

Virtuosity: Some (quasi phenomenological) thoughts

Francisco Monteiro^{1,2}

¹ Research Center for Sociology and Aesthetics of Music,
New University of Lisbon, Portugal

² Superior School of Education, Porto Polytechnic Institute, Portugal

This main goal of this paper is to discuss music performance in terms of what is called virtuosity. There is a certain view of music performance that gives emphasis to what the public and music theorists call “virtuosity in music”. It appears that certain performances—of *virtuosi*—are more relevant, more accurate, more expressive, more fluent, more impressive, more (or less) something. Even certain music works apparently were design to be played specifically by virtuosi: to be performed with virtuosity. This paper proposes a possible phenomenological, social, and cultural approach to virtuosity, suggesting definitions, implications, and different types of virtuosity. It recalls the ideas of theorists (Adorno, Kant, José Gil, Merleau-Ponti) and of music aesthetics (Jankelevitch, Brelet, Rahn, Collins) concerning performance, musical works, and virtuosity. In doing so it confronts anthropological theories, semiotics, and the multiple music practice, proposing different kinds and different ways to understand virtuosity. It also questions the values and the use of this noun as meaningful in terms of music theory, or simply indicative of a tendency when understanding music performance.

Keywords: virtuoso; virtuosity; performance; music culture; semiotics

The words virtuosity, *virtuosism*, and virtuoso/virtuosi lead us to very interesting views: *virtuosi* are those who practice different virtues such as perseverance, charity, honesty; but also *virtuosi* are persons with special demiurgic powers, capable of doing things that commoners can only dream of.

We do not know for sure how morally *virtuoso* Orpheus was or which vices he fought. We know that he enchanted wild beasts with his music. Even

Hades, master of death, was delighted by Orpheus's lira. The myth of Orpheus shows us musical beauty and expressiveness as an extreme bond between performer and listener, and reflects the power of sound structures to captivate will. This is, in my view, one of the faces of musical virtuosity—the Orphic virtuosity.

Virtuosity also means the possibility to bypass some kind of impossibility. In the empirical world, in manual inventions, relationships, communication, or anywhere that a body is present as a subject, virtuosity is the capacity to go beyond reality, to cheat triviality. Virtuosity reinvents a—perhaps diabolic—body capable, as Prometheus, of touching the untouchable: closer to the absolute, to the gnosis, to the Gods.

MAIN CONTRIBUTION

Musical virtuosity

Virtuosity is a very common word used in the musical world: Clementi, Dussek, Paganini, Talberg, Mosheles were known as *virtuosi*. Liszt, a *virtuoso* of the piano, was seen as an amazing improviser, perhaps the *nec plus ultra* of virtuosity. Before him virtuosity was seen in many other composer/performers, such as the devilish Tartini, the widely known *prete rosso* Vivaldi, and Domenico Scarlatti. Some people also see J. S. Bach as a *virtuoso* because of his virtues as a composer and as a performer. He not only composed pieces which reveal incredible counterpoint technique but he also composed, played, and improvised publicly *virtuosic* pieces (*toccatas, fantasies, suites*). Francesco Landini, of the Italian *trecento*, was also a great composer, a distinguished poet, and a brilliant blind player of several instruments, especially the portative organ. Could we say that he was a *virtuoso* of this instrument?

Virtuosity as sacrifice: Prometheus

Virtuoso performances are, at first, a kind of circus performance, where the Olympic motto *Citius, Altius, Fortius* (swifter, higher, stronger) characterizes specific virtues in musical performance. As in a circus, performers are supposed to increase and overlap their body restrictions, or even to forget their own body and physical pain, in order to produce a series of movements with a musical instrument, resulting hopefully in structured sounds: in music. Virtuoso performers play the instrument very fast or very slow, very strong, or for a very long time; but most important is that it has to be somehow understood by the audience as an amazing musical performance. The

audience has to be astonished by the performance, or their expectations of astonishment have to be fulfilled.

Interesting in this matter is the understanding of performance as a kind of civilized emulation of an ancient ritual of human sacrifices (Collins 1994, Adorno 2002). In these ancient rituals, the public, avid of blood, expects the killing of a virgin or of a young person—symbols of purity or innocence—by the hands of a wise person—a priest. This ritual assassination, a cruel act with no other purpose than the sacrifice itself, will calm the gods and the public, conscientious of the generosity of the gift—a young pure person, the purest among the community, perhaps a son or daughter of the priest or of the noble ones. Most important though, the ritual assassination will calm down the frustrations of the public and their anthropological need to fulfill violence and death. As we know, animals substituted humans in ritual sacrifices. Even drama—in the theatre, in opera, even in television series and soap operas—with its capacity to show expressive chunks of compressed and enclosed reality, serve as substitutes to our ancestors' ritual murder: the blood is only symbolized in the antagonism of the theatrical situations, ending, in a very civilized way, with the death (as in Sofocles's *Oedipus* or Verdi's *Rigoletto*), capture of the bad guys (in Dirty Harry films), or the marriage of the antagonist families “until death do us apart” (in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and Brazilian soap operas). In music performance, especially in a virtuoso performance, the blood is symbolized by the conflict between the performer and his physical limitations, or between the performer and the exigencies of the music he's supposed to play; or, in a very scholarly way, by the conflict between performer and instrument.

Virtuosity as seduction: Orpheus

The Olympic Promethean performance is, in my view, only one of the faces of musical virtuosity. An Orphic version of virtuosity is a little subtler.

Many people appreciate in musical performance, besides the excitement of more or less inebriant virtuoso cascades of sounds, the beautiful sound qualities of a musician, the exuberance of the expressive means employed, or the subtleties of an intense *cantabile*. Sometimes it seems that the music performed in a violin or in a clarinet speaks like a voice, having comparable subtle changes of rhythm, dynamics, attacks, or timbre.

Virtuosity as seduction: Touching the sublime

Such a view of virtuosity is reminiscent of the concept of sublime, a level of appreciation applied, according to Kant (1911, p. 98), to the fine arts: “the sublime is that, the mere capacity of thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense.” A sublime performance—in my view both in a bullfight and in music—touches the absolute and sets in motion the public’s mind, reacting at first with repulsion but quickly changing to attraction (Kant 1911, p. 107). Sublime performances are not a function concerning only the body of the performer, or the body of the performing elements: they concern all subjects and all the circumstances present. The body is also the public, the instrument, the place, the time, and the public’s (or subject’s) psychological conditions.

Musical virtuosity: First suggestions

The body

It seems that the body of the performer is somehow important for some virtuoso musical performances. Virtuosity needs the mastering of the body, enabling the performance of musical works that seem to be incredibly difficult (or incredible performances of one apparently not so difficult work). This bodily virtuosity can manifest in two ways. In the first instance, the performance seems to go beyond physical frontiers. The body is an obstacle, an impediment that the virtuoso has to overcome. It seems then that the performer is liberated from those bodily restraints; the music flows and seems to be easy; there is no unpleasant or fearful body there, no restrictions for the pleasure of musical virtuosity. Secondly, virtuosity can also be seen as the apotheoses of the body, here understood as an opponent that has to be conquered. Mastering the body (movements, tensions, time), enables the performance of prodigious works, composed in an intentional sadistic and devilish way, intended to be a torture, to be conquered by the performer.

The sublime

Orphic virtuosity has, in this analysis, different properties: virtuosity can be seen as the revelation, the presence, or evidence of the sublime. I would like to show two slightly different ways of musical sublimity.

1. One of the ways of experiencing this sublimity is when a performance seems to be a unique moment of communication, an exceptional symbiosis of the subject (the public), the performer, and the context; a

moment, or circumstance, characterized not only by a common frame of cultural references but specifically by a common symbolic language including sound, movements, ambiance, and time.

2. A second slightly different view is what can be called “expressive ecstasy.” In this case, the performance is understood as an enormous flow of expressive musical forms. It assumes the premise that music is utterly expressive or that it can provoke emotive experiences on the public. The expressive ecstasy is the astonishment in face of an overwhelming emotional moment.

Musical virtuosity: Second suggestions

Virtuosity raises, however, some other questions relevant by its nature as communicational phenomena between listener and performer.

1. Virtuosity: any kind of virtuosity is just a way of understanding performance. It is utterly *aesthesis*, an understanding of a communicational act as a function and as a specific moment.
2. To assess whether a specific performance is (or is not) a virtuosic performance remains something confined to the time, place, instruments, ambiance, and circumstances of performance.
3. Virtuosity has been measured—quicker, lighter, more expressive, more authentic— and is becoming a surplus commodity, which can be exchanged in the commerce of cultural goods.

IMPLICATIONS

Virtuosity seems to have been present in western music since the end of the Middle Ages. It is associated with the assumption of an authorship and of music making as a creative unique act. It is also associated with the social evolution of music reception and music making, becoming a business product. Yet, it is much more a question of the conditions of the reception as something intrinsic to the performance itself. It is, sometimes, a mere illusion.

Virtuosity is also a peculiar view over music performance, which is the interpretation of a musical work resulting in its transformation in music: structured sounds that are actually heard. Mind, body, and context are always very meaningful for the performer, the instrument (an extension of the performer’s body), and for the listener. Risk, will, passion, excitement, and extreme feelings also seem to be very present whereas security, inattention, normality, regularity, conformity, and lack of feelings are far from virtuosity.

To be a virtuoso means to take risks, to amaze, to move; to understand virtuosity means to confirm a victory, to accept a challenge, to be amazed and to be moved by a performance.

The study of virtuosity raises many questions regarding the understanding of music performance in time and space, such as the social understanding of music, the relationships between composition, performance and reception, the ways people appreciate music in different contexts, the possibilities of performance, and the meaning of different types of music performance in music education. These thoughts and suggestions serve to help assemble a conceptual ground, a comprehensive theoretical basis for further empirical and theoretical researches in music performance.

Address for correspondence

Francisco Monteiro, Praceta Francisco Borges, 55, r/c, esq., Porto, 4200-310, Portugal;
 Email: franciscomonteiro@ese.ipp.pt

References

- Adorno T. W. (2002). *Quasi una Fantasia*. London: Verso.
- Brelet G. (1951). *L'Interpretation Créatrice*. Paris: PUF.
- Collins D. (1994). Ritual sacrifice and political economy of music. In J. Rahn (ed.), *Perspectives on Musical Aesthetics* (pp 9-20). New York: W. W. Norton.
- Csepregi. G. (2001). La Musique et le corps, Vladimir Jankélévitch sur l'art du piano. In G. Csepregi (ed.), *Sagesse du Corps* (pp 103-114). Aylmer, Québec, Canada: Éditions du Scribe.
- Gil J. (1980). *Metamorfoses do corpo*. Lisbon: A Regra do Jogo.
- Hofstadter D. R. (1999). *Gödel, Escher, Bach*. New York: Basic Books.
- Horkheimer M. and Adorno T. W. (1997). *Dialéctica de la Ilustración*. Valladolid, Spain: Simancas Ed.
- Jankélévitch Vl. (1979). *Liszt et la Rhapsodie, Essai sur la Virtuosité*. Paris: Plon.
- Kant E. (1911). *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Merleau-Ponty M. (1945). *Phénoménologie de la Perception*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Morgan R. (1999). *La Música del Siglo XX*. Madrid: Akal.
- Rahn J. (1994). What is valuable in art, and can music still achieve it? In J. Rahn (ed.), *Perspectives on Musical Aesthetics* (pp 54-65). New York: W. W. Norton.