to the mood of the artists, the audience, the instruments played and other circumstances.^[5] Handwritten annotations are just a snapshot of the whole process, but should not be taken for granted: instead, they function as inspiration and provide a witness against the immutability of the artwork, so dear to us Classically trained musicians. We "moderns" pretend to perform objectively from the Urtext edition according to the wishes of the composer. But as soon as we start to rehearse we cannot restrain ourselves from scribbling around the score, imposing our own aesthetic to the music, especially if indications are scarce such for Early Music repertoire.

We recorded the Beethoven and Debussy pieces in detail, focusing on the openings of both works. Thanks to Anna, I could finally experience the sonic impact of Marinus' choices. Fingerings have a huge influence on texture and articulation and those pieces reflected de Jong's obsession with vocality and phrasing. According to Jozef, this more vocally oriented style of Marinus was at odds with the "hammering" technique of his teacher, the pianist Emile Bosquet (1878-1959). For the students out there: it is fine to disagree with your teachers!

Recording sessions with Anna: Day 3

July 23, 2024

Today's recordings represent a good example of what John Butt describes in the third chapter of his book *Playing with History*. The author illustrates how, during the course of the 19th century, the degree of notational complexity has not ceased to increase in musical works. These marks have become, together with pitches and rhythms, an inviolable part of the work that should be abided by the performer.^[6] Unfortunately, the story is a bit more complicated: a music score goes through several (sometimes competing) agents before seeing the printing press. Not only the composer, but editors and musicologists, contribute to shape a musical work.

As Anna pointed out, a performer should always be critical concerning information on the score, building a network of trust and critical thinking around a composer's oeuvre.

It has been a challenge for her today to play Ravel's piece according to de Jong annotations, while being aware of the composer's clear vision and detailed instructions. On the other hand, Marinus' freedom and inventiveness were far more accepted during the Liszt piece, including a five pages original written-out cadenza. As Roland Barthes famously states in his 1967 *La mort de l'auteur*: "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author".

Presentation of the documentary during ARTICULATE 2024

October 18, 2024

I have spent the last days in Utrecht for a conference and got back in time for the presentation of the documentary during the ARTICULATE research festival organized every year by the School of Arts. After watching the 20 minutes film, Anna provided some useful comments to enhance and clarify the underlying narrative. It is hard to come to a definitive version: we are always looking for improvements and changes but at a certain point we have to surrender to deadlines. The same destiny is shared by every human maker, including composers and performers.

Pretending to achieve a final version is utopical, and probably counterproductive to the nature of art itself. Not only Time, but we, the makers, are menacing our own creations.

I would like to leave a final message to the future audience of our modest documentary: watch it as it would be a *non finito* sculpture. Embrace the openness of music: it makes the whole thing exciting.

References

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3. Forment, Bruno. "Musical Texts and Contexts. Stairway to Heaven or Highway to Hell?" *Performing by the Book? Musical Negotiations between Text and Act*, edited by Bruno Forment, Leuven University Press, 2024, pp. 7–17. [↩](#)
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5. Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work*. Translated by Anna Cancogni, Harvard University Press, 1989. [↩](#)
6. Butt, John. *Playing with History: The Historical Approach to Musical Performance* Cambridge University Press, 2002. [↩](#)