Intention revisited: From composition to performance

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Within the context of Western art music performance, intention is a fundamental key concept, generally viewed as a representation of the composer’s creative and interpretative intents. Even though intention is considered a decisive factor in performance, the focus is placed on the composer, and the performer’s own range of interpretative choices has been neglected. This issue is especially pertinent in collaborative work between composer and performer(s) in the interpretation of contemporary repertoire, often informed by the intentional contribution of both parties. This research focused on a case study, documenting the collaboration between a composer and a performer, which involved the première of a new composition for pianoforte, and intended to demonstrate that: (1) the concept of authorial intention, which is traditionally viewed by performers as a mandatory interpretative framework, can also be addressed from the performer’s perspective and (2) a multi-level appraisal of intention can be applied to collaborative procedures in order to promote a successful performance. The concepts of authorship and intention provided a theoretical framework for the analysis of the collaboration process, establishing a parallel between the dichotomies author/reader and composer/performer, and the concept of intentional level was applied in the description of the collaboration stages.

Keywords: author; intention; composition; collaboration; performance

Within the context of Western art music performance, intention is a fundamental key concept, generally viewed as a representation of the composer’s creative and interpretative intents. This concept has been the subject of debate especially in the context of historically-informed performance, namely by authors such as Dipert (1980), Kivy (1995), and Butt (2002), and has been influenced and marked by similar issues raised in the field of literary studies.
Wimsatt and Beardsley’s essay “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946), which criticized the relevance of authorial intention as a criterion for critical evaluation, defended the text, and not the author, as the focal point for interpretation. This approach led to the announcement of the “death of the author” by Barthes (1994), a position that was subsequently reformulated by Foucault (1992).

In music, the debate has mostly been focused on the relevance of composer’s intentions for interpretation. Intention, as discussed by Dipert or Butt, is presented as a multi-level/multi-sided concept, following a similar approach by some literary-studies theorists (namely Hancher 1972). The focus is mostly placed on the composer or the musical text/score, and its significance for the performer’s own range of interpretative choices has been neglected.

This neglect derives from post-romantic views of the work concept, views that emphasize the primacy of author and text over the contingencies and variability normally assigned to performance. Burke points out that “the crucial historical change in conceptions of authorship did not occur in the theoretical upheaval of the last thirty years but with the romantic revolution and the eighteenth-century philosophical and aesthetic discourses upon which it grew” (Burke 1995, p. xix). This statement could also be applied to changes in the notion of musical work during the same period, which led to differentiated views of the relative relevance of composing/performing/listening as creative actions. The intentional fallacy criticized by Wimsatt and Beardsley located the merits of a literary work in the correct interpretation of the author’s intentions. The tension generated by the pressure of playing under the ideal of Werktreue (implying fidelity to the work’s essence), mentioned by Goehr (1992), is a parallel situation, placing constraints and restrictions upon performers on the basis of authorial intention.

This article intends to demonstrate: (1) that the concept of author’s intention, which is traditionally viewed by performers as a mandatory interpretative framework, can also be addressed from the performer’s perspective and (2) that a multi-level appraisal of intention can be applied to collaborative procedures in order to promote a successful performance.

**MAIN CONTRIBUTION**

This research was developed in the context of a case study documenting the collaboration between a composer and a performer, which involved the première of a new composition for the pianoforte. The concepts of authorship and intention provided a theoretical framework for the analysis of the col-
laboration process, which was grounded on two main challenges: applying a contemporary style of composition involving a less-known historical instrument, and building on the sense of historical ambiguity without compromising the effectiveness of the performance.

**Composer/performer/work**

The rise of the concept of the autonomous musical work and the associated concept of *Werktreue* led to the redefinition of the relation composer/performer and the gradual dissociation of these roles, most noticeably from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Goehr mentions that Liszt “spent a considerable part of his musical life developing two distinct forms of performance, first, performances committed to faithful renditions of his works, second, virtuoso performance devoted to the art of extemporization and the show of impressive performance technique” (Goehr 2002, pp. 232-233). Liszt’s option for two different types of performance is representative of the establishment of a viewpoint that distinguished composers’ and performers’ activity. The text became paramount in this new outlook.

**Intention revisited: From literature to music**

The relevance of intention has led to an ongoing debate in the realm of literary studies, linked to the notion of authorship and the establishment of critical parameters. This research extends this theoretical stance to music, drawing a parallel between the dichotomies author/reader and composer/performer. This parallel is not fortuitous: as pointed out by Kivy, there is an “almost universal tendency since at least the eighteenth century to try to understand absolute music on a linguistic model of one kind or another” (Kivy 1995, p. 284).

The debate surrounding the notion of authorship in the late 1960s challenged an author-centered appraisal of literary texts. Barthes announced “the death of the author” in his much-debated essay, highlighting the multiplicity of voices implied in a text: “there is one place where this multiplicity reassembles, and this place is not the author, as hitherto said, it’s the reader” (Barthes 1994, p. 595). Foucault, on the other hand, does not dismiss the intellectual implications of the author figure: “a discourse associated to an author’s name...is not a fleeting and momentary discourse, immediately consumed, but rather a discourse that is perceived in a certain manner and given, within a given culture, a certain status” (Foucault 1992, p. 45). Foucault, however, dissociates author and writer, characterizing the author as a function that can acknowledge the existence of a multiple “I”.
The fact that intention as a conceptual idea remains a recurring issue in literary—and art—studies theory reflects the enduring dichotomy between “the programmatic intention (what the author set out to say) and the operative intention (what his text ends up saying)” (Burke 1992, p. 142). Some critics approach this dichotomy through a hierarchy—or category—based outlook, namely Hancher (1972, p. 835), who writes that the author’s intention:

Can be analyzed into three kinds: his intention to make a literary work of a certain sort (“programmatic intention”); his intention to be (understood as) acting in a certain way (“active intention”); and his intention to cause something or other to happen beyond the mere understanding of his meaning (“final intention”).

The hierarchical/categorical approach has also been the preferred model regarding theories on musical intention.

The concept of intention in musical interpretation has been criticized for its prescriptive stance, often based on textual and analytical constraints that limit the performer’s freedom of expression. As Taruskin ironically contends, “composers do not usually have intentions such as we would like to ascertain, and...the need obliquely to gain the composer’s approval for what we do speaks a failure of nerve” (Taruskin 1995, p. 98). Historically-informed performance, nevertheless, is undeniably connected to the maintenance of intention as a working concept, and represents an innovative trend in musical performance that cannot be dismissed solely on the grounds of poor hermeneutical grounding.

Part of the problem regarding the adaptation of intentional theory to music may lie on the exclusive focus on the composer’s perspective, which contrasts with the above-mentioned trends in literary theory that question the conventional notion of authorship and emphasize the importance of multiple perspectives. Dipert’s description of intentional levels, and its re-evaluation by Butt (2002), are, as acknowledged by Butt, unsatisfactory as theoretical tools, as the distinction between levels of intention, despite the fact that they are established with the composer in mind, is in fact partly or mainly dependent on performer’s choices. Dipert, while mentioning the limited relevance of composer’s intentions for performance, proposes a 3-levelled hierarchy. Butt rejects the hierarchical outlook, and proposes a division between “active intention”—a composer’s specific decisions concerning such matters as instrumentation, tempo, dynamic, ...and ‘passive intention’—those factors over
which he had little control, but which he consciously or unconsciously assumed” (pp.89-90).

**Intention revisited: Prelude in Fugue**

From the early stages of collaboration (*Prelude in Fugue* was composed by Sara Carvalho for Helena Marinho), it was decided that composer and performer would not assume the conventional separation of roles and that the effectiveness of the work would require a close interaction. It also became clear that intention was the focal concept within the collaboration process and that former intentional models should be subject to reformulation.

The initial challenge involved mechanisms of adaptation derived from the composer’s unfamiliarity with the pianoforte, the performer’s dilemma of mediating between historically-informed performing practices, which are particularly suited to the instrument, and the need to convey an original and effective interpretative approach. The issue of intention was addressed initially as being especially pertinent in collaborative work between composer and performer(s) in the interpretation of contemporary solo repertoire, where this type of cooperation often leads to performances that are informed by the intentional contribution of both parties. Thus, theoretical frameworks focusing solely on the composer’s perspective are unsuitable to describe this type of collaboration.

Even though the intentional model proposed by Hancher (1972) addressed the author’s perspective alone, its acknowledged reliance on Austin’s division of speech acts into locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary kinds, allows us to establish a parallel with musical interpretation as a communicative action.

- Programmatic intention, in this case study, was developed through collaboration prior to the composition process: the performer introduced the instrument to the composer, suggested effective techniques, and described instrumental characteristics, namely: the type of dynamic contrasts, the effects obtained through specific pedaling effects, arpeggiation, and flexible tempo choices; the composer departed from a situation of near absence of contemporary repertoire for the instrument and had to find a suitable way to express her intention.
- Active intention was developed in alternating joint and individual work sessions. In joint sessions matters of articulation, tempo, pedaling were discussed, and some changes were gradually introduced; in individual
work sessions, both composer and performer worked on their own vision of the piece for further discussion.

- Final intention was shared by composer and performer, who centered their attention in details that differed in some instances: the composer mostly focused on structural coherence and impact, whereas the performer was more focused on aspects such as effective dynamic contrasts, expressivity, and even articulation.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The concepts of authorship and intentionality can be successfully applied to procedures of collaboration between composers and performers that promote exchange and mediation. Intention emerges thus not in its now outdated perspective of mandatory fidelity to the composer’s directions, but as the core of a collaborative and creative process in which intention is envisaged from the standpoint of the performer as well. Furthermore, the description of the phases and level of exchange between performer and composer demonstrate that intention can be addressed and described as a multi-level concept shared by composer and performer alike.

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**References**