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Together but not 'together': a radical phenomenology of ensemble performance

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Together but not 'together': a radical phenomenology of ensemble performance

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in the Department of Music

Abstract

This thesis develops a radical alternative paradigm for thinking about classical music, and especially about the idea of 'ensemble'. It falls into two parts. The first is a broad theoretical sweep, the five chapters of which introduce successive layers of context, unified by the metaphor of brain hemisphere difference (McGilchrist 2012). Part 1 opens with philosophical debates regarding music's ontological status, before investigating two important 'art world' contexts that pertain to ensemble praxis: the string quartet genre, and the idea of 'historically informed performance'. The discussion then focuses more closely on the Czech String Quartet, musicians who set down a handful of fascinating – and, to modern ears, provocative – recordings in the late 1920s. The final chapters of Part 1 draw upon this early recorded evidence in two very different ways: one explores key aspects of the phenomenology of string playing, while the other examines the significance of the 'logic of division' within empirical studies of ensemble, and indeed musicological inquiry more broadly.

The second part puts this theoretical frame into practice, through a detailed report of an experiment in performance. I draw on my experience as a cellist and string quartet player to explain a process in which my own ensemble colleagues and I engaged directly with the Czech Quartet's manner of playing 'together but not 'together''. These insights do not represent a descriptive survey, nor are they intended as a 'last word' on the Czech Quartet's musical style. Instead, they give an indication of avenues for thinking about music 'and' performance which might be opened up by interrogating the ideological, historical, and epistemological contexts of the idea of 'good ensemble'.

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Introduction

I.

This thesis attempts to explain, and then to transcend, a central incoherence in musicology's current understanding of 'ensemble performance' in Western Art Music.¹

At its heart is a selection of recordings made by the Czech String Quartet – an ensemble of high repute that was formed in the late nineteenth century, and traces of whose playing were captured in the late 1920s.² My concern is not only to describe and understand these musicians' 'performance style', but to show how this evidence cuts across discourse in several ways at once; and to explore the challenges and opportunities it presents for the epistemology of ensemble.

My starting point in this task is to look at the broad philosophical, aesthetic and historical modes that have traditionally underpinned musicological inquiry, and to explore how these have been transplanted into the study of performance. For the structure of this discourse has generated a significant tension between two key regulative concepts. On the one hand, we have notions of faithfulness to the musical object, usually oriented around twin poles of 'compositional intention' and historical evidence. On the other, we find a pervasive but often implicit imperative towards a procedural, decontextualised, even autonomous understanding of 'good ensemble'.³ A central concern of this thesis is to bring these two tangential 'modes' into closer – and hopefully more coherent – contact. What sorts of beliefs, dispositions and narratives underpin the study of ensemble performance in WAM? In the special context of the string quartet genre, how easily can established intellectual frameworks (and dominant aesthetic ideologies) be reconciled with the evidence of early recordings? What are the further implications of this tension? And how might an alternative paradigm allow the insights of performing musicians to be integrated more coherently into our understanding of ensemble praxis?

Answering these questions will involve identifying and critiquing some important *a priori* assumptions, many of which are a direct result of cultural conventions having been misrecognised as essential, abstract, and decontextualised benchmarks. This assessment fits into a broader trend in contemporary scholarship, in which the evidence of change in performance style over time casts significant doubt on the reliability of insights drawn 'only' from notated scores.⁴ In this view, admitting the role of experience in shaping those observations reveals the limits of the work concept – at least as a coherent basis for one's epistemology – because it undermines the

¹ I follow Nicholas Cook in abbreviating this term to 'WAM'.

² [Example 0.1](#) Dvořák, Antonín. *String Quartet in E-flat major*, Op.51. (B 92) ii. Dumka (Elegia). Rec. by Czech Quartet (1928; 2014); Dvořák, Antonín. *String Quartet in F major*, Op.96. (B 179). ii. Lento; iv. Vivace ma non troppo. Rec. by Czech Quartet (1928/29; 2018).

³ As we will see, the latter is closely associated with a model that equates performance with the literal execution of notation, which is held to be regulative, categorical, and deterministic – and which imagines expressive qualities as variations of, or 'on top of', that controllable baseline. For instance, "Synchronization between ensemble members contributes in important ways to the quality of a musical ensemble performance and can be seen as one of their performance goals." (Timmers et al. 2014: 1).

⁴ I use quotation marks here because it seems increasingly implausible that such insights were *ever* isolated from the rich contexts of experience, even if musicology once believed this to be the case.

idea that stable artworks ‘themselves’ function as the main locus of music’s meaning (Cook 2018: 16; Leech-Wilkinson 2012).⁵ My analysis sits inside this larger-scale disciplinary move away from essences and towards contexts.⁶ The Czech Quartet’s recorded performances provide the sharp edge of the same scalpel, in that their radically unfamiliar conventions effectively cut through the layers of ideological inheritance which quietly permeate most contemporary paradigms for studying ensemble practice.

The implications of this diagnosis are not limited to the elevated contentions of aesthetics. Such inconsistencies point to the pressing need to develop a fundamentally new conceptual model – one that is better able to reconcile cultural contingencies with the apparently ‘neutral’ methodologies that have constituted an important strand of the recent ‘turn to performance’ (Cook 2013: 10; see also Ponchione-Bailey and Clarke 2020). To explain this, it is necessary to grapple with the special significance that abstraction has conventionally held in philosophical and aesthetic discourse on music. This has had direct consequences for the study of ensemble performance, because this characteristic mode – along with its many secondary implications – has shaped some foundational premises of that inquiry. In part because of the sheer philosophical range of contemporary discussions of WAM performance, this dependency has often gone unrecognised, meaning, in turn, that attempts to bring those different strands together often yield significant confusion. In an attempt to weave these diffuse threads around a more experiential and embodied core, I adopt the idea of ‘disposition’, in the specific sense of an attitude or relation towards experience (McGilchrist 2012: 4). This gambit allows for a clear diagnosis of the problem, and also points towards potential solutions, by recasting the fault lines that are permanent features of this treacherous philosophical landscape. I call this project a ‘radical phenomenology of ensemble’, then, because it is becoming increasingly clear that analytical models of praxis need to bring these various strands together more coherently – and they can only do this by starting with what musical experience is *like*.

—

The special challenge facing the study of ensemble in the context of ‘Western Art Music’ is that embedded paradigms and conventions interlock in such a way as to circumscribe one’s field of vision, resulting in confusion between (changeable) cultural norms and claims about ‘universal’ functions (or ‘mechanisms’).⁷ My rhetorical approach reflects this interlocking character. In the five main theoretical chapters of Part 1, I circle in on various aspects of this integrated superstructure to illustrate how they coalesce around a central metaphor. For the same reason, I will invoke relevant literature as the topics arise, rather than in a single introductory review.

If one is to get into the business of drawing distinctions, the most obvious conceptual-methodological contrast that springs to mind is surely between the venerable discourse of historical musicology – which has generally been concerned with questions of aesthetics, philosophy, social context, and agential processes; and the very different priorities, methods and inclinations of empirical investigation (Cook 2010). There are tensions here that

⁵ As Cook (2018: 16) has remarked, “performance styles have changed continuously and drastically during the little over a century of recorded music— as they no doubt did in the days before recording— and [...] how the music is played contributes massively to how it is experienced, indeed what it means.”

⁶ Indeed one can imagine the ‘most contextual’ level of analysis as that which is grounded in experience – and thus intimately entwined with questions of consciousness; see especially Clarke (2014), building on Gabrielsson and Bradbury (2011). For a more traditional ‘humanities’ perspective on this tension, see Taruskin (2020a).

⁷ See Meyer (1998) and Cook (2014); for historical analogues, see Taruskin (2008).

pertain to ensemble quite directly, and consideration of the Czech Quartet's recordings is an effective way of probing them. But I will argue, following philosopher and psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist, that there is another 'kind' of contrast in play here, between abstract, controllable, objectified, authoritative, categorised, broken apart and detemporalised 're-presentations'; and the qualities of openness, directness, specificity, contingency, uniqueness, flow, embodiment, fragility, and singularity that ultimately form a 'grounding' for musical experience (McGilchrist 2012). The phenomenology of (expert) performance draws attention to these metaphorical types, and perhaps also contains the seed of a reconciliation between them.⁸

Before getting to that stage, however, it will be worth setting out some context for the main themes I explore in the first (theoretical) part of this thesis. The wellspring for many of these ideas is the apparently inexhaustible anxiety concerning music's ontology. In order to understand what is at stake in the idea of ensemble, we have to go all the way back to the (remarkably) resilient sense that, in the context of WAM, at least, performance is necessarily 'of something'; and, further, that this 'something' not only presents the main object of interest, but (always) possesses an attendant regulative function. Scholarly perspectives on this issue remain mixed. Many are comfortable to admit that the very gesture of abstraction comes with intrinsic limitations, many of which are nuanced still further by a sophisticated understanding of the traditional 'work concept', and the specificity of its nineteenth century origins (Goehr 1992).⁹ But others continue to imply, however subtly, that the activity of performance is functionally synonymous with the "presentation of musical material"; that this "requires something *in addition* to the execution of that material" (italics mine); and that

in presenting the material to an audience, performers project at least some of its qualities into a performance space. In order to facilitate this projection, dynamics, phrasing, tempo, and articulation may need to be adapted or amplified so as to be suitable for the size and acoustics of the performance space, the expectations of the audience, and the nature of the occasion. (Thom 2020: 472)

This is a familiar way of imagining the relationship between abstractions on the one hand, and performances 'of' them on the other, and it is easy to see how it would spring from a literate tradition like WAM. But as a starting point for thinking about ensemble, this model builds in some hard distinctions which I believe are ultimately untenable. This can be seen most clearly by adopting a 'performer's eye view'. In short, such base-level separations – between 'secure' musical object and 'elusive' embodied expression – tend to yield further gestures of division, whereby the qualities ostensibly affiliated with the object 'itself' are treated as the true content of communication, with others – like gesture, for instance – relegated to mere, if natural, 'accompaniments':

...musical performance is naturally accompanied by bodily movements and gestures. [...] most instrumental musicians and singers engage to varying degrees in movements and gestures accompanying their music-making, more or less

⁸ For Høffding (2020: 308), "The performing professional musician [...] is a yet-untapped resource for the phenomenology of music: spending several hours on a daily basis honing her or his skills, thinking about the meaning and message of the pieces to be played, practising the relation between the manipulation of notes and the manipulation of emotions, and not least undergoing various forms of musical absorption; all this gives the expert musician a different, and in many ways a more intimate and intense, experience of music than that of the ordinary listener. This intensity derives not least from the fact that the musician, as opposed to the listener, actively produces the music through her or his bodily movements. The looping cycles of action and perception in turn give rise to experiences of intimacy such as a peculiar form of felt fusion with the instrument, with the music, and even with one's co-players."

⁹ See also Goehr (2000), Strohm (2000), Leech-Wilkinson (2012), and Cook (2013).

unconsciously. Empirical studies show that some of these movements help in communicating the music's expressive or representational qualities to the audience... (Thom 2020: 473)

The convention whereby some (pure) version of musical 'content' is held to be not just latent in notated scores but actually embedded in abstract 'works' has especially critical implications for how one conceptualises 'good ensemble' – and thus for how one studies its practice. This is where the values of particular cultures (and their discursive conventions) intersect with the epistemology of performance: in the case of WAM, the notion of faithfulness to particular works (or composers) has been the dominant force in regulating the demands made on performing musicians, in a variety of different ways.¹⁰ But more recently, the admission of certain types of historical evidence has made such claims appear rather more fraught and inconclusive – and sometimes entirely incoherent.¹¹

The habit of understanding performance in terms of this 'logic of division' has various knock-on effects. One is that it provides the conceptual basis for a philosophical obsession with categorical distinctions – of which the most famous example is surely Goodman's extensive concern for whether a performance can be said to be 'of the work' or not (Goodman 1969; cf. Ridley 2003). Another is the convention by which the activity of performance is equated with the manipulation of collected but distinct 'parameters'. This paradigm builds quite directly on the idea of abstraction, in that 'the music' is regarded mostly as given in notation, with its 'interpretation' conceived, accordingly, as a superstructural layer of parametric variation. In short, it implies that the performer is 'introducing something' to a pre-existing entity. This convention of 'breaking apart' has had a profound effect on how the 'intrinsic demands' of collective performance have conventionally been conceptualised and discussed. It also represents a key point of intersection between aesthetic-historical discourse, and empirical studies of ensemble.

The headline – if often paradoxical – concept of 'synchronisation' epitomises this dependence on seeing scores as regulative. Indeed it does so to such an extent that 'departures' are often considered not just ill-advised, but actually deviant:¹²

Musical scores outline the musical notes and their relative durations, yet many aspects of performance are not precisely defined in a score, including the tempo, expressive timing variations, phrasing, intensity dynamics, and variations in timbre. As such, ensembles not only have to perform their respective parts in a technically competent and synchronous manner, but they must also arrive at a shared understanding about how the piece is meant to be played—for instance, what expressive variations of tempo to introduce and where. This also means they must be able to anticipate each other; the compound delay from sensory processing and motor planning makes it impossible to rely only on a reactive or feedback strategy to produce synchronized variations. If a musician waits to hear how fellow

¹⁰ This is the central focus of two of the following chapters: Chapter 2 deals with this in the context of the string quartet genre; and Chapter 3 discusses the influential idea of 'historically informed performance' as a filter of compositional intention.

¹¹ A powerful recent example of this is Anna Scott's work on Johannes Brahms, who shows how "despite a deep-seated belief in the historical validity of their performances, pianists are still reluctant to play in ways that come anywhere near those evidenced by the recordings of the Brahms circle of pianists." (Scott 2014a: 241). In many ways my analysis of the Czech Quartet parallels this diagnosis of inconsistency, this time putting resilient, generalised string quartet conventions up against surprising evidence of historical practice (and reception). Many other researchers in the field of 'historical performance' have suggested that the prizing of ensemble 'togetherness' should be regarded as a convention, one that cannot necessarily be projected back into the Nineteenth Century (Milsom 2012: 38).

¹² Basic language is often unintentionally revealing in this respect; one study focused "...on a moment of live performance in which the entrainment amongst a musical quartet is *threatened*" (Geeves et al. 2014: abstract, italics mine).

musicians will slow down at a phrase ending, for example, it will be too late to slow down precisely with them. (Wood et al. 2022: 107)

Musical ensembles are able to produce coherently coordinated sounds with impressive accuracy and precision. Despite numerous factors that increase temporal uncertainty—such as noise in the performers' motor control systems, spontaneous expressive playing, and different interpretations and playing styles among co-performers—ensemble musicians manage to keep asynchronies between their sounds small and consistent; around the 30–50ms range, on average. (Ragert et al. 2013)

Emotional expression is a central goal in music performances, and performers often depart from the notated score to communicate emotions and musical structure by introducing microvariations in intensity and speed. Music ensemble performers therefore must coordinate not only their actions, but also their joint expressive goals. For musicians in an ensemble, sharing a representation of a global performance outcome facilitates joint music performance (Chang et al. 2019: 1)

Most forms of ensemble performance require musicians to coordinate their actions with one another in order to realize a common musical goal. These requirements go beyond the cognitive and motor demands imposed by solo music performance [...] in that the expressive parameters—particularly the timing of tone onsets—of each musical part or instrument have to be synchronized with those of the other performers. (Goebl and Palmer 2009: 427)

The discourse on ensemble performance thus seems to exhibit remarkable agreement about what ought to constitute the musician's proper aims.¹³ But there are two problems. First, these specific concerns are manifestly unstable historically. This is viscerally illustrated by the Czech Quartet's recordings and their profoundly unusual attitude to the demand that ensemble players be permanently concerned with 'synchronising note onsets'. To me, that (implicit) claim feels like a basic philosophical misunderstanding, whereby a musician's attentiveness to the flow of experience is mistaken for the procedural, black-and-white alignment of artificially isolated, abstracted, discrete 'events', encoded in well-behaved, manipulable but ultimately lifeless symbols. Second, both the 'abstraction-first' paradigm of performance and the parameter-based model to which it gives rise are practically 'wired' to present a reductive, one-sided view of the experience of making music with others. It is a view that seeks *a priori* to control what that experience should be – and ignore, conversely, what it could be. In the face of growing evidence that people relate to music like a person, rather than as a 'thing', and that music is uncannily effective at modelling feeling states, attempts to shoehorn the rich interactions between human performers into increasingly bureaucratic models of execution would surely represent a regressive step in understanding – even if those attempts did not also neglect the (aesthetic-ideological) contexts in which that paradigm took root.¹⁴ The role of the historical evidence, in this context, is really to make more obvious something that, from a phenomenological perspective, is *always* true of music 'as performance'.

There is an interesting paradox, then, in the way a discourse that claims to explain the 'complex factors' involved in ensemble performance is liable to end up artificially (if unintentionally) circumscribing the boundaries of the phenomenon it purports to investigate. This pattern regularly presents closed loops: because it contains its own

¹³ Consider the content of the assertion that "While successful synchronisation provides a foundation for a high-quality performance, coordination of other parameters is important as well. In the Western classical music tradition, expressive parameters such as dynamics and phrasing must be carefully aligned" (Bishop et al. 2021: 182).

¹⁴ On music's lifelike qualities, see Watt and Ash (1998), Parncutt and Kessler (2006), and Gallese (2017).

referents, it is inclined to choose only samples that already fit its basic claims. Such thinking is resistant to outliers, including historical ones. The specificity of discursive metaphors plays a part here: to posit a 'system', for instance, is already to imply that an ensemble has the qualities of a machine, in which identifiably interacting parts come together in the execution of a well-defined task.¹⁵ The assumption that music inheres in collections of interacting parameters is clearly analytically helpful: the idea of 'synchronisation', to take a conspicuous example, presents a 'well-defined task' in a way that could never be matched by a phenomenological account. The intrinsic 'wholeness' of the latter is easily perceived as an analytical shortcoming: as somehow less 'real' than the harder, more reliable, more concrete data. Similarly, the concept of 'shared representations' has been an influential overarching theme in the study of ensemble, although there has been disciplinary disagreement about its psychological reality (Clarke 2005b: 15). I will not debate the scientific truth of any such 'representations' here. That this idea *appears* such a good fit for explaining ensemble praxis, however, may tell us as much about the shape of that discourse, and the character of its methods, as it does about the experience of making music.¹⁶

A phenomenological approach does not solve these problems, but in presenting another explanatory 'spoke of the wheel' it introduces a rich context in which to situate our analytical reductions – and, most of all, to notice their character. It also shows that while the logic of division is foundational to certain kinds of analysis, for performers music is always an integrated experience: it arises 'all at once' in the moment of its unfolding, such that the specificity of timing,¹⁷ to take just one archetypal aspect, is never witnessed as separate from that flow of contexts.¹⁸

Another point of intersection between these discursive modes can be found in the utopian strain of language that, for a variety of reasons, is especially common to the string quartet genre. Perhaps surprisingly, the idealism of togetherness finds an interesting parallel expression in some strands of empirical research.¹⁹ Take, for instance, Bishop and Keller's claim that successful 'coordination' – which is held to mean "producing complementary outputs that are temporally aligned" (Bishop and Keller 2022: 419) – leads to the demonstrably positive outcome that

a shared sense of togetherness emerges among ensemble musicians. Feelings of togetherness may strengthen as

¹⁵ Pennill, for instance, relates how the string quartet has been seen "as a complex, dichotomous system in which the group coordinates through individual and collective action, through both implicit and explicit modes of communication." (Pennill and Breslin 2021: 5). Even more explicitly, D'Ausilio et al. (2015: 112) suggest that "Individual musicians function as processing units within a complex dynamical system [...] the system as a whole relies upon predictive models and adaptive mechanisms to meet the real-time demands of interpersonal coordination. As in more general forms of social interaction, co-performers behave in complex but formalized (rule-based) ways that are constrained by the tools they use (musical instruments), conventions (genre-specific performance styles and leader–follower roles), and often a script (the musical score)."

¹⁶ For instance, "To produce a cohesive ensemble sound, the pianists must hold a common goal; a shared representation of the ideal sound. This chapter begins by discussing ensemble cohesion and shared musical goals, and then goes on to describe research addressing three specific ensemble skills that are assumed to enable performers to achieve such goals." (Keller 2008: 206). See also Keller et al. (2016), MacRitchie et al. (2018), and Bishop and Keller (2022: 418). A related aspect of this discourse is the term 'coordination', which Clayton et al. (2020: 140) describe as "any process enabling medium and long-term musical processes (roughly > 2s) to be or remain temporally aligned. This can include the cueing of transitions and the use of mutual attention and coordinated body movement to manage changes or reaffirm a shared understanding of the musical structure."

¹⁷ Note that I quite literally mean 'timing' here – and not 'expressive timing'. As we will see, from a string player's perspective it is difficult to comprehend what an essential distinction between these categories would entail.

¹⁸ The problem is that this is not easily expressed in language; thus, one generally depends on inadequately explicit filters such as 'decision-making' – which are privileged still further by the idea that performers negotiate or 'express' (a) pre-existing structure.

¹⁹ For a more critical view of the utopianism of 'togetherness' see Ritchey (2017).

musicians find themselves aware and highly focused on each other's contributions to the performance, and at the same time able to coordinate seemingly without effort. (Bishop and Keller 2022: Abstract)

The implication is that we are dealing with a positive feedback loop: 'successful' temporal alignment leads to 'togetherness', which in turn leads back on itself, to easier facilitation of temporal alignment. But what of its inverse? Is it true that playing 'less synchronised' – if this is even meaningful, once one has ceased to think only in terms of parameters! – leads straight to presumably disastrous creative and interpersonal breakdown?²⁰ Historical evidence is a good starting point for critiquing this claim, for one can easily show that neither this convention, nor its prejudicial implication, has always been in place (Philip 2004; Llorens 2017; Stam 2019; Scott 2022). And it can be witnessed with special potency by comparing the Czech Quartet's recorded playing with the reports of contemporary audiences (and authorities).²¹ In Part 2, I go much further into the realm of phenomenology, because, as I have tried to explain, it is only that kind of engagement with these sources that can unlock the full implications of this collision between epistemologies. I report on an experiment in which my string quartet colleagues and I, inspired by the evidence of these old Czech string players, explored a way of making music together that is resistant to bureaucratic notions of ensemble – and, especially, to the synchronisation imperative that is so often held up as a self-evident truth of proper performance. Fortunately, the latter universe – in which discrete symbolic benchmarks take the place of flowing, intense and playful interactions between musicians – is not the one in which we live.

As will soon become clear, I use a particular overarching metaphor in order to reconcile dispositions that would otherwise lack obvious points of intersection – because they are working under radically different assumptions, and sometimes even 'covert' value systems (Levy 1987). My aims also parallel the recent work of performer-researchers like Anna Scott and Emlyn Stam, insofar as I am interested in seeing what happens when the surprising fragility of aesthetic norms and philosophical models – as revealed with special clarity by early recordings – bumps up against the basic conceptual foundations of ensemble discourse (Scott 2014b; Stam 2019; see also Leech-Wilkinson 2010a). That historical instability presents an opportunity to undertake a thorough contextualisation of the theoretical (and rhetorical) paradigms through which the study of ensemble is filtered. In noticing the imperatives – both explicit and implicit – that underpin this discourse, analysis leads inexorably towards broader questions concerning the relationship between musical experience and symbolic representations. It has conventionally been the latter that have regulated the conceptual landscape of ensemble; and it is from them that we inherit a dependence on separate variables, the language of deviation, and the notion of 'error correction'. If that constitutes one's philosophical starting point, familiar imperatives will seem like

²⁰ Usually this inference remains under the surface, but occasionally is made alarmingly clear, as here: "Social skills influence coordination ability during music ensemble performance as well as non-musical coordination capability. Keller (2014) suggested that for soloists or accompanists, "domain-general" factors (e.g., personality) affect their aptitude for music performance in terms of the level of coordination with the timing of others"; also including the claim that "daily social skills influence coordination in ensemble performance" (Kawase 2015: 352). Again, is the implication here that performers who do not 'coordinate' in the appropriate (normative) sense be deemed socially incompetent? I struggle to believe that this is the authors' intention; yet it is perhaps testament to the strength of WAM's ideology that theoretical frameworks for ensemble investigation frequently seem to regard this as an entirely reasonable conclusion. For a very different view, see Scott (2022).

²¹ A London reviewer early in their career described the group, then known as the Bohemian Quartet, as "exceptionally finished ensemble players" (Anon. 1897a: 243), while another wrote of "a style of delicious refinement as well as a perfect *mécanique* and a discriminating sense of their various composers' texts", remarking that "all went well and the *ensemble* was perfect" (A.M. 1899).

'natural' corollaries of competence. But it is not clear to me, as an ensemble musician with an interest in 'historical performance', how truthfully this conceptual basis (and its attendant pressures) actually maps onto the experience of making music with others. Neither does it survive contact with the critical tools of historical musicology, for a full appreciation of those contexts also leads, I think, to a diagnosis of philosophical incoherence.

This project, then, is an attempt to carve out a space for the elusive dimensions of music as the performer experiences them. These include, but are not limited to, judgement, specificity, context, convention, character, affordance, embodiment, and change. Is there a way to embrace these lifelike qualities alongside the powerful but limited tools which have so often been mistaken for the primary 'content' of music and its experience?

—

Part 1 is devoted to building this large-scale context. It opens at the highest 'level' of theoretical abstraction, with a discussion of the significance (for the study of performance) of the conventionalised gesture by which music and its experience become reified. In the process, I introduce a potent metaphor for thinking about the relationships between our various dispositions towards music, and which makes it possible coherently to embrace Daniel Leech-Wilkinson's observation of reciprocity between performance(s) and how scores are thought about. This relationship quietly underpins many aspects of WAM's cultural edifice.

In Chapters 2 and 3 I focus this broad perspective onto two examples of 'art worlds': elite string quartet culture, and the idea of 'historically informed performance' or ('HIP'). In both cases I refer to Howard Becker's sociological perspective on artistic practice and ideology (1982), placing this acknowledgement of social worlds – and especially their 'affordances' – in dialogue with the patterns of thought identified and critiqued in Chapter 1. My aim here is to generate a more coherent structure for understanding (ensemble) performance in terms of specific but *fluid conventions*. In the process, I draw attention to the ultimate fragility of those norms, and show how they are entwined with the dispositions that are elevated by WAM's discursive norms.

Chapter 4 adopts a very different mode of engagement with performance, to explore some curious aspects of how a string player relates to their instrument. These ideas are then put in contact with selected examples of the Czech Quartet's recorded playing, in a step which provides an important basis for the experimentation to come in Part 2. These observations are also directly related to my central metaphor (and its diagnosis), insofar as they draw attention to some important limitations of a disposition governed by abstraction and generalisation, and show what is involved in getting beyond them.

Chapter 5 performs a similar function from a different angle, by contextualising the contribution of empirical and analytical methods for studying ensemble performance. It looks at some of the philosophical, aesthetic and historical assumptions that are entwined with those methods; but its purpose is not only deconstructive. This disposition is briefly brought to bear on one of the Czech Quartet's recordings in order to demonstrate how that perspective deepens understanding, but in ways that can be recognised as *specific*.

As a whole, then, Part 1 unfolds in a kind of 'pincer movement', beginning with large-scale theoretical concerns and coming gradually closer to the 'content' of our historical example. Part 2 approaches the same sources in an entirely different way: through a direct encounter between the Czech Quartet and my own ensemble. In it, I

present an account of an experiment in which my musician colleagues and I attempt to understand their conventions – and especially the way in which they play ‘together’ – from ‘inside’. These observations could have extended for many more pages, for such a disposition is essentially unbounded by nature. This account is less formal than the content of Part 1; indeed this turned out to be unexpectedly relevant, given that a key concern of my theoretical argument is to accommodate such insights more effectively within the scholarship of performance. I suspect that the approachability of this material may be an asset, if its example encourages more performers to contribute their unique expertise to the project of understanding *music* – and not just a limited, decoupled, well-behaved, parallel sphere of ‘performance’.

I also want to acknowledge a conspicuous omission, for – very unusually for a discussion centred on WAM – composition and notation remain largely in the background. This is not because I see scores as unimportant or incidental, but because my interests lie primarily in ‘meta-analytical’ questions concerning the relationship between notation and experience. In particular, I am interested in how the specific values and conventions associated with performance have mediated that relationship. To see this reciprocity as fundamental need not mean downplaying the significance of compositional practice, or denying that relevant insights can be drawn from scores. But recasting notation more pragmatically, as *enabling of experience*, makes it easier to recognise both the character and the dependencies of the observations drawn from it. In the same vein, I will suggest that WAM’s ingrained habit of elevating symbolic or abstract representations – that is, the discourse’s implicit treatment of notation as an essential and reliable locus of musical truth – is much more coherently regarded as an intermediate transformation. My approach thus builds in a fundamental resistance to the idea that music inheres in static, implicitly controllable aesthetic objects. It is vital that this observation is not confined to a mere sprinkling of incidental caveats. Of course there is still a place for the discussion of scores, and I see no need to dismiss such contributions out of hand, provided both their character and their limitations are recognised clearly. Incorporating those insights has not been a main priority in developing the theoretical framework, however.

Another important caveat concerns the kind of information that can reliably be gleaned from recordings, especially those dating from the early twentieth century. Many of the problems associated with using recordings as sources have to do with the fact that they must be treated relatively, rather than absolutely. In the case of the early technology, it could hardly be more obvious that the perspective on performance they capture is manifestly not ‘neutral’. The frequency profile; the correct pitch/speed ratios; the presence of noise; uneven instrumental balances; the use of editing techniques (or not); and even the specific pressures on performers that might result from the environment – all of these contribute to the sense that recorded evidence always needs to be understood with a keen appreciation of context, and of their resistance to concrete or ‘final’ conclusions (Katz 2004; Trezise 2009; Leech-Wilkinson 2009a, 2009b). (Indeed the apparently greater ‘transparency’ of more recent technology does not change the fundamental importance of context, for neither are they ‘neutral’ documents). While the electrical recording technology of the late 1920s was a marked improvement on original acoustic techniques, there are still obvious limits to the kinds of details one can ‘pick out’ with confidence. In Chapters 4 and 5 I deal with these sources in a conventionally ‘close-analytical’ way, and so it will be important to bear in mind these limitations at those points.

But an interesting incidental implication of Part 1 is that this challenge may be mitigated – or at least usefully contextualised – when one’s epistemology is not built from black-and-white distinctions (and the aggregation of details), but instead retains the capacity always to see performance as contingent, flexible, and elusive. The experimental process of Part 2 necessitated a very different way of relating to that evidence – and also of hearing it. Copying required us to transcend categorical description and go ‘directly’ to the lifelike qualities of musical experience, and adopting this disposition meant acknowledging the sources’ contingent and contextual character almost by definition. Although it took a long time to emerge, this turned out to be one of the most important themes of the entire project. I hope performing musicians, especially, will find it to ‘ring true’ in the analysis; indeed it came into focus, in large part, through informal conversations with other players.

It seems apt that it was an idea encountered and understood only in performance, that came to underpin my theoretical investigation. Moreover, the practical example of the Czech Quartet offered much-needed clarity when pondering the philosophical and analytical entanglements that follow from treating music as ‘sounded writing’. Their example grounded my search for patterns of thought that are better equipped to account for the extensive evidence of change in WAM’s conventions – both in performance and in discourse (Leech-Wilkinson 2012; Cook 2014). For obvious reasons, the domain of elite chamber music presents an especially revealing context in which to attempt this. In a sense, then, Part 1 comes directly ‘out of’ what we discovered in Part 2’s experiment: I have characterised the discursive contexts of ensemble – many of which are deeply assimilated, and often go unnoticed – partly in an effort to make sense of our experimental findings. In the process, I show that those habitual patterns of thought are not arbitrary, but they are *specific*. To trace them means grappling with some foundational ontological assumptions, because it is only from there that we truly understand the affordances that pertain to ensemble musicians. It is crucial, I think, that one does not simply ‘let’ the evidence of early recordings point the way towards ‘more creative alternatives’, while leaving those foundations intact. Like Leech-Wilkinson (2012), I believe these sources suggest something much more consequential about the basic premises on which a great deal of musical and musicological discourse is constructed, and point towards some radically productive ways of thinking about music ‘and’ performance. In the following I simply pull on these threads, and follow where they lead.

Part 1: Contexts

Chapter 1: Musicology and the hemisphere metaphor

The idea of ensemble – and especially of ‘good ensemble’ – crystallises many of the challenges and the opportunities that flow from musicology’s recent embrace of performance. In this opening chapter, I explore some of the broad philosophical, ontological and epistemological contexts that have shaped the study of ensemble, in the specific context of ‘Western Art Music’.

Many important questions about ensemble cannot even be coherently posed without reflecting on the relationship between music ‘and’ performance. The large-scale view I adopt in this chapter lays the foundations for a new framing of musicological discourse which may help to solve some historical problems pertaining to ensemble praxis. While scholars have now begun to explore the implications of the idea that many aspects of how one thinks about music are, and have been, shaped by performing musicians, it remains far from clear how coherently the multifaceted phenomenon of ‘performance’ actually relates to the conceptual thinking that comes so naturally to academics. Given how deeply some of these conventions are embedded, how can one arrive at a productive synthesis that traces a coherent path through this maze? I will argue that it will not be sufficient to graft a fashionable new repertoire of abstractions onto a venerable model. Instead, a far more drastic shift in thought is required – one which means contextualising the central role that abstraction has traditionally played in the culture of classical music.

I. Ontology

We start – as so many questions in musicology must – with ontology. An extraordinary amount of ink has been spilled attempting to answer the question of what kind of thing the musical object ‘is’. For some philosophers and music theorists exploring (and establishing) the limits of this concept has bordered on an obsession, for it seems to present mind games that are too fascinating, too open-ended, too gloriously unanswerable, to resist.²² In recent years, however, some scholars have developed admirable sensitivity to the ease with which ‘talk about music’ slips into a disembodied, abstract universe; and more aware, too, that debating the endless – yet by now utterly conventionalised – theoretical nuances of ‘the musical work’ might have its limits as a way of understanding musical experience (Ridley 2003; Klorman 2016: xxiii; Clarke and Doffman 2017; Cook 2018; Leech-Wilkinson 2020a: 6/17).

These doubts do not constitute a wholesale repudiation of thinking of music-as-object. Instead, the tendency has been to recast that once-central pillar as particular: as one way among many, all of which are needed in

²² Archetypal examples include Goodman (1969), Levinson (1980), Kivy (1993), Predelli (1999), and Davies (2001). For a recent summary, see Nussbaum (2020).

addressing the complex role of music in human societies. Music now stands at the centre of an extraordinarily rich web of epistemologies, and that rebalancing – away from the traditional, ‘closed-loop’ domain of the abstract, and towards more embodied and social frameworks – forms an important context for my investigation. It will be worth setting out my perspective in some detail here.

Remarkably enough, in some corners of the discipline it seems as though the old ‘Platonic forms’ are now firmly on the defensive (Goehr 1992; Abbate 2004: 511-12; cf. Strohm 2000: 130-31). In the right circles, one can encounter a work concept that has been thoroughly historicised and philosophically dismembered, its continued regulative status for the ‘modern’ or ‘mainstream’ performer regarded as the object of mild pity. In many ways I share this distaste for an idea that has tended, whether via puritanical historicism or Platonic absolutism, to reduce the thoughts and actions of generations of performing musicians to little more than the dirt accrued to a painting – in the emotive words of Richard Taruskin (1995: 150). The notion that a performer would be ‘ideally transparent’ shares the same contemptuous undertones of servitude (Taruskin 2006b: 309-11; Leech-Wilkinson 2020a: 6/14). It is to the frustration of many performer-researchers like myself, then, that ‘the musical work’ (or similar) generally remains the *de facto* framework for most people’s encounters with classical music.

But in scholarship, too, abstract thinking about music remains far too useful for recent undermining of the work concept to herald a more general abandonment. That critique, though it has often been vociferously advanced in music philosophy and performance circles, has taken place in a specific and limited way. And so it seems possible that it is not only the esoteric philosophical character of this debate that has limited its relevance to broader discourse, but partly a lack of compelling alternatives.

My argument in the following will often appear to ‘take aim’ at abstraction. I may even give the impression, on occasion, that I consider the work concept to be musicology’s ‘original sin’, or the root of incoherence. But while I am critical of the stifling results of such thinking, my position should not be taken as simplistically pejorative. In an effort to weave a path through this landscape, and to cultivate the theoretical ground for a sufficiently even-handed exploration of the meanings of ensemble, I draw on an idea which stands helpfully outside musicology and its habitual patterns of thought: work on brain lateralisation by the philosopher and clinical psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist (2012).²³ I believe this offers a profound and provocative metaphor through which to read the epistemological tensions that are a by-product of any serious interest in music ‘and’ (or ‘as’) performance. In particular, it cuts through some of the complexity inherent in the relationship between ‘regulative concepts’ and musical experience(s). That relationship holds the key to a sophisticated understanding of ensemble, and I hope the perspective it uncovers will be intuitively familiar to musicians, listeners, and researchers. McGilchrist’s hypothesis is grounded in a vast body of experimental and neurological evidence, but it is also unusually revealing when taken only as a metaphor, and it is only in that latter sense that I invoke it here. The idea will act as a guiding thread for this thesis, and so it is worth introducing at length. At its simplest, the claim is that

for us as human beings there are two fundamentally opposed realities, two different modes of experience; that each is of ultimate importance in bringing about the recognisably human world; and that their difference is rooted in the

²³ I am not the first to note the import of these ideas for musical performance, although the full implications of this idea have not yet been explored. For a previous application to music, see Fabian (2015: 288-94).

bihemispheric structure of the brain (McGilchrist 2012: 3).

Throughout, McGilchrist casts these differences not as a collection of interrelated functions – as though parts of a mechanism – but as something more intuitive and life-like: as contrasting ‘dispositions towards’ (or ‘takes’ on) the world.²⁴ In terms of their interaction, the hemispheres cannot be said straightforwardly to be ‘either’ in competition or co-operation with one another; yet the experimental evidence suggests that when construed independently, those ‘takes’ are consistently, and manifestly different in character:

The world of the left hemisphere, dependent on denotative language and abstraction, yields clarity and power to manipulate things that are known, fixed, static, isolated, decontextualised, explicit, disembodied, general in nature, but ultimately lifeless. The right hemisphere, by contrast, yields a world of individual, changing, evolving, interconnected, implicit, incarnate, living beings within the context of the lived world, but in the nature of things never fully graspable, always imperfectly known... (2012: 174)

Crucially, the relationship between the hemispheres is not symmetrical (2012: 176). And at the root of that unevenness is a difference in attentional capacity: the right hemisphere “underwrites breadth and flexibility of attention”, and so is open to that which is both new and Other, while the left is crucial for anything that requires precisely targeted, and thus exclusionary, attention (2012: 27). This means that the left hemisphere is importantly reflective: it can only ‘re-present’ what has already been encountered (‘presenced’) by the right hemisphere. McGilchrist therefore regards the right hemisphere as having the crucial ‘integrating’ role in a tripartite process of synthesis, in which “whatever the left hemisphere does at the detailed level [needs] to be founded on, and then returned to, the picture generated by the right” (2012: 46). This is imagined as broadly analogous to Hegel’s idea of *Aufhebung* (McGilchrist 2012: 203-04): as a kind of ‘lifting up’, or ‘sublation’, in which “there is a progress from an intuitive apprehension of whatever it may be, via a more formal process of enrichment through conscious, detailed analytic understanding, to a new, enhanced intuitive understanding of this whole, now transformed by the process that it has undergone” (2012: 206).

This central difference in attention underpins another important contrast in the dispositions of the hemispheres, one which will prove especially helpful for thinking about music. The left hemisphere (re)constructs wholes from isolated, individual parts, unlike the right, which “sees things whole, and in their context” (2012: 27).²⁵ This point is expanded upon through the telling comparison between ‘knowing’ a collection of discrete facts about a person – name, date of birth, hair colour, and so on – given by the German word *wissen*; and ‘knowing’ somebody personally (in the sense of *kennen*). These definitions should certainly not be thought of as exclusively ‘mapping

²⁴ There are important subtleties here; McGilchrist (2012: 10) explains that “When I say the ‘left hemisphere does this’, or ‘the right hemisphere does that’, it should be understood that in any one human brain at any one time both hemispheres will be actively involved... But, *at the level of experience*, the world we know is synthesised from the work of the two cerebral hemispheres, each hemisphere having its own way of understanding the world [...] the world we actually experience, phenomenologically, at any point in time is determined by which hemisphere’s version of the world ultimately comes to predominate.”

²⁵ This difference here is very subtle: McGilchrist explains that “...one cannot say that one hemisphere deals with single items (‘units’), and the other with aggregates. Both deal with ‘units’ and both deal with aggregates. Thus the right sees individual entities (units), and it sees them as belonging in a contextual whole (an aggregate), from which they are not divided. By contrast the left sees parts (units), which go to make up a something which it recognises by the category to which it belongs (an aggregate). However, the relationship between the smaller unit and the broader aggregate in either case is profoundly different: as is the mode of attention to the world with which it is associated” (2012: 54).

onto' hemisphere functions; but they are nonetheless intuitively revealing.

Appropriately enough, McGilchrist remarks that it is that latter sense (*kennen*) which seems more commonly to capture people's relationship to music (2012: 96). The left hemisphere's 'take', meanwhile, generally has more in common with the discreteness (and the bureaucracy) of *wissen*: it is a powerful, but intermediate and limited process, by which humans 'grasp' and 'use' the world. For this, he argues,

attention is directed and focussed; the wholeness is broken into parts; the implicit is unpacked; language becomes the instrument of serial analysis; things are categorised and become familiar. Affect is set aside, and superseded by cognitive abstraction; the conscious mind is brought to bear on the situation; thoughts are sent to the left hemisphere for expression in words and the metaphors are temporally lost or suspended; the world is re-presented in a now static and hierarchically organised form. This enables us to have knowledge, to bring the world into resolution, but it leaves what it knows denatured and decontextualised. (2012: 195)

In contrast to the left hemisphere, which "needs certainty and needs to be right", the right is disposed to entertain ambiguity and continuity. That "tolerance of uncertainty", McGilchrist writes, "is implied everywhere in its subtle ability to use metaphor, irony and humour, all of which depend on not prematurely resolving ambiguities" (2012: 82). Along similar lines, he suggests that the right hemisphere plays a crucial role in allowing humans to form social relationships (2012: 28). And music, which is experienced in the body, in time, and not in terms of decontextualised entities but of constantly changing relations, can thus be seen as significantly (though not exclusively) mediated by the right hemisphere. His term for this quality – 'betweenness' – will prove vital to my observations on performance.

It is the relations between things, more than entities in isolation, that are of primary importance to the right hemisphere. Music consists entirely of relations, 'betweenness'. The notes mean nothing in themselves: the tensions between the notes, and between notes and the silence with which they live in reciprocal indebtedness, are everything. Melody, harmony and rhythm each lie in the gaps, and yet the betweenness is only what it is because of the notes themselves. Actually the music is not just in the gaps any more than it is just in the notes: it is in the whole that the notes and the silence make together. Each note becomes transformed by the context in which it lies. What we mean by music is not just any agglomeration of notes, but one in which the whole created is powerful enough to make each note live in a new way, a way that it had never (p.73) done before. (McGilchrist 2012: 72-73)

The primacy of context, and a sense of wholes in flux, is contrasted with the left hemisphere's reliance on clean divisions, static labels, and abstract categories. Moreover, the right hemisphere possesses a far greater capacity to appreciate uniqueness.²⁶ The left hemisphere is hugely resourceful, however, for the tool of abstraction allows for "elaboration (and aggregation) of its own workings over time into a kind of systematic thought which affords the

²⁶ The fine details of this distinction are worth quoting here, for the avoidance of doubt: "...it is the right hemisphere that has the capacity to distinguish specific examples within a category, rather than categories alone: it stores details to distinguish specific instances. The right hemisphere presents individual, unique instances of things and individual, familiar, objects, where the left hemisphere re-presents categories of things, and generic, non-specific objects... It is with the right hemisphere that we distinguish individuals of all kinds, places as well as faces. In fact it is precisely its capacity for holistic processing that enables the right hemisphere to recognise individuals. Individuals are, after all, Gestalt wholes: that face, that voice, that gait, that sheer 'quiddity' of the person or thing, defying analysis into parts. Where the left hemisphere is more concerned with abstract categories and types, the right hemisphere is more concerned with the uniqueness and individuality of (p.52) each existing thing or being." (2012: 51-52).

appearance of permanence and solidity" (2012: 228). There is also an expressive differential which, as we will see, is especially relevant to musicological discourse:

Sequential analytic 'processing'... makes the left hemisphere the hemisphere par excellence of sequential discourse, and that gives it the most extraordinary advantage in being heard... Coupled with its preference for classification, analysis and sequential thinking, this makes [the left hemisphere] very powerful in constructing an argument. By contrast it is hard for the right hemisphere to be heard at all: what it knows is too complex, hasn't the advantage of having been carved up into pieces that can be neatly strung together, and it hasn't got a voice anyway. (2012: 229)

These capacities for system-building and precise expression, when combined with the fact that the left hemisphere can only work with what is already 'known to it', yield a reflexivity that McGilchrist personifies as an "alarming self-confidence". That process is vitally important in lending richness and detail to the whole,²⁷ but it tends towards positive feedback (2012: 6). Reintegration with the broader, more open perspective of the right hemisphere is therefore necessary to 'escape' from the powerfully seductive loops of abstraction (2012: 86-87).

In concluding this necessarily brief survey, it seems appropriate to note that McGilchrist regards the performing musician's process as an excellent example of that final synthesis:

The left hemisphere, the mediator of division, is never an endpoint, always a staging post. It is a useful department to send things to for processing, but the things only have meaning once again when they are returned to the right hemisphere.

There needs to be a process of reintegration, whereby we return to the experiential world again. The parts, once seen, are subsumed again in the whole, as the musician's painful, conscious, fragmentation of the piece in practice is lost once again in the (now improved) performance. The part that has been under the spotlight is seen as part of a broader picture; what had to be conscious for a while becomes unconscious again; what needs to be implicit once again retires; the represented entity becomes once more present, and 'lives'; and even language is given its final meaning by the right hemisphere's holistic pragmatics...

...what begins in the right hemisphere's world is 'sent' to the left hemisphere's world for processing, but must be 'returned' to the world of the right hemisphere where a new synthesis can be made. Perhaps an analogy would be the relationship between reading and living. Life can certainly have meaning without books, but books cannot have meaning without life. (2012: 195)

In what follows, I do not attempt to deploy this sophisticated theory in the task of 'explaining music'. Such an aim clearly lies far outside the scope of this kind of project – if it is even possible. But I will draw out three main themes that are directly relevant to the study of music 'as' performance. First is the idea that how we construe the relationship of parts to whole is an important aspect of current methodological challenges facing the study of performance. Second, I adopt the image of abstraction as a 'hall of mirrors' as a way of framing some long-standing philosophical issues in the musicology of performance. And third, I explore how an uneven, tripartite model of synthesis might yield a radical but newly *coherent* framework for thinking about ensemble praxis.

²⁷ "The right hemisphere needs the left hemisphere in order to be able to 'unpack' experience. Without its distance and structure, certainly, there could be, for example, no art, only experience..." (2012: 199).

McGilchrist takes great pains – and 350,000 words – to avoid being misunderstood as positing an inflexible, oppositional binary into which particular ideas, methods, or practices can be sorted. I hope not to fall victim to the ‘beguiling clarity’ of the idea of organising particular phenomena into ‘left hemisphere’ or ‘right hemisphere’ categories, and calling it a job well done, for such a move would be spectacularly to miss the author’s point. But this philosophical, phenomenological, scientific, and richly metaphorical theory offers an enticing way of re-framing some old musicological problems. It is particularly helpful in clarifying the discipline’s historic, and in many ways entirely reasonable, investment in abstraction. For this framework suggests that the conventional ‘hierarchical’ arrangement of musical thought – in which abstract concepts like ‘the work’ hold significant regulative power over practice, and thus over experience – is not simply ‘the way things are’. In fact, that arrangement is extremely specific, both culturally and historically. And it has embedded some significant epistemological limitations, which the modern discipline has only recently begun to acknowledge. Among them is the fact that research into musical performance has developed amidst a backdrop of mild but semi-permanent philosophical confusion.

One distinctive feature of McGilchrist’s metaphor is its radically uneven structure.²⁸ Having grouped certain attentional qualities together in the notion of each hemisphere’s ‘disposition’, he characterises their relationship not as binary, but as *tripartite*. This has some productive implications for thinking about how our various dispositions towards music are arranged. Like any other field of inquiry, the scholarship of music has its own ‘meta-structure’: there is great significance in how one’s various attitudes relate to one another. McGilchrist’s framework suggests, in fact, that conventionalised relationships between these dispositions do not simply ‘fall out’ of music’s ‘nature’, but are more usefully seen *as a product of the kind of attention paid to musical experience*.

Abstraction is the key move that allows for a semblance of control over an experience that famously eludes explanation. ‘Fixing’ that experience into more graspable but essentially decontextualised concepts, which then interact in a closed system, is a case of what McGilchrist calls ‘re-presentations’: the left hemisphere’s ability to transform experience into something that ‘stays still’ for long enough to generate detailed, internally coherent analytical explanations. The point I will build on throughout this thesis, in various different ways, is that this analytical step is entirely valid, but we need to see it in context – for the precision afforded by closed systems always comes at a price.

Is it possible that aspects of the left hemisphere’s perspective may have come uncomfortably close to dominance among some classical musicians, musicologists and critics? These are hardly new worries to anybody with experience of formal musical analysis. In spite of multifarious disclaimers, one could make a persuasive case that analysts have sometimes embraced enthusiastic, powerfully explanatory ‘re-presentations’ to the extent that they

²⁸ Tensions between a single pair are more common in musicology: consider Cook’s notion of ‘between process and product’ (2001); see also Timmers (2022).

have become functionally ‘collapsed into’ the experience of the music.²⁹ Exponential reinforcement surely underpins the familiar tendency for static, decontextualised, disembodied symbols to be transformed into elevated, essential, ‘regulative’ ideals. Such concepts, in McGilchrist’s vivid metaphor, have come to exert their considerable authority via the left hemisphere’s characteristic behaviour as a ‘hall of mirrors’. It deals in models that are persuasive, and thus internally coherent; yet blind to that which lies outside of themselves. Thus, they are ultimately as deluded as they are brittle.

My aims in commandeering this metaphor are twofold. First, it allows one to attain some ‘useful distance’ from the rigid and moralistic frameworks in which classical musicians and scholars have largely been immersed. Second, it points towards some compelling alternatives, which allow one to see such concepts not as the ‘essence’ of music – still less as its guiding purpose – but instead as a particular *disposition* towards musical experience. As I am a musician, not a neuroscientist, I am in no position to evaluate the empirical accuracy of the claims concerning brain lateralisation. But even when taken as a metaphor, this hypothesis is unusually effective in drawing attention to the background hum of philosophical confusion that has, at least to some extent, become normalised in the study of performance.

This is arguably a repackaging of observations and concerns which have long been circulating. (I am reminded especially of Carolyn Abbate’s article ‘Drastic or Gnostic’ (2004), which did important philosophical work in contextualising the ‘turn to performance’). I do not mean to cast the entire discipline as irrevocably lost to abstraction, then, for many scholars, and, increasingly, performer-researchers are grappling with ambiguity, metaphor, the embodied, and the implicit,³⁰ and overly deterministic analytical methods have long been a target of musicological criticism. Where my perspective may differ is in proposing the tripartite, relational landscape of McGilchrist’s analysis – specifically its *RH-LH-RH* progression – in place of what have conventionally been ‘flat’ binaries: between text *and* act, analysis *and* performance, or ideal concept *against* individual instantiation. The following is an attempt to go much further than simply ‘rebalancing’ the relationship between composer and performer, but while remaining in the service of some or other ‘higher’ abstraction. It searches, instead, for a richer sense of reciprocity of the sort that Daniel Leech-Wilkinson (2012) has identified, and which performers – and surely listeners too – know intuitively. The main reason why I take my large-scale lead from McGilchrist’s paradigm, then, is because his notion of synthesis helps one to explore how the experience of music – *and thus also reflective thought about it* – is shaped by performers and performance. The problem facing musicology is that it is one thing to notice that this is the case, but quite another to develop a model capable of integrating that reflexivity into one’s investigations.

To recap, then. The metaphor of the hemispheres is not derived from a collection of mechanistic brain functions, but instead invokes two contrasting ‘takes’ on the world. In McGilchrist’s terminology, the differences are best understood in terms of ‘how’, rather than ‘what’. Because the left hemisphere’s disposition cannot, in principle, deal with anything Other – it can only ‘re-present’ what has already been ‘presenced’ – it tends towards detail,

²⁹ A paradigmatic example is the work of Hepokoski and Darcy (2006); for cases involving string quartets, Code (2007) and Taylor (2010).

³⁰ There is a wide range in these approaches: compare Le Guin (2006); Scott (2014b) and Stam (2019); Fabian (2015); and Schiavio and Høffding (2015).

obsession, and circularity. That tool-like perspective inheres in a virtuosic capacity for division, generalisation, and control. It is powerful but self-referential, and its trajectory, if left unchecked, is towards irrelevance – as if trapped in a hall of mirrors. That perspective, usefully analogised as ‘predatory’, seems rather poorly equipped to account for many of the performing musician’s concerns, which clearly encompass all that is unique, temporal, embodied, and in constant flux.³¹ The metaphor thus helps explain how and *why* certain academic methods, explanations and preoccupations have sometimes been radically misaligned with the qualities that draw people to music in the first place.³²

One can get some insight into the nature of this misalignment by examining some recent philosophical writings on music, and especially *how* it deals with performance. Peter Kivy, for instance, divides the idea of historical authenticity into four different categories – accompanied, naturally, by various burdens for the performer (1995). Those groupings are so seductively appropriate to coherent philosophical manipulation that it is easy to forget that what appear to be authoritative, apparently ‘essential’ distinctions are, more accurately, provisional, disembodied, atemporal heuristics. Reading analytic philosophers who dwell in similar worlds, one gets the impression that they relish setting up a gladiatorial arena of the intellect, hosting fights to the death between subtly differentiated concepts, as if each is armed with different weapons. ‘The performer’s obligations’ are invariably left to follow in the wake of those contests (e.g. Davies 2001: 151-53). Our metaphor suggests why such assumptions may ultimately lead to dead ends, but it also avoids throwing more babies out with the bathwater than is strictly necessary, for one does not need to deny that such categorical coherence is *useful*. The problem is that because this attitude is principally derived from ‘left hemisphere’ tools – especially abstraction, division and generalisation – its explanations will only ever be partial, and their coherence only internal to the model.

To examine the idea of ‘good ensemble’ is to reveal the inherent fragility of such systems. I aim to demonstrate that the apparently secure floor of our magnificently bedecked gladiatorial arena is supported by no more than a couple of rickety beams, an oversized sheet of cardboard, and a light topping of sand. The accuracy and detail of the conceptual thinking – the skill of the gladiators, if you like – is not the main factor limiting our understanding. It is the very construction of the arena. Continuing to invent new and more specific divisions will never offer a way of resolving these central challenges.

Clearly, theorising the significance of performance from a comfortable viewpoint inside this ‘arena’ will not do. In the search for more precise explanations one can graft performance onto familiar regulative concepts, create detailed categories, and impose clean verbal definitions. As I argue in Chapter 5, these are vital tools for enriching understanding. But that disposition has some important limitations, and such insights must not become

³¹ It certainly accounts for some of my own frustrations, as a musician attempting to engage with an academic discourse saturated with conceptual apparatus, for a non-zero proportion of the latter turns out to be entirely useless in ‘real’ musical situations.

³² The metaphor of gradual left hemisphere encroachment seems apt for characterising the unfolding of Western art music’s intellectual history. It may go something like this: so beguiling was the ‘clarity and power’ of that abstract, disembodied perspective, for bringing music ‘under control’, that such a perspective started more and more to be thought of as its ‘essence’. In turn, that notion of essence, grounded firmly in abstraction, conferred such great social value that the entire conceptual framework became regulative for (this) musical praxis. Once it became regulative for *performance*, it shaped the experience of listeners, too, and so the self-referential loop was closed, and became impossible to escape. This is a fantastical speculation, but I suspect this provocative conclusion may have its uses, if it stimulates productive reflections on musicology’s discursive conventions.

decontextualised, fixed, and complacent, for that transformation yields not explanation but circularity. To double down on the left hemisphere's 'take' in this manner – especially if done under the banner of a 'turn to performance' – would isolate scholarship further still from crucial aspects of what makes music compelling. But neither do solutions lie in some woolly, evasively subjective notion of 'experience'. The experience is precisely the part that is so hard to capture, and why abstraction is so useful in the first place.

The productive realisation is that music *can* be cast into a fixed, atomised, controllable conceptual entity; but it must also, more fundamentally, be regarded as something that *happens*. Just as for McGilchrist it is the right hemisphere that is more truthfully 'in touch' with reality, it is in that living context – characterised by implicitness, specificity, 'betweenness', and so on – that a person's relationship with music is always grounded, and to which intellectual inquiry, too, must be in a sense 'returned'. This idea is crucial to the argument I will develop in the rest of this thesis, for a coherent understanding of ensemble praxis depends on casting 'Plato's Curse' in a radically new light (Cook 2013: 13). McGilchrist's metaphor provides a vivid context for allowing the insights of performing musicians to enrich the study not just of performance but of 'music', in a way that is coherent and intuitive. As we get closer to the realm of collective performance, and the beliefs associated with it, we will see how taking seriously the contribution of performers can draw attention to dimensions of musical experience that will always be neglected by models.

II. The Paradigm of Reproduction

In his expansive 2013 report on musicology's burgeoning embrace of performance, Nicholas Cook proposed 'the paradigm of reproduction' as an umbrella term for the various ways in which performance has been treated as a concrete instantiation of something that 'exists' in a more abstract realm. One implication of this newly broadened perspective is to suggest that the reification characteristic of WAM can be seen more as an outlier than as a benchmark. The point is not, as Christopher Small (1998) might have argued, that thinking of music as an object *in itself* represents a turn away from its proper role in relationships and communities. Instead, one can see it more as a matter of degree: by elevating and formalising those abstractions to such an extent, WAM has proceeded much further down a path that is always available. In making this observation, Cook (2013: 227) drew on the work of Eric Clarke, who had noted in 1992 that "any performance depends on the performers possessing some representation of the music being played, however small-scale and short-term that representation may be" (1992: 794). Importantly, Clarke later revised this claim about representations in favour of a very different notion of perceptual ecology.³³ But the metaphor provides a neat way of expressing a more general point, which is that while a jazz musician might be inclined to treat such 'representations' as partial, casual, and (most importantly)

³³ Clarke's reasons for this change of heart are perhaps not so far from McGilchrist's, regarding the usefulness of 'representation' as tool of explanation. As he explained in 2005, "The information-processing approach [...] relies very heavily on the idea of mental representations... The nature and existence of these representations is purely conjectural (they are inferred in order to account for behavior), and more fundamentally they suffer from the "homunculus" problem: a representation only has value or purpose if there is someone or something to perceive or use it, which leads to an infinite regress of homunculi inside the perceiver's mind, each of which "reads" and in turn generates an internal representation. Rather than making use of the structure that is already out there in the environment, the outside world is needlessly and endlessly internalized and duplicated (literally "re-presented")" (Clarke 2005b: 15).

functional, the classical musician is trained (from an early age) to hold a much more essentialist stance.³⁴ It is specifically from that attitude to abstraction, and the idea that it is something 'more' than a useful, intermediate tool, that the discourses of classical music performance seem to derive their peculiarly ethical tenor.

Strong forms of the paradigm of reproduction exhibit many of the qualities McGilchrist identifies in the left hemisphere, including the tendency towards exponential reinforcement, and perhaps even towards confabulation in the face of obvious incoherence (McGilchrist 2012: 81). One interesting case – because it is so richly self-referential – is Robert Levin's enlightened 'lead sheet' re-reading of Mozart's notation (Levin and Sherman 1997). Levin acknowledges and embraces the functional, practical quality of much of the composer's notation, and a correspondingly 'written-in' need for creative departures from the letter of the text in performance. Curiously, however, the motivating impulse for restoring this attitude in the present appears to be a fairly straightforward sense of historical-ethical obligation 'to the music itself'.³⁵ It is not intended as a criticism of Levin's work to note that it shows how the paradigm of reproduction acts as a kind of *de facto* container – even, rather paradoxically, for historical practices that undermine its basic premise (of essentialism). Another frequently cited case is the set of Violin Sonatas Op.5 by Corelli, in which the famous historical proliferation of ornamented versions points to a culture in which writing music down was understood mainly as a useful, intermediate, enabling gesture (Stowell 2012: 80; Butt 2002: 110-11; Walls 2012). But the category difference is often drawn in the wrong place. In fact, the vaguest memory of such a 'standard' can be considered the same *kind* of thing as a detailed, formally notated text. Both are 'lossy' tools: useful 're-presentations' which have the power to give rise to performances – and more to the point, specific experiences – that are likely to have something in common. As I will explore more fully in Chapter 3, many of the ironies and confusions associated with the ideology of 'historical performance' are a result of nesting that functional, intermediate attitude towards abstractions inside a broader aesthetic discourse that is preconfigured to essentialise (and then elevate) them. It can be richly revealing to explore aspects of classical music culture through this lens of 'left hemisphere capture' – not least because it is so inclined to generate paradox where others see only common-sense solutions (McGilchrist 2012: 137-41).

These lofty topics of abstraction and reification pertain quite directly to the study of ensemble praxis. In short, how we position those 're-presentations' with respect to musical experience has a direct impact on one's understanding, and also on one's assumptions. And the metaphor brings a related challenge into sharper focus, which is that to bring focused analytical attention to 'what performers do' also risks entrapment in the same 'hall of mirrors', whereby the primacy of abstractions is left more-or-less intact. I will come back to this in Chapter 5. To re-balance musicological discourse 'away' from work concepts and 'towards' performances does not in itself guarantee freedom from the same kind of incoherence one can encounter in the historical performance literature. It is easy for the abstractions to be superficially banished from view but to carry on shaping the broader landscape on which analysis is situated. One reason why the evidence of early recordings is so valuable is that it brings these domains into unusually direct contact.

These tensions permeate the contemporary scholarship of performance, but it is far from uncommon for authors

³⁴ For an alternative approach which is especially revealing of WAM's values, see Green (2008). The closely related idea of obedience among (young) musicians is a central theme of Wagner (2015).

³⁵ A magazine article by musicologist Clive Brown (2015) presents a similar example, discussed in Leech-Wilkinson (2020a: 6/13).

to acknowledge the perils of reification in theory, before enthusiastically embracing the paradigm of reproduction in practice (Cook 2013: 23-24). This is surely related to an inclination to see the performance as the intangible, elusive thing, and the abstraction as the solid, fixed, manipulable thing – no doubt stimulated in part by the appealing illusion that notation is functionally ‘permanent’, at least by comparison with sound. In order to ‘elevate’ performance to the status of something one can study, then, it too would ideally be seen as constitutive of an abstraction. As I will explore more fully in Chapter 2, this is sometimes related to the practicalities of language; but it is also entwined with the social prestige conferred on ‘lasting’ art-*objects*, in comparison to ‘elusive’ art-*practice*. At an early stage in the performative turn, José Bowen (1993b) proposed that a solution might be to see ‘the musical work itself’ as a kind of aggregate of all of its performances; indeed this idea persists in some forms today (e.g. Moruzzi 2018). Outside musicology, however, this may seem more like a hilarious reversal, because for many – if not most? – people it is the *experience* of music that is the only ‘real’ thing in town. Musicology’s counterintuitive stance on this issue can probably be traced, at least on some level, to the intense reflexivity of its analytical and philosophical discourse. That sense of ‘runaway’ confidence is a characteristic of systems that are internally coherent but fundamentally ‘closed’.

It is also worth recalling McGilchrist’s distinction between the expressive capabilities of the hemispheres. The right hemisphere deals with all that is in flux, resists clean divisions, and lacks the precision of denotative language, and so is at a huge rhetorical disadvantage, *even if its picture is the more truthful*. One can see traces of this imbalance in the way the paradigm of reproduction wrestles its way into models of performance that might otherwise be close to overturning its hegemony. Dorottya Fabian (2015), in an extensive and enlightening exploration of changing performance conventions in J.S. Bach’s music for solo violin, is demonstrably concerned with such a sophisticated rebalancing. And yet she remarks that ‘classical music’

is neither modern nor postmodern, neither absolutist nor relativist, neither scientific nor reflexive, but a never-ending search to get closer to the essence of pieces according to what this means to successive generations of performers and audiences. (2015: 41-42)³⁶

It is as if we have no alternative but to treat the history of performance (and reception) as the story of the various ways in which those essences have been ‘made manifest’.³⁷ On some occasions this seems to be more a matter of pragmatism than a deep ideological commitment, a confusion which can probably be traced to the (unusually) central role of notation within this particular tradition. But even this softer version entails a continued misunderstanding of what scores and notation are ‘like’, insofar as it implicitly treats as sturdy and resilient what any performer will tell you is fragile and transient.

This conceptual structure is defensible in certain circumstances. If the manoeuvre is executed knowingly, plentiful insights will follow – as in specialist surveys of the ‘performance history’ of particular pieces.³⁸ The problem arises

³⁶ This dependency is all the more surprising, given that Fabian is one of the few musicologists to have embraced McGilchrist’s argument – in the epilogue of the same volume (2015: 288-96).

³⁷ Nick Wilson’s discussion of the philosophical wranglings over the work concept is a good example of how the notion of ‘change over time’ offers a get-out-clause for those committed to the primacy of musical objects: “...though we understand the musical work as existing and enduring through the years, it is not an unchanging “essence.” It is transformed over time.” (Wilson 2014: 51). See also Taruskin (2020a).

³⁸ See, for instance, Turner (2004), November (2010), Wilks (2015), and Volioti (2019).

when this disposition starts to bleed into other research areas unrecognised, for if it is allowed to feed the musicological propensity for theoretical system-building, this framing tends to generate overburdened gladiators of the left hemisphere.³⁹ And some very knotty complications arise, when that neat object-oriented aesthetic frame is put into dialogue with perspectives that lie outside its clean but self-referential system. The flexibility inherent to sociological approaches to WAM, for instance, is not always easily reconciled with the apparent – though illusory – firmness of ‘musical works’, such that philosophical inconsistencies can easily take root alongside valuable insights.⁴⁰

The primacy of essences has sometimes also been given as the basis of an invidious distinction between ‘classical music’ – as the most literate (and thus elevated, timeless, and universal) of all traditions – and other, presumably more fleetingly insubstantial ‘oral’ repertoires, including the dreaded ‘popular’ music (cf. Johnson 2002). It is becoming clearer, from a variety of different angles, that such a distinction is not only distasteful, but is based on a false premise. A commonly cited solution to this is a basic shift of orientation from noun to verb: Small’s ‘musicking’, or Richard Taruskin’s more sophisticated embrace of Act over Text (Small 1998; Taruskin 1995). This shift points towards ethnography, in a manner that has enabled a worthwhile (and surely overdue) ‘othering’ of WAM culture. Indeed, studies that situated its practices and value systems in wider social and ideological context – like Kingsbury’s well-known 1988 investigation of a US conservatoire⁴¹ – have found that, contrary to received musicological wisdom, it is generally classical music ideology that seems to be the ‘odd one out’.

Asking similar questions about notions of ‘good ensemble’ draws attention to the reciprocity that is characteristic of social processes. When one’s account is underpinned at a deeper level by ‘essences’, it seems to make sense to treat particular performance conventions as ‘things’ that are straightforwardly ‘applied’ to the base layer of notation. But when one looks beyond this *de facto* frame, one starts to see how far those conventions are entangled with much wider paradigms; and, moreover, to recognise that those paradigms have *themselves* shaped the social worlds in which musical praxis is situated. Performance conventions thus have an important reflexive quality: they do not just ‘enact’ value systems (in a ‘top-down’ fashion), but themselves do important

³⁹ In a detailed investigation of piano performance, Julian Hellaby (2009: 3) follows many other authors in proposing ‘an analytical framework which enables a suitably informed listener to hear and analyse a performance of a particular work in terms of a number of identifiable constituent elements’. The book’s blurb description is even more revealing: “...the author develops a conceptual framework in which a series of performance-related categories is arranged hierarchically into an ‘interpretative tower’. Using this framework to analyse the acoustic evidence of a recording, interpretative elements are identified and used to assess the relationship between a performance and a work.”

⁴⁰ This point is not intended pejoratively, for such accounts are frequently enlightening in spite of this potential for confusion at a larger scale, e.g. Lott (2015). Melanie Lowe, in an ambitious investigation of meanings of Haydn’s symphonies among historical audiences, closely intertwines social analysis with musical meaning, yet also seems to ground these ‘in’ the abstraction; for instance, she writes that “To speculate constructively about the meanings listeners, whether historical or contemporary, hear in a composition, we must consider not only the work’s intrinsic musical aspects but also its musical, historical, cultural, aesthetic, social, and political situations, for a listening subject cannot divorce a text from its various contexts.” (Lowe 2007: 21). For a very different kind of synthesis, see Volioti (2010).

⁴¹ Kingsbury identifies not only the great import of abstraction in this culture, but also its tendency to result in logical paradoxes and unsatisfactory explanations: “Conservatory musicians continually treat the terms “music” and “musical” as terra firma categories in their explanatory statements, in spite of the fact that these notions are highly contingent and occasionally self-contradictory. When the contingent or self-contradictory character of the “music” category is pointed out, the response is sometimes characterized less by confusion or consternation than by a form of mystification whereby contradiction is accorded the elevated status of “paradox,” and becomes ideologically integrated into the aesthetic or spiritual power of music, “itself.”” (1988: 28).

work in upholding (and 'reproducing') those values.⁴² The closely policed conventions of elite string quartet performance make this point with special potency: it is not only because this genre is my own speciality that I focus on this issue in the next chapter.

Another familiar application of object-orientation is found in a modern trope of music-historical writing, whereby 'the work' is cast as the (almost-)living subject, with the various people who have performed (and listened to) it acting as colourful bit-part players. Akin to 'inverse biography', such an approach seems superficially to depend on a 'strong' work concept. Yet this is usually done in a looser, more metaphorical way, whereby that central abstraction acts like a curtain-rail from which to hang 'hybrid' explorations that blend social, analytical, critical and 'interpretive' perspectives (e.g. Wheelock 1991; Sumner Lott 2012; November 2014). The sheer extent of the body of work that adopts this mode might suggest, simply, that it is 'perfectly suited' to coherent observations about music. But from another point of view, such writing shows that abstraction is central to the creation not just of 'a' discourse, but of an elevated, theoretical and elite one. It can hardly be coincidental, given the tenacity of the idea of music 'as writing', that a large part of that discourse is underpinned by concepts and tools borrowed from literary studies: to appeal to intertextuality in discussing music is a sure sign of one's credentials as a connoisseur.⁴³ But in fact any such move towards aesthetic objects is an elevating gesture of sorts, for it demonstrates that one's engagement with music goes far beyond mere (i.e. naïve) experience, and into the richly expressive, though perhaps rhetorically overconfident, domain of critical reflection. There is a parallel here with Richard Taruskin's observation that 'pseudo-historical fictions' may not be true, but they can be *historical*, because such useful mythologies had a tangible effect on how people thought and behaved (Taruskin 2012: 4). It is in this secondary sense that one needs to be mindful of the continued import of the paradigm of reproduction, and the ways in which it has shaped musical thought and practice.

The latent and unspoken character of this dependence on essences is less helpful when introducing new dimensions to the study of performance. The paradigm of reproduction is resilient, and has a tendency to fight back just as one is on the cusp of an alternative. Studies of ensemble are no exception, and enlightened pivots towards performers' 'embodied knowledge', or investigations of social and musical relationships, are frequently constructed on top of philosophical frameworks in which the score (or 'the work') remains functionally – if implicitly – regulative (e.g. McCaleb 2014; Waddington 2014). It is not always clear whether this arises from the fact that the musician subjects often explain what they do in an intuitively transitive way, or if it is a post-hoc assumption of researchers. But this need not matter, because the idea that 'interpreting the musical work' is a straightforward synonym for 'playing music' does not have to be a strongly held philosophical commitment. It can be analytically consequential even if the basic manoeuvre is only 'soft' in character. Thanks to the runaway

⁴² For a provocative take on this idea, see Bull (2019), critically reviewed in Whale (2022).

⁴³ The sense that connoisseurship is implied by intertextuality is demonstrably not confined to classical music. Serious criticism of musical genres beyond WAM has been a mainstay of print media for decades, and has become still more intense with the rise of social media, as well as comment-enabled music platforms, blogs, and review sites. Meanwhile, within WAM, appeals to literary modes of criticism have sometimes been seen as promising ways of surmounting the limitations of the nineteenth-century work concept. Kevin Korsyn, for instance, writes that by invoking Howard Bloom's famous theory, he is able to provide "a method of critical evaluation that is both historical and analytical; it accommodates the paradoxes of influence showing originality and tradition, continuity and change in dialectical relation. Even if one rejects the idea of an organic work (as deconstruction advocates), it provides a model for analyzing compositions as *relational events* rather than as closed and static entities." (Korsyn 1991: 61, *italics mine*).

inclinations of abstraction – its behaving like a ‘hall of mirrors’ – the mere process of developing formal explanations is generally all that is required to solidify casual, intermediate, functional descriptions into rugged theoretical constructs. The latter confer great rhetorical and explanatory authority, but they also embed a much stronger flavour of reification. Discussions of music ‘and’ performance benefit so much from this useful fixity that it is critical to acknowledge how easily the nature of this transformation recedes from view.

It can be useful to imagine the paradigm of reproduction as the curvature of space-time. The idea of essences shapes the deep structure of the (theoretical) landscape, but it remains functionally invisible to somebody standing on a two-dimensional plane ‘inside’ that world. A traditional model, in which abstractions are implicitly elevated ‘above’ performances, offers plentiful insights, and is perfectly suited to a discourse in which music behaves as a ‘textual aesthetic object’. But in the context of renewed interest in performance, retaining this framework is likely to embed the sorts of theoretical inconsistencies that ultimately militate against a coherent understanding. There are ways of avoiding those complications; but we need to locate the source of the problem, and not just aim our critique at the ‘easy targets’ of its secondary results. McGilchrist’s model, in which the fixing and manipulation of experience is recognised as a powerful but partial tool, points to a productive compromise, in which our rich repertoire of discursive ‘re-presentations’ is not invalidated, but remodelled in terms of very different philosophical assumptions.

III. Evidence, Authority, and ‘Interpretation’

Once one is alert to the significance of the paradigm of reproduction, it is easy to see it at the root of many of WAM’s most contested (and peculiar) arguments. One of these is the long-running debate about the role of evidence in the performance of music. This is a good place to start in characterising ensemble discourse; but it is also quite remarkable how marginal and *uncontested* the values of ensembles have been in those elevated disagreements. Should we see ‘ensemble’ as an epiphenomenon, then, insofar as its meanings and demands are conceived as emergent from a selection of ‘higher’ ideals and beliefs?⁴⁴ While debates about ‘evidence-based performance’ rage, the notion of ‘good ensemble’ has largely remained aloof and detached, as if hanging in the clouds above the grime and dirt of the battlefield.⁴⁵ Such values appear to be ‘given’ in much the same way that the paradigm of reproduction *itself* is rarely questioned in the course of arguments about evidence for performance practice.

The two, of course, are importantly related, in a manner that will come into focus in the following chapters. What is it about WAM culture that creates the conditions for this ‘regulative’ understanding of ensemble?

I have already mentioned the idea of a spectrum of ‘functional’ abstraction, through which distinctions between WAM and other traditions can be seen as a matter of extent, more than of kind. An excellent example of how

⁴⁴ This idea of emergence is reminiscent of Cook’s description of how ‘structuralist’ analysis often treats performance (2013: 98). I will revisit this topic in Chapter 5.

⁴⁵ A notable exception is recent work by Anna Scott (2022). Historical variation in what is considered ‘proper’ ensemble draws attention to its normative association with (idealised) social behaviours; indeed such cases often reveal a utopianism in the idea of ‘faithfulness’ to musical works. As we saw in the Introduction (p.12), indicative examples can be found in Kawase (2015).

intermediate 're-presentations' have been transformed into something with much greater import – even to the extent that they seem to exert moral authority – is the casual use of the word 'interpretation' as a synonym for performance. Laurence Dreyfus's historical analysis of this pervasive terminology provides a useful lens for exploring how the paradigm of reproduction ties together beliefs about ethics, authority, and evidence (2007). To speak of an 'interpretation', he suggests, is

to elevate the act of music-making, to invest it with high, even philosophic, value. Far superior to a mere rendition of notes on the page, an interpretation takes a considered view of a masterpiece, and offers a personal 'reading' which lends itself to a characterisation in words. Whereas one discounts renditions, one argues about interpretations. That is why an interpretation is never a neutral synonym for a performance, and why one elevates interpreters above performers. (Dreyfus 2007: 253)

This term attaches aesthetic gravity and moral responsibility to what in other contexts might be a rather relaxed impression of music's transitive qualities: the sense of 'playing something'. As for the music-historical writing discussed above, it is the 'fixing' of musical experience via abstraction which enables 'interpreters' to "inhabit a world of refined critical discourse" (Dreyfus 2007: 253). The resonances of this terminology with textual criticism, and especially with biblical exegesis, are apt, for nothing could demonstrate with greater clarity the idea that it is the 're-presentation' that is afforded primary significance. Once that move is made, it seems quite natural for a unique manifestation of that essence to be cast as 'fallen'. Appropriately enough, the ways in which classical 'interpreters' have sought to redeem themselves from this fate usually combines a dose of self-flagellation with enthusiastic appeals to authority (Botstein 2001: 593).

As Lydia Goehr has shown for the musical work, to historicise a concept is in some sense to undermine it philosophically, because the very act of contextualisation weakens a 'strong' concept's implicit claim to universality (1992, 2015). In a similar fashion, Dreyfus reveals that the historical window for the 'interpretation' metaphor is surprisingly small, and that the term would have been unfamiliar to any musician before the 1840s. To use it unthinkingly is thus to conjure and entrench an entire network of thought – a paradigm, in short – which a modern musician might well be inclined to repudiate if its ideological content was made more explicit. But by showing that such terminology had a beginning, it is much easier to imagine getting beyond it. As Dreyfus (2007: 256) puts it: "since performance as interpretation arose within a very definite historical frame, might it be approaching the end of its useful life?"

Once again, the point is not that performance in the past was *never* conceived in terms of its relation to some kind of fixed representation, but that the tenor of that relationship was radically altered in the nineteenth century. What was once enabling, became encoding; what was intermediate, became essential. By contrast, Dreyfus notes that Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1753)

invites his musician to trust his own ample insights (*hinlängliche Einsichten*) into an author's work (*ein fremdes Stück*) so as to explain its true content (*den wahren Inhalt zu erklären*). At the same time he must shun any slavish or mechanical attitude (*alles sclavische und maschinenmässige ausschließet*) toward the piece or its author. Instead Bach commands him to exploit the freedom (*die Freyheit*) to make music from his own soul (*von der Seele zu spielen*) rather than behave like a trained bird (*ein abgerichteter Vogel*). This feeling of empowerment even allows for intentional

errors of the most beautiful kind to be made (*die schönsten Fehler mit Fleiß begehen*), so long as they serve good delivery and musical poignancy (*rührendes Spielen*). (Dreyfus 2007: 259)

For Bach the notion of 'true content' was clearly not mutually exclusive with understanding music's meaning (and value) primarily as a matter of experience. Accordingly, it is implied that the performer's 'delivery' has the potential both to make (even) a bad piece, or – more worryingly for the composer – to break a good one (2007: 259).⁴⁶ Mozart's remarks on performance imply a similarly experiential grounding for music-making, in that it is the composer – and not, as it would come to be in the twentieth century, the performer – who would ideally 'disappear' (2007: 260). Dreyfus notes that well into the following century – the era of the high priests of *werktreue* – discussions of performance regularly involved metaphors other than interpretation, even as it drifted towards that more ethical, subordinate conception.⁴⁷

But while the ethical imperatives associated with the proper performance of music came increasingly to be emphasised, the precise ways in which that truth 'to the composer' (or 'to the spirit of the work') was to be 'revealed' were – then as now – the source of much controversy. That musicologists and critics appear, by and large, to be rehearsing the same *kinds* of disagreements today is perhaps a further indication that the ideological heart of the paradigm of reproduction is alive and well. One might invoke Taruskin's own borrowing of Leonard B. Meyer (Taruskin 2008: 130, quoting Meyer 1991: 241): if this diagnosis is accurate, should we regard some contemporary composers' attempts to 'script' the performer's freedom with ever-increasing precision not as a sign of cutting-edge avant-gardism, but of late, *late* Romanticism? This basic transformation, which is enacted so comprehensively by the concept of 'interpretation', generates the conditions for a long war of ideals, characterised by appeals to what Dreyfus calls "different interlocking authorities."⁴⁸ It seems unarguable that the notion of 'evidence-based performance', which reached its most baldly moralising terms in the rhetoric of musicians like Sir Roger Norrington,⁴⁹ simply could not have existed without the specific perspective on aesthetic autonomy that arose in German-speaking lands around the turn of the nineteenth century. That specificity is important. Musicians of earlier epochs demonstrably had use for the idea that music potentially had an 'autonomous' existence: there was a place for playful 'disinterestedness', or some version of the familiar notion of 'art for art's sake'. It is witnessed in notation as early as the sixteenth century, a paradigmatic example (following

⁴⁶ Rather amusingly, in the current context, a few sentences later Dreyfus quotes CPE's remark that "what [the player] must not do is waste time reading rambling books and discourses (*weitläufige Bücher und Discursen*) which bang on about such abstractions as Nature, Taste, Song, and Melody, even though their authors cannot even compose two notes naturally, tastefully, lyrically or melodically." (Dreyfus 2007: 260)

⁴⁷ Some of these included decoding, execution, rendition, reproduction, and translation. The idea of execution familiar to C.P.E. Bach and W.A. Mozart was demonstrably different to that of Igor Stravinsky's more recent – and better known – usage (Stravinsky 1970).

⁴⁸ Dreyfus usefully summarizes these familiar authorities as "(1) the composer who creates the work; (2) the musical text which is commonly a stand-in for the composer himself; (3) the teachers and music directors who transmit the authority of the composer or the text; and (4) superior, usually older musicians whom one emulates. These authorities – mortal or otherwise – are closely related to more abstract forms of authority. I am thinking here of (5) performers' traditions, as in the assertion that this is the way we have always done it; (6) musicological rectitude (if one is so inclined to defer to it); (7) musical structure (as defined by music theorists and analysts); and something called (8) musical common sense. All these authorities conspire to validate interpretations, to assure us that we are doing the right thing, and to help pass on interpretative practices to the next generation." (Dreyfus 2007: 254)

⁴⁹ For further discussion see Wilson (2014: 34-35). Norrington (2009) burnishes his modernist credentials by following Stravinsky in repudiating the 'Romantic' terminology of interpretation; yet he does so while remaining conspicuously sensitive to (interlocking) authorities.

Taruskin) being the proliferation of flamboyant pieces on the popular tune *J'ay pris amours*, not to mention copious other examples of virtuosically complex compositional invention taking place far beyond the confines of court and church settings (Taruskin 2006a: 171-76).

The nineteenth century equivalent was distinguished by the all-encompassing character of its philosophical basis: the curious blend of a teleological – indeed openly nationalistic – historical narrative, with an aesthetic orientation that encoded meaning into artworks quite *independently* of history. It is that paradoxical mixture, of the grandly historical and the untouchably timeless, that underpins the ‘interpretation’ metaphor. The intellectual tangles that characterise so many modernist (and postmodernist) attempts to pin down the ‘proper’ role of the performer can thus be traced back not just to one archetypal idea, but to a broader – and therefore even more potent – cocktail of interlocking ethical, analytical, critical, historical, social and religious themes.⁵⁰

The implicit singularity of the word ‘interpretation’ has some especially important implications for thinking about ensemble, for tied into the ‘interpreter’s’ privileged stance is the idea of a profoundly individualistic artistic vision, ‘undimmed’ by compromise. Perhaps surprisingly, given the apparently collaborative nature of the enterprise, this is a view most commonly associated with orchestral conductors. Metaphorically, however, one can see how the cult of the maestro, having developed almost directly out of nineteenth century aesthetics, perfectly ties together many of the ideals of autonomous art (Bowen 1993a: 85-88). The conductor does indeed present a singular vision, his⁵¹ inspired interpretive instincts ‘revealing’ the meaning already latent in ‘the work itself’, almost in the manner of a biblical prophet. But the maestro also does something else, which is more amenable to the building of quasi-political mythologies of empowerment. Through the sheer weight of his moral righteousness and personal charisma, he brings together a band of (unnamed, transparent) orchestral musicians in a utopian collective endeavour, in which they all are able to ‘express themselves’ through ‘the work’, and create something greater than the sum of its parts. The authority channelled by this shared act of ‘interpretation’ invokes a powerful sense of a religious community, bound together by the virtues of obedience, faithfulness, collective respect, ‘shared goals’, and, incidentally, the implicit denigration and rejection of outsiders. Just as in a military or political setting, it is critical that foot soldiers or citizens buy into the notion of hierarchy, ‘for the greater good’. Thus a ‘great conductor’ functions as a kind of two-way valve: a priest-like figure who exerts earthly authority, while simultaneously claiming heavenly submission.⁵² From ‘below’, even the modern maestro is idealised as an enabler of the musicians, who must believe that their contribution authentically belongs to them as autonomous expressive individuals. Those contributions are ‘brought out’ of the individual and merged – in the greatest, most efficiently collectivized form – by the benevolent leader. From above, he is the unifying ‘interpreter’ of the work itself – the one who takes final responsibility (and the credit) for the properly ethical communication of ‘the composer’s intentions’ to the audience, lest they be sold an experience that is empty of moral worth.

This account is wildly hyperbolic. Indeed it would not be necessary, if the terminology of ‘interpretation’ and its various correlates – ‘shared goals’, appeals to authority, and perhaps even an undertone of intolerance towards

⁵⁰ This wider integration is perhaps a reason to doubt that recent theoretical interrogation of ‘work concepts’ will have a significant impact beyond the academy.

⁵¹ In the nineteenth century, of course, a conductor’s masculinity was hardly coincidental.

⁵² This paragraph recalls Small’s provocative critique of the symphony concert (1998: 89-90).

out-groups and individual difference – did not shape a significant proportion of the literature on ensemble performance.⁵³ Though my account of the nineteenth century conductor-interpreter-prophet is overstated, by comparison with modern norms, that sense of a single ‘locus’ of interpretation seems, curiously, to apply *even more strongly* when the literal figure of the conductor is absent. The work of un-conducted chamber ensembles provides an excellent example of how the special distinction bestowed on ‘interpreters’ – the idea that they have access to an ethical and authoritative dimension that elevates their work above that of ‘mere players’, and into the realm of hermeneutics – is critically dependent on a process whereby the diffuse imaginations of individual musicians are in a sense ‘brought in line’, coalescing into a single ‘interpretive viewpoint’. As in our hyperbolic orchestra, ideal chamber music sees individual self-expression lovingly crafted into a coherent, and even more rewarding composite of musical personalities. It represents synthesis *par excellence*.⁵⁴ Conventionally, then, an ensemble like a string quartet is seen almost intrinsically to present ‘an’ interpretation; indeed it must not present four interpretations. One suspects that for a critic, the idea that a quartet would present ‘four interpretations’ is such an oxymoron as to be deeply pejorative.

That this process is usually conceptualised in terms of wider societal ideals – in our time, those of democratic, egalitarian participation – may go some way towards explaining how a slightly utopian sense of ‘rightness’ has come to be attached to what are demonstrably modern ensemble conventions. But the characteristically ‘back-door’ association of political and moral virtue with quite specific verbal or conceptual frameworks – of which ‘interpretation’ is a prime example – in fact places significant limits on WAM performers’ ability to imagine alternative but equally persuasive modes of interaction. Such unrecognised utopianism yields significant philosophical and methodological challenges for studying ensemble coherently. This discipline’s characteristic mode has generally involved shuttling back and forth between questions of ‘interpretation’ and questions of ‘(social) interaction’. Those insights are not invalidated by looking more closely at frameworks like ‘interpretation’, but understanding the paradigm of reproduction as a kind of ‘space-time of the left hemisphere’ may offer some solutions to this problem of circularity.

Although the idea of ‘good ensemble’ is an excellent example of Dreyfus’s ‘interlocking authorities’, it is also an unusual one. In writing, one often gets a sense that ensemble is a natural affiliate of properly considered ‘interpretations’: it seems to fall out of that responsibility. As I have said, however, the idea always remains general: it is low resolution, and held ‘at a distance’. In this respect, the idea has more in common with the performer’s assumed ‘obligation to the work’, than with the particular details that are thought to follow from that obligation. In practice, this means that something we call ‘good ensemble’ is a worthy, even essential aim of performance is not really up for question.⁵⁵ In the context of WAM, this elevation is entwined with a value system

⁵³ E.g. Keller (2008), Wood et al. (2022), MacRitchie et al. (2018), Ragert et al. (2013: 2); cf. Schiavio and Høffding (2015).

⁵⁴ Many of these themes are brought together in Daniel Snowman’s devoted biography of the Amadeus Quartet; he writes that “discerning listeners have always emphasized that the outstanding characteristic of the Amadeus Quartet is the way in which four players, each with his own independent musical personality and his own distinctive gifts to bring, manage to combine these various gifts in the interests of the communal exercise in which they are all engaged so that the whole transcends the sum of its not inconsiderable parts. Indeed, it is this communality of endeavour that gives the Quartet its special stamp.” (1981: 61). In my more mischievous moments, I am inclined to wonder whether there has been a quartet since that does *not* claim the same ‘special stamp’ for themselves.

⁵⁵ As we will see, the problem is that the boundaries of this category are resistant to simple definition.

built on notions of obedience – for instance, to both the letter and the spirit of ‘the music itself’. Seeing ensemble through this prism means habitually regarding ‘it’ as an authoritative aesthetic category that is (rightly?) entwined with moral virtue – and even ‘acceptable’ social behaviour. Yet it is simultaneously imagined as a constant, insulated from the messy contentions of history. That assumption of ahistorical neutrality makes an important contribution to the belief that it is much more than a matter of courtesy, or a gentle preference. On the rare occasions when the (self-evidently?) virtuous understanding maps less well onto the historical evidence, it is almost inevitably ‘good ensemble’ that wins the day.

This imbalance can be traced back to the idea of aesthetic autonomy, and the wider ‘family’ of ideologies that branch out from that central idea. A conspicuous example of this, for contemporary readers, is a casual equivalence between notation and ‘the music’. Despite many efforts to get beyond it, this mapping is so powerful that it tends to act not only as a basic foundation for the discipline of music analysis, but also for performance-analytical methods. As we will explore in great detail in the rest of Part 1, studies of ensemble performance frequently start from the (‘re-presentational’) assumption that notes in vertical alignment must *necessarily* and *only* be intended to sound at the same moment in time. (The implication is that anything else is deviant). It is important, then, to be specific about how this way of thinking about music arose, and why it has been so persuasive. The authorities that orbit the idea of aesthetic autonomy ‘interlock’ so neatly with each other, that it is often hard to see just how circumscribed the potential meaning(s) of ensemble have been.

Elaine King (née Goodman) has described some of these prized values with clarity:

...‘ensemble’ refers to the precision with which musicians perform together: a good group is often praised for its ‘tight’ ensemble work, whereas an inferior one might have ‘sloppy’ ensemble. (Goodman 2002: 153)

Although the description seems straightforward from a twenty-first century vantage point, it is hard not to be struck by the brief slip of tone and the unequivocal nature of the value judgement. But the evidence of early recordings reveals the bureaucratic limitations of this definition, and the circularity to which it may give rise, if imported uncritically into the study of performance. Note, too, the revealing similarity with McGilchrist’s identification of a kind of chauvinism

in the language used by the most objective writers to describe the hemisphere differences: for example, the smart left hemisphere’s need for precision leads to ‘fine’ processing, the lumpen right hemisphere’s to ‘coarse’ processing. No mention here of the dangers of over-determination, or the virtues of a broader range, of subtlety, ambiguity, flexibility or tolerance. (McGilchrist 2012: 129)

These prejudices are surely as alive and well in musicology as in any other area of analysis, no doubt in spite of good intentions. Is it too harsh to say that King’s definition of ‘proper’ ensemble shares with many others the left hemisphere’s inability to get beyond the fixed, the certain, and the discretely measurable? This is not the only parallel; for there is a rhetorical force in generalisation, by comparison with which the unique and unrepeatable can only cower. Toscanini’s famous injunction “*com’è scritto*” exerts its power of persuasion precisely *because* it is general and universal, and not bounded and specific. Like all belief systems, its most central diktats are not subject to the whims of the particular, still less the ineffable. Indeed it seems to matter greatly that they are not.

In the case of ensemble, it is not just the presumed axis of 'precision—sloppiness' that contains an inherent value judgement. The entire edifice enforces such a reading, from the ethics of 'interpretation', through latent forms of *werktreue* and *texttreue* ideology, to the tacitly ventriloquising pronouncements of a conceptually sophisticated (though inevitably somewhat aloof) musical analyst.⁵⁶ So often, the shape of WAM's ideological 'landscape' – and especially the peculiar hierarchical relationship it posits between abstraction and experience – has meant that many of the old authorities ultimately 'stand behind' even the most inventive analytical or explanatory accounts. The meanings and values of ensemble performance are closely integrated within that topography. An unexpected benefit of this amalgamation, however, is that focusing on 'ensemble' is an effective way of unveiling covert patterns of thought.

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In the rest of this thesis I set up a kind of dialogue between McGilchrist's contrasting but related dispositions. Though I invoke it only metaphorically, this imaginative thread is invaluable for characterising the *kinds* of insights that our different perspectives on music present; and for showing what is liable to be neglected by viewpoints that appear superficially watertight. On the one hand, the metaphor reveals the brittle quality of those systems. On the other, it forms a context in which it becomes easier to recognise the insights that performing musicians offer into the matter of music 'as experience'.

Looking in the gaps between formal frameworks is now an established, if not normative musicological disposition.⁵⁷ One of music's most compelling qualities is that every attempt at explanation seems to transform 'it' into a fixed (but always temporary) form that suits a particular purpose: it is reasonable to cast music as something that unfolds 'on the stage of history', *and* to work inside the rich discourses of compositional and critical thought.⁵⁸ One can also treat music through local, social, and phenomenological lenses. Or one can examine (the sound of) a performance with empirical techniques and measurement, knowingly risking the loss of those more elusive, implicit and embodied meanings which McGilchrist so aptly describes as 'betweenness' (2012: 72). The need to shift between perspectives is not just a more *useful* strategy than attempting to 'pin down' music's nature for good. That multiplicity is a baked-in feature, for what music 'is' changes with the kind of attention we habitually pay to it. McGilchrist's metaphor portrays this even more precisely, in that investigating music will mean drawing on differentiated but *concurrently sustained* modes of attention. This framing yields not an inflexible binary but a rich, tripartite synthesis. How could it be any other way, given that music is so intensely – and perhaps uniquely – entangled with embodied experience?

In the realm of musical discourse, one often encounters a disposition that is possessed of a much greater amount of rhetorical authority than that which is 'available' to a musician as they play. The case I will make here is that musicology cannot do without the right hemisphere's perspective simply because it is less effective at making

⁵⁶ Even Edward Klorman's historically sensitive, well-intentioned and insightful efforts at modelling new kinds of ensemble interaction in Mozart's chamber music are hamstrung – in my view quite needlessly – by a 'quiet' paradigm of reproduction (Klorman 2016).

⁵⁷ For extensive discussion of this topic, see Born (2010). A well-known and original example in a performance context is Le Guin (2006); for further nuance concerning beliefs about performance, see also Beckles Willson (2004: 602-4).

⁵⁸ Christopher Small (1998) might have been one of the few to disagree with this.

itself heard. McGilchrist's framework provides a vivid illustration of the idea that verbose, ideological, theoretical, sometimes deluded 'left hemisphere' systems do not necessarily provide a truer reflection of music's nature than those which are not so amenable to explicit expression. The former may possess greater confidence, but the humanity – and the 'betweenness' – of the latter is manifestly the territory of the performers who make music a meaningful experience. In the following I ask how investigations of ensemble performance might be structured so as to embrace those vital insights.

Chapter 2: The art world of the string quartet

The... performance of this lengthy piece was sensational — focused, symmetrical, and perfectly blended...
(Donelan 2021)

...remarkable for the precision of their expression, their understated but relentless intensity... (Swed 2019)

The quartet... demonstrated its splendidly matched tone, sounding like a single instrument instead of four.
(Wright 2016)

...the players let their hair down in Dvořák's 'American' quartet, No 12... their enjoyment palpable. But ensemble remained as tight-meshed as ever. (Dreyer 2014)

One of the big challenges of playing in a string quartet comes from the same reason why it's such a great medium – because you're playing on the same family of instruments, which means in order to really be together, you have to agree on every little detail, you have to agree where in the bow you're gonna be, for a certain passage, you have to agree exactly an articulation, what speed of bow; things like this, which if they don't match, don't work so well. So, when it happens it's kind of a miracle, because for four people to agree, on so many things, it's pretty spectacular. (The Concert Series 2016)

The string quartet genre presents an ideal context in which to explore the implications of the theoretical recalibration I am proposing. It is also the genre with which I have most affinity as a performer, and experimentation with my own quartet colleagues will form the practical second half of this thesis. In this chapter I show how archetypal performance conventions – and the values in which they are grounded – can be seen afresh once we notice the inclination of WAM to treat (imagined) essences as 'regulative', and for abstractions to be elevated 'above' experience.

The idea of convention takes centre stage here. Long before any formal disciplinary turn towards performance, the string quartet was understood as an 'art world' in which aesthetic experience seemed intrinsically to resist explicit separation from social (and political) concerns. More precisely, metaphorical formulations of 'the quartet itself' frequently cast the genre as a proxy for ideal human relationships, and this archetype remains firmly embedded within contemporary discourse. As we can see in the quotes above, those values are also enacted in some specific, shared beliefs about 'proper' performance.

Another reason why this genre is so well suited to my theoretical context is that it presents a dominant family of metaphors – drawn primarily from social temporal, embodied, specific, and relational qualities, and which are closely associated with performance – but which have *co-existed* in some fascinatingly fluid (and sometimes contradictory) ways with the doctrine of aesthetic autonomy. The latter, of course, played a vital role in shaping WAM discourse from the first half of the nineteenth century until the present. Thanks in large part to the late music of Beethoven, and especially its reception, the string quartet came to be positioned in the vanguard of that

new 'strong form of art'. And 'it' thus partook of the elevated values, of autonomy, universality, and abstraction.⁵⁹ Interestingly, however, the relational and social aspects of the genre's 'intrinsic identity' were not sacrificed on the altar of E.T.A. Hoffmann's 'spirit realm', but actually came to be folded into that elite canonic status.

Modern archetypes of 'the string quartet' continue to be underpinned by this dual structure, and in a way that pertains to one's understanding of the skills and dispositions of quartet musicians. Like so many corners of classical music ideology, such a pervasive characterisation relies on mappings that are complex and resilient, yet which tend towards paradox when analysed explicitly. This situation demands that one ask probing questions about the ideological underpinnings of 'normative' ensemble skills. An historical perspective provides a powerful way of problematising these specific beliefs. But one can go much further, to ask how the reframing proposed in Chapter 1 might enable a more fundamental shift in how one understands the cultural basis of ensemble conventions. Daniel Leech-Wilkinson's observation that classical music is an oral tradition that has been masquerading as a written one, will be especially relevant when asking how and *why* string quartet performance has come to be invested with such a 'secure' set of values (2016: 325).

I. The string quartet 'itself'

By contrast with the aesthetic detachment characteristic of other 'elite' musical genres, in the domain of the string quartet ideas about performance and 'the social' have long been entwined with those of composition and reception. Many of the key themes and metaphors underpinning this discourse are inescapably embodied, whether that be the Goethe-inspired paradigm of intelligent conversation, or the pervasive ideal of 'unity'. From the earliest historical reports, as Mary Hunter puts it, "elements both compositional (the relations of the four parts) and social (listening practices) were typically understood through the lens of performance, or at least in association with it" (Hunter 2012: 54). Here, then, the realms of social interaction, values, and relationships are not held at a distance from reflective conceptions – for instance of the music's 'pure' or 'intrinsic' meaning – but are, through those embodied metaphors, implicitly *integrated within them*. Although this is not a universal feature of music-analytical writing about string quartets, an imaginative ventriloquism of performance often permeates the writing of even the most committed spirit realm ideologues.⁶⁰ For A. B. Marx in the early nineteenth century, as for Edward Klorman in the twenty-first, a true understanding of quartet music must appreciate this embodied, relational quality (Marx 1828, quoted in Hunter 2012: 64; Klorman 2016: 35–36, 117–18, 294). Even from the most analytically rigorous perspectives, then, performance is quite readily absorbed as a dimension of string quartet scores 'themselves', insofar as it becomes an explicit role of the notation to 'script' – or 'afford' – certain modes of participation and interaction.⁶¹ Such overlaps are not confined to analytical readings of particular scores, but characterise a great deal of modern historical work. For instance, Marie Sumner Lott (2015) has focused on the

⁵⁹ Such 'strong' forms (as encountered in Chapter 1, p.24–29) often give rise to the paradoxical sense that the timelessness of the 'great works' runs alongside a deeply historicised sense of 'grand narrative'.

⁶⁰ As a counterexample, Code (2007) adopts a historical-analytical stance that is largely independent of these embodied metaphors, and generally works on the territory of form, compositional influence, and (elite) reception.

⁶¹ This analytical mode is characterised by a blend of openness and specificity, in which subjective response is functionally seen as flowing from 'the work itself', yet without being straightforwardly *determined* by a static, essentialist notion of 'content'.

specificity of the environments in which (canonic) quartet repertoire has been heard and played, placing notions of 'the music itself' in dialogue with cultural meaning, and the values that contribute to defining social groups.

Because the string quartet presents such a rich canvas of historical, analytical, and philosophical challenges, it is a perfect vehicle for exploring what is at stake in the idea of musical 'togetherness'. To recall Chapter 1, such complexity supports the idea that having a range of analytical dispositions available is not simply a desirable bonus, but is indispensable for thinking clearly about beliefs, practices and conventions.

Commentators of a more 'traditional' WAM disposition – the critic or historical musicologist, for instance – have been inclined to treat this foundational synthesis of abstraction and embodiment like a property. This characteristic intersection of autonomous art and socially-grounded metaphor, in other words, is habitually cast as a quality of the art-objects – broadly, musical works – 'themselves'. In turn, at the level of genre, this character is tacitly understood as intrinsic not only to the quartet's 'nature', but also to its historical narrative, which, by the usual standards of music history, is almost uniquely coherent. There remains, in many circles, a shared impression of a multidimensional yet unified 'quartet tradition', buttressed by a discourse that emphasises precision, focus, and historical continuity.

The quartet's basic nature, so the account goes, was established nearly fully formed by Joseph Haydn, whose paradigmatic exploits yielded a corpus of such remarkable artistic (and, let it be said, commercial) success, that its 'core values' of exchange, equality, sociality, and sophistication, were firmly established as native 'to it'. Through synthesis with Beethovenian notions of progress, the genre acquired further associations with the profound, the elite, and the most ideal of all: the incomprehensible. Thus the form came to its full flourishing, as a true success story of WAM. Like many of its sister subcultures, this paradigm is simultaneously timeless and sharply historicized; general, yet allowing of specificity; abstract and elusive, yet also grounded in the particularities of human relationships.

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How can this assessment be interleaved with the thinking I have advanced above? To see these ideas in a very different context, imagine an elaborate 'Russian doll' or *matryoshka*.⁶² These small, colourfully decorated wooden dolls are hollow, and they come in families. Apart from the very smallest, they all come apart in the middle; and because they are hollow, the smaller ones fit snugly inside the larger ones, in as many as seven layers.

These dolls embody two related ideas: nested hierarchy, and family resemblance. Imagine that the smallest doll represents a specific musical experience, and that it is enveloped in successive 'elders', which stand for increasingly more abstract 're-presentations'. The outer layer represents the broadest conceptual apparatus of WAM: for instance, the disposition towards object-orientation and abstraction; or the notion that musical works behave like protagonists ('on the stage of history'). The layers in between are somewhat abstract, but as they approach the infant at the centre, they start to come closer to the character of music 'as experienced'.

Accordingly, these intermediate dolls become ever more specific to individual subcultures of WAM; but at the

⁶² Several sets were owned by my own Ukrainian grandfather, and while their place in the cultural history of that region is interesting, it is not relevant to the analogy.

same time, they also become more metaphorical, complex, elusive, and contingent. The doll's distinct layers are an analytical conceit, but the image is useful because it reminds us that in music we are always dealing simultaneously with both specific 'content' and general 'dispositions'. These are clearly differentiated, but they also possess a deeper kinship.

The metaphor also draws attention to the role of external perspective: the capacity for one's 'viewpoint' on these conceptual relationships to impact the kinds of conclusions one draws. The majority of critical writing, for instance, adopts a view that looks 'from the outside in'. The most general, abstract, powerfully discursive, aesthetically elevated, historically situated layers 'encase' those within, and so are encountered ('seen') first. The smaller inner dolls are regarded as manifestations of the authority of the outer ones, with the elusive 'phenomenological' infant buried most deeply. The overall shape of discourse means that one is effectively peering through layers of 're-presentation', in describing musical experience – especially, as I noted in Chapter 1, when one thinks in terms of competing 'interpretations'. The perspective implies a sense of progression through these layers; and it means that the general, the ideal, and the verbal 'stands guard' over the (unique) infant. Parental authority acts like a filter, ensuring that the experience lying inside can only be 'read' in terms of its fit with the family unit.

The system's self-similarity is crucial. To put it bluntly, if the art world's norms and values are the ultimate locus of authority, then a 'phenomenological' infant that does not share that DNA does not belong inside that doll: it is ostracised and rejected. Once again, the notion of expressive imbalance is relevant here. The parent seems more authoritative, more reliable, and more 'sure of itself' than the infant, just as the experience of performance, in its specificity, irreducibility, and inaccessibility to explicit language, cannot be as grandly assertive as the elevated discourse of art-world theorizing. The practical result of this, especially for criticism, is that performances are not just experienced 'in light of' those authoritative outer dolls, but are embraced or discarded according to the extent of their quasi-genetic similarity.

These ideas are directly relevant to the impression, given by critical discourse, that a particular blend of innate characteristics 'define' the quartet genre itself, and that these should inarguably regulate 'its' performance values. It is quite clear, I think, that this is associated with the pervasive impulse towards reification. But a more subtle reading might be to see 'the quartet' – in that general, somewhat abstracted sense – as one of the elder matryoshka dolls, nestled just on the 'inside' of the matriarch. This subculture is encased just inside the broader ideological context: the *de facto* perspective in which musical experience is 'filtered' through a discourse of musical works and their 'interpretation'. The quartet genre exhibits a telling family resemblance with that universe of beliefs.

Notions of the string quartet genre's 'identity' are of course useful, insofar as they define conceptual boundaries located in a specific historical context. In turn, these set the stage for fruitful discussions and disagreements. But I wonder if there may be benefits to stepping a little further outside of this given paradigm and its distinctive critical-ideological disposition. String quartet discourse is perhaps unrivalled, in the extent to which it promises to act as all things to all people: it epitomises musical utopianism. If that quality seems especially appealing from within WAM's ecosystem, might that be because those dispositions (and values) are so snugly nested inside the

same family unit? For with different eyes, many of these claims look increasingly circular and self-fulfilling (Leech-Wilkinson 2012). In any case, utopias always have their casualties.

A good reason to 'turn to performance' is that methods constructed on more intrinsically experiential foundations will be better equipped to resist such self-referential loops. Our smallest doll is invested in the specificity of performance, and with the uniqueness – or, in McGilchrist's terms, the 'betweenness' – that characterises musical experience. It also resists codified expression in some fundamental ways. If one was crafting a real set of these dolls, one would likely begin with the smallest, because it is easier to make sure that the 'next one up' will be the perfect size to encase the original. The same may be true of musicology, where the option to begin with the smallest 'experiential' doll yields a more reliable grounding of explanations than the abstract premises of the outer layers. One does not treat the baby *only* as a function of the dolls that encase it, but acknowledges that specific, unique, embodied experience has shaped the reflective abstractions that have been built around it. The two perspectives are held in relation: they encircle each other, always 'reverberating'.⁶³

The grand historical-conceptual frameworks which form the currency of WAM's discursive economy – and of which the string quartet represents a prime example – cannot be givens that emerge 'from on high'. Nor do they spring from notation in any straightforward way. It is more coherent to think of those qualities as importantly reciprocal from the very beginning, because they are always held in tension with the elusive specificity of experience. This is another way of formulating Leech-Wilkinson's argument that performance and performance style modulates all aspects of reflective thought about music (2012: 4.1). If he is right, we need to maintain alertness to the possibility that the tail has started wagging the dog. The specificity of the practical and metaphorical apparatus of string quartets – and the curious disposition that has helped to embed that association so comprehensively – means that this field is ideally suited to uncovering some of the intellectual and ideological contexts in which 'ensemble performance' is situated.

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If many of the ideas, inheritances and obligations associated with quartets are sewn into the cultural fabric of WAM, one's path through this subculture will be related to the disposition(s) one adopts towards that larger ideological edifice. As a performer, I would emphasise that living musicians relate to norms, conventions, and values in a viscerally consequential manner – one that is fundamentally *unlike* the dispassionate, analytical stance available to a critic or musicologist (who is able to take a broader view of the 'state of the art' and 'its history'). Having adopted both perspectives at various times, I am convinced that the differences between these 'takes' cannot be overestimated. The approach I take in Part 2 is meant to give a sense of just how far this difference extends, and in which directions. In practice, this means that the 'affordances' of string quartet subculture are never confined to aesthetic issues, or other insulated philosophical pontifications. One might argue, in fact, that popular culture – through bestselling books such as Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* (1999), or films like *A Late Quartet* (2012) – has been more sensitive to the all-encompassing, relational and psychological implications of this cultural universe than has musicology.⁶⁴ The former often illustrates with greater clarity how far 'art world'

⁶³ McGilchrist sees this 'reverberative' quality as characteristic of the right hemisphere's disposition (2012: 170, 94, 96).

⁶⁴ For a fascinating academic discussion of *An Equal Music*, see Smith (2009).

values – and especially the policing of those boundaries – affect the thought and behaviour of actual people. This is far from an incidental point, if one is concerned with the assumed boundaries of ‘proper’ interaction with colleagues; and in understanding the implicit aims of quartet playing, as a refined subset of ‘good ensemble’.

But one need not take fictionalised accounts as evidence to note that a successful turn to performance will first draw on bounded experimental contexts, and then look beyond them. As I argued in Chapter 1, systematic analytical methods are powerful yet importantly limited. And while modern performers may well have an interest in music analysis, different aims reveal different qualities. As we will see in Part 2, an authoritative, explicit and conclusive disposition – which is arguably encouraged by formal disciplinary incentives – is not easily reconciled with the quartet musician’s craft. Even if performers have the option to draw on the tools of ‘re-presentation’, the latter involves living ‘in the gaps’ between concrete assertions.

It is not difficult to come across modern accounts of (quartet) performance in which a reciprocal, ‘reverberative’ process has effectively been replaced by an explicit, normative model. But why should this be the case?

Systematic frameworks are certainly useful if one’s aim is to present black-and-white imperatives that act as ‘benchmarks, for a model’s internal coherence confers the kind of rhetorical certainty that necessarily underpins claims to special authority. It does so, however, at the expense of wider context.

The link between systematic modelling and normativity reaches its zenith in writings hailing from North America’s string quartet community. The security of these models can often be traced to slippage between two meanings of the word ‘elite’: on the one hand, a quasi-Olympian, and implicitly somewhat measurable, understanding of ‘high performance’; and on the other, matters of social aspiration and in-group signification, through the ‘performance’ of particular values.⁶⁵ Consider the more general cultural paradigms (i.e. beliefs about WAM) that underpin these two accounts of desirable ensemble practice:

This study focuses attention on the technical/pedagogical issues that require addressing in order to bring a string quartet’s musical vision to fruition. String quartet coaches and authors of texts on string quartet technique and playing... have indicated that there are skills that must be developed to insure the musical success of the ensemble. If the treatment of technical problems were more standardized, perhaps an ensemble would not have to spend time arguing issues of bow speed, vibrato, points of contact, balance etc. They and those who coach them could utilize that time to discuss views of musical interpretation and perhaps eliminate many personal conflicts that arise as a result of poor ensemble techniques. (Blanche 1996)

Technique may be thought of as the physical precision by (p.131) which a player can execute the score, and gesture may be thought of as the physical and mental combination of a player’s conception of the structure, flow, shape, and understanding of the music. The realization of both of these elements is necessary and important when aiming and playing at elite levels of performance. They form the basis for any group to be able to play their individual parts and provide a means for fitting the parts together with one another, in order create music together. (Boyle 2015: 130-31)

Unsurprisingly, the clearest link between these various meanings of ‘elite’ is to be found in the realm of competition; indeed Koh remarks that “the Olympics of chamber music have arguably resulted in the highest

⁶⁵ For helpful context regarding ‘elite taste’, see Friedman and Reeves (2020).

standards yet seen in the history of quartet playing" (Koh 2014: 133). But there is evidence that (modern) quartet performance, pursued professionally, is psychologically complex in ways that regularly 'bleed out' of the controlled contexts of normative performance discourse. For those involved in it, the subculture's remarkable combination of ideological density and experiential intensity is no abstract proposition, and those factors affect individual musicians in a way that is strikingly – and perhaps alarmingly – all-encompassing. From the perspective of management theory, Howard Robinson (1997) drew clusters of key metaphors from in-depth interviews with quartet players, organising them into five main categories: Quest, Market, Growth, Marriage, and Tao. The descriptions associated with these classifications are conspicuously more intense than the clinical 'models' of elite execution given above:

The quartet musician perceives himself as one who must "sacrifice everything for a higher calling," use one's special talents to journey into the beyond, and return to share the truths found with others who are less able to make the journey on their (p.35) own... [a] mythic formula for the hero underlies the profile of the ideal quartet musician. In response to a higher calling, the quartet musician, like Moses, journeys to the beyond, ascends to the "godhead" of the composer, and returns to fulfill a deeply felt responsibility to others unable to enter "that same place." (Robinson 1997: 34-35)

For this established violinist, the quartet is created through adversity. The journey not only determines whether the group survives but is the vehicle for learning survival. "Resilience, strength and commitment," required to sustain a career, are shaped by adversity itself. The violinist's language plays upon mythic concepts: performing a defining test of strength, undergoing trial in combat, or surviving ritual fire, all of which create self-transformation. Through trial and sacrifice, quartets are transformed into being. As a result, the violinist is unable to give direction to others; each quartet must learn from its own adversity. Through the journey, quartets discover for themselves their inner strengths. (1997: 42)

In general, Robinson's account powerfully demonstrates the extent to which the activity of playing quartets, as a participant in a formalised art world, is grounded in 'whole person' relationships, and indeed the constraints of economic conditions.⁶⁶ Importantly, these practical matters are entwined with attitudes towards abstraction, especially through strong concepts of the genre's 'identity'.⁶⁷ It is not inevitable, then, that players conceive lofty aesthetic contentions as even the central strand of the activity of performance, because they are always negotiating an integrated, contextual spectrum of 'affordances'. Musical considerations are of course hugely significant; but the tendency to conceptualise the demands of quartet performance in somewhat abstract terms – as a functionally decontextualised silo of skills, values and imperatives – cannot truly capture the player's experience. Musicians' actual practice exists in tension with relational contexts: it cannot be straightforwardly 'free

⁶⁶ By contrast with the mythologization that dominates many other accounts, Robinson is direct about these practical demands, writing that quartets "...must commit themselves to organizational tasks beyond performance... these tasks are primarily driven by the current socio-cultural environment, as well as by the organizational needs of host institutions." This observation is even more apt in the 2020s than it was in the 1990s – a comparative 'golden age' of economic opportunity for musicians (Robinson 1997: 8). Note, too, that in recent years the economics of string instruments has become radically decoupled from their use as musicians' tools. Tightening of norms in the 'elite' conventions of string quartet means that tonal qualities are an increasingly important locus of artistic distinction(s), which may exacerbate the advantages of more prestigious instruments – especially the mythic value of the fabled 'set of four'. I will not explore this further here; for context see Cattani et al. (2013) and Cherubini et al. (2022).

⁶⁷ The latter clearly encompasses particular 'takes' on historical narratives. A good example might be an affinity with Haydn's music as providing a 'grounding' for the specialist's understanding of string quartet performance.

floating'. Beliefs about scores play a key role in defining that environment.

Robinson found that elevated talk of artistic values and mythologised lineages sometimes bumps up against more prosaic concerns. For instance,

several informants define the quartet as a private business venture with attendant risks, responsibilities and rewards. Within this perspective, the quartet is most often conceived as a partnership of equals [...] Group tasks, however, are not always performed or delegated according to this egalitarian ideology; as a result, administrative duties can become a source of discontent, especially for those who carry greater burden. Business metaphors, however, allow people to define role relationships within the group, to voice dissatisfaction with perceived inequities and to construct egalitarian norms appealing to the quartet's democratic ideology and the expectation that labor and rewards be distributed equally. (Robinson 1997: 47)

As implied by talk of 'risks, responsibilities and rewards', the stakes are high. The character of modern string quartet ideology can be better understood by noting the synthesis at the heart of its model: between a self-directed, perfectionist, subjective search for a mythic notion of pure aesthetic value; and a competitive, market-situated concept of task execution which, as above, involves the correct application of agreed expertise. These demands are generally cast as extrinsic – and thus as non-negotiable. Once such imperatives have been transformed into matters of basic, qualifying competence, they are not easily recognised as products of *specific* beliefs about music. Interestingly, the marriage between business and quartet performance has become something of a theme, for several academic studies have seen in the quartet a profoundly useful model for effective working practices (Murnighan and Conlon 1991; Tal-Shmotkin 2010; Tal-Shmotkin and Gilboa 2013). I am less interested in those conclusions *per se*, than what the very fact of the quartet's *suitability* for such investigations might communicate about how the demands of this genre are generally conceptualised. I do not think it overstated to suggest that the string quartet is 'regulated' – not in a simplistic way, through explicit rules and regulations, but through the interactions of interlocking dispositions and incentives. It is easy to see, then, that if a particular convention was to become fully 'absorbed' into that environment's value system, the conditions are perfect for exponential reinforcement.

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To deal with performance is to admit a background hum of methodological risk, especially when one widens the net as far as I have done here. Some might regard those risks primarily as a matter of the over-encroachment of subjectivity. But there is an equal amount of risk associated with over-dependence on the perspective of our metaphorical left hemisphere, with its propensity for drawing overly-sharp boundaries, and a predilection for the internal coherence of systems. The dominance of intrinsically decontextualised 're-presentations' increases the likelihood that naïve assumptions will be entrenched, and kinds of thinking incentivised by scholarship sometimes reinforce the performance norms that are based in those assumptions.⁶⁸ It is important, then, that performance analysis avoids simply repackaging well-worn authorities. While it may be a necessary compromise to root

⁶⁸ Unsurprisingly, a volume titled *Musical Excellence: Strategies and Techniques to Enhance Performance* presents some excellent examples; indeed in one case performance conventions are explicitly formulated in terms of 'rules and regulations' (Williamon 2004: 105).

discussions of ensemble in agreed models – such as ‘the shared interpretation of musical structure’ – to *define* performance in terms of such metaphors may neglect the complex play of dispositions that shapes those broader contexts (Cook 2013: 91-134; see also Sewell 2020). In the case of ensemble, there is a clear danger that failing to acknowledge the nature of one’s theoretical models will importantly pre-determine one’s conclusions, because normative cultural assumptions are often subtly interleaved with those paradigms.

This need not mean that analytical frameworks are drained of meaning, only that we recognise their implicit claims. Howard Becker’s concept of ‘art worlds’ (1982) can be valuable tool for cutting through tangled webs of artistic practice, and for noticing foundational beliefs that easily evade the musicologist’s attention.⁶⁹ A particular strength of Becker’s work is his concern to show how artists are not merely *recipients* of ‘ideological’ truths – as if puppets of larger-scale, impersonal forces – but active agents who operate in complex networks of interdependence.⁷⁰ Importantly, he notes that those participants do not (and cannot) all share the same perspective, but arrive at a shared, ‘conventionalised’ understanding from multiple angles. As he writes,

...various groups and subgroups share knowledge of the conventions current in a medium, having acquired that knowledge in various ways. Those who share such knowledge can, when the occasion demands or permits, act together in ways that are part of the cooperative web of activity making that world possible and characterizing its existence. To speak of the organization of the art world- its division into audiences of various kinds - is another way of talking about who knows what and uses it to act together. (Becker 1982: 67)

The collective aspect of an art world thus promotes the impression of solidity, but the same cooperation among differently placed individuals also results in flux. These subtle relationships between participants are easily overlooked by grand, retrospective readings – including mythologies of ‘genius’ – of the sort that have conventionally attracted prestige within WAM’s public discourse.

Musicologists have often found a laser-like focus on agency to be a pragmatic first step in achieving a measure of reconciliation between two contrasting ‘types’: on the one hand, a persuasively argued, verbose but frequently abstract critical discourse; and on the other, the unwieldy, inexpressible and elusive ‘stuff’ of musical *experience*.⁷¹ There is a clear overlap here with McGilchrist’s metaphor, for we might easily regard the former as being captured, broadly, by the ‘take’ of the left hemisphere; the latter by that of the right. As he is at pains to point out, we always need both perspectives, and it does seem intuitively correct that both of these modes shape a person’s relationship to music.⁷² Historical musicologists are certainly well-versed in asking how multifaceted,

⁶⁹ For an interesting contextualisation of Becker’s work within sociology, and an explanation of the differences with Pierre Bourdieu’s field theories, see Serrao (2017: 2-3). I do not endorse Becker’s analytical frame unequivocally, but his work is undoubtedly effective in drawing attention to covert biases and blind spots within WAM discourse. This is probably because his analysis points in precisely the opposite directions to WAM’s most conventional tropes; as Prior (2011: 123) argues, “The draw of Becker’s *Art Worlds* (1982) lay precisely in its unveiling of the delusions of the romantic idea of art as special, esoteric and pure. Sociologizing art, instead, rested on a pragmatic emphasis on the arbitrary status of ‘art’ as well as the basic labour needed to produce, distribute and disseminate it.”

⁷⁰ Becker’s concern with enabling conditions suggests some useful points of contact with J.J. Gibson’s notion of ‘affordance’, which Eric Clarke has discussed in relation to music perception (Gibson 1966, 1979; Clarke 2005b).

⁷¹ Becker’s work is clearly inclined more towards demystification than deification; this tension was also a central thread in the debates about music-historical methodology that followed the publication of Richard Taruskin’s *Oxford History of Western Music* (2005); see also Taruskin (2014).

⁷² Christopher Small went further than most in suggesting that the classical music ‘art world’ was suffering from a mass delusion

philosophically rich tensions have 'played out' in specific processes – archetypally those of composition and reception. The challenge facing the discipline concerns how to achieve the same kind of synthesis, but with performance now placed front-and-centre.

Understanding a landscape as complicated as 'the art world of the string quartet' will always involve the retrospective, abstracted, work-centred explanatory discourses in which musicologists have (conventionally) specialised. To do so with performance more fully in view is not to devalue those contributions; but it does mean noticing what they are like, acknowledging their limitations, and appreciating how the insights of performers differ. McGilchrist's metaphor suggests that those discourses will not be sufficient, in part because their dispositions are drawn from the same 'family'. These limits do not become obvious until one has travelled a good distance along this road, but eventually one will become stranded in inhospitable terrain. An interesting example is the idea that the scholarship of performance inheres in comparing 'interpretations',⁷³ which looks, superficially, like the effective integration of performance into musicological explanation. But it does so while keeping existing aesthetic-philosophical superstructures intact – including their characteristic privileging of the abstract. Can one truly be 'turning to performance', when those insights are framed by, and thus read in terms of, the paradigm of reproduction?

Grappling with the controllable ideals *and* the experience of music presents two equally difficult paths. One is too reductive, the other too elusive. Performing musicians are well placed to notice what cannot be captured by verbal argument; and they know that formulating analytical arguments that 'stay still' for long enough to be revealing will always involve trade-offs.⁷⁴ Robinson's work is useful in drawing attention to the vast distances between the dispositions one can bring to musical enquiry. That range may one day be an asset; but it currently functions as a barrier to rethinking those philosophical foundations in a genuinely collaborative way. The relatively bounded safety of a manipulable, abstract canon of musical works has yielded much analytical and historical insight, but this is not evidence that such a disposition has intrinsically greater (methodological) validity than others. It tells us only that fixity and abstraction are useful and persuasive. The problem is that the intense concentration of insight around that disposition has given rise to an imbalance in perceived authority. And that imbalance is a major impediment to developing a shared conceptual basis of the kind that will be necessary for performance research to resist putting the cart before the horse.

The quartet genre is a prime example of the appeal, status, and authority afforded to abstractions in the 'art world' of WAM. The powerful proxies we have come to know as musical works have been a vector for many profound insights about this musical culture, and I do not propose that we throw this baby out with its bathwater. But a blithely overconfident essentialism lies in wait if one proceeds too far down that path. Indeed many aspects of music philosophy which are unsatisfactory, circular or unrecognisable to common sense can arguably be traced back to this basic transformation. Bringing these dispositions together – for instance, by setting up a dialogue

about who (and what) was involved in creating meaning (1998, 2001). I am less inclined to dismiss abstract discourse out of hand, and McGilchrist's notion of intermediate, enriching 're-presentations' strikes me as a more productive solution to the same problem.

⁷³ This also tends to import an undertone of competition (though not inevitably).

⁷⁴ On this subject, Cook aptly notes that "it is perverse that performers should be valorised for their writing rather than for their performing" (2013: 40).

between ideas about historical performance, genre, and reception, with the empirical study of ensemble – reveals some significant incompatibilities. This continues to hinder research on ensemble performance, and its roots ultimately lie in WAM's most general discursive conventions.

The string quartet 'art world' offers a usefully specific environment in which to interrogate conventionalised meanings of 'good' ensemble. What is the role of performance and performers, in nuancing what we mean by a genre's 'identity'? How well do explicit, systematising descriptions relate to notions of 'appropriate practice' in quartet playing? What about more metaphorical ones? And how secure – or not – have these relationships been, historically? These questions provide a backdrop for the rest of this thesis.

Straightforwardly 'top-down' models of performance generally present an ideal(istic) synthesis of a type that risks predetermining conclusions. Even more significantly, discourses that deal in timeless abstractions, are built from ledger-like agglomerates of factual information, or are dependent on overly mythologised, artificially streamlined historical narratives leave precious little room for the 'telling detail', potentiality and contingency that is so important to the *experience* of music. I believe it is ultimately incoherent, therefore, to treat the performance conventions, practices and metaphors now associated with this genre as if they sprang fully formed from a disembodied conceptualisation of 'the quartet'. In some ways that assessment is a caricature; but versions of such thinking undoubtedly continue to underpin a large proportion of discourse concerning string quartet performance. This is not to say that such conventions are arbitrary 'constructions' with no meaning or consequence. It may be more productive, however, to imagine these various dispositions engaged in a kind of dance – McGilchrist's 'reverberative process' (2012: 228). In any case, there is an urgent need to develop an explanatory basis that can draw upon abstraction and generalisation, yet while resisting their domineering impulses.

II. Language

What is one actually referring to, when discussing 'the string quartet'? Intuitively, this does not require much explanation; but as will become clear, exploring the fine details of this terminology is more revealing than its ease of usage implies. I am especially interested in the way it depends on a kind of slippage between 'types', because this verbal elision is closely related to the ways in which art world participants so readily understand, and then embody, an intelligible ideological whole. This language is one indication of a systematic coherence that will always lean towards essentialism. Becker reminds us that a shared basis of assumptions is more often enabling than problematic for participants in the art world; but when it comes to thinking clearly about music 'as' performance – and establishing where the idea of ensemble fits into that wider project – adopting that disposition uncritically can be importantly limiting. Noticing conventionalised language with greater clarity is helpful in stepping outside this paradigm.

It is a curious feature of musical discourse that the intuitively navigable categories, concepts and entities from which explanations are necessarily built start to shed that explanatory power if one insists on overly specific definitions. The innocuous term 'the string quartet' is a good example of this phenomenon, in which rigorous

specificity more readily generates impractical verbal convolutions than great insights. Telling explanations almost always involve a certain flexibility and ambiguity, and discussions of string quartets are a good example of the usefulness of layered, cross-domain language. Nicholas Cook has noted that this multivalent character can be quite precisely located, historically, in that “commentators from the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century were more likely to talk of the string quartet in terms of social interaction (and a trace of this is preserved in the ambiguity by which the term may mean players, work, or genre)” (Cook 2013: 262). In contemplating the terminology of ‘the string quartet’, then, the first step is to notice that it contains multiple referents – and that, by extension, it may also ‘contain’ multiple ontologies. Making those ‘component meanings’ explicit, however, does not guarantee a more enlightened, clarified picture; in fact, the results are usually cumbersome and unwieldy.⁷⁵ ‘Productive ambiguity’, then, is characteristic of this art world discourse, and this has some important implications.⁷⁶

Our elision taps into the familiar tension between regarding music as a ‘thing’, and as an activity. ‘A string quartet’ can be a lot of different kinds of ‘thing’: some are people, some are abstract, and some are simultaneously solid and elusive (like scores). These definitions regularly shade imperceptibly into one another: indeed the majority of talk about quartets is situated at that ‘crux’. Crucially, the terminology’s unifying yet multi-purpose character means that those collected meanings are understood *implicitly*: it is as if several different ontologies are ‘folded in’ to one another. Writing about the string quartet makes excellent use of this ‘between-space’, in which the reader is frequently drawing on context for determining the precise meaning in any particular situation. These boundaries rarely dissolve completely, and each use often retains some aspects of its ‘compound meanings’. This engenders considerable explanatory subtlety, as when David Wyn Jones writes that “varying aspects of performance practice in a range of instrumental and orchestral music in the first half of the century provide a [...] compelling and pervasive background from which the quartet emerged” (2003: 178). The practice (and practicality) of performance is manifestly implicit here, and yet the statement that ‘the quartet emerged’ against this backdrop can be read in a variety of ways – all of which are expressed ‘together’, and all of which resist explicit identification. Such a fluid, all-encompassing tone is clearly a powerful tool of narrative and explanatory coherence, and it cannot be a coincidence that characterises so much writing about ‘the string quartet’.

This observation might be nothing more than a passing curiosity, if it were not for the fact that this artistic field also exhibits a remarkable degree of what one might call ‘ideological coherence’. For the bringing together of various different ontological ‘angles’ under the umbrella of ‘the string quartet’ associates key abstractions, metaphors, and ideals with specific behaviours, dispositions, critical tropes, and performance conventions. To make this explicit would be to miss the point, for these bonds are strong not because those different facets are

⁷⁵ Unhelpfully, such meanings tend to bifurcate still further into an elusive middle-ground, in which one is consistently left with the simultaneous possibility of concrete instantiations and idealised abstractions. For instance: if using ‘it’ to mean a group of four musicians, does one mean a particular group of people, or an idealised, imagined, disembodied one? And does ‘the genre’ stand for a group of compositions in the aggregate, as if constructed from many independent parts; or is it ‘something out there’, with a complex, predefined, somehow essential character, which exists independently of particular ‘tokens’? If we take it to be the latter, how are we to understand the relationship between that ‘high’ concept and much messier historical realities – including performances? The more one attempts explicitly to pin down and deconstruct the concept into ‘component meanings’ in this way, the more unwieldy (and unhelpful) the terminology becomes. One would not want to be drawn into making this explicit every time quartets were mentioned; and yet, as we will see, this has some important consequences.

⁷⁶ I owe a debt to Mary Hunter’s extensive exploration of this idea, kindly shared in advance of publication (Hunter 2020).

clean and distinct, but because the slippage between them is casual, intuitive, and 'quiet'.⁷⁷ But such coherence goes both ways. For while it enables easy navigation among art world participants, when one steps outside that 'intuitive' context, it presents the analyst with many challenges, because the system's self-similarity makes it very difficult clearly to differentiate between these 'mixed' concepts.

A further result of that definitional flexibility is that the genre nestles very comfortably within the discursive modes that are characteristic of WAM culture. It has often been noted that sweeping accounts of music history, at least since the formation of a historical canon of masterworks in the nineteenth century, tended to 'build in' a certain ambivalence towards agency. This is especially true of surveys of whole genres, which have provided good examples of how retrospective explanations often involve a kind of abstract-historical dualism. Music historians have had to wrestle with this tension between implicitly timeless, disembodied conceptual frameworks – with which many were inclined to begin – and a more contingent perspective, in which the actions of particular agents – composers foremost among them – were understood in terms of affordances and environments. (Earlier versions of this were, of course, more likely to invoke the grander, more impersonal forces of teleology and 'progress'). Historical musicologists are well aware of these big questions of historiography. But the string quartet's hybrid definition clearly presents both opportunities and problems for the balancing act of music-historical explanation.

The point is illustrated by a passage from the introduction to a current undergraduate course at Stanford University:

The string quartet can be defined in several ways. At the most basic level the musical term refers to the medium of four string instruments: two violins, viola, and violoncello. It can also be used to describe the collective identity of the instrumentalists themselves, in particular established professional ensembles...

Thanks to Joseph Haydn, the acknowledged father of the string quartet, the medium evolved into a genre. It is Haydn's compositions for the medium above all - he composed 68 of them - that established the formal conventions and aesthetic values that secured the string quartet a special status and significance in Western musical culture. As developed by Haydn, the quartet became the preferred vehicle through which composers ever since, from Mozart to John Adams, have honed and displayed their compositional craft. (Hinton et al. 2020)⁷⁸

The productive conceit here is to cast an abstract category – some notion of the string quartet 'itself' – as the protagonist. There is little doubt that we are dealing with a success story. But this passage puts an odd spin on the idea of historical development, for there is a sense in which that narrative is being used to explain a significance that ultimately transcends that history. When the very subject is a genre's 'rise to prominence' – the conclusion, in other words, having already been established – it is difficult for one's explanatory perspective to avoid de-emphasising human agency. Such a structure, in other words, builds in an 'incline' towards orientation around an apparently firm but importantly abstract *edifice*.

If this mode is familiar, that is surely because it has proved so extraordinarily useful. But it is another example of

⁷⁷ A more formal encapsulation of this is the idea of heuristics; see Leech-Wilkinson and Prior (2014).

⁷⁸ <https://online.stanford.edu/courses/sohs-ymusicstrngtrtet-defining-string-quartet-haydn>

how WAM's characteristic mode of thinking is dependent on a conceptual model in which, as I have said, the abstraction is implicitly elevated 'above' the experience, the general 'above' the particular. One could go further still, to argue that seeing compositional activity through the lens of 'contributions to the genre' already involves a kind of 'flattening' gesture: it is fundamentally bureaucratic, perhaps even lifeless. Here, genre is akin to a ledger, whereby the 'whole' is conceptualised as an aggregate of discrete, controllable, official, tabulated parts. I have in mind the idea of individual 'works' being built up in this manner; but there is also a sense in which this metaphor has become so assimilated that even contemporary composers, when writing a string quartet, are tied into this paradigm of (mechanistically?) interrelated 'parts' rather more literally.⁷⁹

This point is not intended to be antagonistic. Recognising the particularity of these conventions is important because they point to a broader disposition that underpins how thought about music has conventionally been structured. This has implications for praxis, because of how it is imagined to 'fit' in that structural model. In this case, we can see that the character of its discourse means that 'the string quartet' is set up as a high-level 'umbrella' abstraction, as if an entity with its own independent coherence and weight. It is not a single, distilled idea, but a broader heuristic that encompasses (or 'shelters') several different kinds of thing. The concept of string quartets posited in the above example not only groups together multiple abstractions in the aggregate – such as the works which constitute the repertory or canon⁸⁰ – but is held to 'give rise to' a set of aesthetic values, which are (presumably) coherent enough to invoke and discuss with some confidence.

The peculiar characteristics of this genre's label are thus quietly crucial in affording these 'aesthetic values' an impression of historical and cultural permanence that is relatively unusual within art worlds. When the terminology slips so easily between several domains, we have conditions in which 'essential' qualities can be asserted – or simply assumed – and then tied to specific performance conventions. Moreover, this relationship is embedded so firmly in language that there is barely a discernible gap between these different meanings. This 'ontological elision' is usefully all-encompassing, then; and it helps to explain why the characteristic discourse of string quartets so often involves the interplay of loftily theoretical, Platonic ideals, circulating in the realm of genre 'itself'. It is because those abstract ideals are conventionally treated as the primary 'content' of WAM, that they are assumed to permeate 'down' the hierarchy, and to exert a kind of authoritative power over the (implicitly 'lower') realm of musical performance.

But such elevated conceptualisations of music are not context-free, and indeed from outside the WAM bubble it is rather clearer that this disposition is significantly associated with notions of elite social value. From within the art world, it is primarily the quartet genre's weightily coherent historical-compositional narrative – in tandem with something along the lines of the 'intrinsic greatness of the medium itself' – that appears to support its status as one of the truly 'strong forms' of art. Outside that bounded context, however, it is more obvious that the coherence of the art world itself is critically dependent on a specific disposition towards musical experience. This

⁷⁹ There remains a choice, of course, between embracing this model or playing against it, not least for composers. In the context of McGilchrist's work, the string quartet by Aaron Cassidy (2001-2) is particularly interesting, for he explores themes of fragmentation and separation, inspired by research into speech aphasia (Cassidy 2002).

⁸⁰ I do not explore the distinctions between these terms here, but they are worth noting in passing. For a summary, see Taruskin (2014: 277-84).

framing is far from a socially neutral lens; indeed the 'abstracting' disposition does important work in securing that high esteem. Notions of 'high' (and 'low') value are deeply significant to the study of performance, then – and not just in the conventional sense of characterising musical materials.⁸¹ We would do well not to leave them entirely implicit.

The 'interpretation' or exegesis model also draws its coherence from a kind of synthesis. Broadly speaking, it brings together 'compositional content' – often (confusingly) re-read as a composer's 'intentions' – with a general collection of regulative 'art world' values, and also with more local conventions of execution in performance: more generally, something one might call 'style'. When talking of 'interpretations', judgement is governed by a paradigm which regards the performer's job as reconciling (imagined) compositional intentions, 'proper' art world values, and more specific conventions. In 'faithful' performance, those interlocking pieces of 'understanding' are imagined as coalescing into a complete, ideal, not to say prestigious, whole. This situation is reminiscent of the 'three-in-one' structure familiar from Christian theology. In a striking further analogy with religion, at least some of the power of its central pillar – the 'work concept' – seems to lie in its remaining eternally mysterious; and perhaps even in its being actually incoherent and opaque. (That it 'makes sense', one largely has to take on trust). The contradictions involved in the idea of musical works have been the subject of whole books, and it seems to me that even the most well-intentioned attempts to navigate a sensible path through this terrain almost inevitably end up caught up in elisions and evasions, in an effort to square the circle of *a priori* commitments. For some, this background of mild incoherence seems to be a price worth paying, for the illusion of control and permanence. Yet it is also, somewhat paradoxically, relatively unimportant to most art world participants. Certainly the philosophical status of the concept is not at the forefront of the musician's mind: it affects a player's praxis in a more indirect, 'secondary' sense, in that the concept shapes the environment, and thus affects the player's specific 'affordances'. I am therefore in full agreement with Ridley (2004), when he suggests that most listeners to music do not necessarily share the concerns of analytic philosophers.

Is it possible that WAM's archetypal 'work concept' remains so influential not because it is intellectually coherent and socially neutral, but actually because it is the opposite? Could remaining conceptually mysterious be in some way key to its elite status?⁸² Performance conventions in an 'elite' genre like string quartets are not easily disentangled from these ideas. Indeed the topic of social elevation in art worlds points towards the notion of 'regulative' concepts: ideas that have an impact on behaviour because they confer value (Taruskin 2006a: 172). Such a status is never straightforwardly dependent upon historical veracity: the reality is much more nuanced. And string quartet performance conventions are no exception, for the stakes are defined from *inside* the 'art world', and art world incentives are usually a poor fit for the concerns of historians. Art world participants are certainly not required to be dispassionate analysts – nor should they be.⁸³

The relevance of verbal integration and circularity should be becoming steadily more obvious. The more one talks

⁸¹ The obvious allusion here is mainly to discussions of eighteenth-century music, and especially the metaphors associated with topic theory. For a summary of this extensive literature, see Mirka (2014).

⁸² A willingness to persevere with a paradoxical and incoherent aesthetic frame may be its own (niche) form of conspicuous consumption, an important dimension of the sociology of taste.

⁸³ Again, art worlds are precisely the sorts of contexts within which 'pseudo-historical fictions' have an *impact* that outstrips the truth (or falsity) of the claim itself.

about the category in general – for instance, as a smoothly functioning, quasi-mechanical entity whose parts are perfectly mapped onto one another – the more confidently one will tend to embed related performance norms as *de facto* truths, quite independently of evidence, historical or otherwise. Like the Matryoshka, the system is ‘wired’ to reject paradigms that do not fit that ‘secure’ template. (One might think of aesthetic ideology like the body’s white blood cells). There is also a reciprocal dimension at play here, regarding the ‘family resemblance’ I invoked earlier. For an art world’s internal coherence is also likely to lend further strength to the structure of thought that characterises its broader environment: the discursive conventions of WAM. The implied direction of travel – from abstraction to experience – gains further authority from the presence of ‘internally coherent’ ideological outposts like the art world of the string quartet. From almost every direction, there are incentives to conceiving of ‘proper’ performance practices not as *generative* of abstractions, but always as flowing *from* them.

These self-contained, layered ‘paradigms’ are analogous to those described by Thomas Kuhn in fields of scientific inquiry: the questions one can (sensibly) ask are *already* circumscribed by the context from which one is looking or participating (Kuhn 1962; Leech-Wilkinson 2002: 226).⁸⁴ Thinking about music that prioritizes abstractions, and which casts that Platonic realm as the highest, the most integrated, and the most authoritative, is clearly a useful disposition – and often a persuasive one. But it is profoundly limited, in terms of how it is capable of imagining performance (and performers). Allowing a discourse of essences to expand exponentially in its perceived authority, means that performance is increasingly ‘strung along’ as incidental – or, as Nicholas Cook has put it, as an ‘epiphenomenon’ (2013: 87). For Cook, the classic example of such thinking is the metaphor of musical structure: because its model is so persuasive (and self-referential), it is only able to see performance as a transient manifestation of that intrinsically ‘deeper’ reality (Cook 2013: 98; see also Leong 2016). McGilchrist’s work suggests that this view is inclined to mistake the map for the territory (2012: 219).

The case of string quartets is interestingly layered, however, because, as we have seen, discussions are often grounded not just in idealised abstractions of *notation*, but in abstractions of embodied musical or social *praxis*. That is to say, metaphors of ‘conversation’ or ‘unity’, though they refer to social interaction, function as paradigmatic for string quartets in a generalised, theoretical, and ‘intrinsic’ manner. It is this ‘essence-based’ version that shapes much of our understanding – even, in many cases, of *praxis*. And so we find ourselves in the curious situation whereby the coherence of the art world is closely but *paradoxically* entwined with participants’ actions, which is a direct result of ‘misdiagnosing’ conventions primarily as properties of texts (or whole genres). There is, in short, a bizarrely exponential quality to these conventions, which is a direct result of the structure of discourse. As Robinson found, these have real implications for individual (and group) psychology.⁸⁵ These archetypes are difficult to notice, and still more so to find alternatives. This is why closed paradigm thinking, in the round, is such a critical issue for the study of ensemble. One is never dealing with a neutral, well-defined, value-free research area, but a field that works on the basis of foundational assumptions. Many of these are useful, even necessary. But others, I suggest, impose rigid frameworks that yield a blind spot to the kinds of insights that performers offer. I will attempt to offer some of those insights in Part 2.

⁸⁴ For other applications of Kuhn’s work in musicology, see Liu (2010) and Vladimirovna (2021).

⁸⁵ The key section concerns the ‘marriage’ metaphor (Robinson 1997: 93-101).

To recap, then. It is a basic feature of quartet discourse that various ontologies and values are bundled together into a linguistically indivisible whole. One of the most important outcomes of that arrangement is to de-emphasise the sense that there is a pattern to be spotted at all: it is just the way things are. This creates ideal conditions for *de facto* imperatives, which directly affect the ‘affordances’ of professional quartet musicians. In a manner reminiscent of Bourdieu’s field theories – and especially the notion of habitus – the key here is seamless integration between specifics and their context (Bourdieu 1984; see also Grenfell 2012). Generalisations about ‘quartet playing’ are a case in point, for the question simply *cannot* arise, as to why these particular ideas should be aesthetically elevated, and in the precise way that they are. And this yields an obvious imbalance in incentives: it is never beneficial, from within the art world, to interrogate the intellectual basis of that authority. In WAM, the broader context of abstract thinking will, like a hall of mirrors, generate conceptual models that are both closed and nested. This self-similarity has made certain norms extraordinarily resilient. The ‘work concept’ itself provides a useful analogue for this process, for it is an excellent example of how ‘systems thinking’ can remain persuasive, even if it is philosophically incoherent; and the reason it retains that authority is because its functioning *in society* depends on a much broader context than its capacity to yield clear analytical thought. Conceptual flaws are not fatal to the concept’s usefulness, for the simple reason that its conferring socio-cultural prestige is more significant than its independent philosophical consistency.

A web of complex, interrelated beliefs and incentives is at play here, and how one chooses to navigate them has a tangible effect upon what one finds ‘good ensemble’ to mean. I will pick up this thread in the next chapter, by looking at the equally elevated notion of ‘historically informed performance’, and where the reader is invited to ponder how coherently these various beliefs intersect.

III. Values and mythologies

Recent scholarship of the string quartet genre has sometimes pointed in similar directions, and so a brief exploration of historiography will flesh out some of my ideological criticisms. An effective way of tempering the influence of overly abstract, unified and mythologised views of ‘the quartet’ has been to treat genres as ‘compositional vehicles’. A significant part of this idea’s value lies in its enabling a degree of reconciliation between human agency – which, in principle, at least, encompasses the straightforwardly pragmatic as well as the more grandly aesthetic – and a more general, slowly unfolding sense of shared norms, conventions, and values. Broadly applicable historical narratives, including concepts of the genre’s ‘identity’, can thus be seen in a context defined by ‘active use’ (rather than mere passivity). The caveat is that such concepts of ‘genre identity’ need to be conceived in terms of the accumulations of an active, agential process, and not as an ideological, monolithic, static corpus defined only in retrospect. That shift in perspective – closely related to the broader academic trend towards seeing music as creative practice (Cook 2018) – helps avoid losing touch with human motivations, contentions, and constraints. Done well, it revitalises categories as tools which can not only be ‘deployed’, but contested, negotiated, emulated, and critiqued. And this move also entails a commitment that paradigmatic values, however widely shared or fervently believed, do not spring from ‘on high’, but were (and are) defined and adapted by particular cultural milieux. In sum, historiography suggests that concepts like ‘generic identities’ are

worthy of one's attention, not as essentialised, or 'given', but in terms of the ways they are transmitted and inherited. A practical corollary of this human(e) emphasis – and an important claim of this thesis – is that those identities can always be reshaped by their inheritors.

The idea of a monolithic generic 'identity' for the string quartet has regularly been challenged by music historians. The work of Nancy November and James Webster, in particular, has demonstrated that the ideology of 'classical' quartet composition that serves as the wellspring of popular developmental narratives is perhaps not quite so neat after all (Webster 2005; November 2008). A particular failing among interpretations of the historical evidence, according to November, is a tendency to over-extrapolate from certain defensible but *specific* claims into a unitary, 'generally applicable' archetype. Despite there being "at least some regulative idea of the string quartet" around the turn of the nineteenth century, she argues,

the real hardening of theories and ideas about the string quartet into a unified, regulative concept arguably post-dates the period of the exemplary works' composition and early reception (the time of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven). Conceptions of the string quartet at this time were multi-faceted, dualistic and open to debate. (November 2014: 9)

Rather fittingly, given my overarching metaphor of hemisphere difference, November follows Ludwig Finscher (to some extent) in identifying in historical accounts two main strands of thought, held in a kind of sympathetic opposition.⁸⁶ On the one hand, there was the 'purity and abstraction' associated with the challenge of perfect four-part composition. On the other was the field of meanings drawn from the metaphor of conversation, held to be "implicitly social and entertaining... visual and visceral... [and in which] the musical experience is a product of the listener's engagement with the immediate, affective qualities of the music" (November 2014: 10). Some elite theorists knowingly elided the qualities of "true" quartet composition with those of performance – often in tandem with the necessary cultivation of the performer's taste and good morals – in ways which will likely be familiar to a modern observer. In one of the more famous examples, Johann Petiscus, writing in 1810, explicitly associated the "true nature" of the quartet genre with a kind of proto-phenomenology of performance: grounded in "uniformity of timbre", "harmonic completeness", "clarity and precision", and requiring "self-denial" for accomplishing the task of creating "the most perfect unity" (Petiscus 1810, quoted in November 2003: 173-74). But despite the alluring similarity with contemporary discourse, November remarks acidly that while

this is the view that lies behind more recent perceptions of "Classical" string quartets as the epitome of "Classical" chamber music, and "Classical style" more generally. Not only were these a product more of nineteenth- than eighteenth-century aesthetics, but it was, arguably, based at least as much on non-musical agendas than on its first supposed exemplars—the quartets of Haydn... This quartet theory says at least as much about its theorists as it does about the "exemplary" works they sought to describe. (November 2003: 175)

The heart of the historiographical-critical problem, then, is that the genre's 'identity' was over-determined in retrospect. Value-laden metaphors (including 'truth', 'purity', 'equality', and 'unity') were important framing devices for a small but growing elite of eighteenth-century composers and connoisseurs in the mid-to-late

⁸⁶ Finscher (1974); November cites p.279-301 as relevant.

eighteenth century. Over time, and in tandem with related aesthetic (and philosophical) currents, these relatively loose and *functional* metaphors were increasingly understood as the bedrock an ideology of mythic status. And this later ideology was characterised by a monolithic inflexibility that was alien to the earlier context. When writers projected that vision back into the eighteenth century, as part of efforts to make sense of the masterworks' origins, the essentialist impulses that had (by then) become native to musical discourse meant that accounts of earlier practice were notably susceptible to confirmation bias. (This process is characteristic of many, if not most, of music history's 'origin myths'). This desire to reconcile earlier compositions in terms of the newly dominant paradigm sometimes led music historians – or, more often, elite circles of enthusiasts and musicians – to adopt historically anachronistic positions.⁸⁷

Mythmaking is therefore crucial to the history of the quartet genre; and it started early, with Joseph ('Papa') Haydn himself. (David Wyn Jones argues that both Haydn and his biographer Griesinger "willingly played their part in the evolving mythology of the composer and his music" (Jones 2003: 178)). The character of the writings of theorists including Petiscus, Koch, and Sulzer is also indicative of the extent to which musical elites were, by the turn of the century, filtering their appreciation not just of musical composition but also of musical *experience* through a 'regulative' work concept (Petiscus 1810; Koch and Sulzer 1996; see also Talbot 2000). November reminds us that the theory does (and did) not map cleanly onto praxis. It is probably significant, however, that such writings, insofar as they were to form the bedrock of a nascent ideology of 'the' string quartet, had already encoded an important sense of cross-pollination between a genre or work's most elevated, desirable and fundamental characteristics – expressed in terms of a selection of defining metaphors – and the ideal dispositions of performing musicians.⁸⁸

At the same time as the specific historical-compositional ideology of quartets was taking on an increasingly elevated status among musical elites – through the reverent listening practices consciously fostered in London by John Ella and his Musical Union, for example – many of the same people were adopting and shaping an abstract, timeless, and *ethicised* notion of 'the great musical work' (Bashford 2007, 2010).⁸⁹ The cultures of exegesis that built up around that central pillar – and which most conspicuously orbited the music of Beethoven – bequeathed the intellectual and creative foundations for the 'strong form of art' that has underpinned WAM's characteristic dispositions ever since. Those dispositions can thus be associated with the quartet genre quite directly, and in multiple dimensions. Aesthetically, intellectually, historically, and socially, this art world has long been an extraordinarily good 'fit' for those values, and the broader patterns of thought that sustain them.

The link between imputed compositional or abstract essences and the requisite skills and priorities of (elite) performance remains a conspicuous guiding force in contemporary discourse on string quartets. It is intertwined, further, with notions of 'the classic', in the sense of a model or aspirational norm. The late Walter Levin, a pedagogue who taught an entire generation of quartet players in the second half of the twentieth century,

⁸⁷ November (2008: 347) invokes Donald Francis Tovey here.

⁸⁸ It is worth reiterating that this is interestingly distinct from the formulations of performance related by Mozart or C.P.E. Bach (as discussed in Chapter 1).

⁸⁹ See especially Bashford (2007: 139).

expressed some of these ideas with unusual clarity:

...when you want to convey to an ensemble what it means to interpret something, that is, if you're to teach a quartet how to play, for instance, Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven, then you have to come to some clarity yourself about what it is that a string quartet is actually supposed to render in sound, that is, what the music itself demands: what are the characteristics of the classical quartet composition?

Usually you begin with the classical style... First of all there's the purely technical issue of playing together. Secondly there are the issues of balance and tone colour: should the quartet sound like one single instrument or not? And then you have to think about what decisions have to be made with respect to a composition, what questions must be asked of it, the answers to which are ultimately represented by the interpretation, by the performance. It always has to do with asking questions about a composition, about its particular style, and about what was taken for granted by musicians in the period in which it was written. "Because that's the way I like it," is no criterion at all. (Spruytenburg 2014: 156-57)

In a similar conversation book, the musicians of the Guarneri Quartet were more explicit in associating 'the music itself' with a quasi-supernatural unity. But they do so in a way that is importantly less abstract than many other accounts of 'the genre itself'. Their unification is viscerally 'felt', and situated more in the irreducible qualities of performance as experience than in a theoretical understanding of genre:

Dalley: "It's true that there are occasions when we really do seem to feel and breathe as one player, and there have been moments when I've felt we've transcended everything we've done before. Much of it may be nothing more than the sheer science of quartet playing, but one would like to think that there is also some power at work which does enable one to scale new heights. That's becoming rather metaphysical..."

Tree: "At such times it may only be that we're succeeding in coming a little closer to the power of the music itself, to the greatness of the work at hand – to unlocking and releasing that power. I agree that when all's said and done, there is an element of the mystic in the process." (Blum 1986: 168)

Their model of performance considers the decidedly Hoffmannesque rhetoric of the 'spirit realm' (and 'the music itself') actually to be brought into being through the musicians' relationships.⁹⁰ Analytically, their location of that almost mystical experience in 'the work' seems more-or-less untenable. But this is to miss the point, for the concept is doing a kind of work for them that is *not* analytical in character. It can do so in such a powerful manner precisely because the metaphor is so closely integrated within the wider context of WAM's ideology (and discourse).

The Guarneris' comprehensive but pleasingly un-theorized reflections have been adopted and adapted by numerous quartet players since, notably in North America, where their pedagogy has been the basis of many systematic explorations of ensemble practice within universities (Koh 2014; Klorman 2016: 86; Crane 2006: 28-31; Yu 2013; Blanche 1996: 77-78). In certain ways their ideas are now somewhat dated; but their continued import for such institutional reflections on quartet playing suggests that their comments still give a reasonably accurate picture of the values that 'art world' participants consider to be paradigmatic – at least in North America. (The

⁹⁰ For a contextual discussion of E.T.A. Hoffmann's musical metaphysics, see Rumph (1995).

very fact that their ideas are still being cited in this context, several decades later, might be taken as another indication of this ideology's resilience). Theirs' has remained the dominant model even though the details of the expressive conventions of string playing have changed significantly since the 1980s, and so may indicate a decoupling of 'style' and 'idea': the notion that quartet 'values' are steady and unchanging, because they are held to be grounded in the secure abstraction of 'the works themselves', and are therefore resistant to the (more fragile) whims of 'style change'.

Their discussions also demonstrate how far a performer's understanding of string quartet 'unity' – what it is like, and indeed why it should be like that – is closely connected to other ideas that carry art-world prestige. Some of these values are quite obvious, such as the idea of faithfulness to the 'content' of works, and (in turn) to the letter and spirit of notated scores. The implications of this for how one understands 'togetherness' could hardly be clearer. The impulse towards textual literalism, and the concomitant equation of 'the score' with 'the music', is a key driver of the tendency for modern (empirical) studies to rely on a single model of ensemble skills – one that is not just incidentally but *fundamentally* grounded in the idea of 'temporal synchronisation'. A prerequisite for 'faithfulness', in other words, seems to be that the performance should sound like the music looks. By contrast, performances that are not 'synchronised' in this (paradoxically) visual manner draw conspicuous attention to themselves – at least when a listener is following a score. (In fact that was one of the points Cook was making, when exploring how far WAM ideology is built on the notion of music as 'sounded writing' (2013: 3)). One can argue that the values of the string quartet 'art world' are comprehensively invested in that model; and this means that 'elite' performances tend to be assessed in terms of it.⁹¹ But this is quite different from saying that *string quartet performance* must always, necessarily, and inescapably be 'governed' by these beliefs. Why should this be the case, when this paradigm's allegedly 'ethical' basis can be shown, not least through the evidence of early recordings, to be no more than a chimera?⁹²

Clearly, the 'sounded writing' framework is much less effective in policing musical experiences that are not so closely 'bound' to scores, or other symbolic 're-presentations'. The contrast with other genres, then, suggests the unconditional primacy of writing – and in turn, of abstraction – has been hugely significant in determining this art world's 'proper' boundaries. Once one notices the specificity of the intellectual infrastructure that has been erected around different 'categories' of musical experience, the ethical basis of modern ensemble norms largely falls away into incoherence. In Part 2, I explore how such bureaucratic concerns might be transcended – importantly, by an approach to ensemble that repudiates notions of 'adherence' in favour of the lifelike qualities of musical performance.

Meyer's suggestion that there are important continuities between Romantic and Modernist aesthetic philosophies offers another interesting perspective on the Guarneri Quartet's influential framework (Meyer 1991). Many of those continuities have to do with a shared disposition towards art-objects: broadly speaking, Modernist thought doubled down on that aspect of Romanticism, even while loudly rejecting others. In many ways the Guarneris' stance is not a synthesis of these two dispositions (towards music and performance), so much as a 'piling up' of a

⁹¹ For provocative discussion of classical music as police state, see Leech-Wilkinson (2016: 330).

⁹² See also Leech-Wilkinson (2020a: 19/1).

Stravinskian concept of 'execution', *on top of* nineteenth century idealism. Metaphors with their origins in the latter were frequently filtered 'through' the former.⁹³ A potent example of this is the metaphor of organicism – an idea which of course flourished in the years following the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859); indeed this theme gives a special insight into the 'two-way street' between the elevated terms of critical-compositional discourse, and their 'application to' performance. Organicist metaphors largely governed 'the rules of the game' in musical analysis until the 1980s, when they were increasingly regarded with suspicion, as musicology developed greater sensitivity to 'covert values' (Levy 1987; see also Korsyn 1993). But they have been equally influential within discourses of performance, probably because the role of performance was generally seen to inhere in 'bringing out' qualities thought to be 'latent' in a score. But for obvious reasons, organicist rhetoric was never so *explicitly* formalised in performance as in analysis, and this may explain why the idea has received rather less deconstructive attention in that domain. It continues to cling to string quartet playing, for instance, as a barnacle does to a ship. This is especially true of journalistic criticism, but it remains a tacit assumption in many scholarly contexts as well, insofar as this value is continually but implicitly mapped onto scores (and their 'demands').⁹⁴ This metaphor has come to apply to quartet performance in a distinctive way, and Meyer's observation of philosophical continuities helps to put this usage in context. Despite its nineteenth-century origins, the meaning of organicism in a performance context has more often been 'filtered' through values which are subtly different: those associated with the ideological currents of the 1930s, and with Igor Stravinsky and Arturo Toscanini, whose influential rhetoric elevated the qualities of 'precision' and literal execution above all.⁹⁵ The association of these qualities with ethical virtue often seems self-evident to modern observers in precisely the same way that 'organic development' once seemed a self-evident virtue of compositional practice.⁹⁶

For this reason, Janet Levy's remarks on this subject back in 1987 remain strikingly applicable to the modern art world of string quartet performance. Only a few adjustments in vocabulary would be necessary, I think, to redirect the following observations away from her original targets (of composition and analysis) and towards the realm of performance aesthetics:

...organicism and its related models, nature and biology, are not only pervasive; they are *invasive* in that they affect many other prevalent covert values—for example, such positive ones as "economy/economical," "exhaustion of motives", "natural and idiomatic," [...] "concentration"... Further, the entire constellation of organicist vocabulary itself tends to be used as objective description, from talk of "flowering from seed" and "goal-directed processes," to

⁹³ In the realm of performance these continuities are less clear, perhaps because the rhetoric of *textreue* was to some extent conceived in opposition to 'Romantic' tendencies, and inclined to disavow 'interpretive excesses' specifically on the basis of ethical obligations. The continuities inhere a level deeper, in the very notion of obligation *itself* (whether understood in relation to 'works' or to composers).

⁹⁴ This is not to deny that the metaphor is often appropriate for describing the special 'play of tones' between four string instruments; my point is that this should be distinguished from the 'organicist' claims associated with composition and music theory.

⁹⁵ For further discussion of Modernism and performance, see Taruskin (2012). Fairtile (2003: 49) has also noted that "It is not news that Toscanini's reputation for absolute fidelity to the printed score was little more than a public relations myth".

⁹⁶ Healy (2018) has explored many similar themes of 'self-evident aesthetic virtue'. As an indication of its continued import within performance studies, researcher Alan M. Wing reported the results of one experimental study in the press with the following description: "In some other music, people just come and play together, but in a string quartet, like any ensemble, have [sic] to become one organism" (Shurkin 2014). The original study to which the article refers is Wing, Endo, Yates, et al. (2014).

"gradual transformation," "fluidity," and so on. And opposites of these—for example, "additive," "episodic," and "non-developmental"—often bear immediate (and covert) negative values unless specially qualified. (Levy 1987: 4)

The rhetoric of organicism is related to another musicological bugbear, 'unity' – itself a central tenet of quartet ideology. The (apparent) coherence of current ensemble norms is importantly reinforced by such 'covert' values, especially when they form strong bonds with other values and behaviours associated with 'proper' WAM practice. Anna Scott has identified a 'pervasive aesthetic ideology of psychological and physical control' pertaining to performance style in the music of Johannes Brahms (2014b: 4; see also Scott 2014a). I suggest that a more general version of the same phenomenon has been similarly 'affixed' to what it means to perform string quartets; and thus, that to participate as a truly valued member of that art world means 'performing' – in a subtly different sense – its most firmly embedded metaphors. This is not a criticism of the performers who so skilfully and diligently achieve this in the present. But it seems important to offer an alternative way of thinking about how and why those values took shape in this *particular* way, especially in light of the evidence for historical variation and complexity. More generally, is it possible that the prevalence of 'left hemisphere' thinking may have acted as a brake on the development of ensemble paradigms that are more unique, more fluid, and perhaps even more 'true' to the nature of musical experience?

The burgeoning scholarship of performance suggests that broad descriptive strokes of 'unity' and 'organicism' can be misleading, for their general character masks significant change in the conventions for how people have made music 'together'. This is why any critique needs to grapple with the foundations of how classical music is conceptualised. While we continue unconditionally to elevate abstractions, and prioritise explicit, verbal concepts and values, as if they are the primary 'content' of musical experience, those concepts will shape the terms of engagement with particular performances *a priori*. This is exactly what we do, when we understand 'string quartet performance' only in terms of the social and philosophical infrastructure that is 'given' by its formal, discursive, elite 'art world'. This creates an analytical problem, because to adopt such a model unconditionally is to build in a bias towards participants who are already invested in existing values and norms – and in upholding their *de facto* correctness.⁹⁷ Such pronouncements are amenable to being 'made concrete' in language, and so appear remarkably authoritative. In turn, these beliefs can start to exert 'regulative' influence within *social* fields of practice. Circular, exponential processes of reinforcement actively discourage curiosity about the basis of those conventions, and stifles exploration of alternatives

There is an even more profound sense in which this situation is circular. I have suggested that the generalised performance imperatives associated with those malleable, powerful, explicit, verbal 'values' *cannot* derive straightforwardly 'from' abstractions, but are reflexively shaped by individuals' *experience* of music. And those experiences of performance(s) – which are intrinsically non-verbal, yet also detailed, contextual, and specific – are not easily codified, and many of their most salient dimensions slip through the coarse sieve of denotative language. Thinking more historically, and noticing the extent to which performances (of scores) change over time, makes this point especially vividly. That will be the focus of the next chapter. But it is worth remembering, too, that ensemble performers – including modern musicians – are *always* doing something quite unlike that which is

⁹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical concept of *doxa* is a useful touchstone here; see Grenfell (2012: 68).

encapsulated, theorised, and policed in terms of the discursive language of 'art worlds'. The details of praxis are often located 'in the gaps', in the manner of the right hemisphere. And just as for McGilchrist it is the right hemisphere that provides both the initial grounding and the ultimate 'synthesis' of experience, in many crucial respects it is performances – in their specificity, 'betweenness', uniqueness, contingency, and lifelike qualities – that underpin the values and metaphors of discourse, and not the other way around.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ For a reminder of this principle, see (McGilchrist (2012: 206).

Chapter 3: 'Historically informed performance'

The idea of 'historically informed performance' (following John Butt, henceforth 'HIP') is an important development in the intellectual life of Western Art Music. In this chapter I explore how this subculture's distinctive historical-ideological inheritances and in-group arguments bring into sharp relief some key questions I have raised about performance, musicology, and the idea of disposition. I will not take particular positions on this ideology's intellectual merits and limitations. Instead, I examine the *character* of these contentions in order to develop an understanding of (ensemble) praxis that is more fully dissociated from essentialist assumptions, and situated instead in philosophical, aesthetic, historical and social contexts that are both fluid and contested. Where do the values of ensemble sit within the 'HIP debates'? What does the evidence of early recordings tell us about the priorities and inheritances of this 'live' subculture? And how might the intellectual structure of this ideology yield a predisposition to neglect certain kinds of evidence?

I. Theory and practice

Like the string quartet, the phenomenon of HIP presents a distinctive 'art world' context that is shaped by particular values and beliefs. But it is also a very different kind of cultural ecosystem. One of the most interesting features of this discourse is the extent to which its values have been explicitly (and extensively) negotiated. This process has yielded some noticeably porous boundaries: the topic lies somewhere *between* scholarship and criticism; analysis and activism; theory and practice.⁹⁹ This has generated a remarkably productive capacity for exchange. The idea of reciprocity is key to understanding what is at stake in the idea of HIP, then, because the field has always balanced complex historical and philosophical inheritances with a 'live' field of participants, contentions, and conventions.

The 'sociological gaze' of Becker and others is helpful in mitigating the tendency to conceptualise the claims of HIP primarily in terms of thought experiments. Historicist arguments made 'in theory' often involve positing closed philosophical systems; indeed many of this subculture's claims to distinction seem to depend on that disposition. And as in the previous chapter, I suggest that this mode is given its very *sense* by its context: that it is situated within a broader ontological paradigm that buttresses its core assumptions. Like the string quartet, HIP discourse often gives the impression of neutrality, in which historical authority provides a reliable basis for 'proper' musical values. Once again, it is systematic coherence that gives the rhetoric of HIP a priestly impression of comprehensiveness – and for some, even of moral superiority.

But entertaining certain kinds of historical evidence generates some significant conflicts between WAM's various ideological tenets, and how one chooses to deal with those conflicts reveals a great deal about the thinking that

⁹⁹ Joseph Kerman (1985: 186) memorably observed that "the strength of the historical performance movement stems directly from the rich, varied, and sometimes spiky compost that is produced when all these types are thrown together and left to warm in music's glow."

underpins that discourse. In the face of such evidence, does one attempt to reconcile those discrepancies within the system? Or does one start to entertain doubts about that framework's coherence?

The fact that this live artistic field has been shaped by a knowingly 'theoretical' mode has had some interesting knock-on effects. In practice, this mode is quite broad, and is frequently encountered in softer (pragmatic) as well as harder (moralistic) forms. This theoretical enthusiasm has had some impact on the practices of 'historical' performers, of course. But it is worth remembering that it also – much more covertly – affects the organisation of *social* fields, and characterising this ideology means noticing that these effects are intertwined (Cook 2018: 20; see also Martin 2006: 188).¹⁰⁰ Values play a key role in this process, and as we saw in Chapter 1, elevated beliefs often receive a great deal of their potency from their supporting ideological networks. Once again, reification is the keystone holding this ideology's resilient coalition of authorities in place. Ironically, it is also the feature that consigns HIP discourse to a semi-permanent state of incoherence, when viewed from outside its native paradigm.

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David Irving may as well have invoked Howard Becker directly, when he described the early music movement as

an entire culture, a mode of being, a veritable virtual Republic of Early Music where freedom of interpretation is enshrined in a set of aesthetic values that privilege innovation, the exploration of new sounds and a constant debate over interpretation. (Irving 2013: 83)

Irving was certainly accurate in referring to 'constant debate', though he perhaps understates the extent to which those contentions extended well beyond 'interpretative' details, and prompted broader questions about the philosophical and epistemological status of performance(s). Especially interesting were the questions it raised about the relationship between discoveries about 'historical practice,' and the musical works that were still thought to be the proper locus of musicological attention. The rhetorical bite of the so-called 'authenticity wars' in the 1980s and 1990s was (and is) probably the best possible indication that there has always been much more at stake here than the details of the evidence. These disagreements, and the relentlessly 'innovative and exploratory' climate in which they were located, revealed many facets of a more general anxiety about the place of 'old' music in contemporary society and culture (Kerman et al. 1992; Taruskin 1995; Butt 2002).

By contrast with the more distant 'observational' orientation of many other scholarly accounts of cultural praxis, musicological arguments about historicity in performance played a significant role in shaping the critical underpinnings of this art world.¹⁰¹ At the same time, as many commentators noted, the ideology was not straightforwardly 'born of' academic discourse, because in some ways scholars were playing catch-up to the initiative of performers. Whether it was considered a shared enthusiasm or antagonistic encroachment, this overlap meant that the academic conversation always had a 'live' quality, for even the most abstract of theoretical disagreements could sometimes have implications that were *decidedly non-abstract*, but were financial,

¹⁰⁰ This theme is self-evidently appropriate for understanding the contexts of ensemble performance. Indeed from an early stage in empirical investigations the idea of social relationships was built into the very notion of 'coordination' (Davidson and Good 2002), but it is important to be aware of this analogy's potentially utopian dimensions.

¹⁰¹ As a point of comparison with the 'invested' character of HIP discourse, one might consider the detailed but *distant* theoretical reflections of Slobin (1992).

reputational, and material. It is no wonder, then, that these arguments could be heated.

For obvious reasons, academic discussions of 'historical performance' tended to coalesce around ways of thinking that had already proved useful to musicological inquiry. One such 'angle' combined traditional historical and documentary approaches with the tools of analytic philosophy – especially thought experiments, induction, abstraction, and categorization. The integration of the latter brought with it a propensity for moralising, and discussion of the performer's 'responsibilities'.¹⁰² It is possible that this field of debate may not have existed at all, however, without the basic assumption that a musical work 'itself' should be considered more 'real' than any particular experience. In other words, object orientation is a precondition for the idea of 'authenticity' to be meaningful or relevant, at least in the way it is construed by WAM culture – that is, in terms of the demand for, or the expectation of, 'faithfulness'. As Dodd and Irving put it: "...an art object's being authentic consists in its truly being the kind of thing it purports to be." Given this, they say,

different candidates for the thing to which a musical performance can be faithful, and alternative accounts of the relation of faithfulness, yield different species of authenticity... Significant as these varieties of authenticity are, they are not where most of the philosophical and musicological action is, at least when it comes to Western classical music. Western classical music is predominantly a work-focused kind of music. Performances tend to be performances of musical works: repeatable entities specified by scores that are made manifest in performance. A performance of a work in this tradition is not evaluated as an autonomous musical event, but as a performance of the work performed. As a result, such evaluation involves judging the extent to which a performance is true to—that is, faithfully instantiates—the performed work... The thing to which a work-authentic performance is true—the thing to which it is faithful—is the work of which it is a performance. (Dodd and Irving 2020: 924)

This passage neatly illustrates a number of the intellectual conventions native to HIP discussions. More importantly, it demonstrates how far those arguments are located in a familiar disposition. No such acknowledgement appears in this account, however: the claim that 'Western classical music is predominantly a work-focused kind of music' is merely asserted as a 'given' property of the cultural sphere. A more accurate description, I think, would be that this 'art world' operates in terms of conventions which afford *great value to dispositions that treat objects as primary*.¹⁰³ This is convoluted to spell out on every occasion; but it is crucial to get beyond uncritical assertions that Western classical music is *inherently* any more of an 'object' than any other musical experience. This makes it easier to recognise the processes by which social value is claimed and contested. It is also worthwhile to be clear about this because many such claims degenerate into philosophical incoherence when pushed far enough.

In practice, there is significant variation in the positions scholars have adopted on the idea of HIP. 'It' is not a

¹⁰² As Cook puts it, "Even in the more pluralistic culture of the early twentieth century the moral dimension retains a currency in music for which it is hard to find parallels in other arts." (Cook 2013: 13).

¹⁰³ Sociologist Peter J. Martin is insightful on this intersection between rhetoric and values, suggesting that "the variety of perspectives revealed by, for example, composers, members of audiences, critics of various persuasions, musicians, promoters, sponsors, and so on, appear not as positions to be argued with, but as data which, in the aggregate, can display the realpolitik of a particular art world. Whose claims will be accepted, and why? Who has the most effective symbolic resources, or the greatest material ones? What sort of contingencies will affect the outcome?" (Martin 2006: 26). This was also the core of Bohlman's critique of essentialism in the previous decade, where he argued that the move towards musical objects was an (unrecognised) politicising gesture (Bohlman 1993).

monolithic, single ideology, but is made up of an array of stances on the general principles given above. What binds them together is a sense of resistance – on the grounds of historical change – to the *particular* essentialism associated with the nineteenth-century idea of *werktreue*.¹⁰⁴ An indication of the sorts of questions in which philosophers were mainly interested, and of the methods they deployed in answering them, can be gleaned from a review of Peter Kivy's *Authenticities* (1996):

Part One subjects four senses of authentic musical performance to conceptual analysis. Three are forms of historical authenticity: fidelity to a composer's intentions, fidelity to sounds produced during a composer's lifetime and fidelity to the performance practices of a composer's era. A performance can also be authentic in the sense of being faithful to a performer's individual genius. Part Two evaluates each sort of authenticity as an aesthetic goal. According to Kivy, some forms of historical authenticity are attainable but none of them are aesthetically desirable. (Young 1996: 198)¹⁰⁵

Even outside the realm of the analytic tradition, HIP discussions are brought into orbit around this basic principle. Mark Thomas regards the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer as "tailor-made for the problem" because "one of his central concerns is the interpretation of works distant from us in time, and his aesthetics underscores the performative character of art" (Thomas 2018: 368). The implication here is that an interest in 'the performative' is always oriented around the 'interpretation' of musical objects. Another corollary of this convention is that notions of creativity or imagination – which, one gets the feeling, are essentially embarrassing to such writers – are awkwardly evaded, squeezed into caveats and disclaimers.¹⁰⁶

It is difficult to be precise about how much sway these elegant ('in principle') debates have truly held for the musicians working 'at the coal face'. Once one gets beyond the pronouncements of 'elite' conductors and soloists – who, after all, have pragmatic reasons to be in the business of verbalizing and burnishing their ideological credentials – the processes of exchange involved in the art world's operation are generally rather less lofty, theoretical and explicit, and more local, personal, and implicit. Transmission of 'musical style' – including the development of, and change in, performance conventions – is clearly a much more complex¹⁰⁷ phenomenon than can be explained by recourse to an abstract, boundary-drawing mode of discourse. (The latter might be considered 'tangential' in much the same way that the left hemisphere's 'manner' of doing things is tangential to that of the right). Becker's observation about the importance of variation in the attitudes and skills of art world participants is relevant here, for there is clearly a distinction between the characteristic dispositions of HIP theorists, and those of the performers who play such a major role in the subculture, but which are *not* expressed in denotative language. Exchange of skills and ideas among participants has been a defining feature of HIP movement. But I suspect that the reasons for its prestige are frequently misdiagnosed, for it seems likely that this is not simply a result of theoretical (and discursive) 'coherence'. This is reminiscent of our metaphorical

¹⁰⁴ This often gives rise to complex 'nested' explanations; as in Irving (2013: 84).

¹⁰⁵ Kivy's reviewer argues that jettisoning the harder concept of 'authenticity' in favour of the softer 'historically informed performance' solves basically all of these philosophical quandaries (Young 1996: 199). It may be unfair to cite a source from 1996 to make this point, given the extent to which thought about HIP has changed in the intervening years; but it should become clear, if it is not already, why I do not believe this substitution provides a workable solution to Kivy's entanglements.

¹⁰⁶ How genuinely revealing of the musician's art, for instance, is the claim that "...there is no reason that historically informed performance on period instruments needs to relinquish the performer's creativity. In fact, one of the things that historical research has revealed is the larger creative role of the performer during the Baroque period." (Thomas 2018: 375).

¹⁰⁷ To clarify: I mean 'complex' not in the sense of 'having many parts', but because it is a process fundamentally grounded in experience, and which is therefore not *in principle* reducible to interactions between identifiable 'components'.

differential in the hemispheres' expressive capabilities, and we have already seen where this imbalance leads. As in the case of the string quartet, there is an ever-present danger of confirmation bias, when formal, elevated, explicit patterns of thought are concentrated among a small number of elite participants. We might therefore think of HIP discourse – as distinct from its praxis – as being possessed of an expressive advantage: discourse benefits from the left hemisphere's archetypal strengths, including explicit verbalization, abstract concepts, modelling, systematisation, generalisation, and the erection of firm categorical distinctions.

But the contribution of HIP performers has never been simply to 'apply' that thinking to the task of 'reinterpreting musical works'. Instead, they have been supplying something of an entirely different *kind*: the metaphorically 'right hemisphere' qualities which are so vital to music's meaning, but which are not captured by retrospective explanations. The more bureaucratic concerns of HIP discourse – in which convention and theory is habitually elevated above uniqueness and music's lifelike qualities – might therefore be understood as a prime example of 'left hemisphere capture'. But those arguments do not 'stand for' the entire subculture.

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The temperature of these debates has cooled significantly since the movement's turbulent adolescence. The twenty-first century incarnation of this art world has more often been defined by an expansion of the field of historicism, than by linear changes in participants' ideological preoccupations. If HIP culture was never a single ideology in the first place, that trend has simply been extended, in that it has admitted 'softer forms' of historical curiosity alongside the few remaining bastions of essentialism. The best-known indication of such a drift in HIP's ideological window is the conspicuous reduction in use of the term 'authenticity'. One can now encounter a formulation which commits only to the idea that diligent consideration of the historical context of a particular piece to be performed, on balance, is likely to be musically rewarding. In general, then, the grandiose but undoubtedly committed claims once made on its behalf have been brought down to earth, transformed into something more pragmatic – and surely more defensible. Such softer forms, which I have heard articulated by some colleagues, basically entail the proposition that a 'stylistic square peg in a square hole' generally makes a performance 'work'¹⁰⁸ in a way that is more difficult – though not necessarily impossible – when such an avowedly contextual disposition is absent.¹⁰⁹ Take, for instance, sensitivity to the concept of *inégalité* in music of the French Baroque.¹¹⁰ Although quite clearly inspired by the rediscovery of contemporary historical sources, for many modern HIP musicians I suggest it is no longer essential that this subtle gesture need be grounded only – or even primarily – in that historicity. Instead, players are more willing to recognise that the abstract, detached 'device'

¹⁰⁸ Naturally, this is a complicated concept. For a preliminary discussion, see Leech-Wilkinson (2020a: 22/1).

¹⁰⁹ Leech-Wilkinson has put this more critically, arguing that "while most performers in this (let's accept it, modern) tradition do not make claims for historical accuracy anything like as extreme as those knocked down in this debate, nonetheless the ideology of HIP pervades teaching and practice within that world in the more insidious form of tacit knowledge. Notions of what is or is not 'stylish' are particularly coercive here, as that measure is used to police 'historical' performance style so as to exclude anything that is not generally accepted as normatively HIP. This is the environment in which you won't get booked again if your ornamentation or your articulation, or another aspect of style supposed to be characteristic of earlier practice, steps beyond an imaginary boundary that has emerged through a widespread consensus defining what is and is not done. There can never be historical evidence for the placing of these boundaries: as usual with performance norms, they are commercially convenient in minimising rehearsal and psychologically supportive in providing reassurance." (Leech-Wilkinson 2020a: 6/7). This suggests further ways in which HIP has effectively been constructed 'on' older ideologies of performance.

¹¹⁰ Inequality will play an important role in Part 2, although my approach to this idea could not be further from the way it is envisioned by Moelants (2011).

necessarily becomes embodied in the moment of performance. Thus, 'inéale' can be valued not for its historical credentials, but because adopting such an attitude towards rhythmic motion gives ('real') performances a feeling of lightness, grace and flexibility that is affectively convincing. Gentler incarnations of 'HIP thinking' have shifted somewhat away from concepts or categories, and are more inclined to entertain that which is specific and embodied. This introduces a more probabilistic element: for instance, in the suggestion that musicians find that historical knowledge 'often' helps them to make sense of notation in convincing ways.

The suggestion that evidence – historical or otherwise – might yield a kind of 'natural fit' of expressivity is subtly but importantly different to an abstract, 'work-oriented', primarily philosophical mode of discourse. The former disposition is more familiar to the performer, because it will always admit intuition, flux, physicality and embodiment *alongside* more abstract considerations (concerning intentions, obligations, and so on). This is an excellent illustration of the opportunities of 'both-and' thinking. Following this thread is important for making sense of the evidence of early recordings, for it guards against the tendency to subjugate recorded performances to evidence that offers a better fit with a categorizing, ledger-building, and abstracting disposition. Our tripartite framework suggests that a more pragmatic, looser attitude to history may offer a way out of the various conundrums that HIP has itself generated. But this is not sufficient, and some further assumptions need interrogating if one is fully to step out of the closed loops of essentialism.

I suggested in Chapter 1 that the crux of these difficulties can be traced to the fact that it was musical works that came to function, whether implicitly or explicitly, as music's 'truest' objects – and thus as the main locus of music's meaning. Now we can add a further nuance, which is that this move also essentialises the very idea of context. Musicology often imagines historical context as if it is attached to, or embedded 'in' the works themselves. But I wonder whether this process of attachment, though undoubtedly a useful manoeuvre, transforms the very idea of 'context' into something usefully manipulable, but also more static. (It entails a more functional mapping: "this, so that"). In this usage, such context ceases to be truly 'contextual' – in McGilchrist's open, 'right hemisphere' sense.¹¹¹ For the very process of affixing 'it' to Platonic ideals generates something which is walled off from the reverberative processes he describes, and which are central to any engagement with music 'as experience'.

Arguments over the historicity of performance have largely taken place in the context of an imaginary, utopian universe of manipulable contentions. But while they are frequently fascinating on their own terms, many of those contentions are ultimately chimerical, for they have the character of a game, insulated by its own rules, its own bounded 'universe'. From this perspective, the kinds of questions that have dominated HIP discourse themselves point to the qualities they are inclined to neglect. Abstract philosophical games are well equipped to deal in general propositions. This is why one regularly encounters discussions that play off 'the performer's own conception of the work's meaning' against broadly defined notions of 'the work's original historical context'. How well, though, do these formulations map onto what music is *like*?

¹¹¹ The key point here is that McGilchrist's specific notion of 'context', as appreciated by the right hemisphere, can never be captured by, or reduced to, explicit labels: it is more fundamentally relational (2012: 49-50).

II. Distinction

As for the string quartet, it is useful to re-frame the various dispositions pertaining to HIP in terms of their association with particular social worlds, and especially with notions of elevation and distinction. One of the most interesting aspects of the HIP phenomenon is that it demonstrates how theoretical and conceptual density can give the impression of cultural solidity (and prestige). As in the case of the work concept, however, widespread agreement masks all manner of philosophical or conceptual inconsistencies. One could argue that it is cultural consensus, more than its genuine coherence as an ideology, that has led HIP beliefs to be considered so much less fragile than they might be. It is partly the volume of these arguments, in other words, that suggests it has social (and aesthetic) value. In itself, however, widespread consensus does not make particular claims any more coherent or defensible.

The simple act of viewing HIP as a contentious, unfolding field of social practice – and not as an intrinsically coherent, bounded, and elevated aesthetic philosophy – is already enough to begin looking towards more fluid and contextual qualities. Becker's work was often concerned with this topic, indeed he observed that "art worlds change continuously - sometimes gradually, sometimes quite dramatically... no art world can protect itself fully or for long against all the impulses for change, whether they arise from external sources or internal tensions" (Becker 1982: 300). This subculture's particular fluidity has often been a product of the complicated, often reciprocal relationships to which I have already alluded: between formal academic discourse – much of which is, for practical as well as philosophical reasons, oriented towards 'uncovering the evidence'; critical, journalistic writing and record reviews – albeit sometimes happening in academic journals (e.g. *Early Music*); and a community of practitioners whose participation is held in constant *tension* with the art world's 'affordances'. Largely because of the contexts in which these ideas initially took root, the topic of historical performance straddles disciplinary and epistemological boundaries, running all the way from academic critique to journalistic hagiography, and controversial evangelising on YouTube. Its discursive mixture is curious: as well as the intellectual-theoretical system-building described above, it involves elements of positivism, subjectivity, advocacy, polemic, and idealism. The idea of flux, then, does not refer only to 'change over time', but also to the wide *distribution* of the art world's discourse, and its intersection with other artistic ideologies and subcultures.

It is far from new to understand historical (or 'historicist') performance in this way: Laurence Dreyfus suggested as early as 1983 that it was "more useful to define Early Music as a late twentieth-century ensemble of social practices instead of restricting it to the works which occasion the interest. To be blunt: Early Music signifies first of all people and only secondarily things" (Dreyfus 1983: 298). That a branch of (Anglophone) musicology had found itself actively invested in a 'live' field of practice is important for understanding the directions in which this ideology developed. In simple terms, scholarly reflections on HIP (or, initially, 'Early Music') were never truly dispassionate or 'insulated' from the object of study, because such observations had significant potential to affect the field itself. That effect was felt most directly in terms of belief, and, in turn, of 'affordance'. Thus, while scholarly verifiability may not have been the primary criteria for the assessment of 'historical' performances, it yielded an important backdrop for the conceptualisation of musical value(s). An example of this connection (between the practical arena and academic debate) is the way in which antagonistic rhetoric among scholars

began to soften almost exactly at the same time as the community of practitioners developed sustainable, shared, yet *fluid* conventions all of its own. This was precisely Richard Taruskin's (often misunderstood) point: the spawning of just such a 'viable oral tradition' was a sign not of the movement's failure but its success, insofar as any truly living 'art world' is underpinned not just by shared norms, but by their transmission and variation (Taruskin 1992: 324).

The raw early incarnations of 'authenticist' ideology, then, were gradually transformed. At first, HIP was defined by a special concern for recovery, and especially the notion of 'originals'. At this time, proponents generally regarded flux and change as a sign of corruption, and thus as something to be controlled and minimized. Later, however, the 'art world' of HIP came to be supported and *legitimised* by greater institutionalisation. This growing prestige within the wider WAM ecosystem yielded a stronger inclination to take ownership of processes like inheritance and variation, which had formerly been regarded with grave suspicion. And as people (or 'agents') successfully carved out more legitimacy for themselves, that had a reinforcing effect on the subculture as a whole, for explicitly drawn conceptual and rhetorical boundaries, having fulfilled their primary 'distinctive' function, started to become less significant (and in some cases actually redundant). The direction of travel, then, has been for these subcultural boundaries to become more porous over time. The rhetoric of distinction had arisen because the community needed to cast itself explicitly in opposition to a 'monolithic' – and, presumably, ideologically mistaken – mainstream, in order to gain cultural legitimacy. As the ideology gained that more elevated social position, the claim to difference had achieved its goal. It could therefore be transformed into something more conciliatory, which freely admitted certain continuities and similarities with 'the mainstream'.

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Superficially, the original antagonistic rhetoric might appear to have been the primary force in determining how this process unfolded. But we can see more clearly in retrospect that the particular directions in which HIP ideology developed are explained just as effectively by noting the *similarities* with 'mainstream' WAM beliefs. In many ways it was the presence of shared assumptions that enabled this discourse, even at its most hostile, to take place under the same terms. An initial phase, involving the explicit drawing of boundaries and the rhetorical 'performance' of contention, was followed by greater cross-pollination, absorption and assimilation. Nick Wilson has identified this (paradoxically) close link between integration and distinction, noting that the status (and financial success) of HIP ideology was secured by

appealing to the very legitimacy underpinning the classical music establishment and by "going back to the sources," i.e., including the intentions of the composers themselves... In applying the discourse of authenticity, early musicians were effectively arguing that they were more legitimate than the mainstream, and therefore needed to be taken seriously by the field of classical music production. (Wilson 2014: 154)

I would add, however, that these processes do not occur in a linear way, but are characterised by cycles. The poietic and restorative emphasis of the youthful 'Early Music' movement, for instance, has recently been adopted with enthusiasm by musicians who work in a more 'mainstream' context (Smith 2020). To understand a field of practice as underpinned by *particular* interactions and exchanges is intrinsically to admit specificity. But with specificity comes unevenness, and that is captured much less well by the lofty terms of 'discourse'. At the level of

headlines, subcultural distinctions can fairly be drawn; my point is that examples of collaboration and cross-pollination – of HIP principles ‘working their way into the mainstream’ – do not suggest the straightforward triumph of historicist ideology. In fact, it draws attention to the fact that there were always correspondences between these competing positions, even if it was the differences that became emphasised in the process of argument. That some studies have identified the ‘stylistic distance’ between these parallel cultures decreasing quite significantly over time is perhaps more evidence that they share a core ‘disposition’ (Fabian 2015). The same research suggests, too, that focusing on processes of transmission and exchange will offer a more realistic starting point for understanding performance, than a model which places well-drawn categories in mortal (philosophical) combat.

It is possible, then, that Richard Taruskin’s interventions in the 1980s and 1990s came to a certain notoriety because he emphasised those ideological continuities at the expense of the claim to distinction. Here, too, there is evidence of a rhetorical imbalance, for within art worlds, as in any social world, it is generally the tools of distinction – through which one hopes to make one’s claims ‘stand out’ – that underpin fields (and their structure of incentives). Continuities, conventions, and dependencies, meanwhile, are likely to remain tacit and implicit, because they are intrinsically less amenable to persuasive (and marketable) verbalisation.¹¹² This means there is cultural incentive to emphasise (even relatively superficial) differences, while leaving more embedded notions of value untouched. For WAM, an obvious example of such an entrenched concept is the convention of dealing in elevated, timeless and Platonic ‘art-objects’. To be sceptical about conventionalised dispositions towards such artefacts is to ‘perform’ the wrong kind of distinction. That critique is not incentivised within the art world, for the simple reason that it does not lie on the field of play, but undermines the game itself.

The idea of distinction brings many of these different layers of analysis together, and reminds us that historical evidence is not only ‘invoked’, but can also be ‘wielded’. The ‘art world’ contexts of musical praxis – broad, social, elusive, and messy – are not so easily separable from the realm of abstract contemplation as some thinkers might like to believe. What might it mean, if that clean, categorising disposition has in fact been ‘mis-recognized’ as the most productive analytical lens through which to understand to music (and performance)? Could such discursive conventions in fact be more like useful, interesting, authoritative, addictive, partial, deluded ‘re-presentations’?

III. Persuasive imbalances

I have suggested that the metaphor of the hemispheres, and especially its central theme of ‘disposition’, overlaps with the structure of social fields. In both the cases I have examined, the metaphor suggests that a strength of well-theorized ‘stylistic universes’ is the relative certainty – and thus authority – they bestow upon their adherents. The opportunity to dismiss that which does not fit the quasi-bureaucratic, black-and-white boundaries of a paradigm is a powerful tool for persuading others of the value – indeed the non-arbitrariness – of one’s

¹¹² Pierre Bourdieu’s useful (though not uncontroversial) notion of *doxa* is useful here: the idea of “a set of fundamental beliefs which does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma” (Bourdieu 2000: 16). See also Grenfell (2012: 115-16) for an expanded definition.

practice.¹¹³ The shape of those systems has generally been directly affiliated with historical concerns, either through the lens of revisionism and recovery (as for HIP), or through a deep-seated historical continuity or 'tradition' (as for the string quartet).

The metaphor also shows how the intellectual context of the HIP subculture actually extended some central aspects of the 'modernist' performance philosophy which participants had inherited. Chief among them were attitudes towards reification and authority, which, if one went far enough back in time, sometimes generated intellectual paradoxes. Despite a certain amount of post-authoritarian rhetoric, then, the intellectual disposition of HIP did not equip musicians with the tools to interrogate the ethical tenor of WAM discourse, but only to *shift the locus of that authority*. HIP is usually cast as a reaction to notions of 'continuous tradition' which were arguably more mythical and metaphorical than was appreciated in retrospect. This sense of an explicit reaction, however, can de-emphasise the fact that the new ideology did not simply draw on 'historical context' in a neutral manner, but filtered that evidence through the specific disposition of the 'art world' in which those debates were situated.

The continuities between HIP and other well-established categories used to describe performance – including 'Romantic' and 'Modernist' – can ultimately be traced back to the habit of ascribing primacy to 're-presentations'. It is fascinating that McGilchrist's theory groups abstraction, generalisation, and categorisation; for this seems to me to be precisely the array of intellectual conventions that are common to both the Romantic 'work concept' and the idea of HIP. This shared basis has been one of HIP's most useful defences against the charge of incoherence, but seeing it in context seriously compromises that capacity for resistance.

The fact that early recordings were regarded with such great suspicion – to the extent that they were perhaps the least likely (of the available sources) to be taken seriously 'as evidence' – has always been a significant intellectual vulnerability for HIP ideology (Philip 1984, 1992, 2004; Leech-Wilkinson 2009a, 2010a). There are good practical reasons why HIP was built on the foundations of written treatises, prescriptions, reviews, and other written accounts: in many cases they were the only sources available for discovering anything at all about 'pre-modern' practice. In retrospect, however, it is surely relevant that this evidence is generally of a 'type' that lends itself to systematic organisation, and in which 'context' can be essentialised in the way I described above – in effect, 'written into' the abstraction of a musical work. From one angle, the fact that such accounts were written down (and not heard or experienced) was an obvious shortcoming. But in another sense, this partiality was extremely helpful, for the 're-presentational' quality of much of this information – its explicitness, controllability and fixity – meant that historical sources were ideally suited to systematisation. The fact that such evidence has appeared remarkably persuasive and authoritative need not be ascribed to this alone, but it is worth noting that such organisation provides insulation against certain kinds of critique. One has to step outside that persuasive context, in other words, to witness the brittleness that is the by-product of its central transformation.

By contrast, holistic, contextual, changing information is very poorly suited to the construction of abstract, authoritative models. The evidence of early recordings is intrinsically imbued with flux, instability and

¹¹³ There is some ironic pleasure to be had, in the context of the HIP debates, in comparing string quartet pedagogue Walter Levin's evident distaste for 'arbitrariness' (Spruytenburg 2014: 211) with an account of Beethoven's friend and collaborator Ignaz Schuppanzigh, in which his performances are said to have exhibited... "great arbitrariness" (Gingerich 2010: 467).

contingency, and thus is much less easily wielded 'as evidence' in the conventional sense, despite the fact that it communicates a great deal about musical experience. While historical documentary evidence for performance is available, interesting and useful, the 'reliability' of insights derived from theoretical systems is only gained at the price of stasis. And so there is another imbalance, for the coherence offered by a system – the 'secure' relationships between its various principles and abstractions – will tend to win out over more typically 'right-hemisphere' kinds of evidence, despite the fact that the 'system' is blind to many other things. Take, for instance, the few mechanical keyboard instruments that have survived since the eighteenth century, which 'encode' sounds which transmit some interesting, if not entirely reliable, information about contemporary performance (Wintergatan 2017).¹¹⁴ In such cases, curious rhythmic unevenness is much more easily be 'explained away' by the left hemisphere's impressive but startling abilities in retrospective confabulation, than embraced as a basis for an 'ethically historical' artistic practice.¹¹⁵ Systems are much more easily integrated within the latter than is the sounding evidence, which tends to lead down more radical paths.

These observations are largely tangential to the contentions that have dominated 'historical performance' discourse. Whether one ought to take such evidence 'seriously' or not is less interesting, I think, than admitting the broader implications of the recognition that general, symbolic, and disembodied systems cannot exist in a neutral relationship to musical experience. Once we are aware that early recorded evidence is of an entirely different type – in spite of important caveats (see p.14-15) – it becomes possible to revise one's entire disposition in the direction of uniqueness, flux, context, and embodiment. This is why early recorded performances offer a route out of philosophical circularity. They (can) seem so radically strange because they present music with 'betweenness' intact, and this draws attention to the vast gap between experience on the one hand, and a conventionalised language of static theoretical labels, thought experiments, and generalisations on the other.

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As I said early on in this chapter, the idea of HIP generates many productive opportunities for thinking differently about music and performance. A particularly important contribution lies in how it nuances aspects of the relationship between performance and composition. The rehabilitation of improvisation, along with many other aspects of unwritten, oral traditions, is an excellent example of how HIP points in the direction of a more fundamental rethinking – though it does not often follow through on those implications. In practice, such insights are filtered through an 'art world' model that continues to treat performance as an epiphenomenon of 'deeper' abstractions. For example, I am not sure why Nick Wilson feels such a strong need to insist upon the ultimate 'reality' of the work concept, because in almost the same breath he himself draws conspicuous attention to the incoherent caveats necessitated by putting objects (and their essences) first:

Musical works exist and are real; they are dependent upon, but not reducible to the ordering of sound structures, and their reproduction through performance; they possess emergent properties that are causally generative, and they

¹¹⁴ Many qualifications apply when treating such objects as evidence of musical praxis. And yet the 'clipped' quality of its rhythm sounds tantalisingly reminiscent of certain acoustic recordings made in the early twentieth century. Certainly it seems closer to those styles, than to the rhythmic stability that characterises most modern conventions for 'historical' performance of eighteenth-century music. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Rz9JcOaZw4>)

¹¹⁵ Emlyn Stam (2019) has written about the problems of 'picking and choosing' in the context of HIP, which is a useful indication of the way in which this subculture balances evidence with social processes of 'distinction'.

have an impact on human beings. Musical works endure over time and through space, but only as the result of human practice (most notably, but not only performance), and not as an unchanging essence of the original. (Wilson 2014: 46)

A few pages later he seems to argue that works are analogous to (the right sort of) people, as if musical works are actually embodied, temporal beings, in a state of living 'flow'. The metaphor is certainly appealing, not least because of the oft remarked (if vague) notion of similarity between music and 'life itself'.¹¹⁶ But this seems to me like another misdiagnosis. This metaphorical substitution may take some responsibility for what I consider a thoroughly disproportionate invocation of ethics – via the implication that, if the work is like a person, it can actually come to harm. That subtext runs implicitly through a great deal of HIP discourse; indeed Wilson makes a striking analogy between work and performer, in which the aim seems to be to show that each has 'personal histories' of equivalent (ethical?!) standing:

Bach's Mass in B Minor would not be the Mass in B Minor without it having been composed (then possibly re-composed) and then performed (on multiple occasions), recorded (variously), discussed and written about (in program notes, reviews, books, etc.) in the past. Similarly, Gustav Leonhardt only became the great musician that he was by virtue of his past performances and experiences of performing, to say nothing of all the life- experiences that made him, including his love of fine wine and fast cars, and his staunch Protestant faith. (Wilson 2014: 48)

The ethical tenor of many discussions of HIP is another obvious respect in which historicism in performance has been constructed 'on top of' the social convention which sees music's 'primary essence' as inhering in idealised abstractions.¹¹⁷ This may be why the stakes often appear so (disproportionately) high. Many contributors to HIP discourse seem notably disinclined to treat music as something potentially playful, fluid, or elusive – recall, again, the ironically soft implications of Kant's 'purposeful purposelessness' – and are keen to see music as a proxy for rather more elevated questions.¹¹⁸ But where some imbue music essentially 'with' these high notions of obligation, value, logical coherence, and sometimes even morality (Leech-Wilkinson 2020b), such a tone also suggests, more simply, the extent to which the values of musical subcultures are entwined with other kinds of deeply held beliefs. The ability to *pose* these various meta-musical question does not mean that an intrinsic, ethical 'core' runs through them. It does, however, reveal a great deal about human dispositions, and about how they function within (and between) particular groups. To make this point is to invoke the writings of Christopher Small (1998: 133), who argued that "each musical performance articulates the values of a specific social group, large or small, powerful or powerless, rich or poor, at a specific point in its history, and no kind of performance is any more universal or absolute than any other. All are to be judged, if judged at all, on their efficacy in articulating those values." One of the aims of this thesis is to show just how much detailed investigation of

¹¹⁶ See note 14 (Introduction, p.10). Leech-Wilkinson (2018) has discussed this 'lifelike' quality with reference to the work of Daniel Stern; McGilchrist's treatment of music also invokes many of the same themes (2012: 72-77)

¹¹⁷ Quite unusually for musicology, Wilson's writing (both here and elsewhere) continues to invoke the idea of 'greatness'. Is it possible that the mix of abstraction and social capital I have been discussing helps account for the resilient appeal of those claims? (Wilson 2014). For an example of this as a journalistic trope – and indeed of its 'known' incoherence – see Wilson (2019)

¹¹⁸ Less generously, one might argue that it is wrapped up with the policing of 'correct' behaviour, ensuring conformity of classical musicians with elite societal values.

performance can be undertaken without recourse to an ethical framework.¹¹⁹

One way of distinguishing between ‘modernist’ and ‘historically informed’ tribes is to identify differences in where the performer’s ethical responsibilities are thought to lie. The problem is that this distinction ultimately collapses into similarity, for the reasons I have given above. For I suspect that without the existing philosophical apparatus of WAM, and the beatification of art-objects and ‘great’ composers, to look to historical precedent for *moral* authority for performance would likely seem not just paradoxical, *but actually nonsensical*. This is just one reason why, in claiming to recover old conventions through the lens of a very contemporary aesthetic ideology (and ‘art world’ context), HIP was always liable to present a certain philosophical incoherence. It is obvious, however, that this incoherence did not necessarily act as a brake on the ability of musicians and listeners to reap many rewards, in terms of musical experience. The same practical decoupling – the idea that ‘art world’ participants were able to draw artistic benefits quite independently of the veracity of theoretical pronouncements – was the crux of Taruskin’s ‘positive criticism’ all along: even if the claims made for historical performance were far from intellectually watertight, the musicians themselves were always doing something rather different, and in many ways considerably more interesting, than what the philosophers (and certainly the marketers) had claimed (Taruskin 1995, 2008: Ch. 14, 19, 20, 42).

This moralising core remains integrated into the day-to-day functioning of both WAM culture and its ‘HIP’ offshoot. From informal conversations with performers, however, I retain a sneaking suspicion that this is less monolithic than some suggest. Here the sociological frame is useful, for it can be difficult to discern how far this is a product of ‘art world’ affordances, as opposed to a conviction strongly held by every participant. A further dimension involves existing status and authority: not every agent possesses the same capacity to shape dominant cultural beliefs. For those not in such a position, ‘buying into’ musical ethics may be more like a survival strategy than an aesthetic or philosophical commitment. Another source of circularity is that this undercurrent is likely to be concentrated in performers who write about these issues, such that those contentions – and lines of division – draw disproportionate attention.

Focusing on public pronouncements does not give a full picture of the priorities of working musicians, then, but such statements can provide a useful indication of the overlaps between the moralistic commitments of certain prominent ‘historical’ and ‘mainstream’ performers. Comparing the words of Endellion Quartet cellist David Waterman with those of Roger Norrington, for instance, there are obvious similarities in their respective paeans to ‘evidence-based performance’. These incorporate the whole gamut of implications, from distrust of one’s surroundings and inheritances, to the assumption that musicians must strive towards a more truthful conception to ‘the music’: to look for ever purer forms, ideally shorn of all-too-human, ‘corrupting’ influences. As Waterman writes,

...those answers that instinct does suggest cannot always be trusted, because instinct is all too easily distorted by the peculiarities and passing fashions of one’s musical environment and upbringing. Consequently, it is important for a

¹¹⁹ This idea of moving ‘beyond ethics’ will be worth bearing in mind when we reach Part 2. I do not feel that my account is in any way limited or compromised by repudiating that framework; indeed I see it as a strength that it does not make special claims to ‘authority’.

performer not to rely on instinct alone, but to reinforce his interpretations with evidence from analysis (harmonic, motivic etc.) of the score, together with a historical understanding of its meaning, and an informed empathy with the poetic imagination of the composer. This sets some boundaries within which any interpretation needs to be placed, but it gives the performance a genuine authority and conviction; furthermore, within the limits of those boundaries, an infinite variety of approach is possible. (Waterman 2003: 99)

While for Norrington,

In music teaching, and in performance generally, we rely enormously on tradition. But tradition simply means copying the performances of our elders. It was time to defy our masters. We had to forge a brand new style, based not on recent tradition, but on the traditions of composers during their lifetimes... This can be compared with the development of "evidence-based medicine", which emerged around the time that I was re-examining the Beethoven scores. It is a scary thought that an operation in the 1960s would have been based not on evidence, but on a kind of "tradition" - and it was the same in the music colleges. We tried to make our performances of Beethoven evidence-based. We wanted to re-examine every detail, not because we knew the answers, but because we wanted to ask the right questions. To help us, we had books, instruments, players, and lots of experience of Haydn and Mozart. (Norrington 2009)

These shared undertones are a hallmark of the paradigm of performance as 'responsible interpretation' to which I referred in Chapter 1. These passages also elevate the same *kind* of knowledge. I hardly need to stress again that those priorities generally have to do with setting boundaries, and building up the whole from accumulated details. Most importantly, both are invested in a notion of recovery – a claim which always depends on a basic belief that music's most ultimate forms come 'as fixed', as abstractly 'true' content.

Stowell and Lawson follow a similar pattern when pondering what is required of the 'proper' historical performer. The following passage introduces another familiar gambit, which sees them take the (apparently) more balanced view that evidence is 'necessary but not sufficient':

...close observance of theorists' rules is no substitute for artistry, taste and musical intelligence in bringing a performance to life; for then, as now, performers have been admired for what they as individuals brought to the music, and it is with them that the final responsibility for convincing historical performance must rest. (Lawson and Stowell 1999: xii)¹²⁰

From one perspective, this is a much-needed acknowledgment of the limitations of systematisation. That is welcome; but it seems to me that caveats of this kind have been disproportionately important in preserving the intellectual sustainability of HIP ideology, in the face of evidence for what musical experience is *like*. It acts like a pressure valve; indeed almost all commentators on this subject acknowledge that this is a space that probably needs leaving open. The result, however, is that HIP literature is characterised by a discursive mode in which a sharp intellectual scalpel is brought to bear in those contexts that can be fixed, generalised, and controlled; but the 'spaces between' are filled by convenient disclaimers. Even if this concrete, systematised basis is ultimately acknowledged as illusory, it is implied that little can be done to get around the problem, and so sticking with the

¹²⁰ For another example of this duality, see Stowell (2012: 63).

representations is held to be 'the next best thing'.

A good example of this is the concept of 'taste'. Stowell sings this concept's praises while attempting to shoehorn it into a tidy – and surely rather more twenty-first century – framework of 'appropriate parameters'. In the process, he (accidentally) reveals that 'taste', in its broadly 'right hemisphere' orientation – contextual, elusive, non-verbal, unsystematic, changeable, dependent on complex judgement – is basically incommensurate with most of the stated aims, methodologies, and philosophical underpinnings of HIP ideology:

'Taste' serves as the final arbiter in the interpretation of historical evidence in performance. It is no twentieth-century phenomenon – detailed reference is made to it in a variety of sources, particularly of the eighteenth century. For Geminiani, it involved 'expressing with Strength and Delicacy the Intention of the Composer'; for Mattheson it was 'that internal sensibility, selection, and judgement by which our intellect reveals itself in matters of feeling'. Taste requires performers to exercise discrimination and judgement concerning issues that will best serve the interests of the music and is informed by a thorough understanding of the parameters within which the composer was operating, the consequent national or other stylistic boundaries which should be heeded and a detailed acquaintance with relevant musical conventions. For the optimum tempo, for example, taste involves consideration of a range of factors such as the rate of harmonic change, the character of the figures, the type of texture and so on, right down to the acoustics of the performance venue. Similarly, the effective application of dynamics, stylish continuo playing (where appropriate), flexibility of rhythmic nuance, rubato and appropriate realisation of matters of expression, phrasing, articulation and ornamentation will often necessarily be dependent on sound judgements made in the light of thorough knowledge of the relevant repertoire. (Stowell 2012: 102)

In another sign of the porous nature of WAM's intellectual boundaries, this gap is manifestly not confined to historical performance; nor does adopting a critical position towards these values seem to provide more satisfactory answers. (Even Christopher Small (2001: 348), in the course of his deconstructive account of the values of classical music, remarks matter-of-factly that "not any old performance will do... quality of performance matters - of course, it matters"). In some ways it is hard to argue with this; but it surely poses a problem for the scholarship of performance, because such caveats push the 'meat' of the question further down the road. It is often difficult to envisage precisely how a written account could ever adopt a genuinely revealing disposition on this 'space between' that does not deal in the same old generalisations and evasions, no matter how skilfully repackaged.

Examining another aspect of the same challenge, Mary Hunter (2020) has shown that a great deal of classical performer-talk is imbued with what she calls 'strategic vagueness'. She found that the spoken word is disproportionately effective when it comes to dealing with concepts like obligation, ideology and imperative, but that this appealing specificity becomes almost unmanageably diffuse in the context of musical experience(s). This is directly relevant to the evaluation of performance, especially by performers themselves.¹²¹ In their different ways, Small and Hunter both draw attention to the fact that the determination of musical 'quality' – a central process in the functioning of any 'art world' – is often quite poorly aligned with the discursive tools available

¹²¹ Part 2 is a rare opportunity to explore the underrated role that judgement plays among performing musicians, not least as a practical 'manifestation' of conventions (or norms).

The basic problem here is that a substantial proportion of what performers and listeners find compelling about music lies in that inarticulable space, and not in bureaucratic categorisations. For this reason, I find there to be an element of deception in the way WAM culture builds its structures of authority upon the idea that musical meaning is 'most truthfully' located in bounded, reductive, imaginary objects. HIP discourse, as it is currently oriented, does not undermine this assertion – in fact it depends on it. Approached with a different disposition, however, historical inquiry might easily have led to some very different conclusions. HIP has fully adopted WAM ideology's convention of treating objects as the basic currency for the determination of artistic authority – and, in turn, for bestowing 'elite' status. But abstractions clearly do not offer a tenable foundation for understanding the experiential fascination of music, and this is a major implication of taking early recorded evidence 'seriously'.¹²² These criticisms are not targeted at the practice of HIP, then, but specifically at the structure of its ideology, and the dense thicket of theorizing that is oriented around the general, the conceptual, and the ethical. Though it often appears authoritative, this discourse is saturated with biases and inconsistencies. But these limitations can only be seen with clarity once one is aware of the wider philosophical paradigm on which this subculture is built.

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It is now time to pivot towards the 'performer's-eye-view' of ensemble that will be my main focus in the rest of this thesis. Scholars have long been aware that there is a tension between writing about performance, and performances 'themselves': for instance, in the way written accounts by famous performers can be notoriously unreliable as descriptions of their own playing. This problem has been appreciated ever since Robert Philip's work opened the door to the study of recordings and 'performance style', and has underpinned many recent developments in the discipline.¹²³ But there is an even more pressing danger. If the musicology of performance is unable to find practical ways of transcending the paradigm of reproduction, it is likely to remain 'locked into' dealing with types of knowledge that are essentially bureaucratic. Meanwhile, everything that is meaningful, unique, elusive, imaginative and emotive is likely to be confined to 'the realm of the notwithstanding', in the manner of Stowell's formulation of 'taste'. It is important, therefore, that the 'turn to performance' does not simply repackage convenient musicological priorities, under the guise of 'incorporating' the insights of musicians.

Such evasiveness has a long history, probably because it is a difficult problem. Clive Brown has noted that both Johann Nepomuk Hummel (in his 1828 *Anweisung zum Piano-Forte-Spiel*) and Louis Spohr (in his *Violinschule* of 1833), made a distinction "between 'correct' and 'beautiful' performance", but that in attempting to explain the content of that difference, Spohr "confessed like many other authorities that it can only be properly understood through hearing performances by great musicians" (Brown 2013: 73). Unfortunately, rather a lot of musical meaning resides in this space – certainly by comparison with lists of 'advised' or 'stylistic' performance practices.¹²⁴ It seems likely that this gap cannot be closed through explicit language; but neither do appeals to a

¹²² Another layer here is that musicians who already thrive in this world of 're-presentations' will tend to contribute more to formal, more 'elevated' discourse, meaning the system is even more inclined towards circularity.

¹²³ Stam discusses this issue with reference to violists Lionel Tertis and Oskar Nedbal (2019: 34, 85); Leech-Wilkinson (2012: Para 3.4) cites the more famous examples of Lilli Lehmann, Leopold Auer and Carl Flesch.

¹²⁴ Kennaway (2011) captures many of these tensions in the playful metaphor of 'poachers and gamekeepers'.

quasi-magical ether of 'artistry', 'originality', and 'inspiration' seem like adequate responses. Insofar as writers on HIP feel such elusive contingencies to be an important aspect of musical experience – and that, it must be said, is far from a given – most are inclined to attend to them through a metaphorical filter: the articulacy and precision afforded by dealing in imaginary performances, ideal archetypes, and 'intrinsic' meanings. As McGilchrist reminds us, however, there is an extremely important difference between accuracy and precision.¹²⁵

The image of the hall of mirrors seems an intuitively good fit for the slightly peculiar directions in which debates about the performance of classical music have intensified. More positively, I see no reason why such a diagnosis should imply that the theory of HIP – and still less the praxis – need remain intrinsically tied to that disposition. It is more productive to see entrapment in the left hemisphere's models as (merely) the result of a misguided framing. To put it in the terms of Chapter 1, the confusion springs from an error of hierarchy. It ought to be possible, therefore, to progress beyond noting these paradoxes and inconsistencies, and to start offering plausible alternatives that are grounded in a more flexible synthesis. Indeed it is one of the most productive aspects of the hemisphere hypothesis that the left hemisphere's powerful capacities need not be discarded, but ideally act as an enriching stepping-stone. Similarly, I have decried certain aspects of HIP discourse as limiting or incoherent, but this does not mean they must be discarded. The limiting factor here is not the use of abstract (or otherwise 'left hemisphere') tools *per se*, but the fact that discourse is liable to become trapped in self-referential loops. To recognise this structure – to see this kind of thought 'as' a hall of mirrors – is also to recognise that escape is possible.

In the following I explore how these dispositions might be engaged in more productive dialogue. My central claim is that a different 'conceptual landscape' is a prerequisite for coherently recognising the kinds of contributions that performers make to our understanding of music. Though imaginary, theoretical, decontextualised utopias can give an intoxicating impression of control, the conventional tools of discourse are ill-equipped to break through the regulative ceiling of McGilchrist's 'left hemisphere re-presentations'. How, then, might one embrace 'return' to the right hemisphere when engaging with questions of musical meaning? Whatever the answer to this question, it will not be found only in surveys and systems.

In some ways, this radical approach shares many of the motivations of the growing field of 'artistic practice as research'. Part 2 of this thesis could certainly be categorised in this way, and these opening chapters have contextualised that open experiment in 'historical string quartet playing' in terms of its two main discursive fields. It is tempting, of course, to equate the value of artistic experimentation (or 'practice-based research') with its success in putting into practice well-behaved theoretical, 'historical', or otherwise 'authoritative' and generalisable findings.¹²⁶ The context I have laid out here raises consciousness of the fact that this is not the only way in which those insights can be framed. My approach in Part 2 follows directly from this, in that it is designed to present a

¹²⁵ McGilchrist relates an amusing story on this distinction, which is memorable enough to be worth giving here. "Precision and accuracy", he remarks, "are often confused. It is said that a curator at the Natural History Museum was intrigued to hear one of the attendants telling an impressed party of tourists that a dinosaur skeleton was 9 million and 6 years old. When the curator later asked how the attendant knew, he received the reply: 'Well, it was 9 million years old when I started working here, and that was six years ago...' More precise, but less accurate." (McGilchrist 2021: 392).

¹²⁶ There is a wide range in recent approaches to performance, and 'left hemisphere' principles certainly do not always lie behind the findings. But it can be interesting to compare the 'native dispositions' of such work, e.g. Brown (1999), Da Costa (2001), Moran (2001), Harrison and Slåttembrekk (2008), Holden (2012), Johnson (2010), and ter Haar (2019).

kind of understanding that is easily – perhaps even intrinsically – neglected by more conventional dispositions towards WAM (and also HIP). One of its purposes, in other words, is to draw attention to the issue of *how* performance is invoked in (scholarly) discourse: to notice more clearly when its basic character has been subjugated to abstract stepping stones, and read only in terms of its capacity to exemplify static, persuasive, but lifeless categories. Such thinking tools are powerful, and they always remain available. But we can (and should) also delight in the capacity of praxis ‘itself’ to probe the sorts of questions which intrinsically resist *a priori* models, and which deal instead in all that is implicit, open, embodied, and contextual about musical experience.

Chapter 4: The strange phenomenology of strings

It is now time to delve into the specifics of ensemble playing. From this point onwards, I will focus on a selection of recordings made in the late 1920s by the Czech (formerly Bohemian) String Quartet – an ensemble of considerable repute and historical significance.¹²⁷ These intriguing sources are well known among a small corpus of scholars, performer-researchers and record collectors, some of whom have noted their potentially radical implications for thinking about (and working within) WAM's dominant ideological framework(s).¹²⁸ The argument of the previous chapters has been designed, at least in part, to draw out those 'radical implications' as fully as possible. This chapter, which begins to grapple with some of the experiential and embodied dimensions of ensemble performance on string instruments, marks a shift away from these theoretical contentions, and instead introduces some key themes which will go on to underpin the more practical, integrated discussion of these recordings in Part 2.

I. Describing performance

As we come closer to the realm of performance and performing, it is worth reflecting on some of the conventions on which we draw to describe and analyse music – and especially 'early recorded' examples. In recent scholarship, the idea of 'practices' has arguably been foundational. It is a usefully capacious idea, encompassing discrete categories, general dispositions, and evocative metaphors. Emlyn Stam's detailed exploration of the Czech Quartet's playing is a lucid example of a model in which the analyst invokes a descriptive toolbox of named (and presumably interrelated) performance features, and which musicians, it is implied, are in the business of 'using'. He explains, for instance that their

flexibility results in rhythmic looseness through the use of swinging, over-dotting, multi-layering, and agogic lengthening and shortening... Over-dotting also sometimes creates instances of multi-layeredness: for example, while the notated score has the dotted rhythms in m. 15 and 16 in the viola and cello lining up with the continuous sixteenth notes in the violins, the Czech Quartet overdots these figures, resulting in dislocation. (Stam 2019: 167-68)

Insights of this kind provide a firm, and likely necessary, basis for understanding the 'stuff' of performance style: for getting a sense of particular performers' expressive priorities, structural conventions, and characteristic

¹²⁷ For further context, see Potter (2003: 61-65).

¹²⁸ Robert Philip (2004: 21, 118-24) raises many important questions about string quartet conventions, in part from considering the contemporary reception of the Czech Quartet's performances. An especially telling report is from violin pedagogue Carl Flesch, who – perhaps surprisingly, in light of their recordings – regarded this ensemble as the wellspring of 'modern' string quartet playing. Flesch related in his 1957 *Memoirs* that "The steadily rising development of quartet playing in our own day can be traced back to this revolutionary phenomenon. The "Capet", "Flonzaley", "Lener", "Kolisch", "Brussels", "Pro Arte" and "Guarneri" Quartets would be unthinkable without the electrifying ensemble of the "Bohemians" (Flesch 1957: 181-82). Relatedly, Stam (2019: 164-66) is critical of claims for a 'continuous tradition' of Czech string quartet playing stretching back to this group, given the divergence between their conventions and those of more recent ensembles. I am inclined to agree that such claims represent little more than a "mythical continuity" (p.164). Even accounting for change over time – indeed there are differences between their playing in 1928, and recordings set down three years earlier, in 1925 – it seems likely that such assertions reveal a confirmation bias in favour of WAM's conservative orientations, more than they reflect direct transmission of conventions.

gestures. Such language is particularly well-suited to surveying change in performance style over time, because its descriptive mode almost intrinsically encourages further steps of generalisation and comparison.

It is not meant as a criticism of this practically ubiquitous framework – in which a repertoire of ‘devices’ such as portamento, tempo modification, and dislocation are ‘applied’ by musicians – to note that this admirable quest for analytical clarity might not come without costs. In light of the preceding chapters, the reader may have already guessed what sorts of limitations I have in mind, for they surely dwell in the realms of contextual understanding, integration, and specificity. In the rest of this thesis I adopt a slightly unusual perspective on this evidence, which is meant to complement these more familiar analytical conventions. My large-scale theoretical framing shows how indirect, phenomenological, qualitative, embodied, specific, and ‘continuous’ analytical perspectives can thrive alongside fixed, summary, persuasive categories (like the notion of ‘devices’). Even if the latter model is in many ways a poor fit for the experience of performing, it provides persuasive points of departure for analysis. Explanatory power lies in a synthesis between these dispositions. It is mistaken to argue for the supremacy of one over the other, in a simplistic objective-subjective opposition.

This distinction can be more intuitively grounded in the observation that performance does not look (or behave) the same ‘from inside’ as from ‘outside’. The analytical parameters derived retrospectively from one’s sources, such as recordings, are related to the ‘inputs’ – for want of a less mechanical term – involved in creative activity. But they have an importantly different character, for the act of analysis always entails a transformation. The idea of ‘creativity’ is by turns opaque, culturally contingent, and susceptible to mythologising, which has meant that there are some excellent reasons for using whatever firm analytical territory one can establish as a proxy.¹²⁹ The hemisphere hypothesis offers a potent expression of the need to retain a distinction between the phenomenon ‘itself’ – which will ultimately resist ‘final’ explanation – and the analytical reductions on which we must draw in our attempts at understanding. The latter help us to get closer to certain aspects of that phenomenon, but they are not straightforwardly equivalent, and should not simply ‘stand in’ for musical experience.

McGilchrist’s remark that music ‘behaves’ more like a living thing than a machine is a memorable expression of this idea. Much like an organism, neither a performance nor its experience can be reverse engineered, taken apart and put back together again. This is worth remembering, lest performer-scholars like myself become overconfident about the power of feeding retrospective analytical descriptions and extrapolations directly ‘back into’ experimentation. The power of certain techniques – like, for example, labelling scores with the ‘devices used’ in a particular early recording – can easily embed a false impression of equivalence between two dispositions that are, in fact, subtly dissimilar.

Broadly speaking, the disposition I adopt in this chapter is oriented towards the elusive ‘input’ side. This means it may lack certainty, technicality, and precision; but I regard this not as a limitation, but as an important part of a rebalancing act. Compensations lie in imagination and intuition: some of these perspectives may even be more ‘accurate’, in McGilchrist’s appealingly mischievous sense (2021: 392). The task of reflecting upon what

¹²⁹ For useful definitions (and discussions) of creativity, see Clarke (2005a), Cook (2018), and Hill (2018). For investigations dealing with collaborative and ‘distributed’ contexts, see Clarke and Doffman (2017), and Bishop (2018), while a more critical perspective is found in Zeilig et al. (2018).

performing is 'like' often feels like sneaking up on a problem, for in performance – and ensemble playing especially – one is often seeking to avoid direct confrontation with anything that is explicit or 'named'. When writing as a musician, then, both here and in Part 2, I will often be working in a domain that is removed from 'declarative' or 'explicit' knowledge (McCaleb 2014). What that entails will become clear when I discuss the embodied experience of string playing, and the strangeness this activity presents to conscious attention.

These themes will be intensified when I expand the scope of the discussion in Part 2, for as this 'strange phenomenology of strings' becomes intertwined with, and mapped onto, the interaction between individual musicians, it yields fascinating states of awareness. The concept of attention is thus of central importance in grappling with this 'input' side of ensemble, because it underpins the question of what it is like to play with others. And it suggests that ensemble cannot only be understood retrospectively, in terms of predetermined benchmarks and discrete measurements. Grounding our understanding of this activity in the synthesis between our pair of attentional dispositions means having the capacity to be both predator and prey: in analysis, as in performance, we benefit from (simultaneous) recourse to intentional, committed, focused attention, as well as receptive, open, and reactive forms.¹³⁰

The reflections in this chapter are intended to provide hints of a radically different mode through which to relate to performance. This more embodied, experiential disposition are spokes on a larger explanatory wheel, and these observations will be especially fruitful when *combined* with the more controllable accounts of 'performance practices' to which musicologists are accustomed. There is more interesting substance to the Czech Quartet's 'style', I submit, than that which can be grasped by assessing how far they 'exhibit' (or enact) a roster of archetypal nineteenth-century performance practices. But this is clearly difficult to formalise. I draw on my own experience as a cellist and quartet player here, not in a technical sense – there are far better places one could look for that perspective – but in order to probe the lifelike qualities of music in more vivid detail. I do not get into bureaucracies of instrumental technique, historical or otherwise; my priorities are the relational, embodied, changing, contextual, metaphorical, and integrated qualities of playing string instruments.

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The shift in 'angle' I have been developing is important background for starting to hear the Czech Quartet's recorded performances while transcending descriptive filters of categorisation and generalisation. This is crucial to my radical approach to understanding their 'performance style'. I hope this will offer future opportunities for performer-researchers looking to bring their ears and expertise to explanatory projects, without having to subjugate their insights to coarse categories or predictable surveys. Further, a balanced, integrative 'right hemisphere' perspective suggests that modern encounters with older musicianship do not need to be defined only by the existing terms of 'art world' discourse. This is vitally important, if we are to recognise that performances contribute to generating and upholding those paradigms in the first place.

The interactions between phenomenology and 'art world' values reach a fraught crux in the issue of 'synchrony vs.

¹³⁰ I suspect this is the thrust of Keller's notion of "prioritized integrative attention" (2008), though I see the context (and aims) of ensemble performance very differently.

asynchrony'. I will discuss this in greater theoretical detail in the next chapter, but my conclusion already runs through the present one: concerns about ensemble synchronisation 'stand out' not because of some intrinsic quality of musical experience, but because of specific cultural contexts. By the end of the thesis, I hope to have shown why this fixation is an inaccurate – and perhaps even incoherent – reflection of the phenomenology of performance.

This will mean embracing the fact that some key findings are intrinsically relational. Distant historical styles do not mean to a modern listener what they 'meant' to contemporaries, indeed they *cannot*. This acknowledgement undermines the ability for such evidence to be claimed as 'authoritative'. But that is precisely the point. It raises questions, instead, that I believe are more compelling for living performers – about what it is like to relate to instruments, scores, and colleagues in the manner of those who lived well over a century ago. How far is their manner of performing together, specifically, akin to a language 'no longer understood' (Philip 1992: 63)? Is it possible to get closer to understanding it? And what might the process of engaging with this old style 'from the inside' reveal about music and performance more generally? If the answers to such questions are not codifiable into systematic generalisations, that does not make them any less meaningful. Stepping somewhat outside the conventional 'art world' framing of these issues is key, I think, if we are to avoid enforcing new norms. In previous chapters I have tried to show how certain dispositions (and assumptions) that are habitually brought to bear upon the analysis of ensemble performance are dependent on an important misreading of music's ontological status. A close encounter with these early string quartet recordings draws attention to the vast difference between treating 'ensemble' as a quasi-Platonic, inflexible, abstract ideal; and as an embodied, experiential practice.

To a modern quartet player, these recorded performances will likely seem deeply strange, but also enticingly familiar. Their musicianship is the perfect vehicle for a discussion that acknowledges the curious in-group contentions that underpin 'performance practice' circles – but then looks beyond them. It is worth reiterating that studying performance(s) must not mean only working within a well-behaved, bounded, controllable system. By recognising this temptation, we are better placed to observe how many 'conventional' questions about performance have – at least in the context of WAM – been influenced by musicology's rather peculiar historical and philosophical preoccupations.

II. Continuum

Continuity and indivisibility are essential facets of musical experience. This truism follows directly from the fact that music always unfolds in time. In its most fundamental sense, this observation is obviously independent of any particular instrument, playing technique or genre. But continuum is an especially important concept for understanding the behaviour of (bowed) string instruments, for it is key to a player's embodied relationship with that instrument. This simple recognition provides some useful foundations for arriving at a nuanced impression of how the musicians of the Czech Quartet may have related to their craft. It is only with this context in place, that we can start to explore how they played 'together'.

Continuity is clearly innate to the behaviour of violin family instruments – most conspicuously, in terms of pitch.

But an equally important continuity concerns the *feeling* of contact between string and bow. Like pitch, this emerges from the complex physical behaviour of a vibrating string, and is secondarily related to the vibrations of the wood (or other material) from which a string instrument is constructed. It can be useful to think of this qualitative impression as broadly *analogous* to pitch, as though the same continuous 'core' of a string is being addressed from a different 'angle'. It is a spectrum, one that is fascinatingly relational and embodied. This idea is so central to the experience of string playing that it will ground most (if not all) of my further observations on this topic.

A string player does not have very many points of direct connection with their instrument, but those points are hugely salient. The string's physical behaviour, and its 'continuous' character, thus maps directly onto the phenomenology.¹³¹ A slightly paradoxical feature of our main 'point of connection' is that it is not really a 'point' in any straightforward way. The meeting of string and bow certainly represents a kind of crux, around which every aspect of the relationship between body and instrument must be arranged; but it is not static. That sensation of connection is reciprocal, and to somebody who is attuned to it, it feels strangely 'full' of content; but it is also fragile and transient. (Such a perception is obviously not exclusive to this family of instruments, but it is generally encountered at similar 'crux' points – like, for instance, where the breath meets a reed). For all its salience to performance, this is remarkably difficult to describe in words. To be *approximately* aware of the feeling of a bow on a string, and the kinds of variation that are available, can lead to an understanding of that 'crux' point that is somewhat routine and categorical. To do so is to misunderstand the kind of embodied specificity that underpins that relationship.

This brings us back to the idea of performance norms, because that sense of fine calibration, when taken for granted or codified 'as normative', will tend to mask the more fundamental quality of instability. Once more, the key point is the rehabilitation of the right hemisphere's kind of accuracy. For the fact that such a feeling can be so familiar, so important, and yet so difficult to capture in words, already implies that the categories of bowstrokes that one might use to 'pin down' how a player's bow contacts a string, are in reality retrospective impositions of order upon a phenomenon that is intrinsically much more precarious.

A central claim of this chapter is that that a great deal of the string player's craft resides in this true specificity: in the close yet constantly changing relationship between body and instrument. It provides the conceptual basis for my own group's attempt to 'get inside' the Czech Quartet's manner of playing together in Part 2. And the idea remains foundational, even when temporary categorisations or descriptions are imposed 'upon it'.

If the quality of the contact between string and bow is always felt like an indivisible, analogue continuum, this also applies – albeit somewhat secondarily – to the complex resonances that emerge from the instrument's body. That sensitivity is similarly reciprocal. (This also suggests a multi-layered quality, in that the player's calibration of the body's resonances is held slightly 'at a distance' from that more immediate point of physical contact). While the central relationship has implications that are sensed (and compensated for) further afield, at the point of

¹³¹ For ease, I will assume that a player is using a conventional 'modern' bow, or a finger in pizzicato; but in principle the following observations also apply to many more imaginative, contemporary, or historical 'types' of relationship a player has to an instrument of the violin family.

calibration it is always *integrated*: the sensation arises (and is felt) 'all at once'. In aiming to capture some of this impression, musician-authors of 'methods' of sound production have most often been drawn to the idea that a string tone is dependent on complex interactions between parameters. This conventionally includes such things as bow speed, arm weight, angles, placement, string tension, and so on.¹³² This model has many uses for instruction, but as a paradigm, it builds in some limitations – especially in terms of attention. As one might anticipate, I am concerned to nuance the assumption that we are dealing with a system: something complex but *explicit*, and based in discrete, interacting components. As a matter of phenomenology, if not of physics, this seems to me to be mistaken in some important ways, for discreteness and separation ideally play a minimal role in underpinning a string player's conscious interactions with their instrument. Building 'out' from continuity leads to a very different conclusion: that the precise character of each moment of contact a player feels with a string is actually *unique*. This is not obvious, perhaps because with extensive practice, the contingent qualities of that relationship are subsumed under a more everyday impression of similarity, familiarity, and consistency. There are good practical reasons for this, indeed it would surely become incapacitating to recognise it explicitly. My point is not that the feeling of familiarity or consistency is illusory – far from it – but that the more discrete conceptualisation that comes with such practice is ultimately *superimposed* on a more fundamental 'state' of continuity, uniqueness, and fragility.

To express this more intuitively, consider a simple analogy with a tennis racquet. The racquet's frame sets the boundaries of a finite space, which we can think of as representing the possible patterns of vibration of the string.¹³³ There are limits to how a vibrating string can behave, and also, in turn, to the resonances produced by a particular instrument. Like our racquet, the hypothetical 'space' it encloses is not infinite or unbounded in size. But we can also see that it might be useful to conceptualise that space by breaking it into the visual squares formed by the racquet strings as they cross over one another. This creates a useful coarse measure: if one was describing to a beginner which part of the racquet to use to strike the ball, suggesting that you want to aim for 'this bunch of squares in the middle' would be clear enough, in terms of resolution. The divided framework is the most practical option for clearly expressing the intention. But we can also look beyond the racquet strings, and notice that there is a deeper sense in which that space is simultaneously bounded *and* continuous. Beyond the coarse measure, the space within is actually infinite, if one's level of zoom is high enough. Any particular contact between ball and racquet, if conceptualised in terms of a fine enough grain, will ultimately be unique, but impractical to describe in that level of detail. In the same way, a string player's embodied understanding of the relationship between sound and sensation is always grounded in this underlying continuity. Years of practice means that specificity is filtered through habit, to become reliable and controllable. Yet the richness, focus and singularity of that relationship needs to be understood, ultimately, in terms of continua.¹³⁴

¹³² In paradigmatically 'left hemisphere' fashion, this process of 'breaking apart' is essential in learning the bodily motions that enable the sense of close connection I am talking about; but the metaphor draws attention once again to the disposition's crucial limitations.

¹³³ The environmental dimension of this analogy could be taken further, in that the racquet behaves a little like a 'field' of affordances.

¹³⁴ For further evidence of this phenomenon, one might consider an experienced player's fine-grained sensitivity to changes in atmospheric conditions, which are keenly felt 'under the bow'; or, similarly, the tiniest adjustment in the position of the

An interesting implication of this is that models of string performance that assume a basically stable notion of 'tone' (which is then adjusted or manipulated), are building on creaky foundations. This is because embracing the idea of a qualitative, changing continuum means that it becomes conceptually impossible to construe variation, variability or instability as something extra or 'added in' to a pre-existing base layer. Like the right hemisphere, this disposition always sees variation as intrinsic to the phenomenon. (This state is also an accurate description of the experience of music more generally, whether as performer or listener). And while this is in some ways a quite banal truism, the principle is central to my wider argument for a number of reasons. In order to understand what quartet playing is like, we need to start with an accurate impression of what a string is like to its player. But much depends on how the foundations are laid, and assuming a simplified, static version of a string – as can so easily be implied by the neat categories of 'bowstrokes' found in written manuals and treatises – is likely to yield a similarly reductive understanding of ensemble. One's dispositions tend to permeate hierarchies.

Thus, to arrive at an even moderately sophisticated understanding of 'togetherness', I consider it essential that we 'build out' from the core significance of change, flux, and instability, while noticing the kinds of useful 're-presentations' we might adopt along the way. Rehabilitating these qualities of specificity and contingency is important because they underpin music at so many different levels. This character runs all the way from the local, embodied matter of a string's behaviour, right up to the large-scale issue of music's ontological status. To summarise, then: a string player experiences an alternative continuum of 'contact', alongside the self-evident continuum of string length (related to pitch). And to the player, this is witnessed as a fluctuating, reciprocal, finely calibrated, and specific sense of 'contact in motion'. It is neither infinitely open, nor straightforwardly discrete. It is also critically relational, in that the player and the string relate to each other as two sides of a coin, with action and reaction (or stimulus/feedback) locked together in an inseparable whole. The crux of this relationship is an emergent point of sound-producing 'contact'. That point is individuated, specific, yet always changing. This concept is so central that the process of learning how to play a string instrument can be thought of as the gradual refinement of sensitivity to that point of connection.

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The next step is to see how the intensity of this relational quality gives rise to phenomenological strangeness. This often has to do with collapsing distinct boundaries between body and instrument: it can be productive, for instance, to imagine the string as if it is actually the *source* of the motion of one's own limbs. In this state of mind, one starts to conceptualise the centre of the ringing string length not as the object but as the instigator: it is the string, not I, making my arm and bow move; and it may even feel as though the resonance arises *prior* to the body's movement. A *de facto*, first-person impression of cause and effect is strangely untenable, probably because the reciprocal quality is so key to the sensation. One of the most useful things about this eccentric shift of perspective is that it avoids imposing an 'iron will' on a string's behaviour. Instead, one works 'outwards' from the specific affordances of that connection, which is necessarily held in fine balance. If one's attitude towards a string – especially a gut string – is that of opponent, it will quickly become unyielding and hostile, and so one

instrument's soundpost. A preoccupation with soundpost position, sometimes to an alarming extent, is a striking detail of some reports of nineteenth century cellist Alfredo Piatti (ter Haar 2019: 85, 86, 280).

needs a shortcut to the sort of physical disposition which turns 'it' into an extension of the body. The strange crux of this psychological reversal is to adopt the pose of an enthusiastic sycophant: one addresses the string as though aiming to persuade it, craftily, that you are entirely in its debt, that your main concern, as its player, is for its continued well-being and fulfilment, and that it, *of course*, is the real master of this situation.¹³⁵ This metaphor is equally useful in terms of awareness, for it enables close attention to be paid to the precise quality of the bow's contact with the string, yet while always remaining somewhat implicit, held at a distance. I do not mean a deficiency of care: one needs to retain heightened sensitivity to those few, intensely 'information-rich' points of contact through which all of one's expressive and imaginative intentions pass. The point is that such an awareness will ideally resemble a feedback system, more than an active or 'intentional' stance, in which conscious attention is paid to the body. The latter, at least in my experience, is often the kiss of death to string playing.

This means that a player can 'feel' that physical connection with the string's vibration even after the bow is lifted or released. Indeed one almost has to sense this, in order to anticipate how it will react to the stroke that follows, because a string in motion behaves – and thus *feels* – very different to one that is still. The nature of this sensitivity suggests that attention is distributed across the boundary between person and instrument. An outsider might witness, straightforwardly, that the player (subject) is 'playing' the instrument (object) in a basic transitive sense. From the player's perspective, however, such a hard distinction is oddly untenable, to the extent that continuing to conceptualise them as 'separate' may be a sign that sensitivity to that the central point of contact has been lost – and with it, the key dimension of reciprocity.

It is unnecessary for these particular states of awareness to be located in, or even derived from, an accurate physical explanation of how the sound is being produced. What I am describing here is more akin to sleight of hand: it is not a retrospective, analytically watertight account. The nature of this disjuncture can be made clearer by noticing the contrast with the component model, or paradigms that treat instrumental playing as the execution of a 'given' – i.e. externally specified – task.¹³⁶ The 'irreversible' nature of performance is key here: we can look for retrospective ways of understanding the 'mechanical' interactions of string, bow, and body; yet this will never map straightforwardly onto that connection as it is *experienced* in time. The latter is defined not by its interaction of components, but by integration and singularity. In the same way, one cannot overstate the extent to which explicit, focused, 'predatory' attention is unhelpful to the musician in the moment of performance. This idea becomes even more important when playing with others. Detailed descriptions of the sounding facts of string playing remain indispensable, and I will discuss relevant aspects of 'technique' in a fairly straightforward, conventional manner at certain points. But I want to make clear in advance that such explanations should never be taken as mapping straightforwardly, or even directly onto the experience, for such an explicit, retrospective, descriptive manner will always leave blind spots.

¹³⁵ This state of mind is only effective, of course, if the basic physical motions have already been 'automated'.

¹³⁶ One might recall the business metaphors cited in Chapter 2 (p.44).

III. Beyond categorisation

Analysis by verbal description remains an intensely useful mode of explanation. In emphasising what such descriptions leave out, there is a risk that one will be left holding nothing but an empty husk, emptied of any substance by the zeal of critique. But what sort of model could allow one to do both? That need for synthesis will dominate the remainder of this thesis. I do not intend merely to point out epistemological limitations, but to offer some plausible solutions; indeed I hope that these consciousness-raising observations will be built upon in many more ways by others – including those I have not envisaged.

For now, some of this rebalancing can be achieved simply by listening, albeit with a newly heightened awareness of the lure of descriptive categories. Below are some brief excerpts of the Czech Quartet's recorded performances: try to listen while transcending the left hemisphere's clean logic of division.¹³⁷ From there, it will be possible to readmit the power of verbal explanation, but in a radically new context.

Example 4.1

Dvořák: String Quartet Op.51: II. Dumka; b.27-78¹³⁸ ([SCORE](#))

Example 4.2

Suk: Meditation on the Old Czech Chorale 'St. Wenceslas', Op.35a; b.17-41¹³⁹ ([SCORE](#))

These musicians seem to have been completely fascinated with, and energised by, something quite close to McGilchrist's notion of 'betweenness'.¹⁴⁰ Almost every moment of their performance affirms the bow's capacity for variation, as well as for consistency. The reason for re-imagining the phenomenology of string, bow and body as an alternative continuum is that I believe this re-framing will help get closer not just to the 'general principles' of their way of playing together, but also account for the significance of uniqueness. The latter is deeply salient in terms of meaning, but is also easily neglected by retrospective, reifying analysis. If I imagine myself playing in the group, I can almost hear them 'searching' for newly unique qualities in each moment – not just between notes, but within them. At the same time, they do so within well-formed boundaries of expressive and imaginative convention; like our tennis racquet, their uniqueness is encapsulated within a finite space. It makes intuitive sense, therefore, to imagine that we are hearing the end results of a process in which hard-won (left hemisphere) graft has been synthesised into a more 'open' awareness. A central challenge of understanding these performers, as I see it, will lie in finding plausible ways of accounting for conventionalised horizons *and* specific moments.

It is around these impulses towards continuity and uniqueness that these players can be said most profoundly to 'cohere'. And cohere they most certainly do – but not in the ways conventionally associated with 'elite' chamber

¹³⁷ See discography below for full details of cited recordings.

¹³⁸ Czech Quartet (1928/9; 2014)

¹³⁹ Czech Quartet (1928/9; 2014)

¹⁴⁰ This claim is not intended to form a point of distinction between historical, 'elevated' performers, and unenlightened modern drudgery, for this same experiential quality probably underlies the passion every musician has for their craft. But this metaphor strikes me as an especially useful tool for unpicking what is potentially an unintelligible style of ensemble performance.

music discourse. Again, their sense of ensemble, at least insofar as we are able to witness it on record, is testament to the telling distinction between accuracy and precision.

This starting point opens up a wealth of detail to investigation by close listening. One of the most striking aspects of the Czech Quartet's playing, which is closely tied to this overall disposition (as well as to our theme of 'good ensemble') is an effect one might tentatively term 'integrated distribution'. Examples of this gestural 'type' abound; yet each case is distinctive. It is worth starting out by avoiding the temptation to describe 'features' too closely in words – not because it is impossible to think of this as a useful category, but because I prefer that abstract, general conceptualisation to remain a useful, 're-presentational' stepping-stone. I am keen to avoid predetermining any conclusions by overemphasising static labels. When the analytical listener starts only to pick out moments where 'it' can be identified, routine quickly overwhelms uniqueness, and the bureaucratic attention of labelling – and, relatedly, of division – starts to overtake the richer appreciation of context. Listening to 'micro-excerpts' in sequence can introduce such a 'type' just as effectively:

[Example 4.3](#)

Dvořák Op.51: II. Dumka; b.88-91¹⁴¹ ([SCORE](#))

[Example 4.4](#)

Dvořák Op. 96: IV. Vivace ma non troppo; b.1-4¹⁴² ([SCORE](#))

[Example 4.5](#)

Suk Meditation Op.35a; b.67-69¹⁴³ ([SCORE](#))

[Example 4.6](#)

Suk Meditation Op.35a; b.32⁴-35

[Example 4.7](#)

Dvořák Op.51: II. Dumka; b.64²-67

Listening suggests that these moments are drawn together by an 'open' ('right hemisphere') notion of family resemblance – *not*, in other words, by the presence of a single 'parameter'. But if one wished to pinpoint the crux

¹⁴¹ Czech Quartet (1928/29; 2014)

¹⁴² Czech Quartet (1928; 2018)

¹⁴³ Czech Quartet (1928/29; 2014)

of this similarity more explicitly, it surely has to do with the impulse (or accent) being perceptually 'distributed' in time: it does not correspond to one discrete moment (or 'instance' of note onset). These gestures, in various different ways, share a playfulness with the notion of continuum; indeed I am not sure their character can be fully grasped without acknowledging that basis.

To look into our new 'family' in a little more detail, let us begin with a pared-down version, in which the effect is achieved by one player alone. Though it seems a little counter-intuitive – especially to anybody whose experience of the analysis of performance has more often involved keyboard instruments – a string player is entirely capable of achieving this sense of distribution all on their own, in one stroke. This is possible because of the *ongoing* nature of the contact that characterises the bow-string 'crux'. It is simplest to pick up the character of these gestures directly from listening, of course; but in words, the outcome is that the main perceptual impulse of a bowstroke is 'deferred': it comes after the initial onset of a note.¹⁴⁴ This has an important knock-on effect, because 'carrying' the impulse further into a bowstroke that has already started means that the impulse *itself* is 'spread': it sounds – or 'looks' – more like a bell curve than a vertical line. (Once an accentuation is distributed like this, it cannot function as a sharply delineated, black-and-white boundary, even in principle). The effect can be very precisely timed, but because there is no hard, percussive 'front' on the moment of emphasis, it is more hazy in character. Such an accentuation is inseparable from the idea of 'flow'.

The effect is more subtle and varied in practice than my cumbersome verbalisation implies. [Ex. 4.3](#), for instance, is a notably clear case of this distributed effect, but it involves none of the 'bulge' implied by my description. If anything, the impulse is actually achieved by violinist Karel Hoffmann lightening and quickening the bow in the moment of the downbeat – not deepening the contact, as one might expect. Ensemble playing gives this imaginative option a whole new level of interdependence, for the perception of that metrical significance is fundamentally shaped by the *context* of interactions between players. When there are multiple participants, the effect is defined by wholeness: for instance, the manner in which the violinist's anticipatory, momentum-creating gesture's *meets* the precise entry of the other voices. In this case, the distributed emphasis is precisely coordinated, yet manifestly not 'synchronised'.

[Ex. 4.4](#) is very similar, but rather closer to the 'pure' concept of deferred impulses given above. In the piece's very first gesture, second violinist and violist both 'pull' the string – importantly, to slightly different extents – a little *after* the initial contact is made. This creates a spring-back effect, in which the parabola-like shape of the initial motion propels the rest of the figure. Using this sort of gesture to create momentum creates some delightful knock-on effects; for instance, the third bar-line, cleanly articulated by both parts together, is now perceived as de-accented, and so acts as a continuation of the phrase (rather than as an exact repetition of a modular two-bar unit).

The next layer is illustrated by [Ex. 4.5](#). This version of the 'distributed' gesture lies somewhere between the individual bow/strings continua, and the relative timings of the ensemble as a whole. I suggest focusing on the double stops in the cello in the first instance. Playing on two strings makes it possible to intensify the distributed

¹⁴⁴ This is usually achieved with an integrated, slightly circular motion that involves both a slight lateral acceleration of the bow *and* a movement that takes it further 'into' the string.

gesture, because as well as changing the quality of impulse as one moves through the bow, one can incorporate into that motion subtle adjustments to the balance of contact between the two strings. (Even more simply, one can begin on one string alone before rocking over to add the second). In this case, the uneven balancing of the cellist's pairs of notes – the lower generally receives emphasis slightly before the upper – gives a vividly gestural quality to the 'distributed' emphasis.¹⁴⁵ Working upwards through the group, it is as though the other parts sit 'within' that distributed base: the soft-edged, rhetorical, similarly parabola-shaped notes of the viola's single-line phrase, especially, seem simultaneously to be completely integrated into the cellist's gesture, while remaining imperceptibly spread apart from it. Analytically, then, this can be split apart into interactions between different types (or layers) of continuum; but in practice these layers are not explicit at all, but are far more closely synthesised. The effect is experienced 'as a whole'.

The hypothesis that such an impression of diffusion was cultivated in some way – or that it should be understood, at the very least, as more than a sign of sloppiness – receives further support from the Czech Quartet's rendition of an earlier passage in Suk's Meditation, [Ex. 4.6](#) (b.33-39). This phrase is a close thematic parallel for the material of [Ex. 4.5](#), but is far more understated: this time the lower parts deliver the harmonic foundation not in dramatic *arco* double stops, but in a phrase of delicate, flowing, conversational *pizzicato*. The parallelism is analytically helpful because, by contrast with the continuity that is intrinsic to the bow-string contact, the tone of individual notes played *pizzicato* always has a more percussive, discrete front. Here it seems that these players are attempting, rather as a pianist might, to play *against* the discreteness that is 'native' to the *pizzicato* technique. And again, they do this by spreading the timing of those individual onsets between the two lower players – in the case of the cellist, actually within his own pair of notes.

This is a fine example of their apparent inclination to resist 'alignment' in certain situations. This disposition may strike some contemporary listeners as surprising, if not entirely baffling. This case is all the more significant because it has conventionally been the very discreteness of *pizzicato* that has meant their synchronisation is generally considered one of the paradigmatic challenges of ensemble performance. For the Czech Quartet, it is almost as if their assessment of these qualities is reversed, such that it was an integrated sense of continuity – which included the capacity for a gestural kind of 'distribution' – that posed the central challenge of playing 'together'. In many situations they seem to have regarded unconditional discreteness more as a spectre to be banished, than as an elevated goal – and still less a sign of elite distinction. The real challenge, however, lies in the fact that they also seem to do many things in the same way as one another, and while paying close attention to their interactions. This is why the 'family' of gestural gambits in these parallel passages is such a useful indication of these musicians' imaginative priorities. I would recommend listening one or two more times to this pair of excerpts together, to let this 'rewiring' sink in well in advance of the in-depth examination to come in Part 2.

I have saved [Ex. 4.7](#) until last because it presents the most complex case of synthesis, between the 'lower' layer – each individual player's capacity for the distribution of impulses – and the 'upper' layer, in which those individual gestures are *themselves* distributed among the group. (In a diagrammatical, 'left hemisphere' reading, one might

¹⁴⁵ This is an excellent example of what I mean by the metaphor of a 'three-dimensional' space, as opposed to a straightforwardly linear 'up/down' conception of the bow's motion.

imagine this relationship as the stacking of our different ‘types’ of the main integrated distribution category). Chords are the most obvious scenario in which this might be effective; indeed these are some of the few circumstances in which contemporary performers seem enthusiastic to embrace the obvious logic of ‘distributed’ timing. As the ‘final piece’ of our small jigsaw, this dramatic moment neatly illustrates the way in which our familiar impulse-shape is performed by each player, but *also* layered in time, to produce an even more distributed ‘meta-gesture’. This chord is a perfect example, even to modern ears, of how a moment notated as sounding literally ‘together’, need not be remotely synchronised in terms of onset, for it to be experienced as entirely *integrated*, in terms of gestural and rhetorical logic.

But in fact the significance of continuity runs much deeper, because the chord is clearly conceived as a response to the moment of ‘lift’ that precedes it. There is an inevitability about its placement which is inseparable from the timing and ‘shape’ of what comes before. This is implied by the way in which the cellist permits his resonances to carry ‘through’ the rest, all the way ‘into’ the collective gesture. This kind of embodied logic, however, does not seem to be associated (only) with discrete analytical function(s), or even particular ‘readings’ of phrase structures, but is located on very different turf.

To listen to the Czech Quartet’s playing, then, is to witness the qualitative nature and the contextual dependency of their collective gestures. When we treat those gestures only as ‘manipulations’, sorting them into categories for the purposes of analysis, we end up with an account that is essentially unbalanced – for it is dominated by explicit, ‘dividing’ attention. It should be possible to identify certain dispositions in such an ensemble’s practice without claiming that there is a single ‘formula’ to which these can be reduced. To believe that the latter could ever be the case is to fundamentally misunderstand the phenomenology of performance.

IV. Uniqueness and ‘betweenness’

The theme of continuity nuances the conventional ‘terms of engagement’ with performance on string instruments in many other ways. I conclude this chapter with some further observations of the same type, but this is no exhaustive summary. They will take us a little further into the detail of the Czech Quartet’s manner, and their distinctive capacity to play ‘together but not ‘together’; but they also give a broader sense of the adjustments involved in rethinking descriptions of performance in a more ‘analogue’, ‘right hemisphere’ manner. These themes do important work in preparing the ground for Part 2 (and its disposition).

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Above I described the way in which positive ‘impulses’ need not be confined to the start of a bowstroke, and that this continuity presents a stark contrast with the behaviour of (most) keyboard instruments.¹⁴⁶ Another useful result of regarding continuum as foundational is to heighten awareness of the fact that ‘lift’ out of the string is just as important an aspect of the player’s craft as the more obvious ‘down’ gestures (or ‘accents’). There is a rich qualitative space between ‘hold’ and ‘release’; and, once again, this is both complex and singular, in terms of its

¹⁴⁶ The obvious exception to this is the clavichord.

perception by the player. I find it more useful to conceptualise this as a three-dimensional field, than a two-dimensional 'sliding scale', and as we will see in Part 2, my colleagues and I found that this shift in how one conceptualises this metaphorical 'space' was hugely beneficial for understanding the Czech Quartet's use of the bow.

As I said above, 'lift' is not straightforwardly equivalent to disengaging with the string's resonance – in fact in many cases it is quite the opposite. As usual, this spectrum of movements 'out of the string' (that give rise to the impression of lift) is not generally the object of conscious, explicit attention, but requires a more relational flexibility: an 'openness' to the string's behaviour. 'Lift' is therefore just the kind of dimension of string playing that reaps the rewards of 'functional indirectness'.¹⁴⁷ It is possible to hear the Czech Quartet's playing very differently by paying greater attention to how they manipulate the resonances that arise *after* initial articulations. Indeed this is a good way to start noticing the quality of 'betweenness' that suffuses their playing.

Every player will likely have a subjective conception of this crucial aspect of bowing – something that 'works for them'. My own version is to imagine this ongoing sensitivity in terms of the string's 'spin'. This metaphor will appear frequently in my report on our experiment, because it has been so useful in our own group's practice. It is therefore worth explaining why we have found it so valuable. To imagine tone this way is almost to 'see' every moment as if generating new lengths of thread from a spindle; it conjures an impression of constant change and movement in a sound, in a manner that is always contextual, and always in some sense emergent from, or dependent on, whatever has come before. Another useful quality – which, it must be said, was not originally theorised in this way – is that the image of 'spinning' allows for a multidimensional, yet not overly conscious or overbearing, sense of connection between the instrument's overtones and one's own physicality. I do not claim this as a historical metaphor; it is simply one of ours, and different performers will have their own unique ways of expressing the same idea. Entertaining a greater plurality of these is surely an opportunity, rather than a limitation, of a turn to performance (and performers).

In practice, 'spinning' has to do with being able to sense and 'catch' the contact with the string, not just when it is still, but also when it is already in motion. At its simplest, the progression goes something like this: one briefly instigates the motion-contact, but then swiftly hands over responsibility to the string's own vibration, 'riding the wave' of the overtones as they get going. (It is as if the bow's movement 'hangs off' the vibrations already set up, rather than causing them). Having set up this balance, the bow's continued movement does not behave as an imposition on the string, but instead *allows* the balance of the sound – in its core and overtones – to change. There are several paradoxical dimensions to this apparent relinquishing of agency, one of which is that setting up such a close, interdependent relationship need not mean abdicating the intentional quality of the engagement with the string. That sensation can remain an object of intention and playfulness; but prior to that, one relies on a shift in conscious awareness, through which one's relationship to the string is always able to affirm, rather than to

¹⁴⁷ Whatever one chooses to call it, sensitivity to the quality of 'lift' is self-evidently a concern of any string player, and not just those of a century ago. In my experience, however, this kind of fine sensitivity is easier to accomplish when using gut strings at relatively lower tension, because they are more immediately responsive to change in the precise *quality* of the connection with the string. They also tend to have a wider, more pliant spectrum of overtones and resonances. This is one place in which the idea of HIP directly overlaps with the themes of this chapter.

challenge, its intrinsic reciprocity. Our metaphor, then, is just one way of tapping into the continuity and change that underpins a string's behaviour.

Although this will likely not be a new observation to string players, I would resist the temptation to imagine this, as many have, as 'modulation of tone', because I remain unconvinced that it is useful to believe that we are changing 'something'.¹⁴⁸ Looking more closely – and especially, looking beyond the static symbols of notation – one can see that there is no tenable division between 'the sound' and its modulation: the fact of change is native to the phenomenon itself. If we are constantly drawn to reify it, that is a product of attention, and of the *usefulness* of that tool-like perspective. How one communicates ideas about 'tone', then, is entwined with the hemisphere metaphor. A string player will be intuitively aware that change is experienced as something intrinsic to the production of sound, and not as corruption of a 'normatively' static state. In our experimentation we found this to be a valuable starting point for getting closer to the Czech Quartet's ensemble concept. This foundation could be built upon in many more 'procedural' ways, of course; the point is to take care not to mistake object-orientated descriptions for something more fundamental.

In an ensemble context, the 'spin' metaphor allows a conversation of overtones to unfold, and with a complexity that is always *indirectly* specified. (In other words, it actively encourages forms of attention that 'float free' from distinct verbal categories). This is one way in which ensemble praxis sometimes involves higher-level versions of this reciprocal relationship between string and player, for those qualities must be allowed to intertwine. In short, interactions between those 'flavours' of spin are clearly much more specific than any categorical 'representation' could ever be.

Perhaps because it epitomises McGilchrist's quality of 'betweenness', playfulness in this dimension is key to hearing 'into' the interactions between the Czech Quartet musicians. Their example makes this unusually clear, but it is surely relevant to any string ensemble, and in ways that are always particular to those individuals and – even more centrally – their relationships. One opportunity of this realisation, I think, is that such specificity is always available to modern musicians, and need not be confined to an irretrievable, idealised past. (As I suggested in Chapters 2 and 3, the issue really concerns incentives). But more immediately, this idea makes the Czech Quartet's manner of interaction more compelling – and perhaps even more intelligible – to contemporary ears. More open, less categorical attention, in other words, encourages a very different way of listening to ensemble (and especially string quartet) playing. In the process, it allows for a renewed perspective upon paradigmatic, regulative 'art world' values, in a way that makes better sense of the otherwise 'problematic' historical evidence. To hear even small glimpses of the refinement that was evidently experienced by contemporaries, one needs to look beyond the coarse-grained, black-and-white tools of 're-presentational' categories. Once we do this, it is startlingly easy to hear that it is not just misguided, but actually *unnecessary* to define normative ensemble paradigms on the basis of literal attitudes towards notation. In fact, in light of this

¹⁴⁸ Hans Keller (1986: 9) explains this idea through an interesting reversal, remarking that "the mute imposed upon a string quartet produces, strictly speaking, an invalid quartet sound: robbed of essential overtones, the player is no longer able to produce and modulate his tone to the extent required by a quartet texture which has to differentiate more delicately than any comparable chordal instrumentation."

evidence, it seems that placing that assumption at the heart of the epistemology of ensemble imposes profound limits upon one's understanding.¹⁴⁹

Even as we guard against the idea that note onsets constitute the main (or only) locus of attention, the very first moments of bowstrokes are worthy of attention. To speak of a separate category like 'articulation' is already, to some extent, to engage in decontextualization. But although it is indeed a category of sorts, 'articulation' is a notably intuitive one, in which description seems remarkably well aligned with experience – surely because it is so often filtered through metaphor and 'likeness'. For this reason, it is worth reiterating that clean conceptual separations are *always* held reciprocally 'in tension' with performances. Recognising that permanent state of contingency and 'flow' means abandoning the assumption that each moment of articulated contact can be reified, and considered a single, easily definable 'thing'. The performer's understanding, by contrast, is one in which articulation coalesces around opposites: the bow blends starts with ends; every 'inside' is always accompanied by an 'outside'. In the experimental phase we will see how those contextual spaces 'between' are vastly more significant to the player than any retrospective categorisation ever could be.

For now, however, we can afford to put some of that intrinsic complexity to one side, and draw on some more standard descriptive modes in exploring the space between convention and specificity. Generally, two extremes stand out in the Czechs' attitude to the beginnings of bowstrokes. The first is the instinct to begin from a point of true softness,¹⁵⁰ with detailed sensitivity to the character of contact in that instant. The other pole is an enthusiasm for a surprising degree of 'splashiness', in which the bow is allowed to strike the string from a relatively large distance, often without catching the string in preparation.¹⁵¹

In this section I will focus primarily on the first of these. The opening of the first movement of Josef Suk's *String Quartet in B-flat Op. 11* is a good introduction to this 'softness' – although this instinct seems to have been so thoroughly embodied that almost any 'melodic' moment of their recorded playing could serve as an illustration. The following passage is notable for the fact that 'roundness' continues to dominate even as the rhythmic energy increases through dotted and triplet figures. It is only with the arrival of the enthusiastically babbling second violin semiquavers in b.25 that one hears anything remotely resembling a 'hard' edge in the bow's contact with the string:

¹⁴⁹ For instance, the Musical Standard reported in 1897 that "...it is not only in this conservation of proportion that the Bohemian Quartet excels; it has other and higher qualities. Every little shade of musical feeling is realised, from the tenderest lingering sentiment to the soaring of sublime passion..." (1897b: 129). Note that the Bohemian Quartet was the original name of the ensemble: it changed to the Czech Quartet in 1918.

¹⁵⁰ There is historical pedigree (not to mention aesthetic elevation) in this convention: none other than Leopold Mozart remarks that "Every tone, even the strongest attack, has a small, even if barely audible, softness at the beginning of the stroke; for it would otherwise be no tone but only an unpleasant and unintelligible noise." (Mozart 1951: 97).

¹⁵¹ Even when attempting to confine analytical attention to a specific 'parameter' in this way, the idea of continuum must remain the core conceptual foundation, for integration is basic to metaphorical description. How far can we say that it is irregularity of timing that contributes to the 'splashy' impression, somewhat independently of the distance covered by the bow before it meets the string? The answer cannot be either/or. I suggest that we do not need simply to 'try harder' to isolate these parameters in search of a more 'complete' understanding, but to recognise that it is in the nature of music as experience that they happen 'at once'.

Example 4.8

Suk String Quartet No.1 Op.11: I. Allegro moderato; b.1-32¹⁵² (SCORE)

This softness of contact could fairly be described as a characteristic feature of their performance style: as a broadly conventionalised 'mode of address'. But within that there is great variety. Sometimes, for instance, these beginnings to notes are not only soft but extraordinarily clear. This involves allowing the bow simply to 'rest', in a state somewhere between being in the string and on it, such that a small lateral motion creates a tone without the slightest hint of a click. Here, too, the 'spinning' metaphor is directly relevant, for the precise nuance of this articulation cannot be isolated from the way in which the fine balance of the bow-string relationship is changed – and 'held' – in the split second *after* the motion has begun. That image, of the string already starting to move before the bow does, is crucial to 'allowing' it to happen with this level of subtlety.

It is tempting to extrapolate a 'default' concept of sound production from this descriptive impression, and then to associate this group of musicians with a particular 'type' (or even a 'school') of bowing. This is especially appealing – and therefore especially fraught – when considering early recordings, because the tools of labelling and categorisation take on extra importance when one is attempting to understand unfamiliar, historically distant conventions. This tactic plays into the impression that scholars of performance are 'part genealogist', such has been the impulse to trace teaching lineages. This is a worthy aim, but my reservation about adopting such a vantage point is that it normalises 'blanket' thinking, and implies that 'coarse-grained' descriptive surveys are the accepted vehicle for engaging with (historical) performances. This prism will always yield a picture that is intrinsically general in nature. And this process effectively 'flattens out' many of the vitally contextual aspects of string playing, subjugating its continuous, analogue, and contingent character to the iron will of categorisation. Our tripartite theoretical structure offers a plausible way out of this quandary, again via the notion of reverberation: generalised conventions exist in tension with a recognition of each utterance's uniqueness. One's models, in other words, need fundamentally to build in resistance to fixity (and over-codification). In the same way that abstractions cannot explain musical experience on their own, particular conventions 'themselves' can never be the 'content' of performance.

Listen again to a shorter excerpt of the same passage, paying special attention to how one's impression of the parameter 'articulation' is a different *kind* of thing to the variation and specificity that is actually witnessed in each moment:

Example 4.9

Suk String Quartet No.1 Op.11: I. Allegro Moderato; b.15-32

When confronted with the particularity of actual situations, generalisations and categories possess surprisingly little explanatory power.¹⁵³ This is not a trivial problem, and as I will explore further in the next chapter, it applies to all attempts to analyse performance that involve breaking music into parts. To recognise that the 'whole'

¹⁵² Czech Quartet (1928; 2018)

¹⁵³ The Czech Quartet's playing is ideally suited to this task because that search for uniqueness is so consistently audible.

comes both first and last is also to notice that continuum remains central, even when one's analysis is ostensibly confined to a single parameter.¹⁵⁴ Paradoxically, then, one can only attain truly accurate descriptions by embracing the uncertainty native to the 'right hemisphere's' sense of continuity, for it is the latter that is able to form the 'grounding' of our synthesis.¹⁵⁵ I have suggested that the Czech Quartet's playing embodies and reveals this principle to a rewarding extent – but, to repeat, my claim is that this is *always* true of performance.

It is possible to extrapolate a ream of generalisations from these recordings: shared, well-practised, embodied conventions that serve as effective descriptive summaries. But another disposition is possible: to pay attention to the open, specific, changing, unique and contextual qualities of each moment. The idea of 'performance style' must emerge from a dance between these two poles, and never be confined to one or the other.

This is also the crux of my reservation about seeing 'devices' as the *de facto* framework for understanding performances – even of notated scores. Categorical, retrospective, bureaucratic descriptions are powerful for understanding performance conventions, of course, but without the counterbalances of change and specificity one is likely to neglect the playfulness of this dance – and with it, a great deal of what makes music meaningful. This is not a repudiation of close analytical attention, whether by close listening or measurement. We can certainly say that gentle initial 'fronts' to bowstrokes are such a common feature of the Czech Quartet's playing, and in so many subtle and varied ways, that it must surely have constituted an important general principle for these musicians. But the significance of that principle is inseparable from its contexts. We hardly understand what these musicians were doing at all, then, when we submerge that living context in the muddy waters of generalisation. Analysis of string playing demonstrates this so clearly because the activity is bound up with searching for, embracing, feeling – and even being surprised by – the uniqueness of that embodied 'contact-in-motion'.

As I noted above, percussive 'fronts' to individual notes appear to have been the exception rather than the rule for the Czech Quartet. Such a biting effect may be familiar to modern-day string players and listeners: the most dramatic incarnations usually involve first 'grabbing' the string quite tightly with the hair of the bow, and then releasing it with a 'controlled explosion' of weight and acceleration.¹⁵⁶ (In my experience, modern players conventionally associate this technique with explicit accentuation markings like *sfz*, *sf*, *rinf*, *fz*, and *>*, although this too cannot be reduced to a simplistic mapping).¹⁵⁷ Probably the most helpful analogy for this contact is with vocal consonants: this one most resembles a 'T' sound, and the feeling in the hand, arm and shoulder-blades, as one traces 'back' from the point of bow-string contact, is not unlike the pressurised sensation felt between tongue and teeth when preparing to speak that same consonant.¹⁵⁸ Importantly, the specific character of the

¹⁵⁴ This makes it clearer that aggregated measurements are not able to perform that synthesis by themselves.

¹⁵⁵ At this level of detail, the study of performance increasingly starts to resemble Werner Heisenberg's famous Uncertainty Principle.

¹⁵⁶ This is often variable in practice: just as often, such aggressively percussive effects skip the step of 'finding' the contact first. In that case, there is not a *separate* moment of release, which comes later; the impulse is created from the bow striking the string from a distance, and continuing to move laterally.

¹⁵⁷ The caveat applies most, I think, in the case of the final example (>)

¹⁵⁸ There is a nuance here, concerning the relative behaviour of strings with steel vs. gut cores. Gut provides much greater sensitivity and responsiveness to that specificity of contact; while this is not to say that there is no variation in articulation available on strings with a steel core, they generally require more energy/weight to be 'engaged', and the higher tension

sound/articulation that is produced depends not only on the tension with which the contact is 'held', but also on the precise way in which it is released. This is what I mean, when I say that 'the articulation' is never a discrete, single moment or thing, but comes 'all together', as a conjoined 'inside' and 'outside'.

The Czech Quartet's recording of (second violinist) Josef Suk's *Meditation* epitomises the depth of their resistance to aggressive articulation. Here it is revealing to compare their playing of a short passage with a more recent recording. First, listen to the Czechs in the following section, without the notation:

[Example 4.10](#)

Suk Meditation Op.35a; b.63²-69⁴

performed by Czech String Quartet (1928; 2014)

And now the same excerpt in a more recent recording, (appropriately) made by the Suk String Quartet in 1984, this time with score included.

[Example 4.11](#)

Suk Meditation Op.35a; b.63²-69⁴ ([SCORE](#))

performed by Suk String Quartet (1984; 1993)

On the basis of the notation, a modern quartet player might reasonably assume – as the Suk Quartet do – that the intended 'affect' of this passage would involve percussive, even 'pressurized' consonants. These need not be executed all in the same way, of course, but contemporary conventions usually imply that this accentuation be produced, at least in part, by a kind of 'explosive' impulse. The convention appears resilient enough that there is 'family resemblance' between the Suk Quartet's *rinf* chord b.69² in 1984, and the approach of the Kontras Quartet in a performance in 2021:

[Example 4.12](#)

Suk Meditation Op.35a; b.68⁴-69⁴

performed by Suk String Quartet (1984; 1993)

[Example 4.13](#)

Suk Meditation Op.35a; b.68⁴-69⁴

performed by Kontras String Quartet (2021)

By contrast, the Czech Quartet's playing of this passage – and this chord in particular – has only the smallest hint of that 'T-consonant' articulation. Their contact with the string is intense, certainly; but to my ears it has a 'close'

reduces the 'window' of that consonant-like detail. But (as a result) steel strings also have a higher tolerance for 'aggressive' contact: they allow for extreme, punchy versions of this 'T' technique. Taking the same approach to a gut string at lower tension will generally result in an unconvincing scratch.

and contained quality that is likely to do with the softening of the initial contact. As for Leopold Mozart, this principle seems to have applied “even for the strongest attack” (Mozart 1951: 97).

Engaging with the fine detail of examples suggests that observations about performance can rarely be confined to a single, well-behaved category. The most interesting questions always inhere in relationships. It is barely possible to explain ‘articulation’ in b.69, for example, without considering how that parameter interacts with accentuation and emphasis. Even when one has spilt performance into components, recognising the foundational role of continuum is beneficial, because it means one is never tied into reducing a particular principle – here the idea of softened articulation – to a single ‘type’, still less a ‘device’, even when hypothesising that such an instinct occupied a privileged position in a hierarchy of concerns. The Czech Quartet’s inclination to begin bowstrokes with softness appears to have been quite generally applicable – to the extent that it may have acted on a different ‘plane’ to patterns of accentuation and emphasis, which are more obviously contextual.

A corollary of adopting an intrinsically relational disposition is that descriptions almost naturally ‘spin out’ into questions of aesthetic ideology.¹⁵⁹ The idea that for the Czech Quartet the softening impulse usually ‘trumped’ accentuation markings is a useful shorthand for the modern musician attempting to understand this ensemble’s priorities, because it leaves a space for ‘granular’ detail alongside the generalisation.¹⁶⁰ On the other hand, this is historically anachronistic, for it was not these musicians but *later generations* who understood such markings so much more procedurally. That later convention colours how a contemporary author depicts the earlier performances – but this cannot have been how the performers thought about the music at the time. (Another result of this is that it is easier to emphasise what the Czech Quartet ignore, than what they contribute). I have already discussed associations between symbolic notation and ‘systems’ of execution (including ‘categories’ of bowing), that these associations are related to broader aesthetic-ideological commitments, and that they change over time.¹⁶¹ We can appreciate that performance ‘parameters’ are relational and unstable, then, from at least two different directions: from phenomenology, and from the appreciation of historical context.

To return to the detail of b.69²: I hear a strong sense of rhetorical impulse in this example, but an explosive ‘front’ plays no part in their understanding of the dramatic characterisation. Instead, it is a more lateral motion – ‘pulling’ the resonance out of the string, rather than attacking it vertically (and/or unevenly) – that defines their basic continuum, and their understanding of rhetorical emphasis is built on that foundation. To contemporary eyes and ears, this notation seems to cry out for ‘pressurized’, T-consonant contact. The Czech Quartet’s approach to this moment is notable, then, because it reveals the extent to which this conventionalised softness of bowing was prioritised. More generally, it shows that it is richly contextual *combinations*, not the ‘application’ of single variables, that are truly salient to performers. Their articulation of this single note cannot be understood without seeing that stroke in its (metrical) context, and the impression that the chord comes ‘out of’ the previous gesture. In other words, for the Czechs this chord is a response to the first beat’s main impulse, which retains primary metrical significance. More recent performers often appear to regard the notated *rinf* on the second beat chord

¹⁵⁹ This is probably heightened when there is a historical dimension to the analysis.

¹⁶⁰ Hierarchy proved to be a fruitful concept in our copying process.

¹⁶¹ The ideology of textual literalism is clearly relevant here, but so is the specifically *historical* notion of faithfulness that emerged later in the twentieth century.

as signifying a particular *technique* of accentuation, and this results in gestural (and 'structural') separation. But the Czech Quartet do not read this as implying a new impulse on the second beat at all.¹⁶² These musicians, then, did not habitually read this symbol as implying an aggressively articulated or 'explosive' stroke;¹⁶³ but it also implies that performers' attitudes towards notation and hierarchy have changed in a more fundamental way. When extrinsic (e.g. articulation) markings are treated as representational – not just of gesture or character, but of the manner of execution – they are more likely to 'override' metrical structure. Here, reading the *rinf* marking as an explosive, aggressive 'type' of stroke will always result in that beat dominating (or disturbing) the metrical structure, because of the physicality of the gesture needed to execute it in this way. That the Czech Quartet approach the notation quite differently suggests that there is a tension between the often-conflated ideas of 'structuralist' performance, and 'literalism' (in reading/performing scores). And so it is ironic that these earlier players' less procedural understanding of articulation markings implies that they regarded 'deeper' structural (e.g. harmonic) aspects of a score as taking precedence in some (embodied) sense – in spite of the fact that they could not have been working in terms of formal analytical frameworks.

This tension is illustrated by other early recordings. The Klingler Quartet's rendition of the String Quartet Op.127 by Beethoven is an especially good example: in the opening bars, communication of the 2/4 metre, and the harmonic 'content', seems to outweigh – or at least contextualise – the *sf* markings (placed on weak beats).

[Example 4.14](#)

Beethoven String Quartet Op.127: I. Maestoso; b.1-6 ([SCORE](#))

performed by Klingler String Quartet (1935/36; 1998)

Like the Czech Quartet, these players seem to have understood the markings much more contextually than procedurally. More recent ensembles have been more inclined to regard Beethoven's markings here as intrinsically destabilising of the metre – effectively, the *sf* is positioned 'higher up' the metaphorical hierarchy than communication of the phrase structure (or even of the basic 2/4 metre). It may be too strong to imply that it the earlier performances always prioritise a score's harmonic and structural 'content' over superficial markings; but at the very least, this suggests that broad categories like 'structural' or 'rhetorical' performance should be treated with care. It is perfectly possible that a musician of any generation would conceptualise gestures and shapes in this *metaphorically* 'structural' way, without regarding notation 'as' structure in the more explicitly theorised (and arguably 're-presentational') fashion that held sway later in the twentieth century.

In practice, the details of performances inevitably evade large-scale historical generalisations. Convention is always held in tension with specificity, and the latter cannot be subjugated to the former. In the case of the Czech Quartet's *Meditation*, their general aversion to 'percussive' accentuation seems, in retrospect, to 'apply' to particular musical situations quite directly. My point is that from a phenomenological perspective this is not a

¹⁶² Although I am not interested in arguments from authority, it is surely worth remembering that the composer was one of the performers, as a defence against naïve claims for the universality of textual literalism.

¹⁶³ Judging by contemporary recordings, it is fair to say that this meaning is now somewhat conventionalised; but for the older players the notation seems to have conveyed a different *kind* of information, and which is not easily captured by a literal, execution-based model.

deterministic, 'top-down' interaction but a *reciprocal* one. Consider the complexity of the way they play b.69: they strike the second beat chord at almost exactly at the same time as each other, which gives it an emphasis of sorts; but because the articulation is relatively soft, and the physical gesture not 'grammatically' separated from the first beat, they create rhetorical emphasis at the same time as a structural de-accent. Another important context for this moment is the 'swing' of the quavers in the lower parts in b.68, which heightens the feeling that the second beat chord is a moment of transition, rather than of arrival. Our 'conventional' softness is clearly doing important work here, but such is the integrated quality of the gesture that it makes little sense – at least to me – to imagine that principle as having been 'applied' or 'enacted'. It is intrinsically contextual, and encapsulated within that wholeness.¹⁶⁴

Such examples also demonstrate that the idea of accentuation can never be reduced to simple pairs of oppositions (like down/up; hard/soft; accented/lifted). In Part 2 I explore how performers treat accentuation much more like a continuous, three-dimensional space of interrelations, than in terms of isolatable 'points'. Discrete concepts of emphasis are rather better aligned with the verbal tools of (most) familiar music-analytical frameworks.¹⁶⁵ But in the embodied situation of performance, the core principle is not separation but interplay: those discrete ideas are 'filtered' through continuity and flow.¹⁶⁶ An encounter with the Czech Quartet reveals the difference between the aggregation of descriptive features and 'synthesis'; and, moreover, that to equate the two is to misunderstand the integrated character of musical experience. As I will explore in the next chapter, strategies that separate performance into parts are hugely powerful for deepening understanding. But the insights of phenomenology suggest that, as in our central metaphor, such clean divisions must be recognised as an intermediate analytical transformation.

This has implications for how one describes 'performance style' in words. I have suggested that analysis must not stop once general conventions have been identified, and that coarse descriptions must be allowed to 'reverberate' with unique moments, for synthesis dissolves sharp parametric boundaries by definition. A useful first step towards achieving this is to ground discussions of performance in a *continuous* notion of time, for this is crucial to the musician's experience. To substitute it for something subtly different – by reading music only through explicit components and abstract 'intentions' – is to impose an arbitrary ceiling on one's understanding. In this respect the characteristic tools of 'performance analysis' are far from neutral, for attempts to codify (and justify) prized features of 'canonic' performances draw on such concepts to a conspicuous extent. To deploy concepts of emphasis, accentuation, and articulation is already to break performance apart – to wrestle one's descriptions onto usefully mechanical turf. As I have suggested, it is a significant analytical problem that these paradigms are not easily parted from 'art world' values, and their extensive networks of assumptions.

¹⁶⁴ In a similar way, descriptive comparisons should be understood in terms of continua: the historical example above is not entirely continuous, just as my modern foils (Examples 4.12 and 4.13) are not entirely separated. It makes more sense to argue that the Czech Quartet's execution of this moment is *balanced* more towards continuity than division.

¹⁶⁵ A more precise way of expressing this would be to say that they are aligned with the specific form of attention that is privileged by those frameworks.

¹⁶⁶ The image of the filter is useful for understanding how a performer experiences the relationships between abstract, theoretical, controllable, notation-derived concepts (like metrical structure); and 'higher-level' metaphors and heuristics (which encompasses emotional engagement and 'life-like' expressive qualities). On the significance of the latter, see Leech-Wilkinson and Prior (2014).

To cast these tools, instead, as intermediate reductions is to see that their insights become *more* powerful when 'returned' to the fragile, transient, continuous, and unique qualities of experience. Performers are well placed to explore this 'synthesised' domain because making music never inheres in putting parts together 'again', but *actually requires us to forget that a division has been made in the first place.*

Chapter 5: The logic of division

...performers often depart from the notated score to communicate emotions and musical structure by introducing microvariations in intensity and speed. Music ensemble performers therefore must coordinate not only their actions, but also their joint expressive goals. For musicians in an ensemble, sharing a representation of a global performance outcome facilitates joint music performance. (Chang et al. 2019: 1)

Ensembles face many of the same challenges as solo musicians. They have to maintain technical control during demanding passages, make expressive decisions, cope with (p.419) errors and distractions [...] On top of these challenges they must coordinate their performance as a group. Coordination, in this context, means producing complementary outputs that are temporally aligned. Although ensembles are composed of individuals who may differ in how they want the music to sound, they must play together as a single unit. (Bishop and Keller 2022: 418-9)

In this final theoretical chapter I explore the relevance of my central metaphor to the empirical study of ensemble (and associated models), arguing that the undoubted opportunities of the 'logic of division' need to be balanced by some important caveats. These reservations concern, first, the instability of the historical and aesthetic contexts explored in Chapters 1-3; and second, the fluid and continuous character of the experiential disposition described in Chapter 4. As before, my primary examples are recordings by the Czech Quartet. I do not offer an exhaustive 'left hemisphere' analysis of these performances, which my colleagues and I will go on to 'apply' in Part 2. Instead, this chapter presents a 'productive critique', which characterises, questions and utilises some influential approaches to studying (ensemble) performance. Examining these models 'through' the Czech Quartet helps to reveal such attitudes *as dispositions*, and thus heightens awareness of the sort of recalibration that might be necessary in reconciling those insights with the philosophical paradigms and cultural contingencies I have explored in previous chapters.

I. Transformations

Imagining musical performance in terms of component parts (or 'parameters') is one of the foundational gestures of empirical musicology. This is so often presented as a neutral, 'common-sense' definition that it can be difficult to spot that a transformation has taken place at all.¹⁶⁷ I have already suggested that this substitution is broadly analogous to the work undertaken by our metaphorical left hemisphere, and that it therefore comes with many of the same risks. Recall, however, that the crux of McGilchrist's distinction between the hemispheres lies not in *what* they do, but in *how* they do it. This suggests that the 'logic of division' is not simply an artefact of empirical methods, but holds broader significance within musicological thought (McGilchrist 2012: 54). In this chapter, then,

¹⁶⁷ The idea of parameters (or variables) is often closely integrated with some notion of 'common goals' that 'must' – for some reason – be 'coordinated' (Goebel and Palmer 2009: 427). Not only is it unclear that such 'shared representations' have a psychological basis (Clarke 2005b), but it should also be obvious from my account in Chapter 4 that it is unrealistic to map the richly lifelike activity of music-making onto explicit, procedural 'goals'.

I suggest that a disposition that regards the whole as ‘additively’ constructed from intersecting ‘variables’) is native to many more of the tools used to describe music and its experience. While parameters are most explicitly encountered in an empirical context, the significance of this paradigmatic ‘gambit’ of musicological discourse extends considerably further.¹⁶⁸

Does the idea of explicit, bounded, aggregating attention map onto Nicholas Cook’s category of ‘musicological listening’? The metaphor of the left hemisphere appears an intuitively good fit for the discreteness and separation that has historically characterised music-analytical work – by contrast with the more naïve, flowing wholeness of what Cook describes as ‘musical’ experience (Cook 1990: 152).¹⁶⁹ Critiques of this binary notwithstanding – the point was originally made back in 1990¹⁷⁰ – it usefully distils some major challenges facing the study of performance(s). The emphasis McGilchrist’s metaphor places on the need for ‘return’ effectively reframes this familiar dichotomy. The idea of attention, in particular, affords useful clarity in *characterising* the data that have been drawn from performance(s). Most importantly, the hemisphere metaphor engages the idea of synthesis while also allowing the perspectives to remain distinct, thus building in the ‘both, and’ quality that is so often elusive in practice to discussions of music.¹⁷¹

Scholars working in this field have occasionally expressed anxiety about what the methods of empirical research are ‘actually’ describing, for it is not always clear how far the phenomena being isolated in this manner map onto (any) psychological reality (Desain and Honing 1993). While extrapolating data from performances in the form of parameters is a very basic analytical step, it is worth asking what is sacrificed, when insisting on the discrete measurement of separate properties. Further, what assumptions are being made, when large data sets are compiled in the search for general principles, or fundamental ‘laws’ of expressivity (Todd 1992)? Such goals generate tensions with the more malleable basis implied by discussions of ‘convention’, or any other social processes of exchange.¹⁷² On the other hand, this frame is an ideal fit for systematic reductions.¹⁷³ Researchers have generally been aware of the fact that some trade-offs are inevitable here, but it remains startlingly easy for tails to begin wagging their dogs, when one’s epistemology is constructed upon the logic of division.

This is relatively simple to acknowledge in theory, but remarkably difficult to escape in practice. This may be a product of the shared philosophical basis of common descriptive and analytical techniques, and the fact that this makes them ideally suited to systematic organisation. This follows on directly from my diagnosis in Chapters 1-4, for I believe one can trace a coherent path from the ‘regulative’ status conventionally afforded to abstract ‘works’; through the primacy of the symbolic, clear-cut, categorical ‘re-presentations’ of notation; to treating

¹⁶⁸ Performer-researchers often make this transformation just as readily as theorists: McCaleb (2014: 65) suggests that “...a performer’s musical intention is the collection of qualities or characteristics they intend to embody within their musical output [...] this may include both conscious and unconscious components.”

¹⁶⁹ Note that ‘performance’ is generally used synonymously with ‘recording’, given the difficulty of analysing live performance in real time.

¹⁷⁰ See Agawu (1992) and Cone (1994).

¹⁷¹ The more familiar tension runs in only two directions (e.g. ‘between theory and practice’).

¹⁷² Oral versions of this process are arguably a greater source of concern than written ones, given how much more easily the former eludes ‘capture’.

¹⁷³ This bias may help to explain why even an idea like ‘tradition’ is often streamlined in this way: as Volioti (2010: 91) notes, “it is still attributes such as ‘rules’, ‘conventions’ and ‘deviations from the norm’, with which the concept of tradition has customarily been overloaded, that attract empirical modelling.”

performances as modifications of a pre-existing, essential core; culminating in the idea that those modifications are defined by the varying of discrete performance parameters. This ideological 'family resemblance' is crucial to understanding the premises that underpin the contemporary study of ensemble performance.

It is famously challenging to navigate the borderlands between the cultural and the psychological/perceptual (Leech-Wilkinson 2013b; Morrison and Demorest 2009). While I do not deal directly with those questions here, the contexts of both history and phenomenology suggest that music-analytical methods cannot operate entirely independently of cultural norms and values.¹⁷⁴ It is far from incidentally important that *a priori* concepts – derived from cultural *consensus* – are frequently marshalled as central analytical 'benchmarks'. As I noted in the introduction (p. 9-12), a conspicuous example is the demand for ensemble players to be permanently concerned with the 'specific goal' of maintaining temporal synchronisation. (See, for instance, Marchini et al. (2012: 179); or Moore and Chen (2010)). Many authors wield this concept as though it is untethered to cultural or philosophical concerns, which is exacerbated by the fact that 'it' is relatively simple to measure.¹⁷⁵ But as we have seen, the historical evidence can be problematic, at best, when it comes to that assumption of neutrality. It is undoubtedly cumbersome to explain that empirical investigations of 'synchronisation' are referring to the ability of performers to accomplish 'it' in principle, while acknowledging that this skill is associated with specific cultural conventions. But in light of (for example) the Czech Quartet's playing, it seems worth insisting on a distinction between the *processes* underlying a musician's sensitivity to (relative) timing; and the imperative that two or more players 'must' time the placement of discrete, specified 'events' to occur at 'the same' moment.¹⁷⁶ It is significant, too, that the very idea of synchronisation is intrinsically 'parameterised'. (Music has *already* been transformed, in other words, by the time one encounters this concept in analysis).¹⁷⁷ From the performer's point of view, that process of division means that 'synchronisation' is fundamentally abstracted from context, and reduced to a blunt categorical specification that is ill-equipped for coherent dialogue even with the evidence of phenomenology, let alone historical-stylistic variability.

The hemisphere metaphor suggests that such theoretical 'baselines' sharpen understanding of specific phenomena – including human capabilities – but that this power comes with caveats. In the case of ensemble, it is not easy to account for fluidity in aesthetic norms without undermining the synchronisation concept's brittle philosophical foundations. Measured timing and synchronisation values tell us many things that are analytically valuable (Wing, Endo, Yates, et al. 2014; Senn et al. 2016). But those findings are not easy to apply to artistic practice, because something as broad as 'ensemble performance in WAM' comes with an inconveniently vast expanse of context. In practice, then, cultural conventions will always permeate empirical frameworks. And so it is important to be sensitive to whether these distinctions – between culturally elevated conventions, and more

¹⁷⁴ Might empirical methods have proceeded in a very different direction, had researchers grown up in a performance culture in which 'literal' execution was less aesthetically prized?

¹⁷⁵ There are certain caveats here; see Ponchione-Bailey and Clarke (2020).

¹⁷⁶ The scare quotes here reflect the fact that the latter also contains an important perceptual dimension. Wing, Endo, Yates, et al. (2014) examined the ability of subjects to perceive sounds as synchronous vs. asynchronous, in the context of string quartet performance, but paid little attention to the 'onset measurement' problems inherent in working with strings. For a more general discussion of rhythmic synchronization using tapping, see Palmer et al. (2014).

¹⁷⁷ The 'betweenness' of a bowed string's behaviour, and the fine qualitative distinctions that enables, are opaque to the very concept of synchronisation.

generally applicable findings (e.g. concerning perceptual ‘mechanisms’) – have become blurred. Indeed McGilchrist repeatedly draws attention to the fact that the very idea of a ‘mechanism’, though common in the scientific literature, is a metaphor – one which does not necessarily reflect embodied dimensions of cognition (McGilchrist 2012: 3, 94, 97-98, 174-5). This risk is epitomised by the common assumption that musical ensembles *by definition* aim to synchronise timing according to the clean ‘prescriptions’ of notation. This is remarkably easily (and frequently) confused with the subtly different question of how human perceptual and motor processes work, in the domain of timing.

The ability to accurately perceive and calibrate timing is a manifestly critical aspect of the Czech Quartet’s interaction, as for any musician.¹⁷⁸ But such a capacity does not always map cleanly onto the theoretical abstraction of ‘between-player synchronisation’ – which is itself derived from a culturally specific understanding of notation. I would speculate that these musicians of a century ago would not – and perhaps even *could* not – have imagined the score sounding in a manner that correlates with adherence to a symbolic, denotative ‘baseline’; nor are they likely to have understood the idea that musical performance is synonymous with the manipulation of parameters (cf. Wood et al. 2022: 107). In the context of string playing, especially, what could possibly be the content of a hard distinction between that which is ‘fully notated’, and that which is ‘left to the performer’?

Perhaps the best indication of parameterisation’s explanatory power is its involvement in many different research methods – including approaches that do not involve ‘empirical’ techniques. The Czech Quartet’s playing (and reception) presents an opportunity to ask how far these models are set up to admit evidence of historical change. When set against conventional paradigms for studying ensemble performance, such an approach to the performance of notated music suggests that the foundational abstractions of some empirical methods are structured in such a way as to fundamentally misunderstand the kind of ‘togetherness’ these musicians (and their audiences) were experiencing (Cook 2014: 17; Leech-Wilkinson 2012). An easier route out of this quandary might be to excuse this group’s (recorded) style as merely aberrant, because they do not fit contemporary norms or values (Potter 2003: 62). But that temptation is strong only because the implicit model – defined by a black-and-white axis of ‘adherence vs. deviation’ – remains concealed beneath the surface of discourse, absorbed as ‘the way things are’. That may be a valid cultural and aesthetic commitment, of course – but it is manifestly not the same kind of thing as a perceptual universal.

Focused, ‘predatory’ attention often de-emphasises the fact that its models are underpinned by assumptions: indeed this is an important source of circularity. This analytical discourse often appears to be built ‘upside-down’, insofar as one often begins with a normative, measurable conclusion, and tests how well human subjects ‘adhere’ to it. The Czech Quartet’s example is so powerful because it makes preordained, extrinsic systems – and the ahistorical, positivist philosophies that are buttressed by them – look like neat reductionist fantasies. But there is no need, in fact, to consider the Czech musicians an ‘outlier’ at all, for their striking example simply draws

¹⁷⁸ For an exploration of the related concept of ‘entrainment’, see Clayton et al. (2020).

attention to qualities that are *always* true of (ensemble) performance.¹⁷⁹

None of this need mean denying the value of an analytical disposition; nor does it imply that models of human perception built on metaphors like ‘the machine’ – or the related idea of ‘systems’ – are inherently misleading (McGilchrist 2021: 410). We simply need to recognise the specificity of this disposition, and cultivate awareness of the transformation it entails. In this view, analysis is a temporary platform, on which many different contributions to knowledge about music can be made, without those conclusions solidifying so as to entrench resistance *in principle* to historical or environmental variation. In that context, the idea of parameters can be marshalled to great effect; indeed it is so deeply integrated into our current theoretical and psychological understanding of music that it would be absurd to abandon it. But noticing that this disposition *is itself a convention* is a prerequisite, if one’s thinking is to account for complex webs of ‘art world’ practice and belief. Without that step, the study of ensemble is liable to become trapped in a hall of mirrors, unable to deal with evidence that stands outside its own narrow – indeed elevated – conventions. As I have already suggested, the only tenable conclusion to draw from the historical evidence is that much of the meaning of ‘togetherness’ in ensemble is not reducible to quantifiable parametric ‘re-presentations’. In the moment of its experience, music inheres in wholes, and occurs ‘all at once’. Ensemble interaction thus epitomises the idea of ‘return’ and integration. As McGilchrist puts it,

The right hemisphere’s particular strength is in understanding meaning as a whole and in context. It is with the right hemisphere that we understand the moral of a story, as well as the point of a joke. It is able to construe intelligently what others (p.71) mean, determining from intonation, and from pragmatics, not just from summation of meaning units, subject to the combinatorial rules of syntax, as a computer would. It is therefore particularly important wherever non-literal meaning needs to be understood – practically everywhere, therefore, in human discourse, and particularly where irony, humour, indirection or sarcasm are involved. (McGilchrist 2012: 70-71)

II. The canvas of analysis

For as long as people have sought to explain music, it has been understood that its elusive character makes its ‘meaning’ resistant to atomised, explicit description. This problem of selectiveness does not only apply to representational, symbolic, or abstract tools, however, but extends into verbal and metaphorical descriptive modes. (This is why I was keen in Chapter 4 not to filter every act of listening through a named category). Fortunately, to acknowledge this as a basic feature of music is sufficient to avoid being held hostage by it indefinitely. There is nothing to be gained by believing that one’s analysis could ever transcend the basic character of the phenomenon.

Situating analytical approaches in a more contextual synthesis overcomes the temptation for explanations to be so abstracted that they become entirely divorced from experience. Without tempering influences, performance-analytical techniques seem especially inclined to generate such isolated universes of their own; and the reasons for this can often be traced to the logic of division. As in the previous chapter, time is often a useful barometer

¹⁷⁹ It may not be coincidental that the things that stood out to me ‘the performer’ as being especially engaging in the Czech Quartet’s playing are generally embodied, and grounded in ‘whole’ gestures, rather than discrete events or measurable variables.

here: in many cases, analytical strategies adopt an implicit perspective upon time in which a 'sliced', additive representation is posited in place of continuous, irreducible flow. As Bergson (2013: 91) asks, "...does the multiplicity of our conscious states bear the slightest resemblance to the multiplicity of the units of a number? Has true duration anything to do with space?" That transformation allows performance analysis to present a coherent canvas of interacting 'objects', for instance by measuring 'adherence' to timings of discrete 'events' extrapolated from notation. In practice, this means that if one of these performance 'events' – usually a note onset – is *represented* as occurring in two parts simultaneously, the measurement of performance parameters proceeds with that representation as the reference. The underlying assumption is that notation is the more accurate category, and thus the 'thing' to which the performance ought to correspond.¹⁸⁰ An antidote to this somewhat bureaucratic conclusion is to recognise that notation is *always* partial, symbolic, and lifeless, however elevated or complex it might be.

In some respects this is a simplification of the practice of performance analysis, for some have suggested that the value of empirical models lies in their capacity to enrich specific acts of listening, rather than to act as judge and jury in an isolated experimental context (Cook 2014: 14). This is encouragingly reminiscent of the idea that the analysis demands re-integration. This has an analogue in the context of rehearsal, where it is crucial that analytical work is ultimately de-emphasised, and banished from the realm of conscious attention. To an extent, then, some musicologists have already been treating analysis – including that of performance – in something close to the manner of the integrative 'right hemisphere', and fully cognisant of the limitations of their 're-presentational' reductions. Our central metaphor draws attention to the ease with which this admission is buried, when dominant paradigms consistently reinforce the idea that music's 'nature' is primarily located in abstract essences. When that belief is unconditionally accepted, the idea of division is much more easily read as a foundational feature of music 'itself'. From there, it is a short step to regarding those abstract, separate properties as a foundational to musical experience as well. Thinking in terms of variables, although beloved by musicologists, is itself a convention; and so it often presents tensions with evidence derived from other sources, such as the more 'whole' domain of the phenomenology of performance (Høffding and Satne 2021).

We can see, then, that thinking in parameters is useful because it substitutes the inherently uncertain turf of temporal unfolding – whereby music only exists as a process, intrinsically unfixed, flowing, and integrated – for a more controllable canvas, on which a collection of manipulable objects can interact in traceable ways.¹⁸¹ Splitting time into its own independent 'stream', as is encountered so regularly in the ensemble performance literature, is very useful for interpreting these extrapolated data. From another perspective, however, the logic of division alters the experiential 'object' to such an extent that it is actually quite surprising that this convention has become so widespread in the study of performance. But it is more easily explained, if we notice that this transformation is not limited to 'empirical' parameters, and that the need to generate more controllable objects for analysis has also underpinned many existing descriptive conventions. The idea that a musician 'applies asynchrony as an

¹⁸⁰ See Wing, Endo, Bradbury, et al. (2014) for an example of the relationship between 'introduced' variation and the (somewhat prejudicial) idea of 'error correction'.

¹⁸¹ An intuitive analogy here is the idea of Newtonian mechanics as a practical approximation that works well at the level intended, but breaks down at others.

expressive device', for instance, is made possible by the logic of division in precisely the same way as an experimental method which measures 'mean perceived synchrony ratings' – organised by modality, music style, and musical training – in response to a particular performance (Jakubowski et al. 2020: 164).¹⁸² In both cases, the analysis depends on a base layer of processes: abstraction/reification, followed by separation (or 'streaming'). Techniques that involve measuring discrete variables bring the dividing disposition more obviously to the surface, but it is also present in many 'softer' humanities methods.

Musical experience, then, is often deeply unlike our models of it. It is intuitively obvious that music-analytical techniques – from Schenkerian analysis to pitch-class sets, sonata theory to Sonic Visualiser¹⁸³ – pay a price for their depth of insight, and that it is usually paid in fixity and partiality. From the opposite angle, one might argue that it is because music is such an integrated and continuous facet of human experience, that it presents such a stark contrast with certain forms of analytical thinking. These are not new criticisms, and many past complaints of 'text-based' analytical methods have concerned the way in which 'useful transformations' overstepped sensible boundaries – to the extent that their observations had become detached from perceptual experience. (Common sense was the other paradigmatically 'right hemisphere' quality to have been missing from certain analytical claims).¹⁸⁴ In sum, it does not take great imagination to see how McGilchrist's 'left hemisphere' – and in particular its propensity for self-referentiality and overconfidence – might be relevant to the more dogmatic corners of music-analytical discourse. The combination of abstraction, systematisation, and decontextualization lies at the base of most unfalsifiable theoretical prophecies, and music is surely no exception (Taruskin 2020b).

This points to methodological dangers lurking within musicology's recent attempt to recast performance(s) as the object of analytical attention. For while one might once have hoped that changing the object of attention would be sufficient for overcoming the limitations of score-based analysis, it should now be easy to see how transplanting the same disposition to a new domain leaves the study of performance susceptible to the same problems. This is crucial for understanding my intention in Part 2 of this thesis, because it makes sense of the *relation* in which those observations stand to (more conventional) analysis by parameters.

To summarise, then: the process of transforming music into a collection of related 'things' is conceptual bedrock for a significant proportion of music-analytical inquiry. This is *not* to say that musicology has not been interested in the relationships between those objects; indeed discussion of those relationships is often central to such work. The important distinction lies in the 'how' aspect of the hemisphere hypothesis. The 'default' state for the left hemisphere is essentially pointillistic, with connections made 'on top' of that. Parameters exemplify this disposition, in which the whole is conceived as being 'built up' from separate parts. McGilchrist suggests that this is how the left hemisphere 're-presents' experience. By contrast, for the right, the idea of flow/continuity is fundamental, with division conceived as the intermediate, secondary process (McGilchrist 2012: 137). As we saw in Chapter 4, I believe the latter is ultimately a more accurate reflection of the performer's experience. Redirecting analytical attention – that which is grounded in 'connected discreteness' – towards performance is a worthy and

¹⁸² See also Chang et al. (2019: 2).

¹⁸³ Sonic visualiser is unusually good at retaining this background synthesis, because it puts parametric models directly in touch with listening (Cook 2009).

¹⁸⁴ Historical-ideological context has another famous blind spot of analysis; see Dreyfus (1993).

revealing project, for it provides the best tools we have for enriching our knowledge of the phenomenon, and perhaps also our experience of it. But it is crucial to recognise that this has represented a shift in the *target domain*, rather than in the *character* of the thinking. When it comes to integrating the experiential dimensions of music into discourse, paying analytical attention to performance(s) is not guaranteed to yield a more coherent framework than older 'score-based' orthodoxies.

III. Integration

When the logic of division is foundational to multiple domains, it effectively 'locks them together'. The close connection between score- and performance-based analytical paradigms, for instance, can be traced to the broader philosophical contexts discussed in Chapter 1. Recent developments in performance analysis were clearly neither likely nor intended to give rise to the wholesale abandonment of scores: the categories of notation and 'performance' are entwined because this field of practice is simultaneously a literate culture and an oral one (Taruskin 2005: xiii-xxii). The paradigm of reproduction provides the conditions for a high degree of compatibility between these modes: it is very easy to talk about the performance of notated music in terms of that notation. This means that the principle that the performance is a transient exemplar of a more inherently solid, lasting abstraction is embedded in the language of music 'and' performance.¹⁸⁵ There is nothing inescapable about this coupling – indeed some modern analytical work goes to significant lengths to avoid it (Leech-Wilkinson 2015) – but in practice it tacitly underpins many familiar approaches. Systemisation is another powerful tool of conceptual manipulation, and it plays an important role in structuring the kind of attention one pays to musical experience; but it, too, is a convention with a historical and philosophical inheritance. Indeed the interlocking quality of analytical systems may explain why the idea of timing as 'deviation' has been so central to (ensemble) performance analysis, even though it is not necessarily a good 'fit' for the musician's experience.

As for the 'art worlds' of previous chapters, it is important to remember that consensus does not imply neutrality. Here, this issue concerns the integration of different methods: informal, verbal, and metaphorical 'close listening' descriptions are often blended with precise empirical data in such a way that each supports and stimulates the other (see, for example, Leech-Wilkinson 2010b; Fabian 2015; Volioti 2019). That this kind of explanatory synthesis is generally so coherent can be explained, at least in part, by the close relation in which those different types of observation are held to 'notational' – or even just notional – objects. They are grounded in the same type of ('parametric') transformation, and thus in a specifically *conceptual* mode of thinking. Concepts are useful precisely because they are named, made explicit, and distinguished from one another.¹⁸⁶ It is generally that fixed 'base layer' of notated objects that grounds the analytical meanings of performance data. Timing or synchronisation values are a paradigmatic example: without the initial step of division into separate conceptual objects, it is remarkably difficult to grasp what those measurements are 'in fact' describing, beyond banalities. Consider the

¹⁸⁵ Or in terms of other extensions/extrapolations of it, such as regulative work concepts.

¹⁸⁶ There is admittedly significant disagreement here: Zbikowski (2002: 4) argues that there is evidence that concepts "are not irrevocably wedded to words or to concrete representations." In practice, however, the need for the analyst to 'deploy' them makes this point moot.

following case: if a score was to be rewritten, to ‘encode’ a particular performance’s ‘between-player asynchronies’ in retrospect, would a new performance analysis now categorise all note onsets as ‘synchronised’, on the basis that the performance now adhered precisely to an abstract representation, in which the music’s rhythms sounded precisely as they looked? Adjusting the representation changes the very notion of ‘deviation’, even if the musical experience remains the same. The general conclusion of this thought experiment is that discrete conceptual ‘tent-pegs’ keep our ‘re-presentational’ canvas taut and stable. With those in place, an analyst can understand the relative, predictable, quasi-Newtonian movements of its ‘objects’ with clarity and detail. But this is only possible while those conditions hold: as for the left hemisphere, things often degenerate into paradox once sharp boundaries are made permeable.¹⁸⁷

The idea of integrated systems extends beyond the world of symbols and notation. A prime example is the metaphor of music ‘as’ structure, which posits rich interactions between explicitly defined layers. The benefit of this metaphor is that it sets up a system that is not just describable but *intrinsically relational*.¹⁸⁸ It also comes with an ‘inbuilt’ attitude towards performance, which effectively tightens the analytical canvas around coherent reference points. It is not surprising, therefore, that discussions grounded in the metaphor of structure often appear remarkably coherent – indeed difficult to refute. Musicologists are well accustomed to the power of a mode in which performance ‘strategies’ are understood as ‘articulating’ salient structural moments; or where a performer ‘uses’ particular ‘devices’ to ‘bring out’ key compositional features. The interactions between the system’s various layers are structured such that they are always more likely to cohere than to undermine one another.

This sense of integration can be so powerful that analysts occasionally give the impression that their explanatory systems are much more than a ‘function’ of an analytical disposition, but represent the closest possible approximation of the phenomenon’s ‘nature’. From another perspective, however, the domains reconciled in these models are not obvious candidates for effective mixing.¹⁸⁹ But integration is made easier when perspectives share a base layer of convention: in the case of structural models, that ‘basis’ is the idea that discrete ‘things’ act as ‘constituent parts’.¹⁹⁰ Metaphor, too, is changed by the process of systematisation: what was open, implicit, and experiential, becomes objectified, static, and manipulable. ‘Structuralist’ accounts of music and performance present some of the most striking examples of this logic (see Narmour 1988); but my point is that analytical systems will *necessarily* coalesce around the left hemisphere’s inclination to ‘build up’ the world from parts. When confronted with such persuasive coherence, it is easy to believe that atomistic ‘re-presentations’ lead towards an intrinsically ‘truer’ perspective. McGilchrist’s tripartite context suggests that such a disposition can be locally revealing, yet globally misguided.

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¹⁸⁷ Recall the risk of circularity, which is not easily perceptible from inside a system.

¹⁸⁸ Schenkerian analysis is an ideal demonstration of how a system derives explanatory power from considering the interactions between layers.

¹⁸⁹ I have in mind the mappings from explicit structural analysis onto the imaginative metaphors and heuristics through which music is described ‘in performance’. This is often cast as a harmonious relationship, but does it always work in this direction?

¹⁹⁰ The attempt of de Assis 2018 to rethink WAM’s paradigm is good example of the resilience of such object-oriented logic.

Methods for analysing performance largely repurposed aspects of existing music-theoretical paradigms, and so imported a base layer of ‘connected discreteness’.¹⁹¹ As Ponchione-Bailey and Clarke (2020: 22) put it, “It has long been recognized that expert musical performance involves extremely sophisticated control of tempo, timing, dynamics, articulation, pitch, vibrato and timbre”. From the analytical perspective, this seems to be a self-evidently accurate description of what musicians are doing when they play. Indeed this logic has also been adopted into the theorising of expert accomplishment, where the idea of variables has been similarly foundational for understanding how performances are ‘made’. The notion of ‘fine control’ is an especially vivid indication of the belief that the activity of making music is just like its analysis: that it is akin to adjusting a selection of knobs on a dashboard, in order to accomplish a specified, bounded task. But as I suggested in Chapter 4, a phenomenological perspective shows that the basic gesture of separation works better as a retrospective extrapolation than as a recipe. How true is it to experience to assert that a unique musical utterance is always, and by definition, ‘built up’ by the combination of ingredients?¹⁹²

The main parameters of performance analysis are relatively few in number, but researchers have adopted a broad range of attitudes towards them. Earlier methods tended to rely on comparatively blunt aggregation techniques, of which the archetypal example is averaged tempo data (Bowen 1996; Turner 2004; Rector 2021). In the years since, software such as Sonic Visualiser has enabled more precise data to be extrapolated, and used in combination with other techniques, including close listening descriptions, score annotation, and structural analysis.¹⁹³ Hybrid techniques are common, too, when measuring (and interpreting) ‘asynchronies’ between note onsets.¹⁹⁴ Some investigations have sought to chart not just the interactions between particular performance parameters, but also trends in how those interactions vary over time (Volioti 2019). And parameters have also been a key tenet of multidisciplinary projects that explore how musical variables ‘map onto’ or ‘express’ particular – that is, named and categorised – emotions or feeling-states.¹⁹⁵ This is clearly a vast and contentious area of scholarship.¹⁹⁶ My purpose in invoking it here is to emphasise, again, how far these large-scale frameworks for investigating musical meaning have been shaped by the logic of division.¹⁹⁷ That character is relevant not only to the kinds of questions that have been asked about interactions between musicians, but also to *how* they have been asked.

This shared philosophical basis has enabled cross-pollination between the humanities and the sciences. More ‘traditionalist’ approaches had also been drawing on an implied metaphor of components for some time, but in a

¹⁹¹ See, for instance, Bisesi and Windsor (2016).

¹⁹² To repeat: my claim is *not* that this is straightforwardly mistaken, but that the path through these obstacles may be clearer if we understand parameterisation as a product of the observer’s attention.

¹⁹³ For thought-provoking examples of how this might be taken beyond Sonic Visualiser, and of how parameterisation is entwined with thinking about performance, see Segnini and Sapp (2006).

¹⁹⁴ For some especially interesting applications, see, Scott (2014b), Ohriner (2014), and Llorens (2017).

¹⁹⁵ The most common combination of disciplines here is psychology, philosophy and musicology; see Labbé and Grandjean (2014); and Labbé et al. (2017).

¹⁹⁶ The implications of historical style change have begun to feed back into music psychology (Juslin and Timmers 2009). There has also been motion in the other direction, with psychological insights engaged in dialogue with historical musicology (Leech-Wilkinson 2006; Schubert and Fabian (2014)).

¹⁹⁷ Parameters are the basic gesture here, but one might also expand the ‘left hemisphere’ metaphor to include categorisation. The popular paradigm of musical performance ‘as’ communication is another interesting example of a relatively explicitly construed process, even in the absence of obviously semantic ‘content’.

subtly different way from empirical investigations.¹⁹⁸ Consider musicology's once-overwhelming interest in the characteristics of textual objects, and specifically in determining their categorical status (on the basis of either generic or distinguishing features). Such a task often necessitated seeing music not just 'as text' in a hermeneutic sense,¹⁹⁹ but actually in terms of the explicit specification of variables, which, in practice, were mostly drawn from notation.²⁰⁰ (The frustration of some scholars when forced to deal with musical works that existed in multiple authorial versions suggests that textual analysis saw fixity more as a helpful virtue than a philosophical limitation). This disposition also provided a common-sense solution to the problem of performance, for one could entertain competing 'interpretations', so long as they acted as the subjective waves passing on the surface of the more objective and unchanging body of water that was the fixable text – or, when an agreed, authorised version was technically unavailable, some sort of abstract proxy. That the textual inclinations of musicologists occasionally 'tipped over' into a desire to control how (the great works of) music should properly 'go' is more intelligible in this light.²⁰¹ The impulse must have seemed eminently reasonable from within an aesthetic paradigm that, as Cook points out, had been importantly shaped by philology and archaeology (2014: 1).²⁰² These conditions shaped the sub-discipline that took up the challenge of investigating performance(s). Like musicology more broadly, when it (finally) emerged this field was largely oriented around the elite culture of WAM, and so was constructed 'on top of' that tradition's ontological conventions.²⁰³ And so the new discipline was always inclined to construe performance in terms of the application of 'practices' and 'expressive devices' to ('interpretations of') notated scores²⁰⁴ – indeed that research was such a natural 'fit' for this model that it was quite possible not to notice the underlying structure. The task of tracing the progression (and extinction) of particular 'practices' through generations of performing musicians could appear, in other words, to be a neutral mode which drew on no 'values' at all. These growing concerns were timed perfectly to intertwine with a burgeoning sociological-anthropological interest in how artistic conventions were negotiated, and the processes by which these coalesced into 'traditions' – invented or otherwise (Taruskin 1992; Hobsbawm 1992).

Despite being less explicitly invested in measurable quantities, then, there is nonetheless a strong sense in which even quite conservative strands of musicological thought 'built out' from analytical gestures of separation. The vocabulary of performance description is saturated with examples: in their different ways, terms like 'practices', 'devices', and even 'interpretations' can all be associated with the logic of division. Once again, this can be traced to WAM's convention of elevating music's abstractions 'above' experience.²⁰⁵ A further implication is that 'harder' quantitative data have never needed to be 'softened' in order to contribute to cultural and historical

¹⁹⁸ Marie Sumner Lott (2006: 272), summarizing the work of Robert Philip, remarks that "...flexibility of tempo and rhythm was a vital component of nineteenth- and early-twentieth century performance practice." See also Hudson (1994). I wonder whether this is also the subtext of the common phrasing 'historical *practices*' – in contradistinction to the less easily divisible notion of 'praxis'.

¹⁹⁹ The discipline of literary studies was the obvious model, although as many authors have shown, musicology has historically been several steps behind.

²⁰⁰ See Hepokoski and Darcy (2006).

²⁰¹ The 'classics' of this genre include Cone (1968), Berry (1989), and Narmour (1988). See also Nolan (1993/4: 114); Rink (2002: 56), and, for a recent summary, Sewell (2020).

²⁰² This idea is especially resonant with HIP ideology, but in fact is related to other strands of musicology, notably in the (manifestly commercial) preparation of modern 'Urtext' editions.

²⁰³ The fascinating and pioneering work of Robert Philip (1992, 2004) is a good example of this philosophical 'grounding'.

²⁰⁴ For examples, see Haynes (2007), Peres da Costa (2012), and Brown (2014).

²⁰⁵ See p.25-29

investigations into performance, because many of the latter were being asked in such a way that references to data extrapolated from recordings already made intuitive sense within that framework. This is why contemporary performance analysis can present such productive interplay between empirical observations and measurements on the one hand, and philosophical, historical, and cultural questions on the other.²⁰⁶ Parameterisation is vital in holding this persuasive coalition together.

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Ensemble performance is not an easy domain in which to harness the power of parameters, and the risk of being overwhelmed by complexity makes judicious simplifications essential. One widespread (and consequential) reduction²⁰⁷ involves repurposing an individualistic notion of action-intention. This treats ‘solo-interpretation’ – a formulation which crystallises WAM’s twin ideals of ‘self-expression’ and the realisation of compositional intention(s) – as the *de facto* frame for the study of ensemble performance. For a variety of practical, computational and philosophical reasons, much of the initial development work for performance-analytical techniques involved solo pianism. So much work on expressivity has taken place in this context, that such approaches seem self-evidently appropriate to extrapolation into other contexts.²⁰⁸ But it is easy to see that it is potentially unrealistic to derive one’s understanding of collaboration between musicians *directly* from a singular (and/or explicit) notion of ‘intention’.²⁰⁹

Unfortunately, the limitations of oversimplification are balanced by the sheer impracticality of the alternative. Edward Klorman (2016) has attempted to deal with this problem through the idea of ‘multiple agency’, but even this valiant effort is largely confined to the safe ground of score analysis – presumably in order to avoid tipping the scales towards uncontrollable heterogeneity. Researchers have therefore had to be inventive in deploying the metaphor of ‘interpretive intentions’ in situations in which creative agency is functionally more distributed (Clarke and Doffman 2017). This disposition is frequently encountered in the literature that traces change in recorded string quartet playing (see November 2011). Though this is understandable, singular reductions of collective ‘interpretation’ are never risk-free – as can be intuited by recalling the Czech Quartet’s ensemble.

Another useful reduction that is entwined with other analytical systems is the idea of ‘shared representations’.²¹⁰ Here the promise of explanatory coherence is related to the presupposition of a ‘strong’ concept of decision-making: the idea that musicians make conscious choices on the basis of particular ‘shared representations’, and that those choices are enacted in the manipulation – usually the ‘matching’ – of performance parameters.²¹¹ The shape of this paradigm almost naturally focuses it onto single (‘shared’) points of agency. It may not be coincidental that the ideal agent here is (normatively) a responsible musician(-musicologist?) who behaves with

²⁰⁶ See, for instance, Fabian and Schubert (2009: 38).

²⁰⁷ These include those based in structural or emotional ‘expression’.

²⁰⁸ The instrument’s percussive mechanism means that, in stark contrast to string instruments, the player’s input is more limited to note onsets. For a study which attempts to account for ‘problematic’ overlaps between notions of quality and objective performance data (including MIDI), see Kim et al. (2021).

²⁰⁹ See Bishop (2018).

²¹⁰ As we have seen, these are generally related to musical structure, or to ‘performance goals’ entwined with the ‘expression’ of that structure.

²¹¹ Cf. Eerola et al. (2018: 2) and Ginsborg et al. (2006: 168) on ‘shared representations’; and MacRitchie et al. (2018: 1536-7) on ‘explicit task goals’.

appropriate concern for unity, autonomy, and obedience. In analytical discourse, this kind of ideal, rational singularity reached its peak in the curious phenomenon of ‘dialogues’ practised by (and within) one individual, who acts as both analyst and performer simultaneously. In these exchanges, most of the action takes place inside a single mind, but is made explicit in words or symbols (Schmalfeldt 1985; Swinkin 2016; cf. Doğantan-Dack 2017). Such accounts are also a perfect illustration of how the claim that ensembles ideally behave ‘as one’ – and, relatedly, that success inheres in members being ‘coordinated’ around some kind of representation – is appealing to the logic of division. The norm of ‘oneness’ is not *merely* an aesthetic issue, then, but contributes to moulding a complex, ‘whole’ human activity to the more streamlined, clean but administrative idea of ‘task execution’. It is not hard to see how the unconditional goal of ‘synchronisation’ might fall out of these intersecting conventions.

If mixed, complex, or emergent ‘intentions’ pose an analytical problem, might an effective (not to say convenient) solution be to decree them functionally illegal, by asserting that they always signify an ensemble’s aesthetic failure ‘as interpreters’? Although researchers have not generally gone that far, it is often asserted that a ‘shared’ basis is an important component of (‘valid’) ensemble performances. As Bisesi and Windsor (2016: 618) put it, “the performer must often follow instructions from a score or match their movements to a co-performer (or ensemble), and the timing of their actions must be rhythmically organized to reflect the musical structure.”²¹² But what is the implication here, if the premise is reversed? What does an ‘invalid’ ensemble performance sound like, and where is that line to be drawn? The problem is that such a conceptual framework is simply *not equipped* to account for the fine distinctions that evade explicit conceptualisation or measurement: it neglects everything, in other words, which is not captured by predatory, focused, dividing, ‘left hemisphere’ attention. The paradox is that in other contexts, (sometimes the very same) scholars exhibit an understanding of music that fully embraces those implicit qualities, for it is self-evident that the latter play a role in how people experience music as ‘meaningful’ – in terms of emotions, for example.²¹³ This is the crux of the distinction between ‘synchronisation’ and ‘togetherness’, and why it is surely a misstep to treat them as synonymous.

If one starts with an impulse to (post-)rationalise ‘what happens in performance’ on the basis of an idealised, ‘representational’ form of collective/shared intention, one builds in a confirmation bias towards the ‘performance features’ that are most amenable to explanation on the basis of that model – for instance, of explicit ‘decision-making’.²¹⁴ This affects how parametric analysis proceeds, and thus shapes one’s ‘discoveries’ about ensemble performance. In some cases, this means that analysis is likely to *extrapolate* explicit ‘decisions’ from interactions that, as we will see in Part 2, are much less controllable from a phenomenological perspective. I have felt this impulse myself: in analysing ‘expressive asynchrony’ in an early string quartet recording, for instance, there is a rising inclination to re-purpose Dodson’s detailed account – and here I quite literally mean ‘account’, in the sense of ‘rationalisation’ – of ‘the device’s structural function’ for pianist Vladimir de Pachmann in his recorded performance of Chopin’s famous B minor Prelude (Dodson 2011). But ensemble performance presents a different

²¹² Cf. Høffding and Satne on trust (2021: 5434). The historical dimension is also relevant here (Klorman 2016: 111-97).

²¹³ Zbikowski (2010) has attempted to bring music-analytical insights into closer contact with emotion, although some might regard his priority to associate such states with notation as mistaken (Leech-Wilkinson 2013a). For a provocative further perspective on emotion see Barrett (2017).

²¹⁴ The presumed ‘explicit’ qualities of intention are native to the ‘send-receive’ model; and this, in turn, is often grounded in the ‘coordination’ imperative; see Chew (2014: 832-33).

situation from solo pianism, in terms of the theorising of 'intentions', even if contemporary performance conventions (and analytical models) suggest otherwise.²¹⁵ This aggravates an existing problem, for as in score-based analysis, there is a danger that everything deemed worthwhile *a priori* is practically guaranteed to find 'rational justification' in the model. But if all salient features of performance can always be 'explained' in terms of abstract analytical functions, then they can, by definition, also be explained away (Taruskin 2008: 301-29, 354-81). The question 'was the analyst at any stage free to come to the opposite conclusion?' has always been a simple but effective filter in this situation. My point is that the same caveat also applies in the realm of early recordings, for it can be difficult to disentangle the common aim of historical rehabilitation from the *prestige* of 'explicit' analytical justification, or other forms of 'authoritative' evidence (Leech-Wilkinson 2016). Those justifications paradigmatically involve the deliberate 'application' of expressive devices for valid 'structural purposes'. And so one becomes 'locked into' the parametric flywheel.

IV. Parameters in context

From my perspective as a quartet player, I remain unconvinced that we understand the Czech Quartet's varied, gestural, and occasionally wildly asynchronous playing more accurately by shoehorning the unique utterances captured on record into 'shared structural representations', via abstract formulations of 'collective intention' and explicit decision-making.²¹⁶ My thinking on this matter has changed quite dramatically: when I started working with early recordings, the merit of searching for analytical justifications for unusual 'features' of these performances seemed almost self-evident (Terepin 2021). But working more closely with the Czech Quartet's musicianship – and the copying experiment most of all – yielded a much greater awareness of the many aspects of their performance style that necessarily 'fall in the gaps' between such explicitly formulated descriptions, and which remain importantly resistant to modelling.

We are now better placed to see how this relates to the analytical process, and to parameterisation in particular. To modern ears, one of the most conspicuous 'aspects' of the Czech Quartet's style – because it is so unusual, by comparison with contemporary thought and practice – is their enthusiasm for what one usually hears described as 'between-player asynchrony'. In piano playing, especially, the idea of asynchrony has lent itself to the extrapolation of elaborate conclusions about its 'deployment' as an 'expressive device'. It therefore seems sensible to explain an ensemble's 'application' of the same basic 'device' in similarly intentional terms. As I noted above, the appeal of measuring these particular values is related to the marked quality conventionally afforded to note onsets; and also to do with the way in which those measurements are tethered to notation. But this is less a product of musical experience than of the analytical disposition.

This idea was important to our practical experiment with the Czech Quartet's style. A central finding of our experiment, in fact, was that it proved nonsensical to depend on that 'explicit' understanding, in which we 'used'

²¹⁵ The 'unity' imperative is remarkably effective in making this notion of 'blended intentions' seem like a natural state – even if, as critically-inclined musicologists have often noted, a socially enforced convention is very unlike a 'law of nature'.

²¹⁶ Klorman (2016) approaches this same scepticism in describing the playfulness of Mozart's approach to chamber music composition.

something called 'asynchrony' as an 'expressive device'. As I said at the start of Chapter 4, thinking about performers' intentions in their 'use of devices' is often useful for understanding unfamiliar historical conventions. The problem is that this descriptive mode is intrinsically susceptible to decontextualised and circular reasoning. It is worth asking, then, how far these models actually relate to one's common-sense experience as performers and listeners? In short, assertions about performance often need tempering – even if that inheres only in the admission that "yes, it happened to go this way, but it could also have gone another way." Descriptions that appear very secure from the point of view of parametric analysis often seem much less so from a phenomenological perspective. A particular sound example can be worked over and over in the search for analytical meanings and 'underlying' justifications; but for the player, these justifications are often tangential, precisely because they are fixed. A moment of performance, newly 're-presented' as analytical object, is shorn of the fragility and specificity that the player recognises, and which is most simply expressed as the sense that this was 'just how they played it' in that moment.²¹⁷

To some extent, this neglect of contingency arises from performance-analytical discourse's need for objects, which has generally meant using recordings. But it is not the only reason, and the embeddedness of the cultural conventions I have been discussing – in both discourse and performance – also plays a part. (The 'interpretation' synonym is an example of the former; the prestige associated with our modern, more-or-less 'literal' understanding of ensemble one of the latter). The Czech Quartet's deeply contextual playing, by contrast, draws attention to the ever-present possibility of difference: a quality that may be more significant than analysis is *designed* to acknowledge.²¹⁸ That resistance can be explained by long immersion in interlocking systems of abstract thought.²¹⁹ This claim need not mean positing a magical domain of imagination and contingency 'between' the more reliable foundations of explicit, symbolic representations – we can simply recognise an opportunity. Because performing musicians work in an experiential context that always entails 'wholeness', temporality, and integration, they are ideally placed to explore the qualities of music that, by definition, will elude systems, baselines, and *a priori* concepts. This is the context in which Part 2 should be read.

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Robert Philip (2004: 120) reports that one critic described the Czech Quartet's playing (of Smetana's String Quartet *From My Life*) as "one of the curiosities of musical execution; apparently everyone does just what he likes and how he likes, yet there is never any question of the slightest misunderstanding".²²⁰ This is certainly a striking counterbalance to the exhausting rhetoric of 'shared representations'. Indeed it suggests that we neglect something central about what performance is like, if our efforts to understand (or even rehabilitate) the Czech Quartet's manner of interaction depend on the claim that this style was meaningful because it was 'intentional'. It is not clear to me why should this be the case – not least because the very idea of analytical justification for

²¹⁷ Another indication of the way these experiential qualities 'cut across' discourse is that, according to Tully Potter (2010: 1006), Adolf Busch – a musician famously committed to the notion of compositional intention – once suggested to a student that '...you can start on the last page and go backwards, and if you have enough musical conviction the audience will listen'. The fact that such advice has generally *coexisted* with appeals to more elevated rhetoric may be more significant than it first appears.

²¹⁸ This surely applies not only to past generations of musicians, whose styles are easily mythologised (and thus read 'as fixed'), but to living ones too. A modern musician is obviously witness to the same fact of contingency.

²¹⁹ Ensembles themselves are often defined as systems – albeit 'emergent, complex' ones (Pennill and Breslin 2021: 5).

²²⁰ Anon. (1919); the same source is also quoted by Potter (2011: 15).

'musical decisions' is considerably younger than these performances. The claim that such intentions ought to be both deliberate and deliberated, however, appears to be central to contemporary theories of 'expert' ensemble performance, and to its evaluative ecosystems. Is it possible that these interlinked frameworks of valid 'rehabilitation' shut off alternative explanations of how these early recorded chamber musicians played together? I suspect that the attempt to rescue the Czech Quartet's style through rational, disciplined, analytical justifications of the musicians' 'explicit decision-making' only draws attention away from the most productive – and radical – implications of the evidence.

That synchronisation often takes on a 'marked' quality in studies of ensemble may also be a result of more practical challenges. The involvement of multiple musicians makes extrapolating parametric data from performances considerably 'noisier': it is often difficult to stream the signal into satisfactorily individuated 'representations'.²²¹ This is more problematic for some variables than others. In the move from solo string playing to string quartets, quantitative analytical attention is often dominated by timing data – on both global and local scales – because the introduction of extra participants does not compromise the extraction of timing data in the same way that it does timbre and articulation, for instance (Wing, Endo, Bradbury, et al. 2014).²²² Even with the use of modern techniques for more individually tailored information capture, the latter are resistant to clean differentiation in a manner that timing *appears* not to be. Such data have the great virtue of yielding a realistically bounded and objective theoretical 'picture', and so provide a starting point that is firm enough to be analytically rewarding. Timing and tempo, then, is the explanatory 'stepping-stone' *par excellence*.

If the hyper-focus on synchronisation measurements promises great rewards, that is surely all the more reason to remain wary of positive feedback loops. Methods for measuring timing are relatively accessible – including to performer-researchers, who are not empirical specialists. Because the task of measuring how players time discrete sonic 'events' is straightforward to execute and analytically interesting, it can easily dominate one's findings, such that it becomes increasingly detached from other parameters. This is likely to yield significant misunderstandings about what performers are doing – at least in terms of phenomenology. In addition, the fact that existing work is dominated by discussions of timing data incentivises further research that theorises their significance in the same way. As I have emphasised throughout this thesis, the 'marked' quality of timing synchronisation stretches far beyond the realm of quantitative measurement, into critical and theoretical discourse on ensemble.

My discussion in Part 2 will suggest that from the performer's point of view, the idea of 'between-player synchronisation' is quite different from its portrayal in this model. For the entire theoretical paradigm – in which disembodied performance 'features' are isolated from context, and some treated as 'marked' – is fundamentally unlike the musician's experience. It is crucial to the ensemble player that timing remain as implicit and integrated as possible, and that it never becomes a target of explicit attention, for the moment that happens, both

²²¹ This can be mitigated to some extent by more localised techniques for data capture, including individual player microphones, motion capture technology, or MIDI inputs for keyboard instruments. For further discussion see Ponchione-Bailey and Clarke (2020).

²²² Cf. Fabian (2015). Turner (2004) makes especially heavy use of global aggregates/averages. This gives a broad sense of some historical trends, but is very difficult to map onto musical experience: such approaches sacrifice the specific for the general, for better or worse.

'togetherness' and 'synchronisation' become radically different – and radically difficult.²²³ The Czech Quartet's decidedly unusual ensemble concept makes this impossible to ignore. Explicit attention can be useful to performers, but it must 'give way' to a broader synthesis. It is one thing to emphasise that timing is always 'connected to' other parameters, then; but the true meaning of synthesis is that the 'whole' comes both first and last. In that context, the parametric model falls away. In spite of the literature's relentless embrace of the logic of division, it is *wholeness* that underpins an ensemble player's experience of 'togetherness'.

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Before we explore what this 'synthesised' space might look (and sound) like, I want to give a flavour of what explicit, 'left hemisphere' attention can tell us about the Czech Quartet's performance style. This mode can extrapolate general conventions, probe the detail of specific moments, and offer revealing comparisons (Fabian 2015). The following examples are only brief, for I mean only to illustrate how the wider context offers a way out of the trap that sees descriptive analysis become trapped in its own 're-presentational' systems. I have discussed the dangers of treating the score as a normative reference; of thinking in terms of isolated 'devices'; of using cadences or other 'structural moments' as tent-pegs for explanatory discussion; and of presenting static visual representations of experiences that unfold in time. Now it is time to emphasise their opportunities, and to show how these tools enrich understanding – and even experience. Their power is harnessed more truthfully, however, by acknowledging the need for a final step of 'return'.²²⁴

Moments of structural transition in a score are often good places to look for conventions, commonalities, and exceptions.²²⁵ As we saw earlier in this chapter, neat divisions allow one to bring related concepts together coherently: for instance, structural function, 'intention', and performance parameters can be reconciled under one roof. In that spirit of simplicity, I have chosen the song-like *Lento* movement of Dvořák's *String Quartet in F Op.96*, one of the most unambiguously structured scores the Czech Quartet recorded. Similarly, the parameter of tempo promises some intuitive but revealing insights into performances of this strophic score.²²⁶ These observations start simply for good reason. Because they are founded on an additive premise, they could easily be extended to encompass other parameters and explanatory tools.

Example 5.1

²²³ This brings to mind the image of an inexperienced, over-literal learner: the discourse of parameters seems to me to be stuck in the rut of trying to make explicit what is *necessarily* synthesised into a more open, implicit, integrated awareness.

²²⁴ If such analytical contributions are the product not of a 'what', but a 'how' – not of an action, but of a *disposition* – that 'enriching' purpose need not be construed as the sole preserve of formal analysis. 'Left hemisphere attention' often serves to deepen the creative practice of musicians quite independently of those systems; indeed it also has a role to play in our understanding of distant historical 'styles', as will be evident from Part 2.

²²⁵ This has proved useful not only to discussions of historical practice, but also 'generative' perspectives on performance and expression. For a sense of this range, compare Scott (2014b), Peres da Costa (2012: 102, 269), Llorens (2017); through Spiro et al. (2010: 28-29), and Todd (1992). For a recent discussion of the perils of mapping between 'structure' and performance, see Behan (2021).

²²⁶ It is helpful to minimise complexity when 'building up' one's understanding through sequential introduction of layers (or variables), for overly complicated beginnings make it difficult for disparate strands of information to cohere. By contrast with the ability to take in 'the whole' all at once, the metaphor of 'building up from parts' is only a beneficial strategy if each part is adequately understood. Ironically, then, the risk here is that 'left hemisphere attention' does *not go far enough*. Explanations that bring an overly open, synthesising mode of attention to complex groups of parameters do not help a reader to 'see' those variables 'all at once', and such accounts can be difficult to follow.

Dvořák Op.96: II. Lento²²⁷ (SCORE)

A final methodological caveat is needed, however, for it is immediately obvious that extrapolating precise tempo data from such a performance is a thankless task. This difficulty can be understood more clearly in light of the logic of division – and what is, for that disposition, the absolute necessity of defining tempo by the relationships between two discretely identified points. This concept of tempo is more specific than it seems; and it is a manifestly poor fit for the Czech Quartet's attitude towards collective timing. As we saw in Chapter 4, their understanding of performance always admits the *possibility* of a more distributed beat.²²⁸ In the sheer extent of the players' comfort with distribution, the Czech Quartet is an outlier; but in principle the same applies to any method that involves extrapolating tempo from pointillistic measurements. Whatever the performance aesthetic, the task of identifying note onsets (and perceptual emphases) with true 'precision' requires compromise and judgement (Ponchione-Bailey and Clarke 2020: 24) – and that challenge is inherent to the phenomenon.²²⁹ The need for compromise is particularly evident on string instruments, where the shape of onsets is so much less clear-cut than instruments that work 'percussively'. The special difficulties one might have in drawing these data from the Czech Quartet's playing, then, is best regarded as an extension of this very general philosophical problem, and not something specific to the field of 'historical performance', or even the study of early recordings.²³⁰

Nonetheless, the encounter between this performance and these techniques is disconcerting. This evidence draws attention to the sheer artificiality of 'forcing' a commitment to a singular moment of beat onset, when basic common sense suggests that no such discrete 'thing' has, or could have, a plausible existence. In practice, committing to plausibly representative moments by which to define perceptual beats/impulses requires one temporarily to give in to artificially clean, systematic logic.²³¹ In practice, such compromises – underpinned by human judgement – saturate the analysis of performance. (The smooth curves generated by Sonic Visualiser from the collated beat data are another example of judicious approximations). One ought to maintain healthy scepticism towards the ability of these precise 'representations' to accurately map onto perceptual reality, then, even while embracing their powerful capacity for clarification.

Tempo curves are especially revealing when used comparatively. Indeed music analysis sometimes invokes the same gambit of parallelism, because examining similar passages side-by-side and out of context draws attention to salient differences as well as shared features.²³² A good starting point for examining performance conventions in detail, then, is to compare how similar passages of notation are handled. Not only is Dvořák's *Op.96 Lento* organised strophically, it also includes the re-statement of whole spans of material. The score falls into three main

²²⁷ Czech Quartet (1928; 2018).

²²⁸ More precisely, their beat concept not only entertains 'clouds' of distribution, but also allows for a distinction between *onsets* and *impulses*.

²²⁹ In particular, the authors note that "The temporal coordination of a performance, however, is arguably associated with the perceptual attack time of notes (the perceived moment of rhythmic placement), rather than their physical or perceptual onsets" (2020: 24).

²³⁰ This observation may also help one to see beyond the category distinctions that structure 'art world' discourse.

²³¹ A more comprehensive (if not necessarily foolproof) approach might be to measure the entire 'spread' of timing values encountered across a particular beat division.

²³² See Dreyfus (1996) for some persuasive examples.

sections, each receiving a varied repeat, and finishing with a coda that reprises the A material (AA' BB' CC' Coda; [SCORE](#)).²³³

The Czech Quartet's approach to these passages in their 1928 recording can be understood more clearly – and fairly – by comparing their tempo profile not with an imaginary 'modernist' caricature, but with another real performance. I have chosen the Cleveland Quartet, recorded in 1991.²³⁴ The Cleveland players consistently make small, breath-like 'undulations' in tempo at the precise moment of transition. (This can be seen in real time in [Ex. 5.2 – 5.8 \(Video\)](#), or alternatively in static slides in [Ex. 5.9](#)). The extent of the relaxation at each of these moments varies subtly across the shifting contexts and moods of the piece, and they become more pronounced as it progresses, culminating in the largest slowing into the coda (b.81-2).

This gesture is present at all of the main structural boundaries in the Cleveland Quartet's recording. Direct comparison with the equivalent tempo profile for the Czech Quartet – shown in [Ex. 5.10 – 5.16 \(Video\)](#) and [Ex. 5.17 \(slides\)](#) – shows that the key differentiating factor here is the degree of *consistency* with which these moments are handled.²³⁵ It does not seem that the Czechs were drawing on an alternative but similarly 'generally-applicable' convention for the navigation of phrase boundaries: the visualisation shows that their 'trajectories' at these localised moments are inconsistent and unpredictable. Interestingly, it also shows that there are several cases in which Czechs' undulations are very similar to the Cleveland Quartet's (A, B', C', and Coda). Such similarities are easily missed, in the rush to deem such historical conventions firmly 'non-structural'; or otherwise to emphasise the contrasts between older and newer styles. (This may be another product of 'art world' incentives).

At other points in the Czech Quartet's performance, the 'local minimum' tempo occurs somewhere other than the phrase boundary, with the tempo at the moment of transition either remaining constant, or even speeding up – as in A', B, and C. Slowing at phrase boundaries remained an option, but such transitional moments were clearly not regarded as an opportunity to 'apply' a default strategy. Their tempo conventions do not map neatly (or predictably) onto compositional structure – nor can they be derived from some sort of 'representation' of it; yet they undoubtedly *respond* to certain aspects of that structure. We do not necessarily understand what is going on any better, by conceptualising notation in terms of 'structural' metaphors.²³⁶ But this does not accurately describe the Cleveland Quartet's playing either. Their characteristically 'undulating' pattern characterises every major sectional boundary, but those transitions are not *guaranteed* to yield greater points of repose than the material between them. Despite the temptation to caricature 'modernist' performance in this way, here the large-scale

²³³ The lack of ambiguity over the identification of this structure *as notated* need not mean, deterministically, that 'the music' is always experienced in the same way. In the case of Edvard Grieg's piano playing, Harrison and Slåttembrekk (2008) found that clearly notated structural divisions often yielded a performance that was inclined to de-emphasise or 'play against' them. (Note that the extensive web resources for this research are no longer hosted in their original location, but are still available to view via the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine).

²³⁴ Cleveland Quartet (1991). Like Fabian (2015), I am keen to avoid excessively dichotomising 'modern' and 'historical' style: presenting the former as a caricature of 'mechanical' or 'literal' execution.

²³⁵ Before the entrenching of analysis into performance training, such moments were likely to have been less 'marked'. In other words, it was not necessarily an explicit product of 'style' that meant such boundaries would be treated with less consistency, but that performers – and even composers, like Czech Quartet second violinist Joseph Suk – were less habituated to such moments *as boundaries* in the first place.

²³⁶ The Czech Quartet's resistance to predictable, formulaic responses goes unusually far, even by the standards of early recordings; cf. Harrison and Slåttembrekk (2008).

structure does not yield generically hierarchical, 'arch-shaped' tempo profiles, where the low points (in tempo) are always 'placed' at structural transitions. The visualisation shows that both peak gradients and minimum tempo values occur in 'non-boundary' locations on several occasions. (The tempo fluctuations between b.14.1 and b.16.1, for example, are greater than the relaxations found at the phrase boundaries on either side, at A' and B). And within just two bars (b.14 and b.16), the dotted minimum tempo is 25.6, the maximum 31.8: a significantly steeper differential than is found at boundaries A' (b.11) and B (b.19). The Cleveland Quartet's 'rule' in this respect, if one did wish to assert one, should thus be limited to the observation that they let the music 'breathe' at each structural transition; but the *extent* of that relaxation is not necessarily more at those moments than at others. The convention to slightly relax tempo at boundaries, then, is primarily a local effect, defined by that local context.

The table below draws out some more salient information from the Sonic Visualiser file. This is very simple data, but it is worth following along with the visualisation while taking in these points, so that they do not become entirely abstracted from the music. The table reveals aspects of the playing that are hard to see visually – for instance, the fact that the range between maximum and minimum tempi increases as the piece goes on (and as the sections increase in length). Also, with the exception of the final transition – which is marked with a *ritardando* in the score – the tempi at phrase boundaries lie within a range of only 3.9 bpm.²³⁷

Table 5.1

Main structural unit	Cleveland max tempo (bpm / bar.beat)	Cleveland min tempo (bpm / bar.beat)	Range (bpm)	Is minimum at phrase boundary?	Tempo at phrase boundary (bpm / bar)
A	30.6 / (b.7.2)	26.6 / (b.3.1)	4.0	Yes	26.6 (b.3)
A'	31.8 / (b.15.2)	25.6 / (b.15.1)	6.2	No	26.8 (b.11)
B	33.2 / (b.27.2)	27.1 / (b.28.1)	6.1	No	28.0 (b.19)
B'	32.0 / (b.32.2)	26.8 / (b.40.1)	5.2	No	27.0 (b.31)
C	34.9 / (b.57.2)	25.7 / (b.43.1)	9.2	Yes	25.7 (b.43)
C'	33.1 / (b.76.2)	24.1 / (b.62.1)	9	Yes	24.1 (b.62)
Coda	26.8 / (b.83.2)	16.3 / (b.82.1)	10.5	Yes	16.3 (b.82)

[Ex. 5.18 Cleveland Quartet Full SV video](#)

By using a genuine example of 'modern playing' as a foil for the Czech Quartet's style, rather than an imaginary

²³⁷ n.b. beat = dotted crotchet.

caricature, one can be considerably more precise in characterising the differences between them. Here are the same data in the Czech Quartet's rendition:

Table 5.2

Main structural unit	Czech max tempo (bpm / bar.beat)	Czech min tempo (bpm / bar.beat)	Range (bpm)	Is minimum at phrase boundary?	Tempo at phrase boundary (bpm / bar)
A	27.4 / (b.4.2)	20.3 / (b.7.1)	7.1	No	24.9 (b.3)
A'	26.0 / (b.14.2)	18.3 / (b.18.1)	7.7	No	24.8 (b.11)
B	27.8 / (b.20.2)	19.4 / (b.28.1)	8.4	No	24.4 (b.19)
B'	26.6 / (b.32.2)	20.2 / (b.36.1)	6.4	No	22.6 (b.31)
C	39.2 / (b.54.2)	21.6 / (b.48.1)	17.6	No	25.0 (b.43)
C'	36.7 / (b.73.2)	18.6 / (b.62.1)	18.1	Yes	18.6 (b.62)
Coda	29.4 / (b.95.2)	11.9 / (b.81.2)	17.5	Yes	11.9 (b.82)

[Ex. 5.19 Czech Quartet Full SV video](#)

Even when dealing with blunt 'snapshots', it is clear that the older musicians were inclined to explore greater extremes. The range of 17-18 bpm in the final two sections stands out almost as much as to the eyes as to the ears: it is a huge proportion of the average tempo. On the other hand, while we can see that the Czechs are quite unpredictable in their approach to moments of transition, from another perspective they are actually *more consistent* than the Cleveland Quartet, in that they only treat phrase boundaries as points of repose in special cases. (See the right-hand column of the table). Their 'marking' of the final cadential turn, in the progression that leads back into the C' material (b.60-62), is a good example of such an exceptional case.²³⁸

The idea of a very different, 'pre-analysis' disposition towards the unfolding of performance also supports the historical evidence – for in the late 1920s the idea that performance enacted a 'structural reading' of a score had not even taken root within musicology, let alone been incorporated into the training of performers. In other words, the idea of division, as enshrined in the idea of 'phrase boundaries', does not appear to have been 'regulative' for the Czechs in the same way as it was for later generations. (This is supported by the fact that they

²³⁸ Another interesting point of comparison – even though its perceptual salience is limited – is the surprising consistency of the Czech Quartet's performance, in terms of the tempo at moments of structural transition: until the C' section, the two groups are within a very similar range (Czech 2.4bpm; Cleveland 2.3bpm). *Within* the units as a whole, however, the Czech Quartet's performance contains considerably more variation.

treat these structural moments inconsistently). It seems implausible to claim that they were ‘ignoring’ structure entirely, however; a more balanced view might be they did not recognise these divisions in the precise manner that contemporary analytical thought takes for granted. In other words, the players respond to the notation, but the nature (and specificity) of that response is grounded in a sense of ‘unfolding context’ that is very unlike more recent conventions. This does not mean that their imaginative horizons must only have been operating ‘locally’, for they were clearly able to hold both past and future in their minds. Consider, for instance, the pronounced parallelism of their shape in the C and C’ sections:

[Ex. 5.20 \(b.43-62\)](#)

[Ex. 5.21 \(b.62-82\)](#)

Taken alongside the gestural readings presented in Chapter 4, these brief examples suggest that the Czech Quartet’s playing was grounded in an embodied and *synthesised* sensitivity to context. It does not seem coherent to regard such a style as enacting schematic ‘re-presentations’; on balance, I believe it is unlikely that they would have conceptualised (this) performance in terms of explicit, shared frameworks of decision-making. Seeing past the logic of division is key to understanding their music-making in a radically more experiential and embodied way, which is able to resist the lure of abstraction, systematisation, and generalisation.

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Parameterisation is the logical endpoint of a theoretical trajectory that began with abstraction. As I have suggested throughout this part, these ways of thinking about music are brought together around one kind of *disposition* – one which is remarkably powerful, but circular and limited. Reliance on that disposition alone will doom the study of performance to chase its own tail.

This observation intersects with ‘elite’ WAM discourse on ensemble, and with notions of elevation and aesthetic value. We can see more clearly now that both the logic of division and the primacy of abstraction have been critical prerequisites in the development of influential assumptions about effective ensemble performance – and especially that it depends on something theorised as ‘temporal synchronisation’. This idea has attained the status of a ‘regulative concept’ in this cultural landscape: it confers *value*. Accordingly, its opposite appears to imply incompetence. I have argued that this axiom must be interrogated, on both historical and philosophical grounds. Yet it is not simply arbitrary, however, for it holds roughly the same relation to performance analysis as Taruskin’s ‘pseudo-historical fictions’ do to historiography.²³⁹ The crux of the problem is the confusion between the *cultural dominance* of particular conventions, and claims about universal ‘mechanisms’, underpinned by the imperatives alleged to be intrinsic to ensemble praxis. Such consensus certainly lends analytical frameworks the beguiling impression of ‘underlying’ coherence, but one must not lose sight of the role played by (interlocking) beliefs about aesthetic value. Epistemological problems soon follow, if that structure is imagined to be ‘bequeathed’ in a deeper sense, such that it is casually conceived as an unchanging, rigid, and enforceable aesthetic ‘truth’.

We can understand this situation more clearly by interrogating the (pervasive) assumption that classical music ‘is’

²³⁹ See p.28, 51.

sounded writing – not just in a casual, practical sense, but *in its very essence*. Once that mapping is adopted, it becomes difficult to conceive of a musical ontology that is not dependent upon it. Like the left hemisphere, this path seems powerfully persuasive. But in part because of the ‘re-presentational’ qualities of notation, it also sows the seeds of its own incoherence and circularity. The philosophical contortions required of performance analysis are clear, when real-world authority has become invested in, and dependent on, a particular convention being upheld and ‘reproduced’. Synchronisation is a paradigmatic case of this unhelpful mixing of elite aesthetic judgement with a discipline’s philosophical underpinnings. While it may offer an appealing contrast with the messy realities of human behaviour, dependence on controllable abstractions soon degenerates into blind spots and confirmation biases. An encounter with the Czech Quartet’s manner of making music ‘together’ is a strikingly direct way of diagnosing some of those predispositions, and it suggests that certain branches of ensemble performance discourse are poorly equipped even to *notice* evidence of historical change, let alone to account for it. When the premises of one’s theoretical systems are challenged, it is surely vital not to dismiss the evidence out of hand, but to engage with its full implications.

Part 2: Experiment

It is now time to put these theoretical ideas into practice. In this part I show how treating our metaphorical right hemisphere's disposition as foundational, and not as an additional layer of subjectivity, allows one to begin exploring the spaces between explicit, controllable 're-presentations'. Many themes – for instance, of continuum, integration, metaphor, and the implicit – will be familiar from Part 1. This disposition means operating at a finer grain of detail than distant surveys or general descriptions; but more importantly, it is concerned with distinctions of a kind that will never be reducible to words or categories, and which must be dealt with somewhat indirectly. This part should therefore be considered a brief snapshot of a radical 'take' on ensemble, one which is designed to resist pre-conceptualisation in terms of formulaic models, covert values, or monolithic labels.

The two parts of the thesis are reflexive, despite obvious differences in tone and structure. Both approaches were motivated by my 'musician's frustration' with the apparent inability of HIP (and 'recording-inspired') discourse to notice what sorts of things are neglected by the discursive dominance of categories, systems, and generalisations. And in fact it was practical experience, much more than theoretical contemplation, that stimulated my suspicion that the broader paradigm native to many such approaches – that of performance as 'the application of expressive devices' – had embedded some hard limits on understanding. Most obviously, then, Part 1 provides context for the slightly unconventional approach I have taken in Part 2; but I hope it will become clear in retrospect that the *character* of our practical findings actually provided the underpinnings for much of that argument. Part 1 would not have taken the direction it did, in other words, had our experimental work not pointed towards those avenues so clearly.

Part 2 is built around the lifelike qualities of ensemble performance, as experienced by the player(s). Over twelve hours of sessions, my quartet colleagues and I drew on our knowledge of string instruments – and of each other as people – to 'get inside' this profoundly unfamiliar ensemble idiom of the past.²⁴⁰ Our sources were four short movements that the Czech Quartet recorded in the late 1920s. The process involved listening and copying, but we regarded copying primarily as a diagnostic tool, more than a goal in itself. Engaging directly with the sources 'through performance' was intended to help transcend bland descriptive labels, and to get closer to more experiential realms of expressivity, embodiment, and interaction. But there is no ventriloquism here, for I never considered the impact of this work to be directly correlated with success in copying the early recorded playing. Nor, as I have said, does this account depend on the 'application' of appropriately historical 'devices'. Indeed it was sometimes our *failure* to capture qualities of the originals that yielded the most interesting discoveries.

²⁴⁰ The group was the Florian Ensemble, of which I am the cellist, alongside violinists Kay Stephen and Joy Becker, and violist Anna Brigham. Though there have been some personnel changes since I joined in 2013, the four of us have known each other and worked together in some capacity since 2012, having all studied at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. We have had a collective interest in early recordings since around 2015, which was originally nurtured by study with members of the London Haydn Quartet (Catherine Manson and James Boyd). This project has been a rare chance to commit fully to this way of playing, rather than to assimilate it to more modern conventions. In a sense the musicians of the Czech Quartet – as recorded in the 1920s – are collaborators in this research, and so it feels apt to list their names and acknowledge their contribution in the process: Karel Hoffmann, Josef Suk, Jiří Herold, and Ladislav Zelenka.

Perhaps unusually, our group did not have any formal specialism in copying the playing styles heard on early recordings.²⁴¹ We had discussed this project's content (and its radical implications) informally for several years, but the majority of the investigative work took place in these sessions. For me, the significant benefit of this approach was that it would retain the sense of a *relational encounter*: our insights had not yet been buried in a synthesised, already-embodied knowledge of the style, and this meant they could be uncovered more easily by our quasi-archaeological process. The obvious disadvantage is that it makes precise copies more difficult to achieve, especially in a short time. But different experimental designs will bring different insights, and this approach suggests, more promisingly, that similar work could be undertaken by any group of curious musicians who know each other well. It seems important, in fact, that engagement with the radical evidence of early recordings (and their implications) is incentivised much more broadly. It would be deeply counterproductive, if such projects were to be regarded as 'off limits' to those not in possession of 'authorised' historical knowledge.

More practically, the report is organised into 87 distinct modules, the progression of which retains the broad chronology of the sessions. Topics range from the intricately detailed to the generally applicable. It goes without saying that I could not include every insight we obtained from the process here: everything that remains is built around the core concern to characterise the Czech Quartet's ensemble interaction. It is partly in order to risk the lure of generalisation, in fact, that the investigation is so tightly focused, and mostly deals with small numbers of bars in great detail, rather than dealing with the 'sweep' of whole movements.²⁴² Questions concerning performers' relationships to longer-term structure will be an important aspect of future research, but our priority in this case was a recalibration towards specificity.

Modules include their own score and sound examples, with both original recordings and experimental versions presented depending on the topic. Each module is also marked with one of two tags: some insights are directly concerned with the Czech Quartet's style, and are marked 'CONTENT' (in green); others are reflections on the experimental process that may be more broadly applicable, and are marked 'METHOD' (in red). The four movements chosen were:

- Josef Suk – *Meditation on an Old Czech Hymn 'St Wenceslas' Op.35a* (Czech Quartet 1928/29; 2014)
- Antonin Dvořák – *String Quartet Op.51, ii: Dumka* (Czech Quartet 1928/29; 2014)
- Antonin Dvořák – *String Quartet Op.96, ii: Lento* (Czech Quartet 1928; 2018)
- Antonin Dvořák – *String Quartet Op.96, iv: Vivace, ma non troppo* (Czech Quartet 1928; 2018)

Findings have been organised and formalised to some extent, but I have also attempted to retain the character of our original explanations: indirect, metaphorical, integrated, provisional, unbounded, embodied, sometimes colloquial, and always concerned with judgement. That provisional quality is particularly important, because it was clear to us that even this level of detail will never capture – still less codify – 'the Czech Quartet's playing' in an abstract sense. Working with micro-examples is a good way of demonstrating that musical experience is so intrinsically *specific* that those details will always evade confinement; instead, they will find a way to 'twist' into

²⁴¹ This is a contrast with Stam's work in the same area (2019), where the players were individually more familiar with late nineteenth-century style.

²⁴² I chose scores that present relatively few technical difficulties for similar reasons: partly to focus the research onto interaction, and partly because of time constraints.

smaller and smaller gaps. I have come to see the very idea of codification as a chimera, for it is ultimately uniqueness, not generalisation, that is the lifeblood of musical performance.

Experiments are always shaped by preliminary attitudes towards one's source material. Although they do not necessarily *determine* one's findings, they open up certain kinds of insight while cutting off others. A prime example of this was the role of score annotation. We prepared for the sessions through extensive listening, but avoided marking specifics on scores unless absolutely necessary. I hoped that minimising dependence on explicit would allow us to engage more directly with the sound as an integrated phenomenon, and thus militate against entrapment in the persuasive world of symbols and categories.²⁴³ In a similar way, we deliberately adopted a spirit of naïve openness in the early phases, in order to ground the process in instinctive, embodied response to the style's 'wholeness' (rather than its relevant 'devices'). Detailed descriptive investigation would then function as a knowingly intermediate step, and not risk becoming the *de facto* 'content' of the process. I had long suspected that understanding the Czech Quartet's ensemble idiom would involve going far beyond explicit decision-making, and as the theoretical argument took shape, the idea of 'reverberation' – here between general conventions and unique moments – seemed like a useful organising principle for our practical work. Copies that were too meticulously worked out in advance, and on paper, would compromise that flexibility; indeed they seemed likely to make certain aspects of ensemble interaction not only harder to capture, but *more difficult to recognise in the first place*. Finally, going 'directly' to this unfamiliar way of playing also provided some useful calibration. I was comfortable with the fact that our early attempts would inevitably be limited and unsuccessful, because those versions would provide valuable reference points against which to chart the progression of our understanding.

The 'asynchronous' quality of the Czech Quartet's style draws the attention of modern ensemble musicians because it is so unlike contemporary conventions. But as I argued in Chapter 5 (p.115-18) this 'marked' character is unlikely to reflect how their ensemble was experienced by the original players. We would need to work hard to dislodge our own habits, but I felt that too explicit a focus on this 'parameter' of style would yield strange loops of historical anachronism. (By treating 'it' as marked, in other words, we were bound to misunderstand not just its expressive significance, but also its imaginative locus). From the outset, then, we conceptualised our listening in terms of whole gestures and the intertwining of lines, rather than trying to categorise their 'use' of asynchrony. I certainly planned that we would work on finding the musical logic of particular moments – including 'asynchronous' ones; but it seemed a worthwhile experimental decision, at the very least, to avoid thinking of 'them' as discrete, decontextualised events.

I hoped that this combination of strategies would yield a more sophisticated understanding of how these performers may have imagined musical 'togetherness'. The following does not provide concrete answers to that question, for no such answers exist. But I believe it demonstrates that casually equating togetherness with synchronisation risks placing an impoverished, one-dimensional filter across the manifestly rich, three-dimensional universe of potential interactions between musicians. More generally, I see the ability to look beyond persuasive but misleading 're-presentations' as key to understanding what ensemble can be like – both in the

²⁴³ Markings were not explicitly forbidden, of course, but where possible we prioritised sounds and sensations over annotation.

past and in the future.

I. Josef Suk – Meditation on an Old Czech Hymn ‘St Wenceslas’ Op.35a ([SCORE](#))

#1: Introduction to tone

We began our experiment with Suk’s *Meditation Op.35*, a piece which presented richly songful and gestural

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material through which to explore the hypothesised connection between the character of the Czech Quartet’s ‘togetherness’ and their use of the bow. Throughout our experiment, the bow functioned as a crux: it was the key ‘point’ at which even the blindest of technical descriptions would inevitably shade into the qualitative and the metaphorical.

Very early on, we felt that the Czech players adopted a tone in the opening material with significantly more core than our contemporary instincts would have suggested.²⁴⁴ They rarely allowed the bow to ‘float’ across the strings, even when the mood was calm and the dynamic understated. Playing relatively close to the bridge, with a rather slow bow speed, ensures that the string’s resonances never lose their ‘spin’: the tone is always engaged, even if quiet.²⁴⁵ The feeling is of greater goal-directedness. While this quality was broadly familiar to us, the earlier players managed to retain a feathery quality alongside this spun intensity; nor did their playing have any of the thinness of sound – associated with high overtones – to which this bowing technique can sometimes give rise. The advantage of this kind of contact is that it makes the tone more immediately responsive and manipulable. But it requires a rather contained disposition; and flexibility in the point at which the bow meets the string, in tandem with subtly responsive variation in bow speed, is crucial in preventing the sound from ‘tightening’ when the intensity increases. This stroke is very finely balanced, then, and can initially feel like performing a high wire act.

From [b.1-19](#) their manner of connecting notes seemed inseparable from this commitment to living ‘in the string’. The option to release was always present, but our expressive baseline in this material needed to be associated with that resistant, connected core. More importantly, it was already clear to us that their relative timing would only be intelligible if we treated it as intrinsically connected to their means of generating and relaxing tonal intensity, and the specific resonances they were able to find in the bow’s contact with the string.

Score: [b.1-19](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.1-19](#); [Experiment b.11-19](#)

#2: Reading notation

We felt that the Czech Quartet habitually treated expression markings as invitations, in that they invested such

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moments with ‘more’ of whatever shape or gesture might already have been imagined in response to the notes (and especially intervallic relationships). Again, this disposition cast context as fundamental, not additional.²⁴⁶ This is well illustrated by the ‘>’ marking, which they seem to have

²⁴⁴ By ‘core’ I mean both a tactile sense of resistance in the contact, and a corresponding concern to find width in the spectrum of overtones.

²⁴⁵ See Chapter 4, p.92-95.

²⁴⁶ One might argue that no musician ever truly does this, even if it is claimed in retrospect.

regarded as a form of expressive encouragement, but in a way that left the specificity of that meaning in the hands of the player. What they do on these occasions is so varied that the marking seems to have been inseparable from their understanding of the musical surroundings – including the affective states of colleagues. This is not an abstract concept, but a deeply temporal and embodied one, for it is always entwined with whatever has occurred in the previous moment.

#3: Rehearsing without concrete decisions

It was relatively straightforward for us to undermine the habituated coupling of synchronisation and

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‘togetherness’ in response to our listening. But achieving this effectively as a collective, and in a way that approximated the Czech Quartet’s distinctive manner, was a very different proposition. We clearly required some orientation techniques that would help us to develop this sensitivity.

One approach was borrowed from our ‘normal’ rehearsing. Playing at a slow speed, and without any sense of extrinsic tempo, each player adopts an almost pictorial disposition, ‘showing’ and ‘receiving’ imaginative intention in a way that always remains grounded in the ‘feel’ of particular harmonies. Proceeding slowly allows one to experience a great density of information and sensation, such that a more ‘open’ sense of expressive possibility takes the place of specific decision-making. We thought of the distinction as between ‘witnessing the landscape go by’ and ‘being able to stop in it’. It is crucial that this process avoids verbal description: all of the ‘showing’ happens in the sound itself, starting with modulation of intensity in the bow. Throughout, this proved to be a useful tool for scouting musical sense and grammar, but without imposing limits through explicit language.

#4: Mapping ‘felt logic’ onto historical expressivity

When combined with listening, the process described in #3 helped us to re-orient our expressive gestures around

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a more physical impression of particular intervals and harmonies. Could our experience of that ‘felt logic’ be brought somewhere close to the Czech Quartet’s manner? The role of judgement was crucial here, for we were keen to go beyond simply ‘thinking in the right categories’, and actually develop the capacity to evaluate our playing according to plausibly similar priorities.

Initially, rewiring our instincts meant actively ‘introducing’ more unevenness; and with it, a greater sense of emotional (and ensemble) fragility. Interestingly, this yielded gestures which were considerably more localised than those of the original recording. Our playing could sometimes be described as ‘moment-to-moment’, but it was importantly unlike the Czech Quartet’s shaping: it was more fragmented, and had a halting quality that was conspicuously absent from the original. Nonetheless, we made some progress in acknowledging the pivotal relationship between collective timing and tonal variation.

#5: Listening for ‘personality’

I was keen that some of the more colloquial ‘content’ of our process should not be overly diluted in my account,

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especially in cases where such thinking was key to our understanding. For instance, listening for the people ‘behind’ the notes offered a useful heuristic through which to get a more intimate sense of the Czech Quartet’s internal dynamics. Although these are never concrete (or falsifiable) claims, such sensitivities are a self-evidently important dimension of ensemble interaction. And from our point of view as player-detectives, this impression of lifelike qualities was so vivid that we often ceased to witness a meaningful separation between musician and music. Listening for personalities behind also helped us to recognise that interpersonal interaction is nothing like an expressive ‘device’: it always resists concrete formalisation, yet is ‘directly’ intelligible.

#6: ‘In the background but never passive’

An example of #5 is the way in which Czech Quartet first violinist Karel Hoffmann seemed to be resistant to a

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truly ‘bravura’ disposition. Shapes, intentions and expressive gestures are projected with unusual strength, and are manifestly ‘outward’ in character; but we never had the sense that he was playing ‘at’ either his colleagues or his audience.²⁴⁷ Even more significant, in terms of ensemble, was the ability to continue contributing imaginatively, even while stepping away from the musical foreground. This can be contrasted with a passivity that gives others nothing to play ‘against’.

The capacity to ‘balance up’ as a collective – not just in terms of volume but characterisation – is one of the most keenly felt components of ensemble performance. It is quite distinct, however, from the idea of conforming to scripted textural roles. One adopts a state of committed willingness, supporting another player by offering them a vivid but subtle dose of imagination to ‘bounce off’, rather than requiring a primary voice to take on the full burden of expressive meaning. This is experienced as a finely balanced, non-verbal, irreducible interaction – something which cannot be isolated as a component of a performance. In the early stages of our experiment, we often felt that we were ‘holding back’ to let others through, because this was something the Czech Quartet do very effectively – but we struggled to retain their sense of ongoing commitment or contribution while doing so.

#7: Ensemble tensions encompass ‘whole’ dispositions

We often felt that Hoffmann’s instincts were towards a greater steadiness than his more impetuous colleagues.

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Such general inclinations – akin to an individual’s ‘groove’ – contribute a great deal to the uniqueness of ensemble interaction, but they are never independent or deterministic ‘features’ or ‘attributes’. (Again, they are intrinsically relational or ‘reverberative’). One’s awareness of these kinds of differences between players is heightened when they lead to lines becoming temporally ‘dislocated’, as occurs

²⁴⁷ In this case, that audience was obviously limited to microphones (and their attendant engineers and producers).

reasonably frequently in this historical style. But it is worth remembering that these tensions characterise any ensemble interaction, even when the results cannot be heard so clearly.

#8: Transcending instincts vs. retaining ownership of intention

Copying early recordings implies a certain antagonism towards one's contemporary instincts: that these are ideally barriers to be overcome, or habits to be transcended. There is an element of paradox here, however. For excessive repudiation of such instincts – perhaps in favour of a more detached model, inhering in the application of 'stylistic features' – may divorce one's music-making from the kinds of creative utterances that are genuinely felt and experienced.

In undertaking this work, we hoped to learn how to feel, think and relate to one another in terms of a different paradigm, and especially to reorient our judgement on the basis of that alternative imaginative universe. This was more important than creating 'accurate' copies. We were therefore relatively open to blending our own imaginative instincts 'with' the historical evidence, and sometimes emphasised our potential closeness to the Czech Quartet's expressivity, as well as the (more obvious) distance. In other words, we embraced the fact that our involvement could not be 'neutral', and that this was a relational encounter.

This meant that we were comfortable to play or rehearse more closely to our 'normal way', and to treat the resulting tension as another tool of research. It certainly clarified which aspects of their style were more easily integrated with our own conventions, and which remained in the realm of ventriloquism. Over the course of the process, these distinctions became somewhat blurred, and our embodied sense of intention became less easy to distinguish from 'theirs'. The idea of ownership of musical intention and feeling is of course a complex issue, and historical 'collisions' of this kind may offer a productive tool for further investigations.

Score: [b.16-41](#)
Recording: [Experiment b.16-41](#)²⁴⁸

#9: Finding reasons

In these early stages we used the technique described in **#3** to 'scout' harmonically dense passages slowly, freely, but intensely. This was partly an aid to accuracy and familiarity, but it also allowed us to experience 'betweenness' in the relationships of individual players, as well as tones.

This approach was motivated by reflections on early efforts in which we tried to jump 'directly' into the less synchronised ensemble paradigm. Those attempts seemed to miss something vital about how the Czech Quartet were experiencing the music's potentialities of resistance, and we quickly found that imagining our own playing consciously in terms of 'relaxing the synchronisation imperative' was far too negative a disposition to yield effective results. In its place, we would need to build an embodied, implicit basis for expressive intent, but which

²⁴⁸ This early rehearsal attempt involved intentionally playing more closely to our native style, but without forbidding latent influences from our listening.

remained implicitly 'open', and would not easily be stifled by detail that was inflexible to the point of paralysis. Slowly and collectively negotiating harmonies gave us a way of accessing 'reasons' for expressiveness that felt much more intrinsic, because they were always grounded in that (very physical) 'betweenness'.

The idea of 'having a reason', no matter how implicit, was crucial to the broad disposition we adopted in recalibrating our understanding of ensemble. In some ways a focus on 'underlying' motivations can seem to lead inexorably to the model of 'expressive devices', because understanding horizons for their 'use' is clearly a useful way of conceptualising performance, at least retrospectively. (No researcher has ever claimed that those horizons are irrelevant, in invoking 'devices'). But we found that emphasising justifications of one 'decision' in favour of another usually leads down 're-presentational' paths: to analysis, to systems, and to limits. That 'pull' seemed not to correlate with the evidence we were attempting to understand. This is why we adopted an approach to 'expressive intent' that was built from a very different type of logic: something much more embodied and implicit, in which the idea of 'using' something barely featured at all.

#10: Tone, trajectory, and ensemble

A well-known nuance of ensemble playing concerns how a musician 'shows' to others how the trajectory of a note is likely to unfold. A good example of this was the unison A played by both violins in **b.32**⁴ of Suk's *Meditation*, where a practically imperceptible change in the depth of contact from both players 'telegraphed' not just where the next note might happen, but where it *inevitably had to fall*. The player's job, in many ways, is simply to match that projected, anticipated shape with what they actually go on to do. In terms of experience, it is vital that this process is not the object of explicit attention. It works at its best when it is left implicit. The specific manner of that integration is a key part of what is meant by a 'native' performance style.

As one might expect, then, many of the differences between our own conventions and those of the Czech Quartet lay in this kind of nuance. Such fluctuations are often so subtle as to be imperceptible to a listener outside the ensemble, but an experienced player is extremely sensitive to their presence, and still more to their absence. (This is also closely related to the balance of simultaneous contribution and sensitivity discussed in #6). It is of course tempting to imagine that these 'integrated trajectories' are only ever directed towards 'improving' the temporal alignment of transitions between individual notes: in other words, that it maps directly onto 'synchronisation'. Our experimentation suggested that failing to offer these 'developmental hooks' yielded results that were much less convincing, *whether the next note was synchronous or not*. The Czech Quartet's sensitivity in this respect clearly went considerably further than the concern to 'maintain alignment', and so we found that this concept had to be repurposed in various different ways.

Score: [b.31-32](#)

Recording: [Czech Quartet b.31-32](#)

#11: Bowing, 'betweenness', and storytelling

We were struck by the peculiar 'thickness' of the sound required at **b.34²**, as the distinctive tone of the violin

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unison 'peeled' into separation. Similarly, we found that the intensity of the bowing in the cello and viola parts in **b.36-38**, far from being reduced by the hairpin, actually needed to increase, for it was the *second* harmony of each bar that took on the responsibility of 'telling the story' of those three parallel utterances.

The idea of 'moment-to-moment' playing, with its hands-on emphasis on imaginative contribution, can be misleading when faced with the specificity of real examples. In this case, for instance, the first violin actually repeats the statement three times not with rhetorical concern for variation, but with notable simplicity; it is as if he is content to let the mere force of the (compositional) repetition do the expressive work for him. The really telling narrative detail is left to the lower two parts, and the 'betweenness' of their three different resolutions. Each set of fifths here are imagined as contrasting and unique in their affect; we had to imagine each harmony as if it had a different kind of 'spin' in the tone.

Another detail here is that while the arrival on the resonant open fifth F-C generates a point of repose, the suspended G above it (in the first violin) means that the music is not allowed to 'sit' in that moment, but is gently propelled forwards. (**b.39** has a sense of continuity 'out of' the previous bar which was easily missed in copying). The *tranquillo* marking is also deceptive, for the Czech Quartet treat it not as a relaxation in tempo but as a lightness that contrasts with the portentous, bass-led gestures of the preceding bars. In practice, this translated to continued momentum, rather than a 'winding down'. In order to capture this effect, the first violin had to avoid the temptation to wait, and 'start something new' at the *tranquillo* marking. These gestures were underpinned by an improvisational quality, but they also had a function: simultaneously to 'tie up' the previous section and move the narrative on seamlessly.

The bow's contact in the linking gestures between **b.39-b.40** (in second violin and viola) contributes to this sense of finishing and starting at the same time: the Czechs conjure a sense of 'gliding' here, not just in pitch, but in the way the bow never stops flowing. (They do not 'draw' the tone intensely, but simply let it 'be there'). Here we had to make use of the performer's foreknowledge – by contrast with an audience – to imagine that we were 'aiming' all the way to the modulation, instigated by the cello's C# intrusion in **b.40³**. Such ultimate destination points always need to be kept secret from a listener, as the narrative unfolds; but in this context we found that the rule also applied to us, insofar as every gesture had to be 'permitted' to follow every other without any sense of preordination.

Score: [b.34-40](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.34-40](#)

#12: Imaginative gestures are rarely 'in parentheses'

In this passage the Czech Quartet's imaginative gestures often felt 'big' in comparison to our own instincts. But

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these players also had a curious way of 'catching' such inflections immediately, as if less tempted to put them in parentheses by taking further time on either side.²⁴⁹ Allowing extra time for expressive intent to 'tell' is especially useful if an ensemble's aim is to synchronise their gestures within regular phrase-shapes – indeed these two conventions may be mutually self-reinforcing. When copying, we found that although the Czech players' imaginative contributions were frequently more 'active' than ours, their inclination to 'move on' very quickly provided significant compensation. Once something had been stated or offered, these players had no need to draw further attention to it as a self-conscious, knowing gesture – nor to magnify it by demanding that it be taken up by the whole collective.

Notice, for instance, how in **b.36** first violinist Hoffmann seems to wait *just long enough* for the logic of the lower two parts' pizzicati to 'complete' before setting off on his next phrase. Our instincts were for the (halting) final pair of notes to generate a proportionally-sized breath before the violin's continuation. (The next phrase's timing would then follow the trajectory set up by the relationship between those two notes). Our historical players, by contrast, handled this moment with a 'dovetail' that combined breath and continuation: the violin enters slightly early, tying the new entry into the preceding phrase, and effectively ignoring the trajectory set out by the timing of the lower parts. Their rendition resembles the overlaps of a subduction zone, more than the gently opposing inclines of a valley. At the same time, the two violins modulate the tone of their long A, lifting out of the string 'with a wiggle' somewhere between the middle and upper third of the bow. This culminates in a moment of remarkable fragility, in which the utterance feels all-but-completed, yet the life of the stroke is never relinquished entirely.²⁵⁰

The precarious unfolding of this note was a valuable indication of the conversational, interactive, real-time qualities of their musical logic. Our attempts to capture this made use of deceptively simple heuristics; as our own second violinist put it, "it sounds as though I play our unison bars truly *with* you (first violin), and then into **b.36** you just... stop waiting." In general, we had to unlearn the habit of waiting for each other's contributions to 'clear' before moving on, and to become accustomed to committing in a subtly different way, which was based on the expectation that gestures would (have the option to) run into one another, rather than be clearly delineated or emphasised.

Score: [b.34-36](#)

Recordings: [Experiment b.34-36](#)

²⁴⁹ We were more familiar with 'saying something, having a space to think about it, and then moving on'.

²⁵⁰ String instruments are well suited to this effect, in which the bow 'hangs on' almost to the point of total expiry, yet without ever losing the thread of tone such that continuity into the next phrase is compromised. The tension in that 'close-to-death' contact makes a compelling moment from what may easily have been a routine join.

#13: Gesture, joins, and ‘grammar’

A few bars earlier, we saw how this desire to knit gestures together often took priority over the lengths of rests as **CONTENT** notated. In **b.31**, they clearly imagined the rest as a join, rather than as a break: the length of the silence seemed to us to be directly connected to the quality (and the trajectory) of the preceding gesture. The silence, then, could not be ‘counted’ independently. We felt that the cello entered fractionally earlier than written, and that the first violin slightly anticipated the entry in **b.39** in a similar way. Whether or not this was true in terms of measurement was beside the point: in both cases, we had to be considerably quicker on our feet than our normative feel for trajectory would have required. This aspect of the original performance was clearly motivated by a desire for continuity: the moment of silence is ‘carried’, in order to avoid the music’s fragmentation into straight edged, modular units.

The resistance to aggressive ‘down’ impulses I discussed in Chapter 4 also plays a role here.²⁵¹ At **b.30**³, for instance, their rhetorical emphasis generates a sense of arrival that almost ‘narrates’ the fact that the instruments are speaking ‘all together’ at last. The combination of a subtly propulsive gesture²⁵² with a more consistent, ‘held’ bow speed in the rest of the note de-emphasises any separation between this idea, and the cello’s response (in the following bar (**b.31**²). The softness of the cellist’s initial articulation, and the straight tone, join the utterances even more closely.²⁵³ We felt that this moment must have been conceptualised more conversationally than ‘analytically’, as if the cello supplies a final, individual – and thus more vulnerable and profound – affirmation of something that had already been expressed by the crowd. The more intimate repetition shows a different ‘face’ of the same basic gesture of agreement (**b.31-2**).

In the previous phrase the viola had connected the rising fifth D-A (**b.29-30**) with the confidence of public oration, but the same interval in the cello (**b.31-2**) is far simpler. With a knowledge of ‘period style’, this moment might seem an obvious candidate for an audible pitch-glide. This would have been easier to execute on the instrument, technically, than to ‘cover’ the shift of position, and could probably also be justified analytically, because it draws attention to the repetition (at the lower octave) of a line that had just been presented by the viola. But this is not what cellist Zelenka does at all: instead, he joins the two notes with impressive speed, covering the awkward distance with a clean shift of which any modern cellist would be proud. That quickness allows the viola, here acting as the bass, to take on the majority of the expressive work. Not only does the violist plays his A-D resolution (**b.32**²⁻³²) with telling direction – including a small slide – he also goes out of his way to avoid explicitly accenting the arrival note, which we perceived as notably more ‘sideways’ than ‘down’.

Although empirically the unevenness of the timing in **b.32** is not so unlike that of its equivalent **b.30**, we understood the ‘affect’ of these two moments profoundly differently.²⁵⁴ An ever-present inégale ‘twist’ inside each note imparted an audibly diffuse feeling to **b.32**, heightening the pathos of its repeated statement. The internal timing of that bar is very unstable, too; yet the players begin at almost exactly the same time. Given how

²⁵¹ For the original discussion see p.97-99 above

²⁵² As in Chapter 4, this involves the main impulse taking place slightly after the stroke begins.

²⁵³ It would be easy to make these distinct, if desired.

²⁵⁴ This is confirmed by Sonic Visualiser.

little preparation the cellist affords his shift, this is no mean feat.

This moment epitomised a ‘grammatical’ quality of their playing, insofar as their manner of connecting notes – or not – frequently seemed directed towards clarifying (‘showing’) harmonic content. The precise ways in which this was accomplished always dwelt in the ‘betweenness’ of bowing, and its intrinsic integration of tone, gesture and articulation. For this reason, it seems implausible that playing against the idea of clarification should be considered a ‘native’ – still less defining – feature of early recorded style. Our experiment suggested that the more accurate distinction is between the abstract character of paradigms like ‘structural interpretation’, and more embodied, even willingly anthropomorphic models. It seemed as though the idea of clarification needed to be treated as an optional capacity, more than a norm – in either direction – because the Czech Quartet’s impulses in this respect fluctuated so considerably. Harmonic density sometimes made it more likely that they would aim for a certain clarification, but this was far from inevitable. More colloquially, one might say that some passages required us to ‘walk through’ a listener for it to make sense, while others seemed to ‘play themselves’.

Score: [b.29-39](#)

Recordings: Czech Quartet [b.34-40](#)

#14: Dynamic functions indirectly

As with any music-making, the copying process involved an attitude towards dynamic that was frequently

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tangential to explicit description.²⁵⁵ We felt that the Czech Quartet regarded notated markings in an especially indirect manner, as if they were reading them as the *feel* of a shape or space – or even its ‘personality’ or ‘state’ – as much as its size (i.e. volume). On occasion it even seemed as though they were playing with reversing the procedural implications of the notation: the possibility for instance, that a *ff* might stimulate a narrow, tight, even inward form of expressiveness; or that a *pp* might yield a sound that was open, warm and generous, even if quiet in volume.

As I said in Chapter 4, it is because the bow and string presents such a complex continuum that a player is able to ‘search for’ shifting timbral specificity.²⁵⁶ The quality of always being connected, and always in motion, means that tone is always experienced as a shimmering, ever-changing presence, and thus cannot have the qualities of a discrete, categorical, symbolic description.²⁵⁷ The performing musician always has to see things ‘this way up’, because it is the only way that one’s intentions are made manifest, both in time and in their context. It is not only that notation means different things to different generations, then, but that notation is never able to encode explicit meanings in the manner that is sometimes assumed – especially by analysis.

²⁵⁵ By the latter, I mean anything from measured loudness (in dB) to the familiar incremental markings of *p*, *mf*, *ff*, and so on.

²⁵⁶ This is one of the few places in which equipment is crucial, because gut strings are vastly more responsive in this respect than strings with a steel or synthetic core.

²⁵⁷ Noticing this quality of experience draws further attention to the limitations of a translation-based paradigm of notational authority, in which the explicit symbol is the ‘truer’ thing. It also reveals problems in applying the ‘interpretation as exegesis’ model directly to music, as we saw in Chapter 1 (p.29-35).

#15: Hairpins and tempo-dynamic coupling

While our own training had largely implored us to resist ‘letting the tempo get faster when it gets louder’, the

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Czech Quartet seem to have been comfortable with this coupling. This idea is familiar in historical performance circles, and as in the famous case of the ‘Brahmsian hairpin’, a general feeling of ‘more’ seems to have been a broadly conventionalised aspect of nineteenth-century notation (Kim 2012).

In our encounter with these recordings, however, that general principle proved exceedingly low-resolution. Sometimes it was indeed true that growth in intensity results in these players letting the music ‘go’ in several ways at once – of which their wild accelerations in parallel places in the *Lento* of Dvořák’s Op.96 are a perfect example (see Chapter 5, p.118-23; click [here](#) for audio example; click [here](#) for full score). But this principle was not sufficiently sensitive to deal with the things that we witnessed them constantly ‘looking for’, independently of markings: unfolding tensions in resonance, ‘peels’ between instruments, melodic joins, pauses, lifts, rhythmic unevenness, de-accentuation, and the exchange of whole, ‘lived’ characterisations.

Moreover, in some places where our theoretical ‘nineteenth century-inspired’ instincts might have encouraged us to rush forward impetuously, we just as often found them holding the tempo back, choosing to create energy by other means.²⁵⁸ Where we might have assumed a passage would be densely inflected, we sometimes found it rendered with striking simplicity. And in circumstances where one might expect individualistic expressivity and asynchronous chaos, we could be caught in admiration for the balance, discipline – and yes, even the structural clarity – of their rendition. From an early stage, then, it was clear to us that the process would demonstrate how far general, decontextualised claims about style would be insufficient, for learning to make music in anything close to the same manner.

#16: Specificity and aural illusion

An example of #15 is the markings in the violins **b.33-35**, which the Czech Quartet execute in a fashion that

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might have been predicted by our theoretical ‘Brahmsian hairpin’. The phrase does indeed seem subtly to ‘lead’ towards the middle in both volume and tempo. But reducing such a moment to its ability to ‘enact a general formula’ is surely the opposite of explanation, and the attempt to copy revealed dimensions of specificity that extended well beyond this basic category.²⁵⁹

In particular, we were struck by a sort of aural illusion in which the integration of tone and timing conjured the impression of breadth – a sense of sitting back, as if surveying a landscape; yet the phrase also felt alive with (somewhat irregular) forward motion. We witnessed this moment more like a manner of holding oneself, than a performance practice: it required one to adopt a settled vantage point, from which momentum was not imposed, but which simply ‘occurred’ without effort. Copying often brought such fine judgements centre stage, because a

²⁵⁸ This was another use for the metaphor of the sound’s tactile ‘spin’.

²⁵⁹ This also suggests that the structure of such theories makes them susceptible to confirmation biases.

player is particularly sensitive to the way in which two renditions of the same notes *that are parametrically similar* can have a profoundly different ‘feeling’. Such distinctions may even be thought of as the performer’s basic currency.²⁶⁰

Score: [b.32-35](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.32-35](#)

#17: Flow, inaccuracy, and hypermeter

Overall, the trajectory of our process had a similar shape to that of ‘normal’ rehearsing. Early stages are

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characterised by unfocused but imaginative openness; more ‘closed’, detailed work refines the details more sharply; and the process eventually culminates in a synthesis which allows one to work within a field of imaginative ‘options’ that are both unique *and* usefully delimited. Transitions between these phases are always experienced vividly, but working with an unfamiliar style heightened that awareness, even in a short experimental period.

At first, relaxing our attitude towards between-player synchronisation bred a palpable sense of liberation, and it was possible to approximate the Czech Quartet’s sound world relatively quickly. In this phase, some of our playing was quite technically inaccurate, and it was difficult to communicate and anticipate each other’s intentions effectively, when the carpet of shared expressive norms had been so comprehensively pulled from under us. But the novelty of this less synchronous style – including new gestures, different timings, and even new ways of balancing – gave rise to the experience of ‘flow’ on more than one occasion, perhaps because our mindset had not yet been coloured by excessive self-consciousness.

These early, ‘pre-detail’ renditions were inspired by a fairly general impression of the Czech Quartet’s conventions. We enthusiastically adopted elements of their expressivity, including rhythmic lengthening and clipping, as well as frequent sliding between notes. But it was not only technical inaccuracy that betrayed the naïveté of this phase: our playing lacked their sense of tension, and with it, any real sense of narrative coherence.²⁶¹ When ‘released’ to individual expressive freedom, we missed the Czech Quartet’s ability to avoid emphases in certain (‘de-accented’) places in a phrase. For us, adopting a disposition that emphasised individual imagination often resulted in a dense patchwork of successive ‘down’ emphases. Our playing may have been effective as individuals, but as a whole, it had a relentless character than we never encountered in the original performances.

This failure was productive, however, because our diagnosis opened the door to fine details of ensemble that had barely registered in previous listening. In particular, it became clear that we would need to learn how to ‘carry’ patterns of emphases forward as a collective without the progression of expressive gestures becoming excessively fragmented. This goal is entwined with what we would now call ‘hypermetrical structure’; but it seems unlikely, for both historical and creative reasons, that the original musicians thought in such analytical terms. We felt that it

²⁶⁰ See also #57 below.

²⁶¹ This is the best term I can conjure for this blend of embodied feeling states and analytical/structural communication.

may have resembled an embodied, collectively negotiated ‘feel’ for the moments that required linear continuity, against those that we felt as offering points of arrival or repose. In other words, this sensitivity was associated with motion, rather than theoretical descriptions of ‘strong’ or ‘weak’ bars. (See #75, #88)

#18: Judgement and recording

This report is necessarily entangled with the multi-layered and intangible matter of judgement. The recording

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process plays a significant role in this, for there are inevitably differences between a musician’s perception of their own playing, and their response upon hearing the same take played back.

This tension, which has often been reported in modern musicians’ experiences of recording sessions, is made still more complex by introducing historical recordings – not least because those sources are not neutral in this respect either (Blier-Carruthers 2020). The boundaries of judgement, then, are intrinsically blurry. Listening and comparing during the sessions provided a useful barometer for our investigation, and we generally found that we needed to go much further than we might have expected, expressively, in order to get closer to the Czech Quartet’s manner. This applied to rhythm most of all: in the moment of performance, our embrace of unevenness often felt vast, extensive, and destabilising, but in listening back it often came across as diluted and inconsequential. This had ramifications for other aspects of the research process.

#19: Committing to progression of ideas

In the first phase, we had radically changed our attitude to synchronisation but had not yet embarked on a more

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explicit process of archaeology, and so we soon began to struggle with committing to

expressive intention. It was not such a problem to adopt different responses to the notation as individuals, for greater lengthening of emphasised notes, more extravagant projection of shapes, and so on, was comparatively intuitive. Much more problematic was our latent inclination to adjust to others. The desire to be influenced – specifically towards the ‘safety’ of synchronisation – was especially interesting for the way it compromised our ability to follow gestures through to their conclusion. We would often set out on a path/trajectory, fully intending to shape it in a certain way, only to quickly ‘revert’ to the patterns of colleagues. We were unfamiliar with the mental state that enabled the Czech Quartet always to commit to the full progression of an individual’s imaginative idea, yet while continuing to listen and respond to one another. Despite that awareness, they were far less inclined than us to ‘embed’ those contributions within a collective, generalised timing profile, and retained more of a sense of linear ‘streaming’ in tandem with those ongoing relationships.

We felt that individual shaping instincts would need to be automated more comprehensively in the body, and ideally to cease to be deliberate, or a focus of explicit, ‘left hemisphere’ attention. The significance of that hierarchy was self-evident in ‘our own’ style – indeed it is analogous to the disposition towards one’s instrument described in Chapter 4. To approximate the subtleties of the Czech Quartet’s main mode(s) of interaction, we needed to recalibrate that awareness, according to a radically different set of priorities, judgements, and conventions.

II. Antonin Dvořák – String Quartet Op.51, ii: Dumka ([SCORE](#))

#20: Fragmentation

If descriptions of the Czech Quartet have conventionally stressed an ‘interventionist’ quality, that is likely a result of the sense that their instincts for characterisation often ‘override’ literal execution of notated details. In the early phases of our work we followed this broadly accepted ‘moment-to-moment’ paradigm, and worked hard to imbue local gestures with character in a comparatively more ‘active’ way. But it quickly became apparent that the more we did so, the more fragmented the progress of the music became. It was as if this enthusiasm to characterise had led to ‘musical ideas’ being excessively overlaid, and with a certain self-consciousness, and the feeling of imposition. This may have been because ‘they’ were too explicit, and confined mostly to individual imaginative enthusiasm. As a result, our gestures felt insufficiently entwined with context – both of what had come before, and what was going on in the same moment in the other voices.

As in Suk’s *Meditation*, in the *Dumka* of Op.51 their ability to work those local characters into effective continuities was far more recognisable in copying than it had been in listening. It was true that individual moments are rarely played ‘passively’, and their sharply profiled rhythmic sense was clearly important in that aim. Yet at no point does this concern for local nuance sacrifice the continuous ‘logic’ of the music’s unfolding. This may be related to the fact that they rarely paused to admire their imaginative handiwork, as we saw in #12. In response, we began to search for a disposition towards local variation that was more distributed among the group. This is best described informally: as “playing in a way that makes others do exactly what you want them to do, *but without them realising*; while also remaining open to being influenced yourself”. As will become clear, adapting this familiar concept to such a different set of conventions was no simple task.

Score: [b.217-224](#)

Recordings: [Experiment b.217-224](#); [Czech Quartet b.217-224](#)

#21: Dovetails

The *Dumka*’s frequent handovers of melodic material presented an opportunity to explore the way in which the Czech players elided one instrument’s phrase ends into the beginnings of another. (Indeed they sometimes seek these joins even when it is rhythmically incorrect, technically speaking, to do so). This attitude, and the role of anticipation in achieving it, is easy to hear in the opening melodic exchanges between first violin and viola, but that willingness characterised many other moments. In general, we were struck by three things: a) that they perform such elisions quite ‘smoothly’ at a large scale, despite the frequently uneven rhythmic surface; b) they often have a curiously ‘sneaky’, de-emphasised character, certainly in relation to our own efforts; and c) such elisions (or anticipations) often meant that attention was drawn away from structural boundaries, but without undermining the sense of guiding a listener through the narrative. (The latter was especially true at cadences, or in passages of rapid or dense harmonic motion, where we felt it was very easy for our own dovetails to result only in confusion).

All of these can be related to the idea that the culmination or direction of a phrase is implicitly contained ‘within’

its first moments, as we saw in **#10** and **#12**. But while this is a kind of trajectory, it is importantly different from a pre-ordained, arch-shaped structure, for it usually involves more twists and turns along the way. It made sense to locate such localised ‘twists’ in the potential qualities of the melodic intervals.²⁶² But again, we had to be sensitive to the distinction between *systematic* description of their conventions, and more fragile metaphors, patterns and heuristics. We generally found that the latter offered the best tools for diagnosing their approach in specific situations, but precisely because of this fragility, it took us a long time to acquire a more intuitive sense of how they would handle transitions between moments or phrases.

Score: [b.1-13](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.1-13](#)

#22: Dispositions towards synchronisation

The passage **b.14-25** exemplified a curiously disciplined type of swing, which we felt was oriented towards the organisation and projection of ‘content’ rather than flippant playfulness. This feeling of rigour, associated with ‘showing’ the angles and directions of harmonic progressions, was relatively familiar to us, and meant that in this case we were repurposing existing conventions more than entirely re-learning.²⁶³ On the other hand, embracing the potential for ‘asynchrony’ opened up new horizons for achieving this, especially in encouraging much greater agogic inflection. This introduced a whole new spectrum of challenges, not least in terms of evaluation.

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Most interestingly, this subtle change in our disposition towards ensemble had a discernible impact on our playing *even in passages that remained closely synchronised*. It is worth remembering that the Czech Quartet often played with very close synchronisation, for this can easily be subsumed under general rosters of ‘stylistic features’. My point is that the *potential* not to be synchronised has an impact on the character of their style that is not capable of explanation by isolating particular moments of ‘untogetherness’. We found that focusing our attention more closely on the physical feeling of each harmony, and treating synchronisation much more implicitly, we were able to find more active differentiation in the tone and timing of specific moments while retaining sensitivity to one another’s inflections. This shift operates on a very different ‘level’ to conscious (or ‘interpretative’) decisions. This realisation was important in re-learning how to judge effective ensemble interactions in a different light.

Score: [b.14-25](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.14-25](#)

²⁶² Sometimes we also experienced a ‘domino effect’ of *reactions* to each other’s subtle nuances of tone and timing during the span of a phrase.

²⁶³ Clearly, this ‘vertical’ tension always takes place at the same time as one is negotiating melodic intervals.

#23: Determining instrumental fingerings

We often found it difficult to establish the fingering choices of the Czech players from listening alone. A good

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example was the viola player's opening answer, and in particular the finger used on the note following the harmonic G. The 'lift' of the harmonic means that next finger can be jumped to, rather than connected; there remain multiple options for how to execute the small 'substitution' slide between D and C. I will return to this in more detail in **#47**; but in general, such cases were most interesting for what they revealed about the physicality of the left hand technique, and the flexibility with which they navigated (and de-emphasised) certain intervals when desired.

Score: [b.3-10](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.3-10](#)

#24: Metaphor of 'rolling'

In refining our work on **b.14-25** we felt a need to 'roll' more through gestures, even whole phrases. Creating

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momentum or 'spin' from the first moment became increasingly important, for it was this which would generate and then carry their keen sense of continuity, 'following through' its logic. This metaphor was helpful, then, in overcoming the fragmentation discussed in previous sections (see **#4**, **#13**, **#17**, **#20**). Over time, this seemed increasingly distinct from an approach that would impose imaginative ideas 'on' otherwise lifeless notes; our agency here had a more sophisticated, de-emphasised quality. The difference seems very slight when verbalised in these terms, but as a motivating principle for performance, we experienced it as much larger.

#25: Rawness

Loosening the synchronisation imperative demonstrated how far many of our own technical capabilities had been

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grounded in that convention, and were in many ways dependent on it. The (related) sensitivities to intonation and tonal shaping, for instance, were affected by the removing the 'safety net' of blend and coherence that had been provided by aiming for predictable, synchronous timing. In part, this was probably because we had to pay attention to many new concerns at once, and so our priorities did not initially lie in accuracy or consistency. But attention was not the only reason: we felt that both the rhythmic idiom, and the new manner of interrelation which it demanded, removed some of that technical and systematic security almost 'by itself'. This gave us new-found respect for the Czech Quartet's accuracy. The more capricious nature of their bowing, for instance, suggested that the conventionally systematic approaches to the many challenges of string quartet intonation – usually built on agreed reference points – seemed an awkward fit for this expressive style. We felt that it would be more reliant on quick, instinctive adjustments, arranged around a rather looser – but undoubtedly well-practised – system. Importantly, we recognised that the original players would have built their collective sense of pitch in tandem with their conventions of tonal inflection and expressive timing. These would therefore have been integrated over several decades, in a manner that was obviously not available to us in a short period of intense experimentation.

#26: 'It doesn't need to be with you, but you need to know that I have it'

Learning to play 'together' in this way meant severing the link between awareness of another's figure, and the

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intention to synchronise those figures in time. Consider the energising viola gesture at the beginning of the Vivace section (**b.88-95**): following a semiquaver after the other instruments, the Czech Quartet's violist plays this pair of notes as a vocal swoop, and certainly not as a 'tight' rhythmic reaction to the first beat of his colleagues. There is no sense that it is intended to fit smoothly into the rest of the ensemble: it is not a polite accompanimental colouring, but is more destabilising. In spite of this characterisation, we found that the other three instruments needed to interact with that eccentric gesture – if not exactly to 'go with it'. This was grounded in mutual intention and relation, however, rather than temporal synchronisation (or the related imperative to project structural clarity). The two experimental takes included here give an indication of how finely this was balanced, in terms of motion; they capture some of the original, but seem to lack an important dimension of poise.

Playing that was asynchronous but always aware – and thus able to anticipate and account for others – always had a very different experiential quality from playing that was asynchronous for reasons of uninterest or self-involvement. These evaluations were unmistakable from within the group. It goes without saying, however, that while they might result in measurable differences in performance parameters, the quality of those differences *as experience* cannot be reduced to those values. We found that when synchronisation no longer regulated our ensemble interaction in a straightforward way, this sensitivity – and the fine-grained, quasi-social distinctions with which it is associated – came more clearly into focus.

Score: [b.88-96](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.88-96](#); [Experiment A b.88-96](#); [Experiment B b.88-96](#)

#27: Historical styles are not evenly unfamiliar

Although we had intentionally limited the range of the pieces chosen for the experiment to a narrow historical

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and geographical band, the variations in their character were still sufficient to reveal some fascinating differences in how we responded to the Czech Quartet's performances. For example, their playing in the *Dumka* seemed closer to our own imaginative instincts than it did in other cases: we felt as though many of these gestural 'types' were not so far from those upon which we might have alighted ourselves. The differences, then, were more in magnitude than in kind: the trajectories of their shapes, and the places in which they rushed, anticipated, or lifted, seemed somewhat familiar to both our hands and our minds. Their 'manipulations' of timing were certainly more extreme, and they were obviously more accustomed to rhythmic distribution between players. But their inflections in this case seemed to be further along a path that we recognised, for our training, modern though it was, had given us ways of internalising the motions of this dance-like material which were already very unlike a baldly 'literal' execution of the rhythm.²⁶⁴

²⁶⁴ These responses gestured, at least, to the intersection of 'art music' and 'folk music'; indeed this metaphor remains common in WAM performance teaching.

This was not true of our encounters with the Czech Quartet's playing in song-like or contrapuntal material, where they felt much further away from our own conventions. Interestingly, this differential in our familiarity with their various expressive modes affected the *intensity* with which we experienced their 'asynchronous' style. That manner was far more intuitive to us in lighter, dancing gestures, than in songful or heavier ones.

Undermining a black-and-white synchronisation imperative was always going to mean extending 'togetherness' into a rich three-dimensional spectrum. But as will be clear from the last few paragraphs, it can sometimes be hard to distinguish between cause and effect. Our sense of these differences was often a product of variation not just of the Czech Quartet's gestures in a particular situation, but of our familiarity with that expressive 'type'. (For instance, we were more accustomed to early bass notes than to late ones, and so we generally experienced the former as more immediately palatable forms of 'untogether ensemble'). Our own training and experience, then, was (and is) always entangled with the notation's 'affordances'. This relational quality should not be taken as a bland theoretical caveat, for we witnessed it at first hand during the experiment.

Our understanding of this spectrum of 'togetherness' increasingly coalesced around physicality and embodiment, one key aspect of which was the amount of contact – a sense of hold vs. lightness – experienced in the bow-string relationship. In some cases we recognised the Czech Quartet's instincts, and may well have adopted a similar 'feeling' in the bow ourselves; but in other cases they adopted a physicality on which we would simply never have alighted. This is further evidence, I think, for the irreducible specificity of performance style. The comfort or discomfort we felt with 'their ensemble' was so irregular, and dependent on context, that we soon had to discard any notion that it could be reduced to generally applicable rules or principles.

Score: [b.174-187](#)

Recordings: [Experiment b.174-187](#); [Czech Quartet b.174-187](#)

III. Antonin Dvořák – String Quartet Op.96, ii: Lento ([SCORE](#))

#28: Discomfort and distinction

In stark contrast to the relative ease with which we assimilated a radically different ensemble concept in the Op.51

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Dumka, the *Lento* of Op.96 proved fascinatingly problematic. In one striking response to a full take, our group's first violinist was left feeling "really horrible" about the experience. This was not because asynchrony was permitted, but because uncertain boundaries in our collective negotiation of timing meant that she experienced a loss of mutual trust. In trying too consciously to surmount our own inclinations to synchronise, we had gone too far in the direction of interpersonal avoidance: her distress resulted from the feeling that none of us were responding sufficiently to what was being offered by others. (Everybody was taking, and nobody giving). In terms of research, this was hugely interesting, for it showed how far a dislocated ensemble style that 'used' ostensibly historical 'parameters' might have operated on a very different plane to the idea of

'togetherness'.

This came at a relatively early stage in the process, where we were still operating in a 'pre-synthesis' phase. Our playing was therefore underpinned by general concepts, and was more 'specified' (or 'top-down') in its organisation. We still had to pay explicit attention to our temporal de-coupling, in order to avoid reversion to old habits; and this conscious effort had resulted in much more detachment in our interactions. The experience was uncomfortable, then, not because of 'the style' in the abstract, but because its specific manifestation had compromised the terms under which we related to one another. Despite the embrace of superficially appropriate 'expressive devices', it could not have been less 'historical'. I do not mean to dismiss this mode of interaction out of hand – it may well have been more like the approach of other early recorded groups, especially from Germany – but it was demonstrably alien to the ensemble we were researching.²⁶⁵

On reflection, it is probably relevant that this was the movement I had spent the most time analysing 'explicitly'.²⁶⁶ This meant I was very familiar with the details of how the Czech Quartet navigated particular moments, and larger structural units. Although I had discussed and listened to this movement with the viola player over several years, and all of us had spent a good amount of time with the recordings we were copying, I knew this movement in a very specific *kind* of detail, by comparison with my colleagues. That these early takes were so uncomfortable in terms of 'real' ensemble interaction may have been a direct result of my over-familiarity with (what had seemed at the time like) particular 'decisions' made by the Czech players: I was approaching the copying process, in this piece more than others, as if we were replicating pre-ordained, 'known' nuances. This meant that the continuity and context-dependence that was central to their original performance entirely evaded us. Our playing certainly had "great arbitrariness", but little of the responsiveness that gives life and sense to imaginative gestures. This version was akin to 'copying by imposition', and our reaction was a useful reminder of the pitfalls of excessive analytical familiarity. Happily, this obvious failing presented a valuable opportunity to recalibrate our approach.

#29: Introduction to accompaniment

This movement demanded close attention to the basic idea of 'accompanying', and to nuances within its

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amalgamation of social and musical functions. One might take the view that a subsidiary role – designated on the basis of the material 'itself' – equates to a responsibility to lay down a

disciplined, organised, even 'structural' canvas on which melodic fantasy can unfold with freedom. But this is not necessarily inconsistent with the idea that these voices can take a great deal of control of the music in a less overt manner, by shaping the underlying landscape on which the 'foreground action' unfolds. These dynamics are usually quite imperceptible to a listener, especially when working within a synchronised aesthetic, but they are vividly experienced from the inside of a small group. We found that an incidental benefit of bringing this sensitivity 'outside' the synchronisation convention was to shine more of a light on the precise nature of those

²⁶⁵ Anna Scott (2022) has gone significantly further in exploring more antagonistic ensemble relations.

²⁶⁶ See Chapter 5, p.118-24.

interactions. (Indeed this can be interesting for any ensemble to try, independently of an interest in early recorded style).

This topic took centre stage in the *Lento* of Op.96, where the notion of ‘persona’ overlapped in many different ways with more neutral descriptions of the score, and especially its structural and textural features. One might be inclined to extrapolate subsidiary, pivot-like ‘roles’ from the consistency of the inner parts, at least as they appear on the page. The sheer variety the Czech Quartet adopted towards that material, then, meant that internal ensemble dynamics were always likely to dominate our attention in this movement.

#30: Local shaping and ‘groove’ in accompaniment

We were quickly able to isolate some details in the Czech Quartet’s treatment of the *Lento*’s repertoire of

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‘accompanying’ figures. The viola player in particular seemed inclined to increase in speed in the first half of a bar, and to ‘recover’ that time in the second half; indeed this was one of the things which we had found destabilising in #28. We also found that this give-and-take motion was is never only a matter of speed, but is entwined with change in the physicality of the tone: from an initial sense of containment (i.e. tension), into a more ‘released’ sound later in the bar or phrase. The impression was that this gesture was sometimes significantly ‘clipped’ (b.1-10 in viola; b.11-18 in violin 2).

This effect is difficult for a modern player to grasp, probably because of the placement of the initial acceleration. Rushing a figure at an early stage in a bar or phrase generally feels much more alien than doing so at a later point in such a unit, because it feels like an ‘authentic’ increase in the basic tempo, which yields anxiety about getting ahead of the collective pulse.²⁶⁷ When synchronisation is one’s normative assumption, it is not that this kind of ‘clipping’ never happens, but that it is almost always associated with *recovery*. In our own style, in other words, such an inflection is almost always reactive, and so generally happens ‘late’. (Contemporary ensemble paradigms depend on the idea that capricious nuances will rarely, if ever, risk being read as subversive of the basic pulse of the group as a whole). The Czech Quartet’s viola player usually pays back this time – though not always.²⁶⁸ In any case, that did not make this relational ‘re-wiring’ any easier for us to capture, because the *sensation* of that timing imbalance is related to the whole context, and not to the (more abstract) ‘aggregate’ of the rhythm over the whole bar.

That such complex inflections were taking place in an ostensibly ‘accompanying’ part also made them more marked for us, than would have been the case for them.²⁶⁹ It also took time to reconcile this destabilising flexibility with allowing the music to breathe and flow on a larger scale. That rhythmic detail, not yet fully internalised, tended to give the music a halting quality, and we sometimes had difficulty in committing to the progression of phrases as a whole, rather than as successive modules. In retrospect, we felt this problem was directly related to the unusual fluidity with which their leadership roles shifted from moment to moment:

²⁶⁷ I hardly need to spell out how this feeling might relate to the concern for the ‘proper’ maintenance of timing synchronisation.

²⁶⁸ As we will see in more detail later, these local nuances of unequal timing are directly related to larger-scale tempo changes.

²⁶⁹ We were more used to adopting a certain ‘flexible neutrality’ in such a role.

whatever was happening, it was never a simple case of the melody acting as leader, and the other parts as followers.

Score: [b.1-18](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.1-10](#); [Experiment b.11-18](#)

IV. Antonin Dvořák – String Quartet Op.96, iv. Vivace, ma non troppo ([SCORE](#))

#31: Middle voice bowstrokes

At the opening of the Op.96 *Finale* ([b.1-32](#)) the middle parts play the energetic, locomotive-like figure in what is **CONTENT** by modern standards a subtly unusual way. They did not seem remotely concerned with what we called 'orchestral' priorities, in that they did not aim for any 'sheen' in the sound, and seemed actively resistant to generating 'solidity' in their timing.²⁷⁰ Instead, the physicality of their bowing here felt to us to be consciously designed to work against discipline, rather than to enable more control. Could they have set themselves a challenge by making the bowstroke more difficult to accomplish than was strictly necessary? By executing the stroke a few inches further towards the tip than we might have done, they embraced a natural propensity for slightly chaotic variation. This region of the bow has an intrinsic instability in how it springs back from the string, meaning one has to work a little harder with the fingers to 'catch' it between strokes. The tie is likely to be clipped as a result, and because it is difficult to execute in precisely the same way every time, some playful irregularity is almost guaranteed. Impressively, they retain significant 'core' and projection in the tone while doing this, which we suspected involved staying radically efficient and 'firm' in the stroke in the moment of contact, using only a tiny lateral movement. The bow was permitted to spring *out* of that contact, however, in a way that was enthusiastically chaotic, and which needed constant 'taming'. Our own version began with the same 'pull' between the second violin and viola, and involved the same type of stroke. Yet it sounded notably more controlled in its rhythmic character, even though the Czech Quartet's tempo and sound quality were somewhat heavier.

Score: [b.1-32](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.1-32](#); [Experiment b.1-12](#)

#32: Bowing, unevenness, and ensemble

The inner parts are not consistently synchronised in the opening paragraph of this movement, despite what looks **CONTENT** like an obvious 'binding' in the notation. One should see this in the context of their embracing physical instability in the bow ([#31](#)), which may have been a strategy for creating extra energy: it

²⁷⁰ By contrast, our impression of the usual process of setting out on such a 'finale texture' was that it could resemble 'starting up the orchestral resonating machine'.

gives the impression of acceleration, but without actually getting faster. In terms of ensemble, it is also significant that the two players perform this stroke in exactly the same way, but not always at the same time. In this kind of ‘togetherness’, then, the players’ creative impulses are operating intensely collectively – to the extent that the two are almost ‘fused’ in their manner – and yet this could always be quite independent, in principle, from strict ‘between-player synchronisation’. In part because of the physical behaviour of the bow here – the sense of being constantly on the edge of losing the balance of the stroke – the effect is a curious combination of fragility, poise, and conviction. It is certainly anything but routine.

This also gives a sense of how far specificity is inherent to a style that embraces unevenness (or ‘inégaie’). The experiment suggested that we cannot explain this aspect of their playing by asserting that they were ‘less concerned with evenness’ than modern performers. Not only are they very rhythmically consistent in many situations – witness **b.146-156** – that diagnosis is once again conceptualised in terms of an absence, and so will neglect the qualitative and metaphorical dimensions of their search for specificity. To speak in terms of absences or deficiencies is an easier method of retrospective categorisation, but it is practically meaningless to a performer, because it does not reflect what making music is *like*, whether in the present or the past.

Score: [b.146-155](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.146-155](#)

#33: Character of ‘asynchrony’

A further implication of **#32** is that a string player’s timing variation is always integrated with precisely how the bow is ‘allowed’ to behave. For instance, the unevenness generated by using an intrinsically unstable region of the bow, which then has to be controlled, has very little in common with ‘uneven’ playing that involves different kinds of stroke.

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In this case, the expressive energy of the unevenness seemed to have very little to do with cerebral ‘intention’: it was almost literally ‘playing out’ on the turf of physicality.²⁷¹ Further evidence for this may lie in the fact that we found this patch of music extraordinarily difficult to replicate. It is a banal truism that a musician has to inhabit a style fully before one is able to be truly playful in that context, and for the result also to ‘make sense’. Our early versions were caught in a middle ground: attempting to copy too closely inevitably meant we missed the playful quality, but deliberately aiming to be ‘free’ always missed their stylistic specificity, because our gestures were not sufficiently habituated.

This challenge came into especially sharp relief in the most asynchronous moments. The two inner parts come gloriously out of phase in **b.25**, only to find each other again in the following seconds. When listening, this seems like a large phase difference; but at speed, the timing differential between the players is delicately balanced. Consciously attempting to play out of time with one another was wildly unsuccessful, musically; and, paradoxically, on occasion our attempts resulted in very close synchronisation between the voices. It is probably significant that for us, active gestures of manipulation were required to ‘come apart’ – it would not generally

²⁷¹ Imposing a functionally unnecessary technical obstacle is a pleasing exhibition of this playfulness!

happen ‘by itself’. A softer notion of ‘play’ therefore eluded us. Moreover, because such ‘applied’ variations in timing are generally grounded in a player’s native expressivity, when we attempted to ‘actively’ decouple, our patterns sometimes resembled one another very closely. And in resorting to similarly habituated manipulations of timing, we found that meant that synchronisation was sometimes maintained, even as we consciously attempted to undermine it.

Score: [b.25-31](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.25-36](#); [Experiment b.25-33](#)

V. Josef Suk – Meditation on an Old Czech Hymn ‘St Wenceslas’ Op.35a ([SCORE](#))

#34: Fuller tone increases physicality of intervals

Adopting a fuller, more highly ‘spun’ sound helped us to increase the density of ‘content’ we were able to find

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within melodic intervals: a greater range of overtones opened up a richer range of consonants and vowels in the grammar of the music. This is related to the idea of balancing ‘up’, insofar as we tried to retain some of this feeling even when becoming less present, individually, within the texture.

Cultivating a ‘concentrated but still gentle’ sound quality was especially important here. This also altered our experience of collective resonance: it increased the potential relations between the overtones of each instrument, and – paradoxically – opened up a greater sense of the fragility we heard on the original. This is an extrapolation from the original, more than a direct product of listening. The difference is subtle but audible on record; compare Version A, from early on in the experiment, with Version B considerably later:

Score: [b.1-14](#)

Recordings: [Experiment A b.1-8](#); [Experiment B b.1-8](#)

#35: Not talking was effective problem-solving

In briefly revisiting the *Meditation*, we had considerably more success in approximating the quality of the Czech

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Quartet’s ‘asynchrony’, but this improvement, importantly, was not remotely a product of more detailed verbal discussion. Returning to this piece after the *Vivace* of Op.96 had heightened our sensitivity to their different modes of interaction, and this example felt radically different from the ‘playful’ un-togetherness of the inner parts in **#31-33**. In this material we found we needed to embody a more intense, intentional stance, which may itself be a corollary of the greater sense of physical (and interpersonal) resistance discussed in **#34**. Another dimension of this greater expressive purpose, however, was that the unequal rhythmic inflection could still never behave as an explicit alteration, for it felt as if it was ‘built in’ to their sense of musical motion at a more fundamental level. Awareness of that de-emphasised quality was a direct result of the copying

process, for in many cases we were had not consciously registered those nuances in the original performance; they had been experienced as much more emergent, even understated.

#36: Weave (I)

From this point the idea of 'weaving' became especially useful for appreciating how gestures could be passed and interrelated, but in a way that operated independently of any enforced 'interpretive' similarity.²⁷²

CONTENT Like most of our verbal explanations, this concept eschewed decision-making, yet it was crucial that each player continued to hold the whole ensemble sound in attention. As we gained more familiarity with the Czech Quartet's repertoire of expressive patterns, we did not need to 'try' so hard to come apart in timing, as adopting this specific mode of interaction meant that we were better able to commit to the flow of each player's gestures. More familiarity with this unusual mixture of collective awareness and individual intensity meant that asynchronous timing could be left to emerge from 'betweenness', and never risk the sense of those isolated moments being superimposed. This was not inconsistent with attempting to copy the original quite precisely, but we thought it important that we retain the potentiality associated with allowing each player always to be able to characterise their material independently, and with conviction.

37: Pairs helped structure imaginative response

Rehearsing in pairs is a common convention within string quartets, and we often used it here, albeit in an unusual way. Here we were not aiming to improve accuracy, but to generate new 'baselines' of convention: a kind of embodied understanding of harmonic resistance which would increase the likelihood that spontaneous inflections would 'make sense' in context. Working in smaller groups was thus an enhancement of #3: it gave us a more detailed 'feel' for the sorts of options that would present themselves when we played together.

VI. Antonin Dvořák – String Quartet Op.96, ii: Lento (SCORE)

#38: Playing more 'structurally' generated closer copies

One of the most interesting of our experimental approaches in the *Lento* involved adopting a more deliberately 'structural' mindset, even while retaining the freedom in timing and expressivity we had developed in the previous session. Rather than thinking of ourselves as playing 'moment to moment', then, we adapted our attention to be more conventionally anticipatory: we tried to 'see' the shape of

²⁷² We were also increasingly aware of the integrated quality of recurring metaphors: we barely spoke of 'just' timing, but more often of holding, announcing, spinning, weeping, or rolling (Leech-Wilkinson and Prior 2014).

larger structures, and perhaps even the whole piece, unfold before we created them. Strangely, while the expressive qualities of our previous takes wore their debt to the Czech Quartet's individual gestures on their sleeve, in listening back we felt that this more 'structural' take sounded closer to their playing in some important respects. This judgement applied both on a small and large scale.

This may be further evidence that familiar terms like 'structural', 'rhetorical', or 'moment-to-moment' are useful as retrospective categorisations, but their 'resolution' is not sufficiently fine-grained to capture salient distinctions when directed 'back onto' performance itself. As we saw in Chapter 5, we have good evidence in the *accelerandi* in the C and C' sections of the *Lento* that these players were indeed sensitive to the progress of larger-scale shapes, even if this was not theorised in a 'structural' way. The really significant difference, as we experienced it, was that these shapes never unfold in a schematic, 'top down' manner. This may be connected to a more intrinsically continuous conception of musical time: we increasingly felt that they could not have been thinking of their expressivity in terms of 'manipulations' of a pre-existing, regular baseline, but that everything they did was built from a timing paradigm that *was already intrinsically fluid*.

#39: Surprising discipline

Capturing their attitude towards the *Lento* required us to be much more disciplined than we had anticipated from listening. The familiar linguistic tropes for describing these players' expressivity were sometimes misleading in practice: we found that impression of constant interventionist activity to be at odds with certain aspects of their performance when we attempted to copy. In particular, we felt that we lacked their ability to hold harmonic tension 'through' those local nuances.

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#40: Fragility in bowing

Another aspect of this recording which we had difficulty in capturing was their distinctive tonal-emotional fragility. This presents some practical challenges and some methodological ones. Such sounds lie at the point where feeling meets the physicality of tone production: these 'breaks' cannot be executed intentionally, and certainly not self-consciously. They are often the most vocal, most emotionally intense utterances of all, and their indeterminacy is an intrinsic feature both of the means of its production, and of the effect. Indeed we found this movement the most difficult of the Czech Quartet's recordings to connect with – and thus to copy. And while one could attempt to explain this in terms of its exhibiting more distant 'stylistic features', I suspect that it was the shocking sense of vulnerability, and the ways in which they fully embrace that space of contingency and liminality, that were more deeply responsible for our difficulty in empathising with their expressive manner, and to 'feel as they were feeling'. (#41, #57)

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Recording: [Czech Quartet b.16-21 & b.26-30](#)

#41: Viola bowstroke

In revisiting the accompanying material discussed in #29 and #30, we were able to identify some further nuances.

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The viola player adopted a stroke which we approximated as 'fragile yet solid': playing quite near the middle of the bow, we had to try hard to avoid giving the end of each note a 'banana-shaped' envelope. Once again, this meant going unusually 'close to the edge' in terms of retaining a functional balance of contact point and bow speed. As we saw back in #1, these players' basic mode seems to have been significantly 'in the string', but with the option to lift. This disposition is much more intense, then, than 'brushing' the string from side to side, with faster bow speed and a less weighty contact. The contrast in these sensations was most apparent, physically, when crossing strings between the two notes of a slurred pair.

We also found that this tonal quality is inseparable from the rhythmic swing of the pairs, and that more 'release' in the timing often meant a similar release in the contact. But this is not an exact science – indeed the entire point is that it enables variation. Importantly, the sensation of the contact – as heavy or light, connected or lifted – is always related to the subjective 'feel' of the rhythm's swing as a whole, even if that relationship is not one-to-one. It could not have been clearer that, specifically as a matter of the performer's experience, 'rhythmic inflection' was never capable of 'behaving' independently of that quality of contact (#56).

#42: Teams and tensions

The common grouping of the two inner parts in this movement meant that we sometimes treated them as a

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'single' instrument: as a team, rather in the manner of a rhythm section, although with the viola usually acting as the main 'pivot'.

This clean, abstract designation of roles misses the fact that the pairs are never 'passively' linked together, for they also retain a vital flexibility to push against *one another*. This may seem like a paradoxical aspect of the 'accompanying' role, but we found that it was actually the tension between these two musicians' subtle comings-and-goings, which created a truly 'connected' quality among the pair. A useful mental image for this was a magnet: its opposing poles are inseparable in principle, but force is derived from the difference between them. (It may also be significant that this metaphor, like so many others on which we drew, also invokes the idea of physical resistance).

#43: Bow 'first' – and implications for vibrato

This passage illustrated the extent to which the bow functioned as the primary locus of imaginative intention. This

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attitude has an obvious impact on vibrato, but we did not feel this meant considering it 'ornamental' (in the manner suggested by most HIP discourse). That 'additional' model felt far too abstracted from feeling, and insufficiently integrated within the continuous unfolding of the tone 'as a whole'. This is not inconsistent with the idea that the Czech Quartet's search for expressive specificity was *initially* conceived in the bow, such that everything else emerged from that nexus of imagination and physicality. This was

just one of the ways in which we adopted attitudes that would build in some resistance to parametric division *a priori*.

Like a string's resonances, the oscillations of vibrato are intrinsically continuous and in flux. It is easy to forget that these oscillations in pitch are also intertwined with the character of the resonances set in motion by the bow. The bow lends itself better to discussion through metaphor, because as the 'origin' of the tone it is so obviously gestural and qualitative: clearly, the bow cannot be conceptualised as 'additive' or two dimensional. But neither does vibrato function like this, in practice. Discussions of vibrato in scholarship have frequently been limited by their polemical undertones, and reduced to the evidence for 'with' or 'without'. But it does not take a great deal of listening to realise that such questions would surely have made no sense to the musicians of the Czech Quartet. These players' priorities clearly lay in more integrated, embodied realms: of feeling, shape, and intensity. They must have been invested in conventions, but banal rules and simplistic binaries, I think we can safely say, would have been anathema.

Retrospectively, then, one can assert that vibrato is an important 'component' of sound. But from the musician's point of view such oscillations are never truly separable from tone production, the *specificity* of sound as a whole, and especially its capacity to 'behave' like other things – including feeling states. This is the heart of the difference between how vibrato appears, from outside, to be 'used' or 'applied' by a string player, compared with to how the musician relates to each moment of performance.

#44: Leader-follower dynamics

The 'emotional-pictorial' qualities of the Czech Quartet's playing are vividly illustrated by the variation in their

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characterisation of similar-looking musical material (Leech-Wilkinson 2009b: 252). The apparently unswerving viola part of the *Lento* presents a superb example of this disposition, and our attempts to copy emphasised still further the impulse towards constant change in the personae embodied in each moment. The metaphor of the viola 'as pivot' seems to have been as central to their understanding of this score as it was to ours, but the curious specifics of the expressive style posed difficulties for understanding their leader-follower dynamics. These relationships were often opaque and unpredictable to us, perhaps because they do not follow a basic paradigm of 'adjustment' (to a primary voice), nor do they subscribe to the broader idea that roles are extrapolated from the score (or from a quasi-analytical reading of it).

As we have seen, it is not that the players do not account for one another, but that the combination of a) a relaxation of the synchronisation imperative, and b) a concern for emotional-pictorial expressivity, means that their concept of leadership is regularly located somewhere *other* than alignment of note-onset timing.²⁷³ That 'somewhere' is clearly elusive to codification, again because it is a product of wholeness – not just of 'the

²⁷³ I do not mean to imply that research into leadership dynamics has been exclusively concerned with timing – only that this parameter has often functioned as an effective 'stake in the ground' for probing those relationships in performance. This has, however, generally been dependent on the convention to prioritise 'maintenance of synchronisation'. What other domains might be opened up by treating 'leadership' differently?

ensemble', but of each musician's imaginative and embodied contribution.

As is well illustrated by that active, keenly personified viola part, we had the sense that their leader-follower roles were not determined by material as notated – at least not as a blanket rule – but were governed more by intensity of characterisation. The latter is not only transient but relational, in that the specificity of such individual characterisations always has direct implications for the behaviour (and intentions) of others. In practice, this meant that we had to think of our individual imaginative characterisations as if 'suspended' above the group, such that they were more distributed in ownership, as well as their effect. This often resembled 'real-life' social interactions; indeed this seems natural, if we assume that each utterance has to unfold in a way that is underpinned by this idea of music as a person.

#45: 'Showing' direction

I have already mentioned that being able to resist the impulse towards synchronisation was a key component of the 're-learning' process, and that it was more complicated than simply embracing individuality and independence. Ensemble players frequently telegraph shape, grammar, intention, and so on to colleagues, and they do so in a number of different ways. We found that embracing asynchrony in principle did nothing to dampen this requirement: in fact, we needed to continue projecting intentions more than ever. What changed was our behaviour upon *receiving* such cues from others. In experienced ensemble musicians, the way in which one takes in information from co-performers must generally remain below the level of conscious control. Responses and adjustments take place extremely rapidly, largely without listeners noticing – and indeed sometimes without the players themselves noticing. Working within a 'native', habituated style means that the selection of possible 'types' of response is usefully delimited. This leaves plenty of room for detail and specificity, but their range is helpfully streamlined by 'automated responsiveness'.

#46: Composition and grammar

We were often struck by the viola player's ability to govern the shape of the whole via his accompanying material, and to lead a listener through the music in the process. Sometimes he projects a 1+1+2 structure: first, and most obviously, by the separating or joining of notes;²⁷⁴ but also, more interestingly, through local variations in tempo. To explain: the repeated half-bar patterns from b.1-10 are often 'defined' by a timing convention we saw in #30: the opening of the group (of six semiquavers) is often slightly rushed, the latter part held back.

The more sophisticated evolution of this idea is that in order to show a larger grouping – of a whole bar rather than a half bar – the same pattern of tempo is spread over a larger span. Here, for instance, the two bars are different: in b.8, he accelerates at the start of the first unit, as before, but keeps going through the middle of the

²⁷⁴ With its capacity for delicate lift *and* close connection, a bow can achieve this gradation much more subtly than a keyboard instrument.

bar, only relaxing at the end of the second. The effect is subtle but audible, at least with careful attention.

Score: [b.7-9](#)

Recording: [Czech Quartet b.7-9](#)

#47: Hiding shifts

Determining the fingering patterns used by the Czech players was sometimes very intuitive and straightforward, and sometimes almost impossible. More than the fingerings themselves, we were interested in the reason we often found them hard to discern: their remarkably sophisticated ability to ‘cover’ shifts between positions.

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Because sliding between notes is more prevalent in early recordings than in contemporary playing, it is tempting to pay disproportionate attention to how early recorded musicians ‘used’ portamento, and especially the extent to which they sustained the bow during these glissandi. But this ‘observer bias’ easily draws attention away from their ability to *take out* shifts and slides when covering distances that are melodically de-emphasised. This gets to the heart of a musician’s judgement: it lies at the crux of embodiment and imagination. Working with specifics guards against believing that because slides were comparatively common in the style, copying or ‘re-learning’ will necessarily involve liberally sprinkling them over a performance. That increased frequency is part of the skill set, certainly – but it is only a small part. As we attained greater familiarity with their playing, we found that we needed to build an ‘equal and opposite’ horizon for where the Czech players virtuosically avoided sliding when covering awkward distances on the instrument.

Counterintuitively to a non-string player, this is usually accomplished through subtleties of bowing, rather than left hand agility. There is an important dimension of softness in the latter, but the key to such ‘covering’ is in releasing the bow contact only for the split second in which the left hand covers the distance; and only to a relatively shallow extent. The tone – and the motion of the bow – never stops, but is gently ‘carried’ between the two pitches (#23).

#48: Complexity in transition

The end of the *Lento*’s A’ section (**b.16-19**) presented an especially complex moment of ensemble interaction. We

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initially grappled with the Czech Quartet’s timing here by breaking it down into four independent strands, with each player establishing their counterpart’s precise rhythmic ‘modifications’, with help from Sonic Visualiser (and other reference points, such as a metronome). We were able to determine, for instance, that the violist plays the first three notes in b.17 extremely late, the final note early, and the next bar more simply. But this method quickly encountered hard limits, for in performance the relationships are so precisely balanced that such explicit diagnoses of timing variation, when ‘put into practice’ all at once, were simply incapable of capturing either the fine detail or – more importantly – the delicate *character* of the original. We therefore explored other ‘intermediate’ tools, including treating one part as a detailed ‘pivot’, which was

based directly on the Czechs' rendition (rather than on a group of static references). While listening, we imagined a structure whereby one player – here the second violin – would learn to capture the timing very precisely by playing side-by-side with the original recording, such that the timing could become more embedded in physical motion.²⁷⁵ Then the other parts would try to relate to that pivot more organically, and more responsively. As an approximation of the original, this was more successful; but we still felt that the exponential complexity that arose from all four strands actively interweaving would always evade explicit copying methods. In other words, there was a tension in the internal relationships (that resulted from every part embracing subtle irregularities in timing) which could never be replicated when those patterns were isolated from that context, and then 'brought back together'.

Clearly, our intermediate, 're-presentational' model was unlikely to have reflected their original conceptualisation. There was no real sense in the original of such a differentiation – of 'consistency surrounded by inconsistency'. As a copying technique, this often proved useful, because it gave us 'hooks' with which to diagnose and track their conventions, at least to a small extent.

Score: [b.16-19](#)

Recording: [Czech Quartet b.16-19](#)

#49: Style as 'options'

With greater familiarity with their shaping of the *Lento*, we felt that their ensemble concept was critically

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dependent on each player 'actively' communicating their emotional state in each moment. As we saw earlier (in **#19** and **#36**), a line needed to commit to its own expressive logic, and to 'see through' its implications;²⁷⁶ but alongside this, each player's attention is also distributed among the group.

Our viola player noted that this sensation is a result of years of rehearsal: a player always has a sense of an available 'field of options' open to them as individuals, *and* a parallel sense of that 'field' for their colleagues. This implicit understanding effectively streamlines the ensemble's responsiveness in particular situations.²⁷⁷ This was available to us when playing in our more familiar manner – indeed it is practically a definition of style, that it presents an array of plausible options for how the next moment might go. It was interesting, then, that a take in which we aimed to 'just commit to the imagination, while listening and responding to each other as we normally would' immediately gave our playing a noticeably more modern 'feel'.

²⁷⁵ There was a coincidental pleasure in determining that second violinist Josef Suk might make an appropriate pivot here, because we had already had the feeling that his playing had a streak of appealingly stubborn conviction.

²⁷⁶ As I have said before, this does not correlate neatly with 'phrase arching'.

²⁷⁷ Such options are generally intuitive and embodied, and not explicit or linguistic; indeed this may be related to the finding that professional musicians talk significantly less than students (Ginsborg and King 2012).

VII. Antonin Dvořák – String Quartet Op.51, ii: Dumka ([SCORE](#))

#50: Handovers and personae

In [b.22-26](#) of the *Dumka* first violinist Hoffmann gives the impression of ‘handing a phrase over’ to a colleague –

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but in the event he continues to play. This capacity for transformation resembles an aural illusion.

Superficially, it is related to Waterman’s (2003: 103) exhortation that a quartet player “must recognise his role in the texture at each moment”; yet we felt that the motivations underlying this effect were considerably more embodied, and not captured by extrinsic or cerebral description. It is an imaginative gesture of a kind that cannot truly be ‘derived’ from an analytical ‘reading’: it is practically meaningless, I think, to decree it ‘latent’ in the score.

In [b.23-24](#) Hoffmann gently releases the slurred quavers F#-D ([b.23](#)), as though that character’s utterance has been completed – but he does so in an *open-ended* manner, as if providing others with an opportunity to join or continue what he has offered. But it is he who then fulfils that offering. He sets out on the answering gesture without disturbing the phrase’s timing, while making it sound as though that invitation has been taken up by another character entirely. Upon the viola joining, less than a bar later (on the second quaver of [b.24](#)), his entire being seems to change again: he plays the C#-D-C# figure in so hushed a tone that it is barely audible, shadowing the gestural exchange between the two lowest voices.

This character change happens very quickly, but it is anything but flippant. Our attempts to copy this moment also provided some evidence that, at least in terms of interaction, their manner was often a long way from a caricature of pre-modernity: of un-grammatical, un-structured, essentially spontaneous renditions. Each moment of this passage felt laden not just with intention and intensity, but with notably *structured* progressions of feeling states.

Score: [b.22-26](#)

Recording: [Czech Quartet b.22-26](#)

#51: ‘Make time’ but retain movement

Another quality that is resistant to parametric explanation was something we experienced as their ability to ‘make

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enough time’ for gestural and imaginative content to be clearly projected, but while retaining a feeling of forward motion. This was brought into stark relief by comparing the Czechs’ playing

with our versions. Once we became aware of this, their aptitude seemed almost magical. (It may not be a coincidence that similar kinds of skills are characteristic of expert practice in many other domains, including sport). Part of this magical impression was that the sensation of ‘having time’ was entirely commensurate with rushing – on both a ‘local’ and a ‘structural’ scale. It is difficult to overstate the positive impact this observation had on our understanding of the subtleties of their collective timing.

#52: Function and timing in final imitative entry

The passage **b.14-21** offered a useful case study in this distinction between 'having time' and 'taking time'. In

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b.18 the viola has the final entry of a short gesture that has already been passed around the whole group in exact repetition, and so combines restatement and continuation through another 'dovetail' (**#21**). In our own style, we would generally de-emphasise the final entry in situations like these: a listener has already witnessed it enough for an 'overt' characterisation to be redundant or nonsensical. It made sense to 'lean in' to the idea of continuation here, then, because the viola's contribution would have already been subsumed underneath the new, more 'ear-catching' material now unfurling in the violins above.

This is vital context for appreciating the subtlety of the Czechs' approach. They treat the top A in the first violin as a high point which essentially 'generates' both the individual unit and the phrase as a whole. Hoffmann lengthens this note, as we would also have been inclined to do; and as the next two instruments respond, they treat the first note similarly, as the main propulsive force of the gesture. Slightly rushing through the demi-semiquavers then compensates for that liberty. But the viola's version is ingeniously different, both in timing and accentuation. The gesture begins slightly early, relative to the other parts, and he does not follow them in placing an agogic stress on the first note (A). Nor does the violist wait politely for the cellist to conclude his gesture, but anticipates (and 'treads on') it. The effect of this combination – of an early entry, but with the first note de-accented – is to dovetail the conversational, slightly fragmented exchange which the violist inherited, into the new phrase.

In order to copy this interaction, we had to look for more intuitive ways of describing it. For instance, we imagined that the viola's gesture 'looked' further forwards: it 'aimed' towards **b.20**, and had to 'spin towards' that target, rather than sitting back on its own thoughtfully contained shape, as the others had. Such indirect heuristics were often the only way in which could 'live' the specific qualities of their relative timing. Moreover, understanding this moment certainly depended on transcending the aesthetic of permanent synchronisation; and yet it should be easy to see that this passage was not remotely 'about' asynchrony at all.

Score: [b.14-21](#)

Recording: [Czech Quartet b.14-23](#)

#53: Timing, feel, and context

We found it useful to reverse the basic metaphor of **#52**, to think less of the viola being early (in **b.18**), and more

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as if the other parts had been artificially *expanding* time until that moment. This recalibration meant that the viola could adopt a much more 'neutral' manner. This example was extremely effective in showing how far the surrounding context determined whether a particular inflection was experienced as being more 'actively' rushed, or whether it was more passive – and thus allowed to 'roll' more easily. We felt that the original recording was more inclined towards the latter here, and that it had a 'just so' quality which we had missed when the viola's entry was conceived as more interventionist (i.e. 'intentionally early'). The 'feel' of the original was replicated much more successfully when we imagined this entry to be 'for free'.

Again, the metaphor of conversation is particularly apt here, because it suggests something more immediate and

intuitive than could ever be ‘fully’ rehearsed, let alone determined, or scripted. (In any case, there is always ‘space within’ verbal descriptions of ‘musical ideas’). We reminded ourselves in words that a tail-end affirmation will always have a subtly different tone to something that has been said for the first time. But stating that understanding in words would never be enough to determine its precise inflection in a particular moment of performance. It will be experienced slightly differently on every occasion, according to the irreducible specificity of its context.

#54: Metaphors as problem-solving

Another approach which helped us to develop a more implicit sense of flow was to treat each gesture as ‘starting from here’, and let the precise implications ‘work themselves out’. This meant that the

CONTENT relationships between the lengthened semiquaver and the rushed demi-semiquavers could be grasped more flexibly. The viola entry then simply reversed that temporary ‘rule’ of where the gesture started, and that was enough to transform the (same) material into a long-breathed, dovetailing anacrusis.

Another option was to imagine the earlier entries as if they were still searching for their destination; but when the viola enters, it already *knows* where the music is heading. By that time, the goal had been established by the other parts, who had already set out on a longer phrase (from **b.17⁴**). The indirectness is ideal here, for if the viola’s gesture starts with knowledge of the fact that it has further to go, a more distributed, ‘shallower’ trajectory will emerge almost ‘by itself’. That broad metaphor means that, unlike the other gestures in that family, this statement opens not with a stressed A, but with a de-accented one; but one does not think in terms of ‘stress’ or ‘de-accent’ of the *individual notes*, but grasps their entire context. When suggesting that we treat **b.19¹** as an intermediate staging post, rather than a point of arrival, we were adopting the same kind of strategy.

It is possible, of course, that the viola’s slur lasting a quaver longer – that it extends to the C# (**b.18⁴**) – may create a sense of continuation quite independently of this formulation in rehearsal. That extra note subtly affects the gesture’s physical execution: it demands that the contact in the bow is held for slightly longer, and this means it is less easily ‘thrown’ in precisely the same way as the preceding versions in the other instruments. And a further dimension of this is the way in which the C# continuation note now forms a ‘peel’ against the low F pedal that has been established in the cello. The tension between these resonances feels vastly different from the barer, lighter texture of the first three incarnations of this gesture; indeed it is in a very telling register in both parts: on the lowest string, and also where one has a long string length available, which positively affects the range of resonant ‘types’ one can find in the bow.

More generally, the way in which the Czech Quartet always had the option either to linger or ‘carry’ such gestures meant that the simple act of playing more ‘neutrally’ itself bore more meaning, and this was heightened still further by the nature of their interactions. It was as if simplicity had ‘become’ a topic, which could serve an expressive function of its own. Clearly, such an option is useful for directing the attention of a listener elsewhere: towards a more expressive or characterised voice. But we also found that simplicity could more easily become the object of attention itself in this style than our own, probably because of the contrast it formed with the more

'active' dispositions that often surrounded it. The relative simplicity of the viola line in **b.18-19**, in which the rhythm was less 'elasticated', seems to reflect the idea that the whole group has 'moved on': what was previously thematic material now lived 'in the swim', and had ceased to be the primary focus of attention. And yet it may also draw the attention, precisely because that simplicity is markedly different to the previous incarnations of the gesture.

Score: [b.16-19](#)

Recording: [Czech Quartet b.16-19](#)

#55: Conversation and permutation

Passages in which similar material is 'passed around' presented good opportunities for understanding the

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richness of their conversational disposition. That metaphor suggests that one's 'answer' to a colleague's offering behaves like an everyday interpersonal interaction: one replies 'in the moment' to the *exact* context, not by forcing a predetermined, extrinsic 'idea' upon the situation. Again, it is crucial that this approach embraces wholeness from the outset. It is analogous to the way one adopts a particular tone of voice when contributing to a conversation: those subtle implications are always unique, and dependent on what has just happened. In one sense, then, imitative passages (such as **b.16⁴-19**) have a 'permutational' quality; but such options never behave as isolated modules that interlock mechanistically. The artificiality of copying made clear that a 'natural' response to another's utterance – a tone of voice that 'makes sense' – can never be understood independently of that relationship. This idea is key to ensemble generally, but we felt it to be absolutely central to the Czech Quartet's interactions.

(Examples as for **#52** above)

#56: Bravery in 'finding the twist'

Over time, we felt that the Czech Quartet exhibited real bravery in the extent to which they looked for 'twist' in

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the sound. (This was our metaphor for the specific character of their bowing's 'search for variation'). This assessment came quite directly from a feeling that our takes often captured the right spirit, in terms of timing and 'togetherness', and yet lacked their particular kind of tonal intensity. A good barometer for this was the *crescendo* **b.14-17**, where their playing had a kind of tonal elasticity: they increased volume by holding the bow, as if increasing the 'pressure' of the sound, until finally allowing it to release into the first violin's top A.²⁷⁸

There are many different ways of getting louder on string instruments, and the distinctions between these are very finely balanced, especially in terms of character. We initially produced the increase in intensity by slightly 'firming up' the contact, and using a slow bow speed; but the closer we got to **b.16⁴**, the more we allowed the bow to release. It is never a matter of a linear, one-dimensional 'increase'. Generally, these players seemed more

²⁷⁸ n.b. This top A is the same note as in **#54** and **#55**

likely to grow ‘up the slope’ of the metaphorical hill through more contact, rather than faster bowspeed. They did release into openness on other occasions, but this is associated with less discipline, in rhythm as well as tone, as in the examples from the opening of the Op.96 Vivace. That approach was much more useful to them when aiming to project a gentler character, characterised by much less harmonic tension (or, relatedly, goal-directedness).

Once again, the sensation of this contact is inseparable from individual and ensemble timing (see #41). We worked hard on integrating this sensitivity, such that we could habitually swing the slurred groups in this passage by giving the first note both a little more time and a slightly firmer ‘core’. Interestingly, we found that this was considerably more difficult to achieve while continuing the legato between groupings, as the Czech Quartet did. We often encountered this capacity for a kind of ‘half-swing’, in which the tone does not break completely at any point in the phrase, but each stroke still has an undulation (that follows the shape of the slur). This was an important ability to develop ‘together’ as an ensemble, but we also needed to remember that in their hands it was never formulaic or reductive. Indeed this aspect of their inflection aptly illustrated the difference between flexible, instinctive *conventions*, and bluntly unresponsive, ‘applied’ *defaults*.

Score: [b.14-17](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.14-17](#)

#57: Synthesis

Further work on **b.20-26** built on the transformation in persona of #50, in ways that frequently invoked the idea of narrative. As the harmonic ‘tightens’ towards G minor in **b.21²-21⁴**, Hoffmann’s affective state turns on a dime: he seems to ‘live’ the semitone **Eb-D** in a manner that cannot be confined to a theoretical understanding of the key areas. It was revealing that we found it difficult to capture the particular way he achieves this ‘turn’ while *also* retaining a sense of momentum all the way down the scale in **b.22**.²⁷⁹

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The distinctive continuity of Hoffmann’s execution of this turn directly affects how the pizzicato chords unfold in **b.22-23**. To ears unaccustomed to asynchronous onsets, these can sound disconcerting; but as we got used to their repertoire of concerns, this moment became surprisingly amenable to rationalisation. First, we needed to invert modern assumptions about ensemble pizzicato: that synchronisation is the *de facto* aim. Here it seemed as if they had made a clear decision that the D major chord on the down beat of **b.23** would be synchronised; but this in fact *marked it out* from its surroundings, the greater harmonic tension of which would be communicated by less predictable, and thus less unanimous, individual timing. The effect of this is to create a central ‘pillar’ at the point of lowest tension – the harmonic resolution on D major. The synchronisation of the pizzicato accompaniment at this moment, would allow the different qualities (and functions) of the other harmonies to be experienced in starker relief.

We also felt that a significant dimension of this meaning was associated with the specific embodiment of this

²⁷⁹ See #10. We could recognise this aspect of their performance in description, but in coping it still felt unnatural: our first violinist remarked that “it’s not in my bones yet.”

decision. When a pizzicato note is intended to be synchronised among the ensemble, the feeling of holding the string in one's finger is very different from when one is searching for a fraction of instability in that collective timing. The complicating factor here is that it can plausibly go in both directions: one is aware of the tension in the timing itself, the 'fizz' of the connection with colleagues in that moment, and *also* the physical strength with which the string is held taut. A synchronised chord, then, can either be a point of repose, or of relaxation, depending on the way one's whole body 'is' in the moment it takes place.

Score: [b.20-26](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.20-26](#)

#58: Implications of gestural differentiation

Attempting to copy (rather than simply describe) what happens in **b.23-25** revealed some interesting limitations of the 'decision-making' paradigm, specifically as a way of understanding ensemble interaction.²⁸⁰ As these similar gestures are passed around the group, the Czech Quartet subtly differentiate their 'angles', such that each utterance makes a unique contribution. Our initial difficulties in replicating these bars were probably a result of paying disproportionate attention to capturing the precise *details* of their shaping and articulation. The takes we recorded in this way – that is, aiming at exact copies – inevitably sounded like an elephant galumphing over a hill by comparison with the delicately imaginative original. It soon became clear, then, that focusing on details would always mean becoming blind to our surroundings. Even our bowstrokes could seem to take on the character of 're-presentations': in this mode they felt self-conscious, 'made', and decontextualised. The take included here, then, is quite unlike the original; and yet we felt it captured its character, and especially its close responsiveness, much more accurately than any explicit copy could have done.

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Score: [b.14-26](#)

Recordings: [Experiment b.14-26](#)

#59: Homogenous bowing independent of timing synchronisation

A loosened attitude to timing synchronisation can be consistent with homogeneity in matters of bowing technique and sound production. Accordingly, in passages where the same material is passed around the group, we often found it useful to develop a shared physical basis. This does not mean playing notes, gestures or phrases in an agreed manner, but building the group's collective priorities around a shared (bodily) disposition towards the instrument(s).²⁸¹ This proved very helpful for understanding the behaviour of our historical ensemble, because it does not depend on 'decisions', but goes more directly to the mysterious way in which imaginative options 'appear' in the mind at each moment. It was possible to calibrate

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²⁸⁰ The implications of this observation are potentially quite generally applicable to the analysis of ensemble performance, even in 'modern styles'. Such conversational responses – unique, immediate, whole, and contextual – are more obvious in the Czech Quartet's style than many others, but their example simply makes more audible something that is involved in all collective musical performance, at least to some extent.

²⁸¹ This imaginative-physical reciprocity is also unlike a technical 'school', in that it never behaves like a recipe.

those kinds of horizons as a collective, independently of specifying particular decisions (or ‘expressive manipulations’).

#60: Lightening without lifting

The Czech Quartet’s players often lightened the bow’s contact without lifting it entirely off the string. In [b.14-26](#),

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we found it hard to replicate the Czech Quartet’s distinctive unevenness without breaking the tone a little between the pairs. When developing a more habituated sense of *inéale*, we often found ourselves lifting the second note of a pair too comprehensively, as can be heard on the (early) experimental take below. Much more than listening, experimenting with instruments suggested that the ability to lift out of the *core* of the contact, yet not entirely ‘out’ of the string was a pervasive aspect of the Czech Quartet’s melodic surface. This was an important tool for us in creating more sophisticated patterns of accentuation: we were effectively able to transcend binary categories of ‘emphasised’ and ‘de-emphasised’, in favour of a more three-dimensional concept. This principle could also be applied to larger phrase groupings, as well as individual couplets. The lighter second note thus needed to retain the potential for variety, and not to follow the same kind of ‘lift’ on every occasion. Nor did their pairs necessarily consist of an active first component followed by a passive second one. Sometimes we felt that the second note had a much more ‘active’ character than the first, even if the ‘strong-weak’ relationship was retained rhythmically.

Score: [b.14-26](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.14-17](#); [Experiment b.14-17](#)

#61: ‘Not dropping the thread of a thought’

The metaphor of storytelling was often indispensable for replicating specifics of performance, because it allowed

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us to capture more integrated details than any attempt to ‘apply’ generalised concepts. We had the vivid sense that in [b.21-23](#), for instance, the first violinist “never drops the thread of that thought”. This slightly oblique metaphor embraces the fact that the musician constantly juggles difference and change, yet sometimes needs to connect potentially diffuse moments into flowing sequences. This is very difficult to achieve when particular details become the explicit focus of attention. The idea of a ‘field of options’ was sometimes useful here; but this image implies discrete choices (or even checkboxes) in a way that does not capture some crucial dimensions of that ‘flow’, or the space ‘between’ particular decisions.

A narrative sensibility, by contrast, is always entwined with a performer’s habitual gestures, and ‘feel’ for the motion of the music. As elsewhere, we identified a characteristically suspended quality to Hoffmann’s bowing here: the sound is rarely allowed to settle, but continues to ‘spin’. An important aspect of this effect is the unusual manner of ‘phrasing off’ within slurs (as in [#60](#) above). In some cases, the ‘from here’ emphasis on the beginning of a group is generated by lengthening the first note, but the contact in the bow remains comparatively strong through the pair. In many cases the Czech players clip slurs in a more extreme way, but sometimes they sustain the contact all the way through the group. These gestures are so specific that they are probably most accurately

described through the lens of characterisation: in other words, through analogy with other aspects of experience.

There is a special place in their style for lifted gestures which nonetheless act as a continuation. These can be strung together, which gives the effect of suspension. (It is like keeping a balloon in the air by occasionally tapping it from below). This concept is subtly different to most codified 'HIP' conventions for lifting between figures, which are more likely to emphasise breaks over continuities. Such details are perfectly suited to oral – even 'experiential' – transmission, but are almost in principle elusive to writing. (Indeed the clunkiness of my explanation, by comparison with the example below, makes this point by itself).

The ability to 'carry' phrases in this manner while also taking in detail 'on the way' was one of the most challenging aspects of the process. Momentum-generating gestures seem to have allowed the Czech players to compensate for their occasionally extravagant 'weightiness'. Their style thus involves an intuitive sense of 'spring-back': a balancing impulse that is never confined to a single 'parameter' – such as tempo – but which resembles a longer-term sensitivity to fine-grained feeling states (e.g. simplicity vs. complexity; weight vs. flight). The metaphor of the storyteller is probably closer to this, then, than measured parameters, however 'interlocking' they are thought to be.

Score: [b.21-23](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.21-23](#)

#62: Imitative entries can challenge as well as affirm

The passage from **b.14** also required us to adjust how we built up textures from sequential or imitative entries.

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The difference often lay in the assertiveness of the contributions: in this case, we got closer to the Czech Quartet's rendition by playing a little stronger, individually – to the extent of being more consciously 'attention seeking'. In contrast to a notion of ensemble that always inheres in agreement, these contributions built up the whole by challenging those that had come before.

This suggested that their sense of ensemble commitment could not have involved hard distinctions between leaders and followers: certainly they do not seem to adopt one or the other specified 'role' on the basis of analytical assertions. Effective ensemble in this style relies on these poles being adopted broadly simultaneously: as we saw in Part 1, they 'reverberate'. The Czech Quartet's interactions here were not so far away from how our group might have conceptualised this passage. But a special subtlety was that those committed, quite individualistic, characterised affirmations build intensity while also 'allowing for' the next entry. They slightly reduce the intensity of the bow's contact once their initial gesture has been established: each leaves room in the tonal blend for the next entry. But as in **#6**, each does not become so passive as to give their colleague nothing to 'play against'. This, in short, is simultaneity in action: ensemble as a two-way valve.

#63: Character can govern tempo relationships

In **#50** and **#57** I hinted at the potential permutational complexity of **b.23-26**¹. A similar realisation that improved

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our copying was the idea that the low point in pitch (D2 in the cello, **b.25**) might act as a pivot for tempo (i.e. the lowest point in pitch was also the slowest moment in the phrase). This mapping is not exact, but deriving the timing profile in terms of this moment's portentous 'personality' meant it could then be 'balanced out' by lightening into **b.26**.

Score: [b.23-26](#)

#64: De-emphasised vs. imposed unevenness

We often had to think consciously about playing sufficiently unevenly, and required frequent reminders until the

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very end of the experimental process. (We never felt we were going beyond the original recording, in the extent of our *inégame*). This is not because we would always 'play exactly evenly' in our native style – that is surely an unhelpful caricature of contemporary performance. The real challenge was not just in automating that irregularity to the same *extent* as the Czech Quartet, but to do so while remaining sufficiently flexible and responsive. For instance, our violist noticed that her 'natural' expressive response in **b.20**¹ would be to linger on the last semiquaver (Bb) of the four – the melodic high point; and that she was also doing this when playing *inégame*, which ended up stretching the bar as a whole. The Czech Quartet did not do this, which heightened our sense that the task would not simply involve 'applying' unevenness more consistently, but that we needed to re-evaluate our whole understanding of musical context in light of an *underlying* *inégame* convention.

Score: [b.20](#)

#65: Unevenness enhances uniqueness

The implications of unevenness for character, impulse and momentum are significantly affected by whether one

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imagines it as lengthening the first note, or clipping the second. This is very powerful for the player, and suggests that the special power of *inégame* lies in its function as a kind of 'gateway to uniqueness'. We found this to be most effective when it came out of quite indirect, intuitive thought: modes, in short, which always exist a 'layer above' the domain of separate parameters. This idea became even more important later, when we had developed a better understanding of how the Czech Quartet's unevenness shaded imperceptibly into larger-scale changes in tempo. (See **#81**).

#66: 'Wait until there's space'

The pair of demi-semiquavers at the end of **b.57** illustrates a type of thinking that often underpins ensemble: our

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first violinist felt that Hoffmann simply 'waits until there's space to play it'. It is hard to express what this means empirically, of course, because this impression is not necessarily even

correlated with slower timing, nor is it 'waiting' in a conventional sense. (For us it felt more 'curved', and somehow non-linear). As a description of the 'feel' of the Czech Quartet's manner here, we found the phrase extremely accurate, and especially useful as a basis for capturing this moment's character 'all together'.

Score: [b.57-59](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.56-59](#)

#67: Weave (II)

In #37 I mentioned the ability to conceptualise, or even to 'see' the weave of contrapuntal textures. This is a

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familiar trope of string quartet ideology, and throughout the process we found that we needed to repurpose (rather than dismantle) this form of awareness, in order to account for the Czech Quartet's conventional modes of interaction. As I implied earlier, the key to this was often a 'stretched' linearity: the way in which each player 'lives' the distance between each interval. This sensation was constantly in flux: some intervals seemed to need really 'playing', but others could simply be allowed to 'be there'. The dramatization of these distances is witnessed with singular clarity at the point of contact between bow and string.

These embodied patterns of tension and release in the tone are experienced in constant tension with the 'vertical' (i.e. harmonic) dimensions of a particular texture. We were most successful in capturing their ensemble interaction – and especially the character of their 'asynchrony' – when those 'discrepancies' between the voices resulted from true commitment to this melodic 'betweenness' in the trajectories of the voices. I am unconvinced, therefore, that the Czech Quartet's ensemble is captured by a monolithic term like 'dislocation' – or even 'asynchrony'. In this model of interaction, asynchronous onsets are manifestly not a result of mutual disinterest, but are witnessed with the sort of sensitivity to nuance that is reminiscent of more everyday interpersonal relationships.

A central challenge in understanding their ensemble, then, was the fact that such relations can never be *explicitly* choreographed in the way that 'dislocation' implies. That is to say, such a named concept is simply incapable of sufficiently fine calibration, nor of truly contextual sensitivity. Instead, the core of this expressive mode can be more usefully grounded in attention, and the way in which a player commits to their own sense of melodic/linear tension – and, relatedly, characterisation – while always seeing that in the context of a constantly shifting harmonic 'betweenness'. Each line requires both 'logic' and openness simultaneously: collectively negotiated conventions, options, and habits – but *not* decisions. We felt that to 'weave' in this way depended on one's attention being 'locked into' the melodic motion of each other's parts, and being entirely captured (and captivated) by them at the same time as one offers motion, 'angles' and imagination in the other direction.

#68: Voice (and role) exchange

Czech Quartet violist Herold seems to take a great deal of time over the D-F# interval in **b.56**. On closer

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examination, this is revealed to be more akin to an aural illusion arising from the context. His supporting bass here has remarkable width in tone, as if he is ‘making space’ for the meeting of viola and cello on the same pitch in **b.57**²⁸². These moments of voice (and role) exchange are among the most directly experienced facets of playing quartets: there is also something deeply embodied about the tension with which those all-too-brief meetings then ‘peel’ away. These bars are also distinguished by their sense of swing. Despite the time taken over the interval, the viola’s arrival note (F#) in **b.56** is clipped, and is thus somewhat de-emphasised. At the end of the bar, then, it is as if he is accounting for the first violin’s trajectory, while acknowledging the ‘stepping-stone’ quality of the cadential progression his part makes together with the cello, as it ‘swoops underneath’ once more.

This moment can be traced even further back, to the switch of roles **b.49**, where the viola takes on the ‘load bearing’ responsibility while the cello shadows it a third above. Quartet players habitually make adjustments to tone and resonance in these situations: the viola ‘takes on’ qualities of the larger instrument by significantly slowing the bow, and adopting a different manner in underpinning what goes on above. It is like taking the tiller on a large ship, compared to a small boat: gestures become slower moving, ‘rounder’, and more committed (once they get started). Conversely, the cello appropriates the more flexible, pliant tone conventionally associated with inner parts, and even a more enthusiastically ‘mediating’ character. (An inner part has to be especially sensitive to ‘switching teams’ in the middle of a phrase, in a way that is less true of a bass function). (**b.49-56**²).

Score: [b.49-57](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.47-57](#)

#69: Breaking notated slurs

Hoffmann frequently breaks notated slurs in this passage and many others. It is impossible to tell if this is a

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relevant convention – in the sense that the meaning of such slurs was broadly different, and more fluid than later in the twentieth century – or if he just ran out of bow in the moment of performance, and preferred to prioritise the sound’s continuity by taking another. It seems probable that a combination of both is in play. But when they did play the slurs, we felt that the Czech Quartet committed to those legato connections remarkably ‘actively’, again emphasising intervals – at least when a feeling of resistance was implied by the material.

#70: Option to treat evenness as ‘marked’

Admitting unevenness into the very foundations of one’s rhythm brought an unexpected benefit, in that it opened up expressive potential in the other direction. Playing very evenly, rather than being the *de facto* norm,

²⁸² The slowly oscillating vibrato contributes to this ‘widening’.

could itself be much more 'marked', by comparison with more irregular surroundings. It is probably misguided to

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speculate about how the original players experienced the 'affect' of this, given the extent to which it was dependent on context – even for us. In **b.47-48** of the *Dumka*, second violinist Josef Suk plays his undulating semiquaver figures considerably more evenly than in the surrounding bars, which are characterised by much greater tension – not just harmonically, but rhythmically, as a result of his much less predictable uneven inflections. The effect, for us, was to heighten the impact of the G major tonality as a brief oasis of calm. The 'even' bars were not neutral, as they might have been in our own style, but created a more obvious feeling of relaxation because of the contrast this 'marked' moment made with the more *inégalé* surroundings. In copying this passage, it was useful to imagine the second violin as a 'pivot' for these affective fluctuations. The way in which she varied the rhythmic profile here – indeed, of material that looks very similar on the page – essentially governed the intensity of what unfolded around her. As the viola passes the main melody to the first violin, the rhythmic character of the second violin's semiquaver 'innards' could make a considerable contribution to the sense of harmonic 'tightening'.

This observation does not suggest a general mapping: I certainly do not mean that one always associates harmonic stasis with evenness, and motion with unevenness. But it did give us a greater appreciation of the way in which rhythm was integrated with 'affect'. Here, a brief moment of harmonic simplicity could be heightened by adopting an equivalent simplicity in rhythmic nuance. In other places, such as the *Vivace* of Op.96, evenness was associated with very different qualities, including a more mechanical idiom in **b.146-150**; or, as we will see in **#75**, the angelic, hymnal, simple atmosphere **b.155-171**, which could hardly make a greater contrast with the fragile humanity of **b.179-198**.

Score: [Dumka b.47-55](#); *Op.96 Vivace* [b.146-150](#) & [b.155-198](#)

Recordings: Czech Quartet *Dumka* [b.47-55](#); Czech Quartet *Op.96 Vivace* [b.146-150](#) & [b.155-198](#)

#71: Recovery depends on tactile beat concept

Their manner of 'recovering' time often felt unfamiliar and unpredictable, probably because it was never

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formulaic. We felt that the concept of recovery must have been important to them on some level, but it was remarkably difficult to generalise about their strategies. This difficulty encouraged us to look again at how we were conceptualising timing and beat structure. Theorising about the idea of recovery sometimes gives the impression of a functionally independent (and regular) timing framework lying 'above' the performance, where the process of 'paying back' time is underpinned by a metaphorical pendulum that swings between adherence and deviance. Though appealing in theory, we found that this model did not accurately reflect the musician's relationship to time in each moment of performance.

The Czech players' system of 'payback' – insofar as it could ever be called a system – became far more intelligible once we had alighted on an understanding of 'beat' that was a) tactile; and b) intrinsically continuous. From this point of view, 'the beat' is much more *like* time itself: it is never a 'given' quantity that is 'imposed' or divided, but is permanently in the process of being created/destroyed. The idea of an abstract aggregate of time, by contrast, was of little practical use. The Czech Quartet were clearly sensitive to the idea of 'payback' on some level, but we

felt their concept must have functioned ‘from below’ rather than ‘from above’.

Cultivating a greater physicality in our perception of timing involved treating every moment of holding or yielding as if it had its own feeling of contextual inertia. This meant that we were never truly counting, but allowed the spring-back (in either direction) simply to ‘occur’ with inevitability, rather than calculation. We could feel it in this way because it was never solely a matter of timing, but was now allowed to behave as an implicit, integrated response to each moment *and its context*. This is vital for understanding how and why ‘asynchrony’ was allowable for the Czech Quartet, and for going beyond seeing ‘it’ only as a parametric manipulation.

#72: Evaluations

This section offers a small taste of our evaluations in the passage **b.39-59**. We felt this take was getting closer,

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but the cello needed to be more ‘covered’; the *inégale* was too subtle – to the extent of being barely audible on listening back; vibrato was too present in second violin; and the violist remarked that far from hearing her own intentions back – which had seemed vivid at the time – the sound played back was ‘plain’, as if lacking ‘content’ (especially by comparison with the Czech Quartet).

The sense of propulsion in the viola line **b.47** onwards was particularly interesting to us, because while it does not technically ‘rush’, the sound remains airborne, and never ‘sits’ in the string. We found we had to release the bow a little more after the contact has started: one opens and develops the sound through a kind of self-reinforcing resonance, instead of increasing contact ‘into’ the string.²⁸³ A further dimension here is the need for a certain lightening in the bow towards the end of the viola’s long note, but early enough for the note to then gain momentum and develop into the next pitch. (The effect of this is a little ‘wobble’). That shape is connected to the timing of the semiquavers in the second violin – not in terms of precise timing, but in the slight feeling of instability that accompanies the harmonic intensification. Finally, as the viola’s role changes to one of bass support, it seemed important that the increase in ‘core’ did not compromise the feeling of development in the tone, because that capacity was essential if it was to relate to the trajectory of the voices above it.

Dvořák’s score here evokes a vivid sense of different ‘teams’, as recognisable figures are passed around the group. One might assume, on brief acquaintance with the Czech Quartet’s style, that clipped gestures might take on a certain flippant spontaneity here. Although I would not want to deny this improvisational spirit, we felt that they were able to ground those imaginative characterisations in the ‘thread’ of the harmonic narrative, in a way that was conspicuously elusive to our early renditions. The progressions **b.55²-59¹** were significantly more successful once we had spent time playing them at a free but much reduced tempo, zoning into the potential twist, angles, resolutions, and partnerships of each ‘vertical slice’ (as in **#3**).

As in **#54**, seeing certain key modulations as ‘targets’ was useful here. In copying, we increasingly felt that the ability to hold destinations in mind was entirely commensurate with the Czech Quartet’s ostensibly more

²⁸³ This is reminiscent of the motion involved in playing the instruments of the viol family, in which that moment of release ‘outwards’ needs to happen very early in every strong ‘push’ stroke.

‘rhetorical’ surface. Thinking about what performers are doing with their attention suggests that dichotomies between moment-to-moment spontaneity and entirely ‘planned-out’ inflexibility are ultimately unnecessary. A sense of ‘direction’ does not need to be entwined with a specifically structural ‘model’ of music; there are many more ways of conceiving goal-directedness. In this passage, embracing teleology in how we played together – but not, of course, ‘together’ – lent our performance a more compelling, integrated quality, even while the surface gestures and spoken figures retained their non-literal character.

Finally, the last four bars of this excerpt (especially **b.58**) posed an entertaining problem: our second violinist was keen to try arriving at the cadence later than everybody else, but found it impossible in practice, because everyone was (unintentionally) continuing to follow her. Clearly, these are not easy habits to overcome. When concentrating on multiple things at once – including new ways of using the bow, and exploring new kinds of connections between notes – we often found that our learned synchronisation responses returned with a vengeance.

Score: [b.39-59](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.39-59](#); [Experiment b.39-59](#)

VIII. Antonin Dvořák – String Quartet Op.96, iv. Vivace, ma non troppo ([SCORE](#))

#73: Asynchrony as ‘unmarked’

In **#31-#33** I discussed the idea of accompanying bowstrokes that seem designed to invoke instability in timing and tone (e.g. **b.25-29**). The embrace of individual indeterminacy is significant for the copying process more generally, in that ‘planning to come apart here’ is a different kind of ‘strategy’ to that which likely generated the original performance. In the intervening time we generated many more insights into the potential modes of interaction between players.

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We have already seen how asynchronies, particularly in accompanying textures, were probably less ‘marked’ for the Czech Quartet than they seem to us in retrospect. This is surely true of the opening paragraph of the Vivace, where the sense of motion/energy is reminiscent of a ratchet, as the inner parts attempt to outdo each other for characterisation and momentum, albeit with their ‘two-way valve’ always hard at work. In other situations, the players’ gestures are integrated in a way that is far from independent, yet is distributed in time (as described in Chapter 4). There is no single recipe, then, for their asynchronous ‘strategies’ – if that word is even meaningful. We increasingly felt that the Czech Quartet were working within a very ‘open’, relational concept, and which was complex in ways that will remain opaque to categorisation. That is the heart of the hemisphere metaphor’s practical value to performance researchers who are so often forced to shoehorn our understanding of music – including alternative or obsolete approaches – into coarser-grained, inflexible ‘systems’. It also helps to contextualise the understandable focus on synchronisation within ensemble research.

#74: Phrase boundary de-emphasis

A particularly difficult transition for us to grasp was between **b.47-52**, when hard-edged martial gestures give way to delicate playfulness. This is a good example of the ostensibly less 'structural' outlook characteristic of the Czech Quartet's generation, and of the idea that playing across phrase boundaries was an available option, if not exactly a norm. In this quicker movement we often found ourselves drawing attention to such moments of transition – surely because the Czechs' handling of them seems so unusual and marked, from our perspective – and this resulted in a sense of conscious manipulation that was far more subtle in the original. I suggested above (in **#72**) that we regularly found ourselves having to 'do more' than we expected, if details were to be audible on record. On some occasions, however, the situation was entirely reversed, and our gestures sounded much more explicit, less continuous, and more consciously 'made'. I have included two of our attempts here, to illustrate how finely this moment was balanced, and how our versions approximated the character of the original without ever capturing the true details of its grammar – especially in the final quaver of b.50.

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Score: [b.47-52](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.47-52](#); [Experiment A b.47-52](#); [Experiment B b.47-52](#)

#75: Tensions within synchronised ensemble

In **#22** we saw how treating asynchrony as 'allowable' in principle also changes the character of playing that is closely synchronised. Two examples following in quick succession – between **b.155-171**; and **b.179-198** – build on this point.

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The first is easier to grasp, because its unfolding tensions develop progressively. First violinist Hoffmann presents new (hymn-like) material (**b.155**) in a flowing tempo that seems to 'come out of' the preceding music. That tempo is quickly undermined by next entry, however: it is as though second violinist Suk starts 'holding' his colleague, challenging him to *resist* the easy 'flow' he has already set up. The two-way valve concept is essential here, because at no point are these voices perceptibly 'asynchronous'; yet in terms of their *attitude* towards the material they pull in different directions. This is not so keenly felt outside the ensemble, but we experienced it viscerally 'from within'. To make this passage work, every moment had to risk being 'un-together'. (In this process of mutual persuasion, the 'valve' was working very hard).

Adopting this mindset generates tensions within the voices that are impossible to quantify, but its qualities were made audible by noting their absence in our early versions. They were not simply performing particular tempo 'strategies', then, but seemed to be adopting much more 'whole' personae: dispositions, in other words, towards both the musical material and one another. The *potential* for asynchrony is so important here because no risk-reward framework based around the normative value of synchronisation would consider this disposition a worthwhile gamble. With different rules, different possibilities are opened.

The second passage **b.179-198** presents an easily neglected but important combination: irregular swing executed

in very close synchronisation.²⁸⁴ On the basis of this example, it seems plausible that much of the Czech Quartet's attention (and rehearsal) over the years of their collaboration was devoted to developing the ability to play expressively and irregularly – but in precisely the same way, and at the same time. This skill is rarely practiced either by 'mainstream' modern players or by ('radical') RIP specialists – clearly, for different reasons. Such grey areas are casualties of polemical argument, and the vocabulary of 'devices'. In particular, they fall into the gaps generated by an insufficiently flexible understanding of 'togetherness' in musical performance.

This section was brutally revealing of our comparative lack of synthesis. We were simply not familiar enough with the general convention (skill?) described above, for the particular details to be executed sufficiently implicitly – and indeed 'together'. Relatedly, we often lacked their sense of forward motion, and were liable to break the music into overly 'straight' units. We attempted to capture their rhythmic fluctuations, but it may be that trying hard to be fluid in this respect was our key mistake. As in **#17**, saturation of agency meant that we unintentionally fell into simplistic habits (including imposing small, unintentional pauses every 4 bars). These habits were *not* pre-ordained decisions, but seemed to 'fall out' of the faulty assumptions upon which our attempts were built. As before, our 'big beats' (i.e. 'hypermetrical structure') felt fundamentally different to those of the Czech Quartet. Ours were strangely regular, despite the overly conspicuous variation: they were too 'given', too *regulative*. Their variation seemed to be generated more 'internally', as though it was coming from 'within' the notes themselves.

Score: [b.155-198](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.155-198](#)

#76: Preparation and completion: dovetails revisited

In **b.179-198** our quartet's violist perceptively traced some of the stylistic contrast to the preparation and

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completion of phrases. From a performer's perspective, 'preparation' – especially when it involves the breath – is a usefully embodied explanation of the way in which 'structural' phrasing tends to emphasise separation between perceptually salient units.²⁸⁵ For the purposes of this observation, it is worth keeping the idea of preparation intact, and resisting the urge to split it into parameters like dynamic and tempo. She noticed the Czech Quartet's uncanny ability to elide gestures of completion into gestures of preparation: in the passage above, for example, they 'prepare' the phrase ahead while they are still in the process of completing the preceding material. This is subtly different from simply playing 'across' a boundary without a hint of relaxation or acknowledgement: we felt that they did both, but that the two are dovetailed rather than distinguished. (We were more inclined, by contrast, to devote separate gestures to each of those tasks). This is not offered as a theoretical or explanatory model, but as a good example of a 'performer's understanding': a useful generalisation that is ultimately aimed at uniqueness.

Score: [b.179-198](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.179-198](#)

²⁸⁴ Their swing does not map onto the notated hairpins; indeed we had to work hard to avoid our collective variations falling into simplistic four-bar patterns.

²⁸⁵ This is paradigmatically on the level of the phrase, but it can work at either a smaller or larger scale.

#77: Physicality in bowing as shared basis

Staying with **b.179-198**, we found it helpful to unify our physicality in the bow, and to find a shared character of

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contact that would underpin our individual variation. This approach to the archaeology of recordings lies a long way from painstakingly identifying the timing of notes. This more ‘already whole’, embodied perspective on their playing offers an alternative ‘way in’ to the Czech Quartet’s sometimes peculiar trajectories. As in **#1**, we met with more success in ‘feeling’ their rhythm when our contact was a little firmer than one might assume from listening alone. But as before, they guard against the tendency for this greater contact to yield rhythmic stolidity. This fractional adjustment allowed us to ‘play with the vowels’ of the resonances; we could then feel our timing as a product of that tonal palette. This is not possible if the bow speed is too fast – for us, ‘whooshy’ – and inclined to release automatically. (This feeling is a favourite for many string players: the bow is in the string, quite close to the bridge, and feels delicate, contained, and poised). The basic state is not easy to find; but once the feeling has been located it makes for effective manipulation, in that the tone can fluctuate either by increasing the depth of the contact, or by ‘opening’ the sound through greater motion. We struggled to combine this insight with copying the details of the Czech Quartet’s rubato precisely. Yet this matching of physicality allowed us to get much closer to the character of their variation. It was crucial, indeed, that it tapped into the immediacy and responsiveness of collective embodied sensation, and was considerably less abstract than ideas like ‘phrase arching’ or ‘strategies for the navigation of structure’.

#78: Complex internal dynamics compromised by generalisation

The final dimension of this passage concerns leader-follower dynamics. It was one thing to know explicitly that we

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needed to try and ‘keep the momentum’ as a group between **b.179-187**, and to avoid overly predictable units of phrasing. It was another to do this while also capturing the sense that the first violinist was “dragging the sound forward, rather than constantly chasing it”. This metaphor also hints at the frustration one experiences if the cart gets ahead of the horse. An open disposition was once again key to unlocking these internal dynamics: to have ‘space’ to push or pull other voices requires them to provide it. The first violin cannot ‘catch’ that linear resistance – effectively pick up the slack – if the other voices are already rushing ahead, in their efforts to keep the music going. In retrospect, this concept of between-player relationships seems to be closely related to their tactile feel for beat structure: as something always being created and destroyed, rather than given ‘from above’ (see **#71**). Finding this peculiar ‘elastication’ between the parts *within a broadly synchronised idiom* proved very difficult to capture, and we did not feel we ‘succeeded’ in the time available.

Score: [b.179-198](#)

Recordings: [Experiment b.179-198](#)

IX. Josef Suk – Meditation on an Old Czech Hymn ‘St Wenceslas’ Op.35a

(SCORE)

#79: Initial misconception in pitting detail against specificity

We usually felt better equipped to record immediately after doing detailed ‘detective work’ on particular

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passages. I had expected the opposite. In retrospect, that expectation was derived from the faulty assumption that detailed work would likely be somewhat ‘left hemisphere’ in character. In fact, because we were encountering such unique sounds, and because our manner of relating to them had to be so direct – if often heavily metaphorical – we found it relatively easy to go from that exploration into committed takes of our own. Surprisingly, we found that deliberately attempting ‘a more synthesised version’ often resulted in playing that seemed to be ‘about’ generalities rather than specifics. Gestures were ironed out and made too similar, and our interaction sometimes lacked intensity. The balance was fine, then, for we had to live in the discoveries for long enough to believe in them; but we also could not allow those findings too much time to ‘sit’, such that they became overly generic – or took on the character of executed categories – when we came to play in this way ourselves.

#80: Change over time in perception of listening

Our experience of the Czech Quartet’s sound production sometimes changed quite significantly over time –

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especially when we were experimenting with instruments in tandem with listening, and coming back to one recording after time spent with another. As I have said, these re-evaluations generally tended towards greater focus and core, as in the opening viola statement of the *Meditation*. The initial ‘softness’ of contact was potentially misleading; we had sometimes read into their tone a more diffuse, silvery body than was actually the case, on the basis of that initial articulation. Softness of course remained important to our understanding, but it became clearer as time went on that this gentleness would need to coexist with greater concentration of tone, at least in lyrical material.²⁸⁶

#81: Inégale is often intrinsically connected to structural rubato

It is time to deal with the seed I planted in #65, about there often being no tenable distinction between inégale

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and tempo change. (It should be noted that this is a practical observation derived from experience, rather than an analytical or empirical one). In **b.14**, the timing of the local rhythmic figures in beats 2 and 3 in the inner parts – a telling lingering on each of the melodic quavers, with a spring-back in the final semiquaver – was interesting to us because it does not slow the overall tempo, but still imbues the bar with a feeling of heaviness. We found that inégale often gave rise to a productive contradiction between ‘affect’

²⁸⁶ It should be said that focused quality of tone is relatively conventionalised within the chamber music art world, for a number of reasons; the more radical aspect of their style is the *combination* of that contained overtone spectrum with a remarkable softness in their feel for the string.

and the (more obvious) conclusions extrapolated from measured timing profiles.²⁸⁷

This also works in the opposite direction. It is most audible in the *Lento* of Op.96 that large-scale tempo changes are often a result of variations that are ‘smuggled in’ at the ends of beats. Because they are *felt*, not counted, these moments of swing always leave ‘room’ for quick adjustments – in either direction. Sometimes that capacity is used to account for other voices. But sometimes it means taking the imaginative reins, and using the ratios of evenness to unevenness to instigate much more radical changes. (See example below, listening carefully to the role the viola’s inflections play in governing the overall speed). The key point is that treating swing as the grounding of the rhythm means that both options are always available, and are entirely integrated with the higher-level abstraction of ‘tempo’.

Score: [Suk Meditation b.14](#); [Dvořák Op.96 Lento b.63-75](#)
Recordings: [Czech Quartet Suk b.14](#); [Dvořák b.63-75](#)

#82: ‘Grammatical’ details

The Czech Quartet viola player completely changes persona between **b.1-2** – where he is a thoughtful,

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imaginative orator – and **b.3**, when he becomes a supportive harmonic ‘pivot’. This transition has a delightfully grammatical quality: the bow makes an ‘envelope’ that hands over responsibility in a manner that is simultaneously distinct and flowing, rather like a semicolon, and which sees him arrive at a gentler, less ‘present’ sound quality precisely at the moment at which his colleagues enter. This is another example of how one can show with trajectory – in this case, that of the last note’s intensity – when another player’s phrase *has* to begin. A moment like this is impractical if approached as a ‘lead’, and must remain more implicit. Tonal change is especially important here because the freedom of the melodic timing in this introductory material makes counting a deeply unreliable guide. It is better to conceive of the trajectory as a whole, in order to anticipate the next phrase.

The heaviness of the inner part gestures I mentioned in **#81** seems to be stimulated, at least in part, by a telling (and technically unnecessary) shift by first violinist Hoffmann on the first beat of **b.14**. The change to the lower, heavier D string creates a certain emphasis, but he does not slide in the way one might assume of an early twentieth century string player: the change in tone is actually very clean. The effect is of a kind of rhetorical culmination, but which nevertheless remains firmly grounded within the mood of the preceding material.

The C-C shift across the string is a relatively large (and unnecessary) distance to cover in a small space of time, and might be an obvious candidate for a ‘violinistic’ moment, emphasising that distance by a conspicuous slide. But Hoffmann eschews any soloistic impulse, largely ‘covering’ the shift by releasing the bow at the moment of travel, and playing the arrival note with a ‘bare’ sound (with very little vibrato). It is specifically the *weightiness* of his tone here that performs the critical function: of arriving at a destination that the harmonic texture has been

²⁸⁷ I have in mind the latter formulated as relatively coarse averages.

circling for the previous bar and a half. In the process, he sets up a cascading trajectory for the remainder of the bar, which is completed by his inner part colleagues.

Score: [b.1-14](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.1-14](#)

#83: Breathing and (un)familiarity

Building our expressivity around the breath made a vast difference to how close we were able to get to the Czech

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Quartet's 'feel' for ensemble, if not necessarily to the specific performance they recorded. When playing in this way, we had noticed that we were generally more likely to 'hold onto' our breathing, and to become physically tighter. This may be related to our attention being focused on executing novel – and thus comparatively pre-planned, or consciously considered – gestures. Simply noticing this tendency was enough to give our playing a more 'synthesised' feeling – not in the sense of being more 'structural', but in the way our individual gestures had greater continuity, and were more contextual and responsive. Imagining *rhythmic* nuance as closely related to the breath was also very helpful in finding more of that elusive specificity in our *inégale*. This meant overcoming the temptation to count or 'measure' what one was doing too explicitly; or even to think about how we were doing it at all. The obvious problem in doing this was that was one risked reversion to a more habituated (i.e. modern) expressive style; on the other hand, this arguably told us something important about the sorts of things that are hardest to capture when copying performance styles from early recordings.

A special challenge of experimenting with historical *ensemble* is that to play individually in a style that is distant from one's own – however long this has been practiced – already requires a great deal of conscious attention. In practice, maintaining a 'normal' amount of sensitivity towards others at the same time is simply not possible. Clearly, this situation does not reflect the original circumstances. When this is factored in alongside the slightly chaotic impression of some early recorded styles, the result is a ratcheting effect, whereby interactions become dominated by individualistic (and interventionist) gestures that are rarely counterbalanced by mutual awareness. (We saw an example of this in **#73**). It is possible that this could form an effective basis for performance in its own right, but it cannot be an adequate explanation of the Czech Quartet's ensemble paradigm.

#84: Description privileges singular reductions

Overly concrete descriptions of the Czech Quartet's performances risked neglecting the extent to which tone (and

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its specific affective qualities) was always in flux – to such an extent that we found it was resistant, in practice, to singular 're-presentational' descriptions. In certain places we thought we had found exactly the right kind of tension, but that in such cases it was tempting to double down on that success, and to 'hold onto' that tone for an artificially long time. In fact, we needed to let that feeling pass much more quickly, when it was no longer demanded by the context, and always be ready to allow one's sound to transform (itself) into something different in the next moment. Again, integration is the central thread here: we

often felt that the timing had been convincing, but that the tone was too static, and so the two did not coalesce.

Our experiment suggested that it is entirely possible to track one's understanding of (a) performance style in relatively confined terms – of mood, affect, bow use, rubato, etc. – but that this is sometimes misleading, in terms of how well (or for how long) those descriptions accurately reflect the original. This applies especially when dealing with musicians whose inclinations lay in the direction of uniqueness: our descriptions of the Czech Quartet's sound were sometimes accurate only for moments at a time. There is an obvious, even banal point here about the difficulty of expressing music in language. The more interesting implication, for me, is about the extent of performers' sensitivity to changes in mood and 'feel', and the specificity and precision with which a player experiences those changing states, in spite of the impossibility of verbalisation.

#85: Intermediate re-parameterisation

In an effort to mitigate the problem of too many concerns being held in awareness, on occasion we temporarily

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focused conscious attention on single 'dimensions' of our playing. The obvious pair of candidates for such 'streamlining' were tone and timing. One version, then, involved directing attention towards '*when* we play, not so much *how*...' ²⁸⁸ This offered a chance to prioritise looking for an 'inner logic' in timing – the way the trajectories rose and fell in tempo only – and in a sense taking a brief holiday from other stylistic 'parameters', such that we could pay closer attention to rhythmic relationships between the voices. This was not meant to undermine the importance of tonal and instrumental details, but simply to allow us to witness the same notes with more of the freedom and awareness to which one has access when playing in a 'native' style.

The impact of these two parallel experiments was probably more keenly felt than it was heard, but it was useful calibration, first, of our perception of tonal and emotional intensity, and second, of the balance between 'hold' and 'flow'.

#86: Is it possible to focus on 'felt emotion'?

An important question that has been lurking throughout this account is whether it is possible for modern players

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to embody these sounds fully enough that (genuinely) 'felt emotion' can start to take the place of (self-conscious) experimentation with performance style 'features'. How far could we keep hold of this unfamiliar style while also attempting to recast it as emergent from 'real' feeling – that is, to channel C.P.E. Bach's notion of the performer 'letting themselves be moved' by the music?

Another of our metaphors that hinted at this was the idea that 'we did not need to see the duck's feet under the water'. We felt that there must be no hint of moving parts, which needed to be subsumed under 'higher' expressive intentions. While we were sceptical that this would be possible, I was keen to see what the attempt

²⁸⁸ This intermediate tactic emerged quite organically out of rehearsal conversation, rather than being a pre-planned exercise.

might tell us. In the event, the results were fascinating: some aspects of our playing were far more convincingly 'synthesised' than previous takes, but we also witnessed a sense of reversion to a more modern idiom, when we prioritised 'feeling' in this way. The playing still involved slides, unequal rhythm, asynchrony, and tempo flexibility. But its *character* was undoubtedly different to the Czech Quartet's, in a way that arguably resists explanation by parameters.

#87: Perception of beats

By the end of the process, we had much greater insight into the relationship between tonal intensity in the bow,

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and the feeling that the next beat 'could' always fall somewhere that was indistinct, distributed, and not pre-determined. It had been easy to revert to a very different, more 'given' concept of beat, even when one was ostensibly performing the same kinds of slides and rhythmic variations as the Czech Quartet. This shift in beat concept proved to be one of the most practical ways of overcoming modern ensemble conventions which, as I have said, could be surprisingly resilient, even when multifarious historical 'devices' were in play.

In certain situations, then, we emphasised this idea of tactility and resistance in the beat, such that it would never be just 'there', ticking away, but that the idea of beat itself was only *ever* emergent from what we do. We needed to treat it in a much more 'right hemisphere' manner: as if it had its own width, uncertainty, and 'quality' (rather than quantity). When we felt frustrated that we had not yet managed to transcend our 'modern' sound, that could often be associated with a feeling that beats were 'decreed' from above, and existed *independently* of our rhythmic inflections. When we felt closer to the Czech Quartet's rhythmic feeling, the sensation was often more like we were reshaping plasticine.

#88: Twin modes

Having become familiar with the idea of 'tactile beats', the next stage was to see it as a capacity, and not as a

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blanket disposition. We eventually considered this to be one of two possible poles, for in other situations we found we needed the reliability and consistency afforded by a more 'given' beat concept. We imagined the latter state as 'being the wheel': in this mode, one lets the beat 'tick along', not necessarily always completely metronomically, but with the groove reminiscent of a rhythm section. It is a much cleaner sensation than the 'plasticine' concept discussed above: more straightforward, and perhaps more brittle. We found that ensemble 'roles' could then be grounded in this rich spectrum of attitudes towards time.

Consider the textural contrast between **b.17-19** and **b.20-22**, in which the lower two voices move from arco to pizzicato, leaving the violins to their understated conversational exchange. In the Czech Quartet's performance, the lower parts seem to transform their whole concept of time – and with it, their function in the ensemble – as they switch from inégale, tactile flexibility in the bowed material (**b.17** onwards), to a much more 'wheel-like',

regular concept of beat from **b.19**⁴. The change to pizzicato makes this change especially audible, but the really crucial dimension of this transformation is not in the technique, but in their attitude towards the beat. (In principle, the same contrasting effect is easily achieved with the bow.)

A complicating factor here is that the viola and cello embrace regularity – their disposition is not remotely ‘flighty’ – and yet they do not play at the same time. This may sound paradoxical, given that I am arguing that this ‘straighter’ mode depends on a more discrete, extrinsic beat ‘origin’. Our attempts to copy this peculiar combination suggested, first, that it was not possible to replicate this unevenly distributed pizzicato by deliberately attempting to separate them. Recall the point from **#73** about asynchrony in such situations being importantly ‘unmarked’, and never the object of explicit attention (or intention). In this situation, we realised that self-conscious ‘deviations’ of timing, however small, often compromised the feeling of ‘groove’ that was critical to this accompaniment. It was more effective to set down only the general principle that the lowest part would be the firmest – the most ‘extrinsic’ – in how it laid down a regular beat structure. The viola would ‘sit inside’ that rhythm, but have a fraction more imaginative leeway to ‘account for’ the changing harmonies in her placement of the pizzicati.

This more implicit tactic was an improvement, but we still found it difficult to capture the precise ‘feel’ of their accompaniment. But our struggles once more bred insight, because the Czech Quartet’s version increasingly resembled an early twentieth-century incarnation of something that was familiar from our own experience: of a timing pattern that is shared by two (or more) players, and which has been repeated and internalised for so long that the shape merely emerges, mutually, without any real awareness of agency. If we had been working within our own conventions here, that was precisely the feeling we would have looked for (and expected).

As we have seen throughout, one of the biggest challenges for modern players experimenting with historical style is to reconcile the impression of imaginative spontaneity with their care in handling hypermeter.²⁸⁹ The ability to ground one’s ‘active but accompanying’ role in a regular, ‘sitting-back’ rhythmic feel provides another counterbalance to the tendency for collective expressive imagination to result in too great a consciousness of individual beats and bar-lines. We found that if a more rhythmic ‘groove’ sat underneath the irregular melodic expressivity of the surface, that significantly mitigated the tendency for the collective’s imaginative disposition to saturate the texture with frequent ‘down’ impulses.²⁹⁰ The latter is not the inevitable outcome of playing that sets out to embrace spontaneity; but in our experience, it can be a common result.

I do not mean to undermine the impression of spontaneity in early recordings, in arguing that it is better to see those improvisational qualities as *synthesised*. These players had been through explicit processes collectively, and had made it to ‘the other side’ – or, alternatively, had been returned to the right hemisphere, enriched by the encounter with the left. We felt this to be the crux of the difference between playing that *aims* to play ‘loosely’ and imaginatively, and the performances that were captured on record in the late 1920s.

Like almost everything else I have discussed, these two ‘modes’ are never monolithic theories to be ‘applied’. They

²⁸⁹ See **#17** and **#74**.

²⁹⁰ The similarities with ‘contrametric rubato’ are obvious (Hudson 1994); I hope it is equally clear, however, why I have not described this phenomenon in those precise terms.

are 'whole' states, and they can only be felt (and transmitted) in the moment of performance. Their physical, embodied dimensions are key to that flexibility. We found that there is often a greater sense of tonal relaxation – a sense of *ease* – in the second ('given') mode, than in the more unpredictable first, and this realisation provided another 'way in' to understanding the Czech Quartet's fluctuations in intensity. It provided an alternative basis for our musical relationships, in the absence of a simple synchronisation imperative. For it brings notions of 'affect' and 'shape' into direct contact with a fluid 'feel' for ensemble roles – but, crucially, it does so indirectly. This was an apt distillation of our findings overall: one ceases to think of playing either evenly or unevenly, and instead aims attention at a specific conceptualisation of time, and witnesses the music unfold in relation to it. It is a spectrum that never needs to be decreed or scripted, but instead, can remain implicit, emerging, coexisting, and freely circulating among fellow musicians.

Score: [b.17-22](#)

Recordings: [Czech Quartet b.17-22](#)

Coda

Finally in this section, I present some longer excerpts of our own playing. In such a short process, the results are necessarily somewhat raw and un-synthesised, but I hope they give an indication of the kinds of directions in which further experimentation could be taken. They are not intended as exact copies, but are inspired by the 'feel' of the Czech Quartet's interactions – especially their understanding of rhythm and gesture. This is only the first step along this path. It is clear, however, that early recordings constitute a richly rewarding source of insight, for those interested in 'rethinking' performance.

Antonin Dvořák Op.51: II. Dumka

[\(b.39-95\)](#)

Josef Suk Meditation Op.35a

[\(b.1-40\)](#)

Conclusion

The main finding of this thesis is that the evidence of early recordings does not just nuance the 'parameters' by which we think about ensemble performance and its values, but actually calls into question the structural *basis* of that understanding. This can be traced back to confusion about classical music's ontology, which itself is a result of patterns of thought that are embedded in, and incentivised by, the culture of WAM. Those patterns are also entwined with social organisation, and the policing of 'elite' values in performance. The two approaches I have taken here are both intended, in their different ways, to show how the persuasive tools of discourse have generated an (implicit) understanding of musical experience that is functionally upside-down. It is as though musicology has been absorbed in drawing its picture of the sky at night while looking through the wrong end of the telescope.

It is important that the study of ensemble praxis develops a more coherent resistance to the fact that performance changes. Although this project has not directly proposed solutions to that challenge, I have sought to diagnose the problem in a level of detail that I hope will be helpful to future research. In particular, it should be clear that the intrinsically experiential quality of music bestows philosophical complexity that must be accounted for in epistemological frameworks, however persuasive certain simplifications might appear. The metaphor of 'left hemisphere capture' provides a memorable distillation of the risks of seeing bureaucratic task execution in place of complex, meaningful experience.

The further implications of this investigation are simultaneously theoretical and practical; indeed, as I have emphasised throughout, these domains are 'locked together'.

First, it suggests a need to look beyond parameters in studying performance. I have argued that the language of devices has, for many good reasons, provided the conceptual basis for much of the scholarship of performance. We can see now that this assumption requires some philosophical counterbalancing. For the logic of division is not a neutral disposition: it substitutes discrete conceptual 'ingredients' for the flow and context that necessarily characterises experience – especially that of the performing musician. This quiet analytical transformation has permeated musicological discourse at many different levels. My claim is that this has been an important – but mostly unrecognised – driver of theoretical incoherence at a larger scale. This convention often forces one to put the cart before the horse, despite the best of intentions. And it can be seen clearly, I think, in the confused blending of cultural norms and 'psychological mechanisms' we find in the study of ensemble performance.

The approach I have taken here points instead towards a basic structure of musicological investigation which does not treat phenomenology as an addendum to the 'more secure' findings of empiricism, but, metaphorically, at least, regards embodied experience both as the grounding of that analytical disposition, and as the site of a fuller 'synthesis'. The idea of measuring adherence to models, concepts, or 're-presentations' can thus be seen in a context where such tools enrich but do not *pre-determine* one's understanding. The notion of 'expressive devices' as additional to scores, or as manipulations ('of something'?) is a product of the same family of dispositions, and which are inevitably locally persuasive, but globally mistaken. To recognise this larger structure

is to see why the logic of division has so often appeared to be the only possible way of 'explaining music', despite the fact that it does not make intuitive sense of its experience. In the same way, one can admit the compelling usefulness of abstraction as a tool of discourse, yet while clearly recognising that its grain is far too 'coarse' effectively to probe questions about 'musical meaning'.

This leads directly to the idea of reciprocity. As Leech-Wilkinson argued in 2012, discussions of scores are never neutral, but are integrated with the experiential dimensions of music – the two 'reverberate'. It is not just 'how scores sound' that is inseparable from conventions and affordances, then, but how scores are even *imagined* to sound. Finding practical ways of accounting for this requires much greater clarity about the intrinsic 'lossiness' of notation. The point is not, of course, that one should not discuss scores at all, but simply that musicological discussions recognise far more clearly what notation is *like*. Following Robert Levin, one might say that scores always behave like a 'lead sheet', for specificity and uniqueness can only be qualities of experience, not of lifeless symbolic representations. Notation is enabling, not encoding. Once more, ensemble norms provide a helpful illustration of this general point: assumptions about the absolute value of 'synchronisation' are dominant *conventions* which have been reflexively incorporated into normative beliefs about scores – that is, how they are imagined to sound, and how people believe they *ought to sound*. The unrecognised incorporation of such beliefs into empirical methodologies intensifies this circularity still further. Fortunately, engaging seriously with historical evidence offers a way out of this loop.

The imperatives tied to certain questions – for instance, the idea that a 'historical basis' is necessary for performance – often fall away once their premises are characterised in these terms. For we can see now that those questions mostly exist in symbolic, categorical, abstract, explicit realms. With this realisation, it is easy to show that there are many domains in which they are simply neither answerable nor relevant – and, moreover, that the musician necessarily works in those more implicit, fragile domains, and not in the clean lines of category distinction. This may also help to explain a certain amount of hypocrisy: consider the contrast between the strength of the rhetoric about 'evidence-based performance', and the actual extent to which performers embrace the manner of the Czech Quartet (for instance) when playing the quartets of Dvořák. This suggests, in turn, that Bourdieusian processes of 'distinction' are hard at work (1984), in amongst lofty aesthetic discourses: in practice, performance 'of' the correct *values*, and upholding existing conventions, is often more important than faithfulness to (any) evidence. The string quartet genre is a prime example of this incompatibility. In many cases, those values are affiliated with some form of obedience – whether to works or composers – and this means one remains trapped in loops of reification and abstraction, which perpetuate the cycle still further. Ultimately, these demands can be shown to be illusory, for they depend on concrete claims of 'intentions' where nothing so explicit could exist *in principle* – as the evidence of the Czech Quartet demonstrates beyond doubt. Quartet playing is a perfect example, then, of how the interlocking structure of a subculture's values exerts far more power over praxis than the intellectual coherence of those ideas, assessed independently. The synchronisation imperative may be a house of cards, intellectually; but it is a fortress, in terms of its regulative social function.

There is a certain irony, then, in the fact that it is the manifestly evidence-based approach of 'HIP' (and more recently 'RIP') that promises to break this cycle. The real benefit of involving performers in research, I think, is that

it makes it impossible to ignore how much of music's meaning resides in those 'spaces between': in emotional states, tones of voice, the implicit, embodiment, and so on. Truly recognising their nature is the move that may open doors to an understanding that is less hamstrung by latent philosophical confusion. One approach to practice-based research is to 'fit' performance to models, symbols, and theories, and then to claim answers to general historical-stylistic questions. But this disposition will soon run into limits. The theoretical idea of 'HIP' exemplifies the left hemisphere's combination of decontextualization, persuasive power, and delusional incoherence. That such thinking has produced profound results in performance – which it undoubtedly has – is because performances are *never* products of a purely analytical disposition, but are profoundly 'right hemisphere' in character. The reason they 'work' is precisely because they are synthesised with their expressive context. 'HIP' is resistant to the evidence of recordings for exactly the same reason. We can see now that dealing with evidence that retains its 'betweenness' – such as the Czech Quartet's radical vision of ensemble – is a very different task from building 'stylistic systems' from explicit demands or written accounts of historical conventions. The latter are resistant to the contexts of experience, and so our own can be more easily substituted. A delicate, vulnerable, fragile slide in 1928 does not mean to us what it meant to the Czech Quartet then; nor could a modern musician ever be witnessing the same 'fine details' in their ensemble that contemporary listeners were. My point is not that modern ensemble conventions should be replaced by the Czech Quartet's 'more accurately historical' ensemble when playing Dvořák or Suk, but that we *recognise what this evidence is telling us about the character of musical experience in general*. That acknowledgement constitutes our best route out of the maze.

This case will probably be made most persuasively by more performance, not more theorising. And a crucial dimension of this, as will be clear from Part 2, is judgement. The evidence of the Czech Quartet suggests that it will be rewarding to shift the 'turf' of musical judgement away from blunt notions of 'intentions' – especially when those are equated with the 'literal' execution of notated symbols. (Indeed I remain unsure what this *could* mean, in light of our experimental process). Rethinking of judgement is inseparable from thinking more clearly about abstraction, and recognising the extent to which the idea of 'musical works' is only a heuristic, and that it does not ultimately hold regulative force. If we see the idea as powerful not because works are the 'essence of music', but primarily because of social values, it becomes easier to orient one's ensemble concept, for instance, around specificity and uniqueness of experience, and not some mythical notion of 'adherence'. To some extent, the nature of these fine judgements has been de-emphasised and circumscribed by ideology, as well as by performance conventions (like the 'synchronisation imperative'). But there is huge creative potential, if those capacities can be developed on the basis of a more 'right hemisphere' disposition, and directed towards uniqueness, continuum, integration, and lifelike qualities.

More informally, I harbour a desire for music to be 'real': for it not to exist in a meta-domain, in which performers are doomed to contest 'authorised' knowledge, and 'execute' practices in which they are cast in an empty ventriloquising role. Anna Scott's work on other historical chamber groups points to the sheer uniqueness of the dispositions and relationships of small ensembles, and this could be radically encouraged simply by thinking differently about what 'good ensemble' *could* mean (e.g. Scott 2022). This may well involve taking away the 'safe zone' of normative temporal synchronisation, for as we saw earlier, this move is often enough on its own to change the character of a particular moment of performance – and even, paradoxically, if it remains 'very

together'. There is no need to discard the ability to synchronise timing: this would remain a powerful option, and an important (not to say transferrable) skill. But belief in the non-negotiability of synchronisation has many exponential qualities: adherence to the belief itself is a source of stress, and so working hard to achieve it 'automatically' is often the best way to overcome that anxiety. But this makes one's habituated style even more resistant to searching for the kind of variation in tone and gesture that was characteristic of earlier generations of musicians, to whom the ideology would – at least in principle – have us be 'faithful'. The entire situation, then, is circular in its incentives.

It is not easy to change the structure of a value system. When so much of this field is built upon arguments from authority, 'smuggling in' new approaches through historicism may be a practical way of encouraging greater independence of thought. But the target of such work must be loosening, not entrenching, the regulative function of abstractions. In my more optimistic moments, I like to think this could be straightforward, because it only involves recognising clearly what is *already known from experience*. This is powerfully encapsulated in the hemisphere metaphor, which provides a memorable rhetorical distillation of both the problem and its potential solutions.

Even in a very short time, the encounter with the Czech Quartet had a profound impact on my own ensemble. Time spent with their recordings meant learning not just to play but actually to *hear* music differently: it was as if their embrace of unevenness – and perhaps even the style's intrinsic 'potentiality' – meant that it absorbed one's attention in a radically immediate way. Similarly, with greater intensity of characterisation came greater intensity in the connection between us: there could be no 'neutral zone' in our interactions, no elevation of predictability. Recovering this playfulness also meant always seeing adjustment as a positive, responsive contribution, never as a negative 'correction'. (We had to learn how to run with each other's gestures: colloquially, to always be prepared to 'style things out' in performance, and not to be distracted by bureaucratic concerns, for that disposition would make an unpredictable moment 'stick out'). As I have said, it takes long-term work to reconcile accuracy of intonation with this new rhythmic sense; indeed this is probably another way in which the synchronisation convention builds in exponential reinforcement. Most of all, though, we were changed by these players' inclinations to explore realms of extraordinary tonal fragility and emotional vulnerability, and to adopt a confessional disposition that contrasted so profoundly with the *resilience* demanded of 'elite' modern quartet players. Their example makes it easier to notice the capitalist undertones of that contemporary culture, and the nature of the distinctions that are encouraged by the 'interpretation' frame: more competition, more 'quality', more competence, more precision. The paradox, as is so often noted, is that emotional engagement is a prerequisite – but not to the extent of vulnerability, which will compromise those 'elite' values of faithful execution and competitive resilience.²⁹¹

²⁹¹ My practical advice to quartet players wanting to explore this historical style would be to prioritise intensity of connection – specifically a kind of intensity that comes from treating 'togetherness' not as a black-and-white goal (that can be either 'achieved' or 'compromised'), but as a shimmering presence defined by qualitative potential. Routine must be disincentivised: one should look for unique ways of living in those 'between spaces' which can never be fully explored or agreed. We all know these spaces are there already: simply recognise what they are like, and look for the angles, relationships, and 'whole states' in each moment. Take inspiration from a string's tactile and continuous nature; live in the play of overtones as much as in the core;

To understand WAM as an oral tradition means recognising that (ensemble) performers are always navigating conventions and expectations in specific contexts, not general ones. It follows that if performing musicians are not just inheritors of the allegedly 'absolute' contexts of 'musical works', but actually make a vital contribution to establishing and upholding them, then they *also* have the power to reveal that the gates of this ideological prison have been unlocked all along: that the emperor has no clothes. Acknowledging this reciprocity, in other words, means that persuasive performances can reveal the nature of our delusions. From the perspective of 'normal musicology', then, it may seem that I have focused on the Czech Quartet for a strange reason, for my investigation has concluded with no claim to authority. I absolutely do not argue that modern string quartets only need to start performing 'their way' in certain repertoire, and then all will be well. Instead, their way of making music together must act as the key for unlocking a radical vision of ensemble – one which resists utopia, categorisation, and obedience, and is built instead on context, uniqueness, and experience.

and always 'watch the note'. Never meet each other through top-down 'interpretive' decisions or self-conscious 'manipulations', but in the irreducible realms of gesture, shape, and feeling. Retain the capacity to push against and challenge one other in those domains, for you will find that you 'join' almost without thinking. Listen like an audience member, and 'show' grammar without 'telling' it. Finally, make sure never to get stuck in bureaucracy, and trust each other as whole people.

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Part 2: Experiment

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