

## Agency and Creativity in Music Performance

### Author, Agent, and Creator

**T**he terms “author” and “creator” are close, almost identical in much common English usage. Indeed, the *Pocket Oxford American Thesaurus* gives “creator” as the first synonym in its entry for “author”, while the term “author” is the second listed under the entry for “creator”.<sup>1</sup> Yet, for the purposes of understanding artistic creativity, it would be unwise to take this as a logical connection and assume that all creators must be authors, and this is particularly true in the case of music. Music is an art form that to a large degree and across a variety of distinct musical cultures depends on live performance, even in this digital and mechanical age. Thus, the production of music often demands human action, and such actions bear witness to the presence of one or more agents. Such agents, as much if not more than authors, are musical creators.

An agent, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth: *OED*), is a «person who or thing which acts upon someone or something; one who or that which exerts power; the doer of an action».<sup>2</sup> This essay will explore the potential of this concept and the related notion of agency as tools to understand creativity in musical performance. Such tools do not replace the idea of author or authorship, but instead they act as a complement to authorship, and through them we may better come to terms with the diverse ways in which performance engenders musical creativity.

It is no secret that the concept of author is beset by problems of fixity and identity, both in terms of the authorial product and the person “behind” it. Such problems have been discussed in a veritable storm of scholarly work over the last half century or so, work that has consistently undermined the idea of a stable author and a unified monophonic text.<sup>3</sup> The inference that, because we may happen to experience a work of art as single and

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<sup>1</sup> In *Pocket Oxford American Thesaurus*, Oxford University Press, 2008, <http://bit.ly/1eO3Abe>, accessed March 13, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> *OED Online*, “agent”, n. 1 and adj., Oxford University Press, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1eO56tZ>, accessed April 04, 2014.

unified, then we should conclude that the work was intended as such, and that the author behind it also exists as a separate, independent identity, has been often disproved, so that the idea of an author as a lone originator of a solitary work can no longer be seriously maintained.

While much of this debate concerning authorship has been played out in terms of literature and textual creativity, it is also clear that in music the problem of authorship is also vexed. For one, the idea that musical tradition consists of a series of graduated individual works, related in greater or lesser ways, has been criticized by scholars, thus undermining the stability of the authorial product as a concept.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the growing emphasis on the value of performance in music-making has put the importance accorded the composer as author under question. Thus, theories of musical meaning and aesthetics that foreground authorial intent in guaranteeing the integrity of the work have fallen out of favour. To take a well-known example, Nelson Goodman argued in the 1960s, based on his distinction between autographic and allographic arts, that the only performance of a work that should count as proper would be one in which every marking on the score was realized exactly.<sup>5</sup> While Goodman is perhaps concerned with the ontology of the work-object rather than theorizing practices of performance, his theory has often been criticized as implausible from the latter perspective, indicating a shift in critical concerns from ontology to pragmatics.<sup>6</sup> Goodman's idea has plausibility in the case of a literary text or a painting, where a copy of a canvas with a spot on it might be seen as a flawed copy. But what it fails to take into account is the temporality of performance in the case of practical music-making. For example, it is often the case that a performance of a work may deviate from a score not due to error but because of the circumstances of performance. Thus, in the case of Beethoven's controversial metronome markings, pianists playing the first movement of the

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<sup>3</sup> Three of the best-known works that have been instrumental in this include ROLAND BARTHES, *The Death of the Author*, in *Image Music Text*, ed. by Stephen Heath, New York, Fontana Press, 1977, pp. 142-149; JORGE LUIS BORGES, *Labyrinths*, New York, Modern Library, 1983; UMBERTO ECO, *The Open Work*, Cambridge (MASS.), Harvard University Press, 1989. Many other authors and scholars could be added to this list.

<sup>4</sup> For this, cf. LYDIA GOEHR, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. NELSON GOODMAN, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, Indianapolis, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1968.

<sup>6</sup> LEE B. BROWN, *Musical Works, Improvisation, and the Principle of Continuity*, «The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism», LIV, 4 (1996), pp. 353-369; STEPHEN DAVIES, *General Theories of Art Versus Music*, «The British Journal of Aesthetics», XXXIV, 4 (1994), pp. 315-325; STEFANO PREDELLI, *Goodman and the Wrong Note Paradox*, «The British Journal of Aesthetics», XXXIX, 4 (1999), pp. 364-375; RALPH SMITH, *Art in Philosophical Context*, «The Quarterly», I, 1-2 (1990), pp. 22-35; WILLIAM WEBSTER, *Music is Not a 'Notational System'*, «The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism», 29 (1971), pp. 489-497.

*Hammerklavier* Sonata often choose to ignore the inscribed helter-skelter speed in favour of a significantly slower tempo, especially as the latter is generally more effective on a more sonorous modern instrument.<sup>7</sup> Similar examples might be multiplied in the case of musical elements that are specified less objectively in the score. Indeed, even when playing music from a score, fidelity to the page as a stable object may be far from a performer's intent, for the temporal nature of a musical event means that there may be many contextual reasons for a performer to deviate from what is written.

These creative options available to performers, and the limits that they imply for authorial powers, have been recognized in various attempts to loosen the tight boundaries imposed on a performer by Goodman. For example, the philosopher Peter Kivy has advanced a more flexible account of musical performance, arguing that a performer approaches a score much like an arranger, someone who places the sounds prescribed in the score in a new context: «Musical performing artists [...] execute “versions” of the works they [...] perform]; and just as we admire and appreciate one arrangement of a work for some features, another arrangement for others, so we admire one performance of a work for some features, another performance for others».<sup>8</sup> Put in this way, Kivy's argument nicely assigns a role to the performer in the creation of musical events, but it does so only through envisaging the performer as a kind of author, an author of less importance than the composer, perhaps, but still an inscriber of texts. Thus, Kivy's performer works within a textual medium, re-arranging versions of someone else's texts, and the versions (s)he creates are admired for the same features that works possess. Kivy's performer takes some creative decisions, but only in a limited fashion. Missing from his argument, I believe, is an engagement with the temporal and physical contexts of a performance situation. Such contexts ground a particular form of creativity that is inherent in performance: a form of engaging with sound that includes the potential for spontaneity, improvisation, and the exploration of particular temporal moments derived from pre-existent musical ideas.

These potentials of performance cannot be addressed through an approach that prioritizes the figure of the author as the fundamental type of creator. Rather, what is

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<sup>7</sup> See STURE FORSÉN [et al.], *Was Something Wrong With Beethoven's Metronome?*, «Notices of the American Mathematical Society», LX, 9 (2013), pp. 1146-1153. This recent contribution points to another reason to avoid giving the score supreme importance: some markings may, potentially, be founded on inaccurate calculations by the composer.

<sup>8</sup> PETER KIVY, *Ars Perfecta: Toward Perfection in Musical Performance?*, «The British Journal of Aesthetics», XLVI, 2 (2006), pp. 111-132: 113. See also Kivy's extended argument in PETER KIVY, *Authenticities: Philosophical Reflections on Musical Performance*, Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press, 1998.

required is an understanding of the performer, not only as a faithful reciter of the score, or a quasi-authorial arranger, but as an active agent in the creation of music. To think of a performer as an agent is to emphasize his/her capacity to «exert power» as the «doer of action», as the *OED* definition has it. Such a concept does not annul the role of an author, but acts as a bridge between the quasi-stability of authorial intent and the temporal flux of a performance situation. This complicates a view of performance as the communication of a pre-existent work: a transaction that effectively only involves composer on the one side and listener on the other. Instead, seeing the performer as a musical agent allows for more satisfactory understanding both of the experience of performing and of the musical creativity it entails.

### **Composerly Agency: An Introduction**

In this section, I explore the conditions that give rise to the experience of agency and the ways in which they may influence musical performance. Since there are many potential sources of agency in any human action, I will draw on the example of solo performance to identify a type of agency that I will call “composerly”. This type of agency is the focus of this paper, and the subsequent discussion and analyses will serve to further define and qualify it as a concept.

I imagine that I am at my instrument, playing, and I ask you to do the same for yourself. As someone who is causing sound, I may certainly experience a sense of my own agency: I am the doer, in this case. It is indeed conceptually possible that I may feel there is no other agency involved. On a practical level, though, I think this last is unlikely, and would represent a very unusual situation. For, more likely than not, I am playing a pre-existing tune or piece, from a score or chart or perhaps from memory. In such a case, consciously or not, I am disciplining my actions to follow this pre-existing music: allowing what I do to be controlled by a separate, external agent. It might be objected that I – or you – could be improvising freely, seeming to find whatever sounds occur to me at my whim. Even admitting this possibility, though, it is a matter of record that the vast majority of improvisatory practices are grounded in pre-existent «building blocks», as Bruno Nettl puts it, such as scales, exercises, riffs, and hooks that are practiced and internalized by impro-

visers in many different traditions.<sup>9</sup> Whether improvising or not, then, I am likely to feel the influence of another agent through a faithful attempt to follow some pre-existent directives, whether on paper or from memory. Such directives function in the same way as a plan or map: I am usually aware of their existence prior to using them – which is to say, I intend to play this music – and I approach them as a way to organize the activity of my playing. All of this is implied in the answer to the common question: «what are you going to play?».

Since the answer to such a question very often invokes the name of a composer, I call this type of agency “composerly agency”. Broadly, this is any type of agency that pre-exists the temporal now of performance and therefore it goes beyond the traditional notion of “compositional intent”. Here are two examples of how such composerly agency may exert power over my actions. First, in playing from a score I play a certain passage softly, acting on the direction *piano* written in the score. Second, in approaching the end of this same passage, I hear and see a final cadence approaching and I slow down toward this conclusion, not because there is a marking in the score, but because I have been taught that such a *ritardando* should be standard practice before such a cadence. In both these cases, my control over my actions is shared with another agential source. Thus, both actions demonstrate what I term composerly agency: that is, a pre-existing source acts as an agent by exerting power over the performer’s actions.<sup>10</sup>

This type of agency is, of course, typical of the influence exerted by composers, especially within the Western classical tradition. However, as the second example demonstrates, it also includes a variety of different influences on players. It is certainly possible, at least in theory, to distinguish clearly between different sorts of composerly agency, such as those acting through a score, through stylistic traditions, through schools of performance, or through the influence of interpretive practice. Such distinctions, however, are not germane to this essay, which is a preliminary investigation. For my

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<sup>9</sup> In Nettl’s Preface to GABRIEL SOLIS – BRUNO NETTL, *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society*, Urbana (IL), University of Illinois Press, 2009, p. XII. For a study of the pedagogy of improvisation in the Western classical tradition, which also emphasizes the importance of pre-existent material, cf. AARON LEE BERKOWITZ, *The Improvising Mind: Cognition and Creativity in the Musical Moment*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Both of these actions may retrospectively be debated and criticized from an aesthetic perspective. It may be that the *piano* marking is revealed as a “spurious” editorial addition, and that I am later convinced that the practice of slowing at a cadence is anachronistic or ineffective for this repertoire. However, the potential fallibility of these composerly agents does not undermine their effect on my experience of playing.

purposes, it is enough to indicate the importance of composerly agency as a frequent and vital agential force in all types of musical performance.

Composerly agency is an important force, which exerts control over the actions of performers, but it is not the only one. There is also, of course, the agency of the performer: the “me” who makes the actions as I play. And there are other forces that may well exert control over the performer’s action during the temporality of performance, such as a listening audience or a co-performer. To avoid becoming lost in a plethora of agents, however, this essay will focus on composerly agency and its relationship with the agency of the performer. Composerly agency may and often does stand in as reasons for performance choices and musical paths taken, as in the two examples given above. Thus, I claim that such agency is experienced as a phenomenological reality by performers. However, it should also be clear that this agency in no sense contradicts or excludes the agency of the performer. After all, the performer willingly follows the established directions of the score or utilizes the previously practiced turns of phrase. Therefore, it is the norm that both agencies will work in tandem with each other in the process of playing.

Having outlined this concept of composerly agency, I use the analytic examples that follow to illustrate and explore further details of its operation in the context of specific musical events. In these analyses, I focus on how composerly agency works with that of the performer to produce instances of musical creativity. Before entering on these analyses, however, I need to clarify two important aspects of the notion of agency I use in this essay.

### **Agency and body**

Since agency involves action, a performer’s agency vitally involves the actions of the body, for the production of music demands physical involvement. Thus, the presence of the body is a central element in the experience of agency. However, though the presence of the body is a necessary condition for agency, it is uncertain whether it is a sufficient one, to use the language of analytic philosophy. It is quite possible, for example, for a physical action to be performed unconsciously, whether as a repetitive action such as a tic or a singular action, such as when I, in writing this paper, may feel an itch on my ear and scratch it without deliberating or forming any conscious intention to complete an action. This is not an idle example: the case of skilled actions, developed through hours of practice, are clearly vital to musical performance, and it is hard to deny that, given the complexity, number, and

rate of the actions that are required to perform even the simplest piano piece, many of them must be performed without deliberation.<sup>11</sup>

It is another question, and a vital one, whether this absence of deliberation equates to a lack of control, and subsequently an absence of agency. On the face of it, it might seem that actions that are performed as the result of long practice, in a quasi-automatic fashion, should have less direct agency. Neurologists and cognitive scientists often refer to such actions as taking place on the “lower level” of the hierarchy of decision making, as opposed to deliberate, conscious decisions.<sup>12</sup> However, a growing body of work based on phenomenological research into creative practices seems to indicate that the employment of skilled movements, developed through repetition, may involve a greater level of control rather than a lesser one. Even if such control may not necessarily filter through the conscious decision process, it still functions within an act and may even be central in the processes of artistic creation.<sup>13</sup>

These questions involving the relationship between unconscious movements and the process of agency are important, but, though I state them here to acknowledge their vitality, they are not the focus of this essay. However, with such questions undecided, and likely to be debated hotly for some time, it should be clear that the concept of agency I use here does not necessarily involve a direct and deliberative conscious experience. Sidestepping for the moment the question as to whether such an experience is central to agency or not, this essay will continue to explore the particular qualities of agency in performance in relation to the external and internal conditions of any musical performance. In doing so, I plan to establish a foundational notion of the concept of agency as an active element in musical creation.

## **Agency in Musical Performance**

The concept of agency has a considerable history in musicology, as I discuss further below. However, the notion of agency that I employ here is not one that is common in recent Anglo-American musicology, and thus I need to clarify the difference to avoid misun-

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<sup>11</sup> On the notion of skilled action as (partly) unconscious, see the discussion of “body schemas” in SHAUN GALLAGHER, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, Oxford – New York, Clarendon Press – Oxford University Press, 2005. A thoughtful defence of automatic actions in skilled movement can be found in ALVA NOË, *Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain, and Other Lessons From the Biology of Consciousness*, New York, Hill and Wang, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the hierarchy of action shown in ELISABETH PACHERIE, *The Phenomenology of Action: A Conceptual Framework*, «Cognition: International Journal of Cognitive Science», CVII, 1 (2008), pp. 179-217.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. CARRIE NOLAND, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*, Cambridge (MASS.), Harvard University Press, 2009; TIM INGOLD, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge, and Description*, Hoboken (NJ), Taylor and Francis, 2011.

derstandings. In this paper, I refer to agency as a real element in the experience of a performer, directly stemming from the actual physical production of sound. This sense of agency is the default meaning of the term in many disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, and cognitive science, and I use it in this sense in order to focus attention on the performer's experience and its contribution to music. Within recent work on music, albeit from a philosophical perspective, my use of the term connects with the concept of a performer as agent discussed by Stan Godlovitch in his monograph on performance.<sup>14</sup> For Godlovitch, the agency of a performer is located in her/his causal relationship to the musical sound: «performances draw together sounds, agents, works, and listeners».<sup>15</sup> In this sense, then, agent means simply “someone who acts” and this rough gloss echoes the thrust of the *OED* definition quoted at the start. Such agency accompanies all voluntary action, and it is therefore a given for the actions of musical performance.

The concept of agency does not generally have this meaning in music studies, however. The notion that music offers an experience of agency has been explored fruitfully by scholars including Edward T. Cone, Carolyn Abbate, Lori Burns, Fred Maus, Seth Monahan, Naomi Cumming and others.<sup>16</sup> Such writers have, in general, understood musical works as narratives signifying the actions of a person or force, through interpretive readings. Simplifying a little, the notion of musical agency developed from this narrative approach involves hearing sounds “as” human actions. These actions are then credited to a metaphorical agent who is usually located in the music. This agent, the chief actor in the musical narrative, is sometimes conflated with the composer, as in Cone's influential viewpoint, more rarely with the performer, or seen as free-standing.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to this, my exploration of musical agency focuses on the sense of agency as experienced by a

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<sup>14</sup> STAN GODLOVITCH, *Musical Performance: A Philosophical Study*, New York, Routledge, 1998. The multiple implications of the word agent, including both “someone who acts” and “someone who acts for someone else”, are taken up in many interesting ways in Godlovitch's work, particularly through his many examples and thought-experiments. What he does not attempt, however, is any sustained analysis of the concept of agency which is at work in musical performance. The current paper ventures to fill this gap, among other things.

<sup>15</sup> *Ivi*, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> EDWARD T. CONE, *The Composer's Voice*, Berkeley (CA), University of California Press, 1974; CAROLYN ABBATE, *Music: Drastic or Gnostic?*, «Critical Inquiry», 30 (2004), pp. 505-536; LORI BURNS, *Musical Agency: Strategies of Containment and Resistance in 'Crucify'*, in *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity and Popular Music*, ed. by Lori Burns and Melissa Lafrance, New York, Routledge, 2001, pp. 73-96; FRED EVERETT MAUS, *Agency in Instrumental Music and Song*, «College Music Symposium», 29 (1989), pp. 31-43; SETH MONAHAN, *Action and Agency Revisited*, «Journal of Music Theory», LVII, 2 (2013), pp. 321-371; NAOMI CUMMING, *The Sonic Self: Musical Subjectivity and Signification*, Bloomington (IN), Indiana University Press, 2001.

<sup>17</sup> S. MONAHAN, *Action and Agency Revisited*, cit., provides a very clear account of the conceptual foundations of such agency.

performer, Godlovitch's principal agent. Thus, I work here toward an understanding of the experience of agency during the creative process of performance, where the actions controlled by the agencies under discussion are not metaphorical, but physical gestures that produce material sound. To appropriate a working definition from the discipline of neuroscience, this type of agency refers to «a person's ability to control their actions and, through them, events in the external world».<sup>18</sup> It may well be that this latter sense of agency can be connected to the narrational metaphor, and this possibility will be touched on in the analytic discussion of the performance of Beethoven's Piano Sonata in F minor, Op. 57. However, despite such connections, the two kinds of agency are conceptually quite distinct.

With this clarification in place, the rest of this essay will take up examples of composerly agency in three analytic examples. These examples draw on varied repertoires and styles, though they all involve solo piano performance: this restriction in performance forces makes the discussion of agency rather more straightforward than would be the case in group performance. In these case studies I explore the interactions of composerly and performer's agency through close listening and discussion of a score, where appropriate. The methodology of these analyses involve treating the musical event (recording or performance) as an interplay of agential forces, using the perspective of a performer's experiences. In this approach, I am not claiming that the analysis represents a specific performer's actual experience of playing, such that, for example, Vijay Iyer experienced the actions of recording *Human Nature* as I discuss it. Rather, I claim that my analysis is a coherent approach to this music as it suggests a (potential) performer's experience. Thus, this methodology is in fact quite close to that of more traditional analytic approaches which seek to analyze a (potential) listener's experiences from the basis of a score or recording.<sup>19</sup>

### **Analysis I: Vijay Iyer and Michael Jackson**

*Human Nature* is a track on jazz pianist Vijay Iyer's 2010 album *Solo*. It is in both title and sound an homage to the song *Human Nature* on Michael Jackson's album *Thriller*,

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<sup>18</sup> PATRICK HAGGARD - MANOS TSAKIRIS, *The Experience of Agency: Feelings, Judgments, and Responsibility*, «Current Directions in Psychological Science», XVIII, 4 (2009), pp. 242-246: 242.

<sup>19</sup> The idea that a listener might hear the performer's actions through the sounds has been discussed and illustrated in many recent studies, including ARNIE COX, *Embodying Music: Principles of the Mimetic Hypothesis*, «Music Theory Online», XVII, 2 (2011), <http://bit.ly/1iZKqzX>, pp. 1-24; DAVID CODE, *Parting the Veils of Debussy's 'Voiles'*, «Scottish Music Review», 1, 1 (2007), pp. 43-67; MARC LEMAN [et al.], *Sharing Musical Expression Through Embodied Listening: A Case Study Based on Chinese Guqin Music*, «Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal», XXVI, 3 (2009), pp. 263-278.

released some twenty years before.<sup>20</sup> Like most such jazz numbers, Iyer's track is driven by improvisation, but, again like most jazz numbers, it depends on an active and lively sense of composerly agency. Here, this sense of agency does not reside in a written score but in the ways in which the performer's actions are controlled by the aural memory or tradition of the song or standard: that is, something which already exists. Thus, in this performance, to say that Iyer interprets Jackson's song does not mean, *pace* Kivy, that he arranges it for piano, nor does it mean that Iyer plays Jackson's song transcribed for piano and then plays variations on it. Rather, Iyer uses traces of Jackson's song as directions for action, following an agent that emerges from the earlier track and, in this process, also re-creating the figure of Jackson as the singer of *Human Nature*.

Throughout *Human Nature*, Iyer explores specific nuances in short motives and hooks from Jackson's song, finding constructions that are only hinted at in the original.<sup>21</sup> One short example of this needs must suffice for my purposes. Jackson's song, after a short introduction, opens with an extended verse in which the singer anticipates a nocturnal journey into the heart of a large city, perhaps New York, as there is a specific comparison of the town to an apple. The effect of the city with its charms is seductive, luring Jackson out into electric encounters with strangers. The most prominent melodic hook of this verse is its opening: a leap of a minor third followed by a descending second, D-F-E in the modally-inflected D that is the key of most recorded versions. Iyer picks up this hook as an invitation to action, following the second interval in particular through an emphasis on its falling semitone, though in his version it is D flat-C in the context of a B flat tonic, at the start of his take on the verse (at 0'50" on the recording). The agency of Jackson's verse is clear, but also obvious is Iyer's neglect of the opening rising third, creating a fluid melodic profile in which the goal of the melodic phrase is much more ambivalent.<sup>22</sup> Eventually, however, the ending of this phrase follows that of Jackson with a melodic resolution A flat-B flat that echoes Jackson's C-D (1'20"). This resolution, ostensibly driven by composerly agency in its mirroring of Jackson's cadence, becomes overlaid with other meaning through its context. Jackson's C-D is a return to home spot, a circling around that prepares for departure: the

<sup>20</sup> VIJAY IYER, *Solo*, CD, Act Music & Vision, B003PCL1A8, 2010. Jackson's song appears originally on MICHAEL JACKSON, *Thriller*, CD, Sony, B0000025RI, 1990.

<sup>21</sup> The song is indelibly associated with Jackson as its singer, though the writing credits for *Human Nature* are assigned to John Bettis and Steve Porcano. However, it is surely the figure of Jackson that acts as the composerly agent for Iyer's piece, which emphasizes the conceptual gap between the figure of the author, or text-creator and the composer as agential force that I discuss here.

<sup>22</sup> The more so in Iyer's version as the introduction spends most of its time outlining A flat minor as a harmonic centre.

city, with its «sweet seducing sighs» awaits. The freshness of Iyer's arrival on B flat gives this resting place a different attraction: it now feels and sounds new. By contrast, the city becomes less attractive. Amplifying this novel context for Jackson's cadence, the harmonic context of Iyer's phrase is dominated by an insistent pedal ostinato that anchors the B flat tonality. This action, not driven by composerly agency, makes the looming encounter with the city appear threatening and not merely enticing. From the perspective of twenty years beyond *Thriller*, with all the personal and social tragedies of Jackson's life and death, the sentiments the singer associates with the appeal of the seductive city and the need to escape into its encounters appear more ominous than innocent. Iyer's actions, driven by the composerly agency of Jackson's song, evoke a re-consideration of these sentiments, inviting the performer, and the listener, to feel more at home with the initial starting-point, and warning of the dark potential of the alternatives to the initial tonic, whether B flat or D.

In acting upon this small phrase, then Iyer treats Jackson's song as a collection of musical opportunities for performative action. The composer of these opportunities, therefore, emerges from the performance as an agential force that lies behind certain choices and certain tones. Such a composer is effectively an agent, a co-collaborator with the performer rather than an author. Thus, Iyer's re-casting of the opening gesture becomes not just a comment upon Jackson, but a re-creation of the singer, and the creation of this track involves a sharing of agency between Iyer and Jackson, performer and composer.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, just as Iyer as an agent is shaped by how this performance goes, so too is Jackson.<sup>24</sup> Attendant to this judgement, for both listener and performer, is the aesthetic value that such shared agency brings, a value which is of particular importance in jazz and other African-American traditions. Iyer's identification with Jackson in the guise of his ruminations on *Human Nature* is both provocative and melancholy, given the title of the track and the chequered career and reputation of Jackson as a singer. Through responding to the composerly agency within *Human Nature* Iyer succeeds in creating a shared space and time of action, which has the potential to re-define both of the agents involved.

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<sup>23</sup> This point is made as a claim about the phenomenological aspects of playing the track based on close listening and the performance context. It is part of my general argument on the agential conditions of playing non-improvisational or pre-authored music. To that extent, I am not claiming that Iyer had a particular conscious experience of composerly agency in playing this track, rather that this agency plays a general part in shaping the experience of playing such music, whether conscious or not.

<sup>24</sup> Such a sharing of agency is clear in Western classical terminology when we speak of influential interpretations such as "Karajan's Beethoven" or "Horowitz's Chopin". The event of performance shapes both performer and composer together, and such shapings, I claim, are best understood through the lens of agency.

## Analysis II: Anton Diabelli and Johann Schenk

The potential of such composerly agency is certainly not restricted to jazz, as illustrated by my second example from the Western art tradition of variation. In 1819, the publishing house of Cappi and Diabelli in Vienna initiated the *Vaterländisches Künstlerverein*, a collaborative project in which fifty-one composers associated with Austria (the *Vaterland*) were asked to contribute a variation each on a pre-existent waltz by Diabelli, forming a single new set of variations for piano.<sup>25</sup> This project is of course now most famous for having led to Beethoven's massive thirty-three variations on Diabelli's theme, which went on to occupy a separate volume of its own in the project. My concern here, though, is with Johann Schenk's contribution to the publication, which appears as Variation no. 36. Here, in a more text-based tradition than that of Iyer, we can observe many of the same characteristics of composerly agency at work.

Example 1 provides the first eight measures of Diabelli's waltz, followed by the first eight measures of Schenk's variation in Example 2.

EX. 1: ANTON DIABELLI, Waltz theme from *Thema, Vaterländisches Künstlerverein*, Vol. 1 (1819-1824), mm. 1-8.

EX. 2: JOHANN SCHENK, Variation 36 from *Vaterländisches Künstlerverein*, Vol. 2. (1824), mm. 1-8.

<sup>25</sup> For more on this project, see ALEXANDER WEINMANN - JOHN WARRACK, *Diabelli, Anton*, in *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online, Oxford University Press, <http://bit.ly/1uES6eM>.

To minimize for the moment the effects of text, let us imagine Schenk improvising his variation, much as Iyer may have improvised his version of *Human Nature*. Working from the perspective of composerly agency, it is clear that Schenk takes up several of the opportunities in Diabelli's score: the turn at the start and the block triads in the right hand of measures 2 through 4 are derived from the original waltz and as such controlled by composerly agency. This control, it should be emphasized, does not attribute a particular originality to their use by Diabelli – no more than the D-F-E figure discussed above can be said to be original to Jackson. Such originality is no concern of this particular waltz: William Kinderman's detailed discussions of Diabelli's theme makes plain its character as a thoroughly, indeed almost obtrusively, standard piece in the context of 1820's Vienna.<sup>26</sup> Thus, to attribute these aspects of the waltz to Diabelli is in effect to use his name as a stand-in for the generic qualities of the music. That said, such a use of Diabelli fits well with my use of "composer" in the adjective composerly, with its emphasis on pre-existing material whatever the origin of that material may be.

Schenk responds to Diabelli's agency with some alacrity, switching the standard repeated triads between hands, and adding similarly generic actions, such as the triplet run in the left hand in measure 3. It is noticeable, for the performer, that Schenk takes over the gestures of Diabelli's waltz with little alteration in terms of physical motion or indeed of sound. The triplets of measure 3 likewise do not alter the harmonic or registral structure, and so feel a little frenetic, given that they merely reiterate more quickly ground that has already been covered. These unmotivated aspects of the music are amplified with the reiteration of the triplets in measure 7 followed by a cadence to C as V of F, implying a non-functional move to a sub-dominant area as compared to the rhyming cadence on V7 of C in measure 8 of Diabelli's waltz. If the sense of composerly agency is undoubtedly strong, the performer's agency – the improvising Schenk – is also clear, though to somewhat uncertain effect.

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. WILLIAM KINDERMAN, *The Evolution and Structure of Beethoven's "Diabelli" Variations*, «Journal of the American Musicological Society», XXXV, 2 (1982), pp. 306-328; WILLIAM KINDERMAN, *Beethoven*, Berkeley (CA), University of California Press, 1995.

The puzzle of agency presented by Schenk in this variation therefore concerns the role of the improviser. Presented with a waltz that implies a composerly agency consisting largely of clichés, Schenk uses the opportunities to increase rather than lessen the effect of generic repetition and redundancy. Thus, he takes up the sequential progressions of Diabelli's measures 9 to 13 and draws them out at facetious length through measures 9 to 19 and again 22 to 33 (see Example 3).<sup>27</sup> Moreover, this whole sequential passage is associated with an abrupt harmonic movement to E major in measure 34, though whether this is a dominant or tonic is not quite clear, nor fully resolved in the continuation. Through actions such as these, Schenk's variations confirm the Diabelli of this waltz as a composerly agent of clichés. Schenk as performer, however, embraces and re-inforces these banalities, developing and exploring his own commonplace motives in addition to re-emphasizing Diabelli's. Thus, Schenk's redundant triplets of measure 3 become extended two octave scales in the left hand of measures 53 to 57, scales that again achieve no harmonic change. Moreover, in comparison to Diabelli's short and firmly balanced binary structure, Schenk's actions occur within a rambling 120-measure *Capriccio* that includes harmonic hitching-posts at a rather chaotic selection of keys, including C minor, B flat major, and D flat major before the return to C. The initial problem of Schenk's responses to Diabelli thus becomes part of his answer: the humorous placing of Diabelli's actions within the context of an unwieldy fantasia in which the motivic and rhythmic clichés – the directives of composerly agency – remain stubbornly un-motivated.

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<sup>27</sup> Kinderman remarks that in his Variations Beethoven takes up Diabelli's sequences as an object of ridicule, a sentiment which seems to be close to Schenk's treatment in this passage, cf. W. KINDERMAN, *Beethoven*, cit., p. 236.

**Caprice. Moderato.**

EX. 3: JOHANN SCHENK, *Variation 36* from *Vaterländisches Künstlerverein*, Vol. 2. (1824), mm. 9-34.

In many ways, then, Schenk's response to Diabelli's waltz reproduces problematic qualities of the original composition. As Kinderman has noted, the waltz offers little that is original: it is a «cobbler's patch» of contemporary triteness, as Beethoven caustically declared.<sup>28</sup> This heightened conventionality may have been intentional on Diabelli's part, as the set of variations was to have a nationalistic and collective quality. Whatever the cause, Schenk's use of Diabelli's clichés creates a composerly agency that consists of repeated actions with little overall function. Placing Diabelli's already well used materials in the context of a harmonically free extended composition creates a Diabelli whose clichés appear

<sup>28</sup> W. KINDERMAN, *Beethoven*, cit., p. 280.

to have even less explanation or function. Unlike Iyer, Schenk does not alter or fundamentally re-cast the composerly agency of the waltz. Rather, he intensifies and re-doubles its effects.

As an improvisation, Schenk's response contains some humour and a little wit. Once written down, however, Schenk's *Variation 36* becomes doubly problematic for a performer of today. Part of this problem lies in its incessant rhythmic continuity: unlike the original waltz, where rhyming phrases and the relatively sparse texture left room for a performer's agency, the unbroken rhythms of *Variation 36* offer little space for those who take up its composerly directives. The lack of characteristic events and the amount of repetition dissipate much sense of goal for the performer, and this weakens the potential for creative action. Given that an agent, whether performer or composer, is defined in the now of temporal action, the absence of a clearly defined temporal goal makes the score of this variation challenging, and perhaps less attractive, for a contemporary performer. The composerly agency here, it could be said, becomes too overwhelming, even though – or perhaps because – it largely implies generic actions. The agency of a performer has little place to exert power.

These reflections on the relationship between composerly and performative agency in Schenk's variation lead directly to what in some ways the obverse of this situation, which emerges in my last analytic example. Here a strong and distinct sense of composerly agency over actions sets up a temporal now in which a performer's agency may be felt as particularly relevant. Thus, composerly agency is, again, defined as a complement to that of the performer.

### **Analysis III: Richter and Beethoven**

In the examples above, composerly agency has emerged as one of the forces, and a vital one, that controls the actions undertaken by the physical body of the performer. Such an agency operates through directives, whether written down or not, and thus is in one sense removed from the temporal flow of performance. For example, to read or remember the motive D-F-E is distinct from the process of playing it. However, once composerly agency is put into practice, becoming a «power», as the *OED* has defined it, then it is also an active force affecting the process producing the actions, including the when as well as the what. Such agential effects are indeed implicit in Iyer's re-contextualization of Jackson's motives, and in Schenk's over-indulgence of Diabelli's clichés. They are explicit in many

other musical contexts, and particularly in the creation of endings and climaxes: in, that is to say, the creation of musical goals. At such places in the music, the temporal qualities of the flow of sound determines and controls much of its effects, and therefore a performer's agency is particularly engaged. Such a place comes in measures 233-237 of the first movement of Beethoven's Op. 57, shown in Example 4.

The image shows a musical score for measures 234-238 of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 57. The score is in 12/8 time and features a key signature of two flats. Above the staff, the durations of anacrusis-downbeat groups are listed in seconds: 1.6, 1.74, 2.03, 2.3, 2.9, 4.55, and 10.2. The score includes performance markings such as *p*, *diminuendo*, *ritardando*, *adagio*, *pp*, *p*, *più allegro*, and *ff*. A blue arrow points to the 10.2-second duration above measure 237. A question mark is placed at the end of the score, and a dotted arrow points from the end of measure 237 to the beginning of measure 238.

Ex. 4: an analysis of the rhythmic effects in Richter's performance of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 57, mm. 234-238.

I suggest at this point in my example that the reader play through the score, or read through the above example carefully while imagining a performance, or listen to a live recording of this piece. The live performance I will refer to in this analysis exists in recorded form, it is one given by Sviatoslav Richter in 1960 in Carnegie Hall.<sup>29</sup>

After doing this, I believe most readers will agree that the measures quoted above are explosively dramatic in performance. Such drama is intimately linked with the actions of the pianist, particularly during the passage of time marked with a fermata during measure 237. It is during these moments that the when of action, rather than the what, becomes of prime importance in creating the sense of drama. Thus, it is a moment when the agency of performer seems especially important. How, though, does this agency – Richter's

<sup>29</sup> This recording is released as SVIATOSLAV RICHTER, *Sviatoslav Richter in Recital: Haydn, Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, Prokofiev*, CD, Regis, RRC 1399, 2013. A streaming version of the recording is available through the online service Spotify, which is free to download, through the following link: <http://open.spotify.com/track/0qqydaQZsuwbTxi7Xu9vx7>.

agency in the recording cited here – interact with composerly agency at this musical place? There is, of course, no question of the type of improvisation or variation present in my first two examples: such would be anathema to the performance traditions of this music. To answer this question, then, demands close attention to the details of musical temporality as suggested in the score. For this study, I draw on Christopher Hasty's notion of projection to illustrate the delicate balance between agential forces at this juncture.<sup>30</sup> Example 5, then, shows the score with an analytic overlay of one particular strong possibility for hearing the meter of this music as projection. Such a hearing, founded on the notion of temporal impulse, promises to illuminate something of the forward motion in this passage.

The example demonstrates two vital rhythmic elements. First, each group of three quavers becomes an anacrusis to the downbeat crotchet, as shown by the horizontal square bracket combined with a forward slash above, which slash graphically leans forward in a visual analog to the temporal propulsion of an anacrusis towards the vertical downbeat stroke on the next crotchet.<sup>31</sup> Second, this pattern sets up a metric projection over the course of bars 235-237, which is shown by the curved arrows beneath the staff. This projection has a duration of a dotted minim, and as the music continues, the gradually slowing tempo causes this relative duration to become dramatically extended: this effect is shown by widening the curve of each projective arrow.<sup>32</sup> This sense of projection continues through measures 235 through 237, albeit as each sense of projection lengthens.<sup>33</sup> However, as a result of the *ritardando*, the sense of each group of three quavers as an anacrusis becomes weaker as the passage continues. In my analysis, this is indicated through a reduction in the opacity of the anacrusic bracket and downbeat, so that by the adagio group of three, the sense of anacrusis has become seriously weakened. The crotchet before the double bar, now dotted, barely manages to fulfil the anacrusic potential of the previous *pianissimo* chords, as it in turn sets up a quite fluid and uncertain sense of projection on the

<sup>30</sup> The theory of metrical projection is introduced and developed in CHRISTOPHER HASTY, *Meter as Rhythm*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 1997.

<sup>31</sup> See Hasty's discussion of this in *Meter as Rhythm*, cit., pp. 89-103.

<sup>32</sup> It should be noted that this analytic technique of widening to indicate a growing duration of the same projection, is not used by Hasty in his book, though the potential for a projection to become smaller or larger while remaining identifiably the same is introduced and discussed. Hasty's projection relies as much on the material qualities of each unit as on its durational construction.

<sup>33</sup> The exact duration of each projective group in Richter's performance is shown measured in seconds above the score (in blue font). This is provided as an interesting sideline: it should be noted that the projective analysis is, among other things, a suggested way of feeling the rhythms of a musical phrase and the comparison of each unit in terms of clock-time has no relevance on this analysis.

very edge of the available duration. Another, more straightforward way to put this as a listener: while we expect something to happen, it becomes quite unclear when we expect it to arrive. Will the next sound allow us to continue the same sense of rhythmic projection?

The same dilemma affects the pianist. While (s)he knows what comes next, the crashing chords of the last beat of measure 237, when they should arrive is uncertain. The gradual *ritardando* has slowed our rhythmic expectations almost to a stop, each unit gradually lengthening until it comes gradually to seem as though the sense of continuity is lost. The effect is one of searching for a projective continuation, as shown by the question mark over the resultant curved arrow. In Richter's recording, one can as a listener follow the sense of this projection from measure 236 onward, and the subsequent sense of search that it entails. A listener who does so will notice that the final projection is just short of its fulfillment when Richter interrupts its course by crashing into the three *fortissimo* chords. This eruption reinstates the anacrusic figure, as shown by the fully-opaque bracket. It is also exquisitely timed in that it hovers on the cusp of realizing the previous projection and denying it: the three dominant seventh chords followed by the tonic thus operate as simultaneously a jaw-dropping surprise and a felt, rhythmic, continuation of the previous music. This analysis of rhythmic projection suggests that in creating this wonderful moment, Richter uses the directives of the score as a foundation for rhythmic effect, creating an overwhelming sense of dramatic arrival and a temporal now which has few peers in the Western solo piano repertoire. This now is formed by the performer's intense focus on the details of sound, and from hearing or playing such an event, it is but a small step to hear the sound itself determining its own course, as though a separate agent were at the heart of its narrative "voice". In such a hearing, I suggest, may lie at least one connection between the metaphorical agent of much musicology, discussed above, and the agency of the practical performer that has been the focus of this essay.

It is noticeable that the analysis of Example 5 concerns itself with fine temporal details of music, details that are only available through the pressurized course of a performance. This context is telling for the particular agential character of this passage. In performance, in a temporal context where every second counts, a performer must continually respond to the sound that (s)he hears, using it as a guide to the next sound that (s)he produces. In this way, the improvisatory practices of an Iyer are not so far removed from Richter's creative imagination in this performance. For while Richter follows the directives of the score, his performance is fully alive to the potential for a creative explosion such as

in measure 237: he is using the inherent power of the score to dramatize and enliven his actions and the sounds they create. This is not, then, a mere matter of composerly markings such as *ritardando* and a fermata giving a performer “more freedom”. Rather, such markings ask the performer to work even more closely with the pre-existent agential power in order to find the now that shapes both agential forces.

Two important consequences follow. As argued in the previous examples, Beethoven becomes defined as a composer through the temporal details of Richter’s performance, and the ways in which his manipulation of the score’s directives reflect back on Beethoven. However, these temporal relationships are already over and done. They cannot be repeated, because each playing of this piece and these measures will follow the individual context of the temporal flux of performance. Of course, in the sense that this performance, recorded over fifty years ago, established a certain temporal relationship between the sounds of these measures, one could seek to reproduce these exact relationships, using a stopwatch and a recording. Software would do this more easily, however, and this underlines the point that treating the recording as an author is no more useful than treating a composer as such. Richter’s recording, in this case, is no authority, but it can exert, has exerted, and surely will continue to exert composerly agency over the course of many performances of Beethoven’s Sonata since 1960 and into the future.

### **Towards a conclusion**

Composerly agency is no more an independent force than the agency of a performer. In fact, both forms of agency depend on the decision of a performer to lend her/his actions to some external control and give that force agential power through her/his movements. Such a decision is made countless times in the process of a performance, making the question of agency something that is negotiated through the course of a work. The body of the performer, through her/his actions, becomes the site of agential exchanges and the experience of playing sustains this interaction of agencies over the course of the music. Thus, the performing self becomes a blending of these forces, and there is a constant sharing of resources, as in Richter’s Beethoven performance, in the process of creation.

This characterization of performative agency suggests a multifaceted, layered concept which admits no simple model. Such a take on musical agency chimes well with descriptions of agency in other disciplines. For example, philosopher Shaun Gallagher warns that «the sense of agency is both complex and ambiguous. It has multiple contrib-

utories, some of which are reflectively conscious, some of which are pre-reflectively conscious, and some of which are non-conscious». <sup>34</sup> From the perspective of this essay, Gallagher's summary of agency is illuminating, for its emphasis on complexity brings it close to the types of agency discussed in my examples. Since the topic of agency in musical performance is indeed multifaceted and complex, it is at least possible that the study of agency in music might prove enlightening to other disciplines. For the complexity and ambiguity that Gallagher sees as part of the sense of agency are both certainly part of the analyses and examples discussed in this paper. Thus, future work on the experience of musical performance may well have relevance for the study of agency in other disciplines.

In this essay, I have argued that the matter of authority in music is of less relevance than the question of agency, conceived as the various powers that control the actions of performers. My analytic case studies have suggested that approaching musical performance through agency, and particularly composerly agency, has the potential to enhance our understanding of musical creativity across different musical repertoires and practices. Much remains to study in regard to the operations and experiences of agency, therefore this overview of agency in musical performance is a beginning rather than an ending. In putting this beginning forward, I hope to have shown that agency is a useful concept for musicological research, that musical performance is an important site for the study of agency, that such a study can help inform debates in other disciplines, and that bringing issues of agency to the study of performance can illuminate the complexities of creativity and authorship in music.

**NOTE**

About the examples, according to the editorials guidelines the author has verified, under his own responsibility, that the reproductions are not covered by copyright: otherwise, he obtained from the copyrights holders consent to the publication.

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<sup>34</sup> SHAUN GALLAGHER, *Multiple Aspects in the Sense of Agency*, «New Ideas in Psychology», XXX, 1 (2012), pp. 15-42: 39.