

The Rush to Seek Authenticity in the Shadows

‘Musical authenticity’ seems to be a catch phrase on the lips of performers of many kinds of music: from performance practice of medieval organum to the aleatoric works of John Cage. However obtaining authenticity, or even defining it, proves difficult. Performers strive to express meaning through their work and through that meaning, a true authenticity. Musicologist Gary Tomlinson suggests instead that “. . . the authentic meaning of a musical work is not the meaning that its creators and first invested in it. It is instead the meaning that we, in the course of interpretive historical acts of various sorts, come to believe its creators and audience invested in it. . . .”¹ For the most part, I agree with him feel authenticity by necessity incorporates our own experiences and perspective, but I believe these factors should only be used as secondary resources. In as much as it can be known, composer's intent should be given priority in shaping our perception of the work.

There seem to be two prominent theories of interpreting authenticity from which Tomlinson derives his mediating viewpoint. The first is the positivistic view that there can be one meaning and one authenticity of a work purely derived from the composer’s original intent. This idea has resulted in a greater emphasis on historical performances that endeavor to recreate the composer’s intent. I feel this fails to consider the inherent misconceptions that we all carry in us by the every nature of being independent individuals, let alone individuals looking back at music created perhaps centuries ago in cultures quite different from our own. We must recognize that we cannot help but to bring current biases of thought and perspective into the interpretation, for that is what it truly is—an interpretation.

The second school of thought claims that there is no authenticity except that expressed in the moment of performance. Will Crutchfield, a proponent of this perspective, explains by saying “. . .

the authenticity of a performance is to be understood in terms of the sources of the performance; and these lie within the person who is performing"² Musicologist Christopher Small would agree arguing that “. . . it is not so much about *music* as it is about people *musicking*”³ He goes on to explain musicking as a verb that describes the taking part “. . . in any capacity in a musical performance” However, I believe that strict adherence to this line of thought leads to a chaos lacking in any sort of discipline. The idea that one’s opinion on the performance of a piece can be substantiated by nothing but one’s own fancy in pure falderal.

I instead adhere to a more moderate view that requires both extensive knowledge of the piece’s background as well as one’s own interpretation of its relevance to the performance at hand. I do, however, give more credence to the opinion of the composer (as much as it can be known) than that of any other source. This submission of authority is most beautifully demonstrated when observing the composer also functioning as the performer and premiering his or her own work.

I was recently given such an opportunity by hearing Heather Stebbins’s *Rush Me to Shadows*. This work in particular is an excellent case study because it is a duet for cello and electroacoustic sounds, which were created using cello sound samples played by Stebbins on the same cello used in performance. These details are significant for the implications they carry concerning consistency blend, intonation, and technique. Stebbins’s performance of *Rush Me to Shadows* represents a high amount of control for a composer to have over her work. This situation allows for the exploration of the boundaries of authenticity and its derivation, through which we will see the importance of both original intent and personal interpretation.

If ever there was a performance from which to gleam ‘true authenticity’ in the positivistic sense, Stebbins’s premiere would be it. Yet even with this example, I find tremendous room for

¹ Gary Tomlinson, *The Historian, the Performer, and Authentic Meaning*, ed. Nicholas Kenyon (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): 115.

² Will Crutchfield, *Fashion, Conviction, and Performance Style in an Age of Revivals*, ed. Nicholas Kenyon (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): 20.

individual opinion. I was fortunate to attend two performances of the piece, one in repertoire class (not officially considered the premiere) and the second at Third Practice Music Festival. I also have a recording of the first performance. All three use the same cello, same performer, and the same electronic recording; and all three were quite different from each other. How can this be when the recording was of one of the performances itself? Simply: between repertoire class on Tuesday and receiving the recording on Sunday, my ears as an audience member changed through my daily life experiences. This caused a different performance to reach me and hence a different authenticity.

Truly the minds of the audience will chance the meaning of a work, but so too will the experiences of the performer. Stebbins’s state of mind may change each time she plays what she deems a notated, yet improvisation-derived, work. How different her perspective on the piece must have been as she sat before electroacoustic composers from around the country! This deviation again causes a new authenticity to emerge.

These variations in interpretation will occur with any piece, no matter how strictly notated, but Stebbins allows room for interpretation with her own score. The freedom she felt as she improvisationally explored her options for the composition comes though in the musical notation of the cello part. For example, approximately forty-five seconds into the piece (the score does not contain measures), groups of notes appear without note heads (Figure 1) and the program notes indicate “. . . pitches and rhythms are relative. Play furiously. . . .”⁴ This allows her more liberty to express herself in the moment as she chooses new meanings for the work.



Figure 1. Heather Stebbins, *Rush Me to Shadows*, 45”.

³ Christopher Small, *Musicking : The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998): 9.

⁴ Heather Stebbins, *Rush Me to Shadows*; 2007.

Beyond Stebbins’s own interpretation of her work, one must consider future performances with different musicians. Each performance has its own implications though the variations of meaning that every performer's circumstances will elicit. One should not expect the sound of this work, nor its meaning, to remain constant. The only thing that can possibly remain acoustically constant in a new performance venue are the prerecorded sounds⁵ and even that will be heard differently depending on the audience, concert hall etc. Stebbins actually embraces this evolution, describing the piece as a conversation. She sees it as a “performer interacting with pre-recorded sound. Thus, the inflections, dynamics, and overall emotions put into the piece will vary . . . and that's ok! . . .”⁶ She gives performers many opportunities to express themselves with general guidelines rather than strict notation (Figure 2, triangles indicate “variation of bow pressure as well as sul pont”⁷). Because of this notation, novel performances will vary even more than by personality and circumstantial differences alone.



Figure 2. Heather Stebbins, *Rush Me to Shadows*, 2’10”.

Ultimately I believe performers should look back to the original performance by Stebbins to guide them, but should also add their own experiences to the work. Small believes that one performance is not more authentic than another, but rather that each carries its own authenticity.⁸ Although I understand in the importance of each performance’s interpretation, I still cling to composer authenticity. I agree that ultimately a different performer's reading cannot be proven to be less valid, but I believe a composer has a better chance at getting to the heart of the piece’s meaning

⁵ Heather Stebbins, *Rush Me to Shadows, Laptop Part Only*, Heather Stebbins, 2007.

⁶ Heather Stebbins, personal conversation, October 23, 2007.

⁷ Stebbins, *Rush Me to Shadows*

⁸ Small, *Musicking : The Meanings of Performing and Listening*: 9.

in a single performance.

Beyond the confines of a solitary performance a piece may in fact embody a single authenticity, a 'soul of meaning' so to speak. It is, however, unattainable in a practical sense. In fact, it is only through centuries of collective perspectives, performances and live observation that one can even approach this authenticity. In this sense, there may be one true meaning and authenticity, but it is a construct that can never be fully realized by one person in one moment. Therefore, one must rely on what is known about the composer's original intent to approximate a piece's larger meaning. I feel a single authenticity of a piece exists, but is such that perhaps only timeless Apollo, god of music, can perceive it.

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3) When you include a quote you should follow the quote with an explanation and/or interpretation that tells the reader why it is important in the context of your paper;
look for articles and/or books on the composer and work

1) When you include a music example in your paper, please discuss that example in some detail;

Rewrite first sentence

I assume reader knows too much

How do we know that?

Many—Who?

Ellipsis

Whose voice?

Cites not sites

One also must, instead of “one must also”

Ibid not ibid

: page-- not , page

He reads careful

Perhaps, **a piece loses value if it completely can't be reperformed at antoher time**

But I also believe that music is a process not a produc and that even the strictes of scores cannot be performed the same way twice. A process in fact that continues beyond the modern performance though the reflection and analisi that takes place in both performers' and audience members' minds long after the curtain falls.

Two hundred years from now, when musicologists using technology the hasn't even been developed yet to precisly measure the characteristic of ink and paper used in *Rush Me to Shadows* to try to identify Stebbin's intentions for the piece, will their conclusions be any less authentic? If their interprection is based on the future's persective on what is significant in music, then they are incorporating their own experiences into a new authenticicy, just as Tomilson suggests that they do. Nevermind that Stebbins never consered the fine details of the density of the printer ink; pehaps these future musicologist have discovered subconscious significance to these details. Although I hope to make my sarcasm in this extream case clear, I do point out that events of the future have a definet chance of completely changing the meaning of *Rush Me to Shadows*, which would result in a completely different authenticicy for the work--one which Stebbins may never have dreamed of. Not only is this allowed, but it is even to be expected.

As a work as a whole that endures through time, however, it (is only though years of collective persectives and performances that one can get a deeper authenticity) that is beyond pehaps even the composer's inical conception of the piece. "Meaning that is, does not inhere in individual signs but inseed is determined by their interestions with other signs. (end here?) Together congeries of such signs, groups of signifying acts, make up contexts in which individual signs or acts, make up contexts in which individual signs or acts gain significance" 118

"there can be no single authentic meaning for a work; the existance of multiple authentic meanings for any work is another corollary to our axiom" 125

"without context there is no meaning" 118 but "the meaning of any one act deepens as we broaden and enrich the context in which we perceive it." 118

"the authentic meanings of a work arise from our relating it to an array of things outside itself that we believe gave it meaning in its original context." 123

Authenticity is not a **SINGULARITY** embodying the intentions of a composer or the perceptions of the first audience, but rather the process through which one comes to understand these factors through a lens of one's own experiences.

her performance varies but computer remains perfectly constant
variables are reduced even more--eliminated performance variation and relying solely
reception of the audience

if composer performs twice and says one performance was better than another is she saying that one was more authentic? If a piece is performed with less technical accuracy does that necessarily preclude it from being more authentic?

score not show all

"the meaning of a work as a work of art--let us specify a piece of music--is not wholly inherent in it, but only partly so"

(this quote is more about personal context)

Love solo cello--"the cello is often considered one of the most elegant instruments; even so it is capable of making harsh, often obtrusive, noise."

"*Rush* explores both facets of the instrument by juxtapositioning pre-recorded samples and composed, live acoustic cello. The piece begins with a chaotic rush of sound in both the electronic and acoustic components. They eventually settle into an ambient exploration of tone color, but this mellow sound-world is soon transformed into another chaotic dive into the cello's more assertive side"--p 15

"as authentic as it gets"

her email description--conversation

"I would say that 3P was the most successful...I was the most nervous, but I think that made me play better, actually. I don't think one was more authentic than the other...in each performance, I knew exactly how I wanted to interact with the electronics. That's how I would describe my piece...performer interacting with pre-recorded sound...thus, the inflections, dynamics, and overall emotions put into the piece will vary..and that's ok! I think I played the part better at 3P...so I guess that one was more technically accurate, however like I said, performances can change. As you see, I don't notate the solo so one can add whatever technique they'd like there."

"one historian's partial context will always differ from another's and afford somewhat different meanings" 125

solitary

Be able to discuss:

how language takes on codes

What he means by authentic meaning

reaction against objective and presentigng

where he sits

history as a conversion (heather) between histoian/performer and agent (score)

where I satnd in context of the piece (considering small...)

but if from objectiveist view..she is the perfect model

Precision of sliding, tempo

Timing without meter

Meaning of extended technic and notation

Meaning of sympbols and emotional meaning of the gesture

Improvised over computer

I say—it looses value if it completely can't be reperformed at antoher time—unperformable—I would strongly caustion composers against this as it seems to be the trend.

The performance itself looses no value—but the work as a whole

Then again that makes this performance even more poingent

And it ok if no able to repeat exact (true for all music—interpretation goes into it)

If each player can bring own meaning and authenticity ther is value in that