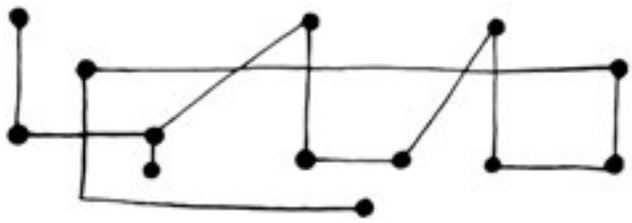


THE CHANGING COMPOSER-PERFORMER RELATIONSHIP: A MONOLOGUE AND A DIALOGUE

LUKAS FOSS

I

ON THE heels of the invaluable discovery of what is commonly referred to as electronic music there followed a diametrically opposed movement endeavoring to draw the performer closer into the composer's laboratory, to build performance at times "into" the composition. This movement consists of a series of efforts in different directions, efforts so full of vague, half-understood implications, that an attempt at objective critical assessment would seem to be premature. Also, I hardly qualify as an objective observer, having been steadily involved with new performance ideas for some time. Thus my remarks here may best be understood as observations made from "within."

Progress in the arts: a series of gifted mistakes perhaps. We owe our greatest musical achievements to an unmusical idea: the division of what is an indivisible whole, "music," into two separate processes: composition (the making of the music) and performance (the making of music), a division as nonsensical as the division of form and content. The history of music is a series of violations, untenable positions, each opening doors, as it were: the well-tempered scale, Wagner's music drama, Stravinsky's neoclassicism, Schoenberg's twelve-tone method, to name but a few. ("My method does not quite work . . . that makes it interesting," Arnold Schoenberg to Gustave Arlt, U.C. L.A.). The methodical division of labor (I write it, you play it) served us well, until composer and performer became like two halves of a worm separated by a knife, each proceeding obliviously on its course.

Around 1915, composition withdrew underground, leaving the field to the performer and to the music of the past. That this created a sterile state of affairs "above" ground was perfectly clear to the more educated virtuoso, who has been trying ever since to resolve the conflict, often leading a Jekyll and Hyde existence on account

of it. Thus, Arthur Schnabel gave his audience Beethoven and Schubert; his lifelong involvement with Schoenberg was kept scrupulously to himself. His 1960 counterpart, Glenn Gould, rebels, openly attacks our "narcissistic listening," despises our applause, threatens to retire from the concert circuit at the age of thirty. Leonard Bernstein, deeply aware of the missing element of urgency in our symphonic culture, consoles himself with the musical theater—and so on.

The conflict still rages, and yet the feud between composition and performance is over. The factor which led to the conflict, the division of labor (performance/composition), will remain with us. The procedural advantages are too great to be sacrificed. But a creative investigation is in full swing, and correction of the sterilizing aspects is under way. Composers have had to abandon Beethoven's proud position: "Does he think I have his silly fiddle in mind when the spirit talks to me?" Composers are again involved *in* performance, *with* performance. More—they work with handpicked performers toward a common goal. Among the new composer-performer teams: Cage and Tudor, Boulez and the Südwestfunk, Berio and Cathy Berberian, Babbitt and Bethany Beardslee, Pousseur and a group of seven, my own Improvisation Chamber Ensemble. Each of the teams mentioned is involved in a search, what we might call a joint enterprise in new music. Characteristic here is the composer's fascination with the possibility of new tasks for his new-found partner and confidant. The new tasks demand new ideas of coordination. In fact, the creation of a new vocabulary requires that the composer give constant attention to all performance problems in connection with his score. As a result, a thorough overhauling of conducting technique is in the making, new instrumental discoveries have antiquated every existing orchestration treatise,—traditional limitations of voice and instrument have proved to be mythical: the piano was the first instrument to expand, the flute underwent a change of personality (due largely to Gazzeloni). The human voice followed; percussion came into its own.[1]

The emancipation of percussion and, for that matter, the new use of flute, voice, strings (Penderecki), and *Sprechchor* (Kagel) must actually be attributed to yet another factor: I began by observing that the performance movement directly followed the discovery of electronic music. Paradoxically, it is the advent of electronic music which sparked the performance renaissance.

[1] The extent to which percussion has begun to preoccupy the composer can be illustrated by the recent mania for acquiring one's own percussion instruments, then lending them out to percussionists. Stockhausen bought a Degan vibraphone, Berio brought a marimba from San Francisco to Milan, Boulez owns a whole collection of percussion instruments. Can we imagine composers twenty years ago going to such pains to ensure faithful performance?

Electronic music showed up the limitations of live performance, the limitations of traditional tone production, the restrictiveness of a rhythm forever bound to meter and bar line, notation tied to a system of counting. Electronic music introduced untried possibilities, and in so doing presented a challenge, shocked live music out of its inertia, kindled in musicians the desire to prove that live music "can do it too." When I say: "I like my electronic music live," the somewhat flippant remark contains a tribute. Via electronic music came a new approach not only to the above-mentioned instruments and voices, but to their placement on stage, to phonetics, to notation. Percussion found a new climate in a "handmade" white noise. Today, it appears to some that electronic music has served its purpose in thus pointing the way. "Tape fails," says Morton Feldman. And I remember reading in Thomas Mann: "Everything, even nature, turns into mere scenery, background, the instant the human being steps forward."

II

"I beg your pardon if I may be so bold as to interrupt: this new team, this joint 'composer-performer enterprise in new music,' is it to replace the composer's former, solitary work?"

"Give up solitude, and you have given up composition. But performance is always *with* or *for* or both. As to the team (I dislike the word as much as you do), it complements the composer's work, it is a bridge . . ."

"Then all is as it always was, it would seem."

"Yes and no. When I advise a young composer—one so young and foolish as to seek advice—I say: study old and new music, work by yourself. When you grow up, find your performer(s)—and then work by yourself again."

"I am a performer. I am intrigued by the 'laboratory' approach of recent music, but I must admit that I find my powers as an instrumentalist, the capabilities of my instrument, more often abused than used. Playing behind the bridge, inside the piano, slapping the wood, this is not a new task, it is withdrawal to mere marginal possibilities."

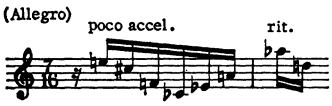
"Marginal possibilities are good for marginal purposes . . ."

"And as to the new freedoms and choices suddenly handed to the performer, they seem intriguing and dangerous at first, but soon reveal an inane foolproofness. They are safe, either because the given entities control the desired result, neutralizing my own additions, or because the result does not concern the composer (only the "situation" does). In either instance, I am given choice because 'it matters not what I do.' "

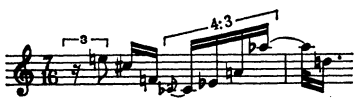
"And that you resent, understandably. But performer-choices where it matters can be accomplished only after years of study. My colleagues of the Improvisation Ensemble and I undertook such a study five years ago. In spite of this experience, or perhaps because of it, I am among the most reluctant of composers when it comes to introducing performer-freedom into my composition. Moments of incomplete notation do exist, but only—to quote you—where it is safe."

"Then why have them at all?"

"For the same reason that figured bass was 'filled in' by the performer. As you know, solo parts plus *basso continuo*, reasonably insured the harmonic result. Figured bass was never conceived as a performer-freedom but as a form of shorthand for composer and performer; one avoids cluttering up the score with unessentials. Today our scores are more cluttered. Schoenberg invented H^{-} and N^{-} to clarify the *Notenbild* (a makeshift device, to be sure). This brings me to the notational dilemma of the 1940's and 1950's: the precise notation which results in imprecise performance. Can we speak at all of precise notation if the practical realization can but approximate the complexities on the page? The dilemma lies in the need to notate every minute detail . . . Take a rubato. Here is a comparatively vague notation:



The accelerando, ritardando, written out would produce:



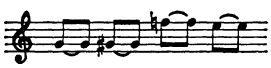
This seemingly precise notation puts the performer in a strait jacket. It is a translation of the supple into the realm of the rigid. A rigid rubato: contradiction in terms. Imagine asking the performer to feel a moment 'out of time,' as it were, when it is notated slavishly 'in time.' Similarly, an effect of, say, chaos, must not be notated in terms of a subtle order. To learn to play the disorderly in orderly fashion is to multiply rehearsal time by one hundred."

"Allow me to be the devil's advocate here. Is not the orderly fashion

the only way to play the disorderly? Is not all notation a translation? Is it not a sign of sophistication that this is so? I know of some recent experiments in which the notation simply consists of showing changes in the position of the hands on a keyboard . . ."

"You mean Ligeti's organ pieces."

"Is this not an infinitely more primitive notational concept? It is our traditional notation's ability to translate subtleties like a rubato into measured exactitude which makes it a highly developed tool. Inspired notation is inspired translation, transposition of the inexpressible to the domain of the exact. Take Beethoven's introduction to the last movement in Opus 106, those chords in both hands, that no one can feel as anticipating the beat, because the beat becomes a mere abstraction, as in Webern a hundred years later. I marvel at the surrealism of this notation, implying—without footnotes—the tentative no-beat feeling of a music in search of . . . the fugue theme. Not to mention the ingenious



in the *Grosse Fuge*. As to the complexities of the 1940's and 1950's, agreed, I am yet to hear a precise and spirited performance of Boulez's *Marteau*, instead of all the counting, watching, and approximating. But at least it's all there on paper. The function of notation is not only to serve the immediate performance efficiently, but to keep, to conserve. What will happen to all the aleatory scores in a hundred years?"

"It is perhaps typical and commendable that you, the performer, should be concerned with the composition's immortality. For the composer the issue is how to make it, not how to keep it. New tasks: new performance, new notation. Let me forget the 'masterwork.' We have new problems—some of them perhaps primitive, hence primitively notated. But here I must clear up a misunderstanding. I should like to see traditional notation expanded, not replaced. For instance: I am well aware of the inherent subtlety of the relationship of bar line and beat to the music, which 'overcomes' them. But we also need moments of no bar line and no beat—notes held not by mutual agreement as to the number of counts, but via a spontaneous reaction of one performer to the other. Here is a germ of a performance task capable of much development, and, as yet, far from resolved in the notation-coordination domain: a music where the instruments or voices either individually or in groups, act and react to and against one another, like

characters in a play, at times turning the concert stage into a battlefield. This idea proved to be fertile ground for ensemble improvisation. It is easier to improvise in that manner than to compose. On the other hand, one can go much further with it in actual composition. One can develop it into a veritable polyphony of musics, with each music independent of the tempo and pulse of the other. I repeat, this presents a coordination-notation problem. Ives wrestled with this problem, not without reward, but, lacking practical performance experience, he could only derive certain limited effects. Carter found a useful device in 'metrical modulation,' but one that demands concentration by each performer on his own part to the point of shutting out the conflicting pulse of the others; hence, a genuine reacting, in my sense of the word, cannot take place (isn't supposed to, perhaps). Stockhausen's *Gruppen* is the most daring attempt, with its three orchestras, but here the composer relies on the makeshift method of metronome watching, a method which completely isolates one group from the other. I am convinced that genuine coordination must ultimately be obtained via 'reaction,' in other words, via *musical* points of reference, via listening and playing accordingly. Such interplay would constitute a task capable of engaging the performer's entire musical being."

"Is it not perhaps too schizoid a task, forcing upon the performer a role of simultaneous support and opposition? While you ask two players to play *at* each other, you still expect them to play *with* each other."

"Why not? Performance always required the ability to combine, say, passive and active, leading and following. Every downbeat is also an upbeat; our senses take in, enjoy what is just moving into the past, as our mind is shaping the next sounds. Performance also requires the ability to 'interpret' while at the same time allowing the music to 'speak for itself.'[2] And the degree of tension in a performance is dependent on the presence of such a dual effort on the performer's part. A crescendo to a climax is dramatic only if the performer is both the racehorse and the horseman holding the reins. Playing *at* as well as *with* is simply an extension of the duality principle inherent in the drama of musical performance."

"Are there any examples in your recent music which bear out this principle?"

"There is the clarinet, barking in the foreground at a distant tune in the background of *Echoi III*, a piece in which the foreground is much of the time in conflict with the background. But do not stress

[2] At the root of this paradox is a phenomenon experienced by all performers: the emergence of the interpreter's originality through identification with the author and submersion in his work.

the 'conflict' aspect of these notions. We are dealing here with a variation of the old idea of different things going on at the same time, and the somewhat newer idea of what may be called a montage. The unforeseen relationships forming between the mounted elements interest us today, open up new possibilities. There is a moment in Bach's *Matthew* Passion which always struck me as unique and prophetic. A concert-duet, a setting of a poem of meditative nature, is suddenly blotted out (without preparation) by the chorus shouting: 'Bind him not!' Meanwhile, the concert-duet continues under the shouting, unperturbed; a form of superimposition, this; a montage of two musics, that stand in opposition to one another, yet miraculously relate, the way everything relates if one but finds the key, the nonsense can make sense and 'open doors' in the hands of genius."

"You mentioned the notation-coordination difficulties arising with the realization of these ideas. Can you show this on paper?"

"It would take the space of a book to do it."

"You mentioned the need for notation to expand, as indeed it does today. Is this in the direction of the performer's choice, in the direction of 'less notation'?"

"A hundred different composers will devise a hundred different ways. But the new approach to notation can certainly not be equated with 'avoidance of notation.' Moreover, granting the performer limited areas of freedom and choice is primarily a formal and textural, not a notational idea."

"When one looks at the beautiful calligraphy, the graphic originality of recent scores, is it not as if the notation, the 'writing' of the score had become an end unto itself?"

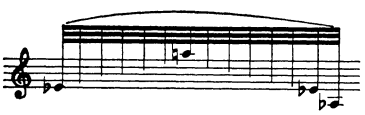
"An end perhaps not, but here too, we have a *performance* of sorts . . ."

"What did you mean earlier by 'moments of incomplete notation'?"

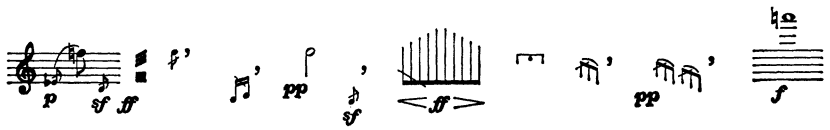
"Unessentials to be filled in by the performer."

"I meant to ask then what could possibly be unessential in a composition, outside of the filling in of a self-evident harmony (as in figured bass)."

"Take a very fast run, for example, low to high and back to low: lowest and highest notes may be essential. Intermediate notes may, under certain circumstances (tempo, style) be unessential:



Leave it as above, and there is immediate clarity regarding the important low and high notes. The performer will realize that the in-between notes need hardly be discernible; the seemingly sketchy notation actually clarifies. I mentioned the barking of the clarinet in *Echoi*. This is to be done by way of a tone distortion, rendering pitches unrecognizable. Hence, I do not write them in, I indicate the approximate height, but erase the staff lines:



In his *Tempi Concertati*, Berio uses the word 'tutta' to indicate that the percussionist is to hit everything, as fast as possible; try to notate this exactly, and you force the percussionist to wrestle with an unessential: the 'order' in which these instruments are to be hit; the resulting performance will seem studied, whereas the effect in the composer's mind was one of abandonment, of eruption. Of course, choices allotted to the performer need not be confined to such detail."

"Where draw the line? At what point does the performer begin to be smothered by unsolicited freedoms, handed to him with a gesture of: '*You* do it.' "

"Never draw the line and say: 'beyond this line there is no art.' But I sympathize with you. Many a new task is an old, or worse, a poor task in disguise. It sounds good in theory, fails in practice. Desk-experiment one may call it; choices allotted to the performer by a composer who has no live experience with performance problems, and who works out a new task like a chess problem. Freedom—choice—dangerous words. Yet the aleatory idea is no idle invention, and quite naturally follows the serial idea. In fact the two complement one another, share the basic premise of an ingenious 'pre-ordering,' which guarantees a particular result. Both involve a *canvassing* of possibilities, which is always in danger of deteriorating into a cataloguing of possibilities, or games of numerology. Both run the risk of self-deceit, serial music in the direction of a would-be order, aleatory music in the direction of a would-be freedom. In our most recent music the two techniques join forces, producing perhaps the most interesting 'laboratory situation' of all times."

"And the music sounds like a 'laboratory situation' some of the time."

"I would not 'object to all this, on principle.' Object if you will, but not on principle. Object if you must to the extra work without extra

credit demanded of the performer by the most extreme aleatoric music. Here a situation of 'musical indeterminacy' may well oblige you to decide for yourself what, where, and when to play, perhaps even write out your own part. In the program book there will be no mention of this 'overlapping' of performance and composition. One might call it 'Action-music,' or even, if you wish, 'Gebrauchsmusik.' "[3]

"How closely related are your improvisations to the situation of musical indeterminacy?"

"The latter lays the emphasis on the 'situation' giving birth to the performance. Chamber improvisation lays the emphasis on the 'performance' resulting from the situation, and puts the responsibility for the choices squarely on the shoulders of the performer. It by-passes the composer. It is composition become performance, *performer's music*."

"Age of performance, laboratory obsessed!"

"Yes! 'All the world's a performance.' A monkey performs, lovers perform, Picasso's drawings are a marvel of performance, and the President of the United States performs his office. The word is growing old under my pen. Give me young words . . ."

"Like: situation, event, statement, variant, resultant, parameter?"

"These are 'borrowed' words. One uses them and blushes a little."

"I wonder why you neglected to mention 'chance' in this essay?"

"Quite by chance, I assure you . . ."

[3] In a number of Cage's compositions one may play as much or as little of the music as is convenient, use all instruments or only a few, depending on available performance time and personnel.