

HAS THE ONTOLOGY OF MUSIC RESTED ON A MISTAKE?

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THE LAST TWO decades have witnessed a lively debate concerning the ontological status of musical works. Philosophers and musicologists have defended a variety of contrasting views on this topic, and the discussion of the merits and drawbacks of the rival hypotheses still occupies a central place in the controversy on the metaphysics of artworks. To a large extent, however, the parties involved in the dispute share an important philosophical assumption. Jerrold Levinson describes it as the 'widespread consensus' that a musical work is a 'variety of abstract object,' whose instances 'can be found in the individual performances of the work'.¹ This view of the ontological status of musical works, to which I shall refer as *Musical Platonism*, is the topic of this essay.

My aim is twofold. Firstly, I intend to unveil the often implicit role played by Musical Platonism in the considerations proposed in the literature on the ontology of music. It will turn out that the Musical Platonist stance influences not only the arguments of self-proclaimed Platonists, such as Peter Kivy, but also the theses proposed by philosophers of seemingly different philosophical persuasion. In section two of this paper, I discuss the importance of Musical Platonist assumptions in a popular argumentative pattern, which infers results about a work's ontological make-up from facts pertaining to the correctness of its performances. As an example, I focus on some aspects in the controversy between Levinson and Kivy on the importance of performing means. In section three, I turn to the widely accepted notion that the range of objects relevant for the inquiry into the ontological status of musical works should be limited to the prototypical examples of relatively recent Western 'serious'

music, i.e., to the products of cultural settings in which the concept of a musical work plays a central aesthetic role.

As the title of this paper may suggest, my description of the pervasive role played by Musical Platonism is not neutral. Indeed, my second aim is that of casting some doubts on the tenability (or at least the inevitability) of the Platonist standpoint in the ontology of music. Although I do not present knock down counter-arguments, I hope to convince the reader that, far from providing a well established and intuitively convincing approach, Musical Platonism is at best an unargued and questionable hypothesis.

1. The Road to Musical Platonism

The view that there *are* musical works is a *prima facie* plausible tenet. In particular, it provides a natural account of the fact that we commonly talk as if there are musical works, for instance when we apparently attribute to them properties such as that of being composed by Brahms, or of being representative of the late Romantic tradition. The acceptance of this position provokes questions concerning the ontological nature of musical works. One result that appears to be fairly conclusively established is that a musical work may not be identified with any of its performances. There are at least two argumentative strategies supporting this conclusion. The first employs the premise that, for some property *P*, a performance of a work, but not the work itself, has (or lacks) *P*. For instance, a performance of a work, but not the work itself, takes place at a certain time and in a certain location. It follows by Leibniz's Law that the work is distinct from that performance. This result may then be generalized to the conclusion that, given *any* performance of a work, it may not be identified with the work itself. Arguments of the second type appeal to the principle of transitivity of identity. In particular, Nicholas Wolterstorff argues that, given two distinct performances p_1 and p_2 of a work w , w may not be identical to both. But the identification of w with one of them, say p_1 , entails that p_2 , which is a performance of w , is also a performance of p_1 . And the idea of a performance of a performance, Wolterstorff claims, 'is impossible'.²

The relatively well established result that a musical work is distinct from any of its performances is usually taken as sufficient for the further conclusion that it must be an abstract object. This step is not inevitable, given that entities distinct from performances may nevertheless be concrete items. It may however be pointed out that

performances are the only *concreta* with at least some initial claim to the status of musical work, and that, in the absence of other plausible candidates, the foregoing arguments suffice to support the thesis that musical works are abstract entities. This thesis is the characteristic claim of what I call Musical Realism, in conformity to the common use of the label 'Realism' as denoting positions committed to the existence of abstract entities.

The *prima facie* plausible views of the Musical Realist typically provide the springboard to a stronger, and less immediately plausible tenet, namely the thesis that a musical work is an abstract entity of a special kind: it is an instantiable entity, i.e., a *universal*. This position is not equivalent to Musical Realism, given that universals form a proper subclass of the set of abstract entities: uncontroversially, certain abstract objects, such as sets, numbers, or propositions, are not instantiable entities. The passage from Levinson, quoted at the beginning of this paper, is unequivocally committed to the universalist standpoint, as is Peter Kivy's claim that 'musical works are universals, or types, or kinds, and the performances of them are particulars, or tokens, or instances'.¹ Moreover, this position is further enriched by Kivy and Levinson with another important assertion, namely the thesis that the performances of a work are instances of it (or, at least, the claim that they are importantly related to its instances—more on this *caveat* later). The thesis that a musical work is a universal, instantiated by its performances, is the trademark of Musical Platonism (hereinafter also simply 'Platonism').

Why should one subscribe to Musical Platonism? At one point, Kivy declares that its advantages are 'obvious', a confidence counterbalanced by the admission of being 'neither confident, nor altogether happy' in adhering to it.¹ In fact, the step from Musical Realism to Platonism is neither immediate nor *prima facie* convincing. The evidence which a Musical Realist needs to take into account is the apparent existence of an interesting relationship between certain abstract entities, the musical works, and items of a different kind, namely the events we tend to regard as those works' performances. But it seems to be questionable (to say the least) that the only plausible candidate for such an account is the model provided by the relationship between universals and their instances. Indeed, although arguments in favor of Musical Platonism are nowhere to be found in the recent literature on the subject, the reason for this lack of support does not lie in the conviction that it is an uncontentious and

self-evident position, but rather in the belief that the task has already been satisfactorily carried out:

'Why Platonize music?' I cannot answer this question here and now; and, quite frankly, I do not know if I could even answer it any better than it has already been by such elegant practitioners as Wollheim and Wolterstorff.'

It is however far from clear that the 'elegant practitioners' did indeed provide an answer to Kivy's legitimate 'why'. Within a single paragraph, Wollheim directly moves from the premise that musical works are not physical objects to the conclusion that they are entities instantiated by their performances:

once it is conceded that certain works of art are not physical *objects*, the subsequent problem that arises, which can be put by asking, What sort of things are they?, is essentially a logical problem. It is that of determining the criteria of identity and individuation appropriate to, say, a piece of music or a novel. I shall characterize the status of such things by saying that they are ... *types*. ... In other words, *Ulysses* and *Der Rosenkavalier* are types, my copy of *Ulysses* and tonight's performance of *Rosenkavalier* are tokens of those types.'

Similarly, Wolterstorff, immediately after having presented arguments against the identification of a work with its performances, merely states the characteristic tenet of Musical Platonism:

A performance of a work of art is an occurrence of it ...
Most if not all occurrence-works are universals, in that they can have multiple occurrences.'

Wollheim and Wolterstorff may well be entitled to develop more or less detailed versions of the Platonist approach to musical works, even in the absence of convincing arguments endorsing their conclusions. We, on the other hand, should be careful not to confuse considerations favouring at best the Musical Realist stance with reasons for embracing the Platonist paradigm. In particular, if my analysis thus far is correct, the initial plausibility of Musical Realism does not suffice as a justification for the confidence with which Musical Platonism has entered the contemporary debate on musical ontology.

In the next sections of this paper, I focus on certain important consequences stemming from the assumption of Musical Platonism. Before I turn to this task, however, I wish to clarify the *caveat* I left

unexplained a few paragraphs ago, namely the idea that, in certain versions of Musical Platonism, the performances of a work do not instantiate it, but are nevertheless importantly related to that work's instances. In particular, what I have in mind are two recent positions which propose a distinction between performances and instances, but which, in my view, still fit squarely within the Platonist paradigm. The first is Levinson's, which suggests that we identify the instances of a work with a subclass of its performances, namely with its *correct* performances.⁹ The other is Gregory Currie's, which holds that a work is an 'action type', consisting (among other things) of a sound structure and a 'heuristic', and instantiated by a certain event involving the work's composer.¹⁰ Both positions qualify as Platonist for my purpose in this essay, since in both of them the class of performances of a work is defined, one way or another, in terms of the instances of the universal element constitutive of the ontological structure of the work. According to the former suggestion, a performance of a work is a sound event appropriately related to an instance *i* of that work (e.g., one which sufficiently approximates *i*). According to the latter, a performance of a work must instantiate an element in the make-up of that work, i.e., the sound structure contained in the *n*-tuple with which the work is identified. As Currie puts it, a performance of a work involving a sound structure *S* 'instantiates the event type *playing of sound structure S*', that is to say, 'the work's pattern or structure'.¹¹

2. The Ontological Grounding of Performance Criteria

With or without the above mentioned epicycles, Musical Platonism entails an important, debatable result, namely the thesis that the class of a work's (correct) performances is determined by the ontological make-up of that work. Suppose for example that we agree that a musical work *is* a mere sound-structure (or, in Currie's case, *contains* such a structure). Uncontroversially, if it is granted that sound-structures are universal items, it follows that the instances of the work at issue (or the instances of the relevant element in the *n*-tuple representing it) are only sound-events which exemplify that structure. Given the Platonist thesis that a work's performances (or, in Levinson's case, correct performances) are its instances, it may be concluded that only exemplars of the structure at issue may qualify as that work's (correct) performances. Had we settled on a different ontological picture of musical works, other criteria of correctness

would have emerged on the basis of the Platonist interpretation of a work's correct performances as its instances. I refer to this consequence of Musical Platonism as the *ontological grounding* of performance criteria. This intimate connection between performance criteria and the ontological make-up of the work is particularly explicit in Steven Davies' discussion of the concept of authenticity. For instance, he writes that 'theories of musical ontology should tell us the type and range of properties which must be produced in an authentic performance of a work', and that 'what we require from an authentic performance of the work is a performance which ... truly represents that in virtue of which the work is the individual which it is'.¹¹

The relationship between the ontological constitution of a work and the class of its correct performances, as described in the principle of ontological grounding, is typically exploited by Musical Platonists in terms of arguments leading from certain intuitions about what counts as a correct performance of a work, to conclusions pertaining to its ontological nature. For instance, in this framework, the notion that any correct performance of a work *w* must begin with a certain pitch, produced by a certain instrument, indicates that *w* itself is the kind of universal instantiated by sound events of this type, i.e., roughly, that it is (at least) a structure of pitch sequences paired with instrument indications. In a footnote to a passage which identifies a work's instances and its correct performances, Levinson makes this kind of transition apparent:

If instrumentation ... is definitive of what a *correct* performance amounts to, this means that requiring proper instrumentation is essential to the kind, and constitutive of it.¹²

The Platonist strategy of inferring metaphysical conclusions from premises about performance criteria is at work in one of the prominent debates on musical ontology, that between Kivy and Levinson on the importance of instrument indications for 'fully notated classical compositions of Western culture'.¹³ In a nutshell, Kivy holds that musical works of this kind are mere sound structures, and Levinson objects that they are at least as complex as structures of sounds and performance-means (in Levinson's terminology, S/PM structures). In his essay 'Orchestrating Platonism', Kivy challenges Levinson's proposal by citing a variety of works, with respect to which indications of performance-means are apparently inessential.¹⁴ For instance, we are told that Gabrieli's *Canzona per sonar* may be exe-

cuted by 'any combination of instruments capable of realizing its sound structure', that sound events produced by a modern Steinway may count as performances of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, and that performances of Mozart's 40th symphony with or without clarinets are performances of one and the same work. Levinson counters that no sound events issuing from a 'versatile synthesizer' may count as performances of Beethoven's Quintet op. 16, and that no musician operating 'a computer or some novel string instrument using nonviolinistic technique' may perform Paganini's *Caprice* op.1, no.17.¹⁵

In the absence of an independent justification for the Platonist's endorsement of the ontological grounding of performance criteria, the arguments adduced by Kivy and Levinson in favour of their contrasting views in musical ontology are inconclusive. For if one rejects the Platonist interpretation of performances as instances of a work/universal, the conflicting evidence provided by either Kivy or Levinson fails to support any conclusion pertaining to the ontological make-up of the works at issue. Suppose for instance that, as Kivy insists, a sound event resulting from appropriately operating a modern Steinway may count as a performance, perhaps even a correct performance, of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Couldn't it still be the case that Bach's work *is* a Levinsonian structure, i.e., a complex consisting, among other things, of instrument indications (say, the indication that it be performed by some keyboard instrument of a type commonly used in Europe around 1730)? It could, if, *contra* Musical Platonism, one assumes that the criteria for correctly performing a piece of that kind allow the performer to disregard that particular aspect of the work's ontological make-up. In a non-Platonist view in this spirit, Bach's work may well be a Levinsonian S/PM structure, but the events which are accepted as correct performances of it do not belong to the class of that structure's instances. Suppose on the other hand that one grants Levinson that a sound event which perfectly instantiates the sound structure of Beethoven's op. 16 may not count as a performance of that work if it is produced by a synthesizer. Couldn't it be the case that the Quintet under discussion is constituted only by that sound structure, in the spirit of Kivy's theory? It could, if, contravening the Platonist stance, we agree that a correct performance of Beethoven's work ought to conform to the composer's indications of instrumentation, regardless of the irrelevance of such indications for the ontological make-up of the work.

3. History and Ontology

It seems undeniable that, even within the boundaries of 'fully notated classical compositions of Western culture', alternative criteria of performance correctness are operative in different historical periods and cultural traditions. This is a point which both Kivy and Levinson concede, even though they belittle its significance by accounting for it in terms of occasional deviations from what they believe to be the norm. Levinson, who champions the thesis that works are S/PM structures, labels works like Bach's *Art of the Fugue*, where no performance-means appear to be indicated, as 'the exception that proves the rule'.¹⁶ Kivy, who analyses compositions as pure sound structures, insists that works for which instrumental indications are essential are 'rare'.¹⁷ Such an analysis of recalcitrant cases as 'rare exceptions' has important metaphysical consequences, once the Platonist stance is accepted. For if the *Art of the Fugue* may be correctly performed without regard for performance-means, and if correct performances of it are instances of the universal with which it is identified, it must follow that the *Art of the Fugue* is not a structure consisting, among other things, of indications of performance-means. Similarly, if Mahler's symphonies (to pick a plausible candidate for Kivy's 'rare' instances) may be correctly performed only by ensembles appropriately involving 'odd members of the horn family', it follows from Musical Platonism that such works may not be conceived of as mere sound-structures. Thus, regardless of which side one takes in the debate between Kivy and Levinson, it seems to be a consequence of Platonism (together with certain plausible views of what it takes to perform the *Art of the Fugue* and a symphony by Mahler) that the tradition of Western fully notated 'serious' music is populated by objects belonging to importantly distinct ontological types. This is a conclusion which Stephen Davies explicitly draws in his essay 'The Ontology of Musical Works and the Authenticity of their Performances':

the totality of musical works from culture to culture and from time to time do not have any *single* ontological character.¹⁸

Davies' result is an outcome naturally emerging from the conjunction of the Platonist principle of ontological grounding with two relatively plausible theses: the conviction that musical works are produced within a variety of cultural and aesthetic contexts, and the real-

ization that little agreement is to be found across such contexts regarding what matters for correctly performing those works. It is a conclusion which amounts to the admission that no interesting univocal metaphysical result concerning a certain kind of objects, those we commonly call musical works, is to be expected from a Platonist approach, and that the philosophical conclusions derivable from such an approach may at best echo in an ontological jargon independently established aesthetic tenets regarding performance criteria.

Another approach has however been pursued as an alternative to Davies' ontological pluralism. Some have argued that musical works exist only as products of a relatively well defined, possibly fairly recent tradition, and that only cultural imperialism motivates our inclination to subsume under the label of 'work' types of musical activity belonging to different cultural contexts. Thus restricted, the range of musical works may turn out to be ontologically homogeneous, and apparent counter-examples may be relegated to a convenient metaphysical limbo. An attitude of this kind may for instance motivate Levinson's announcement that he had 'no pretension to arrive at an analysis general enough to accommodate music before, say, 1750'.¹⁹ Even Kivy, who apparently has a different idea from Levinson on what constitutes a prototypical musical work, writes that he intends his results to concern the 'most valued art music of the West', even though they 'may not be true for most of the world's music'.²⁰ So, apart from the question whether the *Art of the Fugue* or Mahler's symphonies should fall within or without the range of paradigmatic musical works, there seems to be a widespread attraction to the view that a particular context, defined in cultural and aesthetic terms, constrains the class of items of interest to the musical metaphysician. A common choice for such a context, though clearly not the only plausible one, focuses on the emergence, hegemony, and development of the Romantic aesthetic attitude, during the last two centuries in the history of Western music.

Note that Levinson's determination to concentrate on the Romantic and post-Romantic tradition, and Kivy's broader concern for 'valued art music of the West', may not be interpreted as innocent and unassailable decisions to focus one's field of inquiry. Given that the issue is that of determining the ontological profile of a musical work, any arbitrary restriction of the class of relevant examples may yield unreliable and biased conclusions, comparable with the results one may reach, were one to develop a description of, say, the *canis*

familiaris, based solely on the observation of Labrador retrievers. In fact, the view that musical ontology ought to focus on (a privileged subclass of) the works of relatively recent, 'serious' Western music, is typically presented not as the sheer result of one's whimsical predilections, but as the outcome of certain important historical and aesthetic considerations. Particularly telling in this respect is a footnote to 'What a Musical Work Is Again', in which Levinson justifies his bias for the creations of the last two centuries by endorsing Lydia Goehr's claim that 'the very *concept* of a musical work does not jell, does not exist completely in recognizable fashion, until around 1800'.²¹ In Goehr's framework, this thesis is developed into the radical conclusion that musical activity taking place in cultural contexts deprived of the concept of a musical work results in the mere production of 'ephemeral' sound events, and is unable to yield any enduring work at all.²² In other words, according to this approach, it is only recent musical practice which generates exemplars of the relevant ontological kind, thereby providing a strong motivation for the decision to base one's analysis of the ontological status of musical works *simpliciter* on the features characteristic of relatively late products.

This strategy sacrifices generality in favour of ontological uniformity: according to it, most of what we would pre-theoretically think of as a musical work turns out to be nothing of the sort, but, in exchange, the class of musical works may plausibly be interpreted as falling under a uniform metaphysical type. Clearly, the success of such a programme is in part dependent upon the plausibility of the surprisingly narrow time span within which cultural practice is recognized as governed by the concept of a musical work. But it is not this premise of the argument embedded in the foregoing considerations that is important for my purpose in this essay. What is most interesting here is rather the fundamental step involved in the argumentative pattern sketched above: for it is far from obvious that if the *concept* of a musical work is not recognized as regulative in a certain cultural setting, then musical activity produced in that setting does not result in the production of *objects* falling under that concept. The fact that this controversial transition is typically taken for granted is a testimony of the unjustified confidence with which the Platonist paradigm has been welcomed. In the absence of the very idea of a musical work, so one may argue, musical practice may not be regulated by the ideal of 'fidelity to the work', that is to say, by criteria that define a class of sound events as a class of 'same-work perform-

ances'. And if a cultural tradition does not so regulate musical practice, then it may be safely concluded that there *are* no standards of correctness governing that practice at all. But if there are no performance-criteria operative in the cultural context under discussion, it follows from the Platonist stance that no musical works may be produced by musical activities within that tradition. For if there were works, according to a Platonist, they would be universals determining a class of sound events as correct performances, i.e., they would be entities carrying standards of correctness within their very metaphysical constitution.

4. Conclusion

In the first section of this paper, I distinguished the dominant approach to the ontology of music, which I called Musical Platonism, from the *prima facie* plausible hypothesis of Musical Realism. Unlike Realism, Platonism does not enjoy the methodological privilege of pre-theoretical attractivity: although it is undeniable that musical works bear an important relationship to events of a certain kind, their performances, it is by no means obvious that such a relationship ought to be explained by bestowing works with the status of instantiable universals. Yet such a controversial and questionable assumption has come to occupy a central role in the contemporary debate on musical ontology without any convincing argumentative strategy in its favour.

As I explained in the subsequent sections of this paper, the research programme stemming from such an unwarranted conjecture has proven to be remarkably unfruitful from the ontologist's point of view. It is true that the Platonist focus on performance criteria has called the philosopher's attention to a variety of interesting musicological issues, such as the study of musical practices in different historical and aesthetic settings, and the analysis of the regulatory role played within these practices by certain aesthetic concepts. However, there is little the metaphysician of a Platonist persuasion may add to the conclusions reached by the musicologist and the cultural historian, except for a rather uninformative rephrasing of such results in the terminology of traditional ontology: given the independently motivated thesis that any correct performance of a given work *w* must conform to certain properties *Ps*, all we are entitled to infer in virtue of the Platonist's commitment to the principle of ontological grounding is the not so startling conclusion that *w* is the kind of structure whose instances must bear the *Ps*. In other words,

as a result of the Musical Platonist paradigm, the initially promising programme of investigating the ontological constitution of musical works is abandoned in favor of the important but metaphysically less urgent analysis of the relationships existing between works and their performances. Not surprisingly, whenever such an approach is coupled with the discovery of a variety of performance criteria operative in different historical contexts, it yields either Davis' admission that the class of musical works fails to provide a metaphysically interesting kind, or Goehr's contention that such a kind at best contains a dramatically restricted list of specimens. In either case, the Musical Realist project of unveiling the interesting ontological features of those objects we commonly regard as musical works has been abandoned.

Notes

- 1 J. Levinson, 'What a Musical Work Is', *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980), pp. 5-28; reprinted in J. Levinson, *Musical Art & Metaphysics* (Ithaca and London, 1990), p. 64.
- 2 N. Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford, 1980), p. 36.
- 3 P. Kivy, 'Platonism in Music: Another Kind of Defense', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 24 (1983), pp. 245-252; reprinted in P. Kivy, *The Fine Art of Repetition* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 59.
- 4 See P. Kivy, 'Platonism in Music: A Kind of Defense', *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 19 (1983), pp. 109-29; reprinted in *The Fine Art of Repetition* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 35; and P. Kivy, 'Platonism in Music: Another Kind of Defense', p. 59. As a referee pointed out to me, a Platonist understanding of *some* items associated with musical composition may have at least *prima facie* plausibility: melodies or rhythmic patterns, for example, may perhaps be interpretable as instantiable items. This tentative proposal is however importantly distinct from the full-fledged Musical Platonist stance I discuss in this paper, according to which musical *works* are universals, exemplified by their correct performances.
- 5 P. Kivy, 'Platonism in Music: A Kind of Defense', p. 57.
- 6 R. Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, second edition (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 74-5.
- 7 N. Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art*, p. 36.
- 8 J. Levinson, *Musical Art & Metaphysics* (Ithaca and London, 1990), p. 236.
- 9 G. Currie, *An Ontology of Art* (New York, 1989), pp. 66-77.
- 10 G. Currie, *An Ontology of Art*, pp. 75-6.
- 11 S. Davies, 'The Ontology of Musical Works and the Authenticity of their Performances', *Nous* 25 (1991), pp. 21-41 (pp. 21 and 25).
- 12 J. Levinson, 'What a Musical Work Is, Again', in *Musical Art & Metaphysics*, pp. 215-63 (p. 236, footnote 44).
- 13 J. Levinson, 'What a Musical Work Is', pp. 64-5. More correctly, as a referee suggested, such qualification should pertain to the *contemporary understanding* of the Western classical tradition; more on related issues in section three.

- 14 See P. Kivy, 'Orchestrating Platonism', in T. Anderberg, T. Nilstun and I. Persson (eds.), *Aesthetic Distinction Essays Presented to Goran Hermerén on His 50th Birthday* (Lund, 1988); reprinted in P. Kivy, *The Fine Art of Repetition*.
- 15 See P. Kivy, 'Orchestrating Platonism', and J. Levinson, 'What a Musical Work Is' and 'What a Musical Work Is, Again'.
- 16 J. Levinson, 'What a Musical Work Is', p. 74, footnote 19.
- 17 P. Kivy, 'Orchestrating Platonism', p. 88.
- 18 S. Davies, 'The Ontology of Musical Works and the Authenticity of their Performances', p. 37.
- 19 J. Levinson, 'What a Musical Work Is, Again', p. 231.
- 20 P. Kivy, 'Platonism in Music: Another Kind of Defense', p. 59.
- 21 J. Levinson, 'What a Musical Work Is, Again', p. 232, footnote 36.
- 22 See L. Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works. An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford, 1992), for instance p. 150.