The Pianist’s Freedom and the Work’s Constrictions

What Tempo Fluctuation in Bach and Chopin Indicate

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Declaration

I declare that the research presented here is my own original work and has not been submitted to any other institution for the award of a degree.

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Abstract

The concept of the musical work has triggered much discussion: it has been defined and redefined, and at times attacked and deconstructed, by writers including Wolterstorff, Goodman, Levinson, Davies, Nattiez, Goehr, Abbate and Parmer, to name but a few. More often than not, it is treated either as an abstract sound-structure or, in contrast, as a culturally constructed concept, even a chimera. But what is a musical work to the performer, actively engaged in a “relationship” with the work he or she is interpreting? This question, not asked often enough in scholarship, can be used to yield fascinating insights into the ontological status of the work. My thesis therefore explores the relationship between the musical work and the performance, with a specific focus on classical pianists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

I make use of two methodological starting-points for considering the nature of the work. Firstly, I survey what pianists have said and written in interviews and biographies regarding their role as interpreters of works. Secondly, I analyse pianists’ use of tempo fluctuation at structurally significant moments in a selection of pieces by Johann Sebastian Bach and Frederic Chopin. This analysis is based largely on tempo graphs of recordings which I have generated using Sonic Visualiser software.

The key question that runs through the thesis asks how constraint (as imposed by the work on the performer) and freedom (for the performer to make artistic decisions) are implicated in the performance of a work. I conclude by suggesting a model for the work-performance relationship inspired by Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s philosophical writing, which reflects the paradoxical nature of the musical work’s “existence”.
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Part 1: What Was a Musical Work, Again?

“What is a musical work?” Countless writers from varying scholarly backgrounds have addressed this question, attempting to pin down and define or describe the ontological status of the musical work. Their approaches have ranged from the abstract to the more down-to-earth, usually falling somewhere between complex and near-incomprehensible for those unfamiliar with analytical philosophy. But as illuminating and fascinating as each theory may be, the sheer diversity of definitions of the work, often presented as mutually exclusive, might suggest that defining it — selecting one or just a few essential factors, such as the score, the composer, the performance, or the historical circumstances in which a work arose — narrows down its potential meanings or associations. A “definition” of the musical work often fails to be sufficiently all-embracing to reflect what a work truly can be.

Therefore in this thesis I seek not to define but to shed light onto one of its dimensions. The musical work, in both musicological and everyday locutions, has often been associated more with the composer than with the performer, despite, firstly, the existence of theories according to which works are sound structures, or are types whose tokens are performances, and secondly, the recent effort to include the notion of the performative in the discourse to a greater extent than hitherto. The process of performing is a fascinating one, and a crucial part of the work’s potentially endless “life-cycle”. Much can be learnt about the ontological status of the work by thinking about what is involved in the act of performance.
Accounts of the musical work

In what ways has the work been described? Lydia Goehr’s book *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (1992) begins with a survey of the ways in which theorists had up to then talked about the work.¹ She identifies four broad categories into which the analytic views roughly fall, before spelling out the limits of the analytic approach in general and going on to present her own “historical approach”. I will revisit the two most disparate of the four main analytic approaches here, in order to bring attention to the fact that the work can mean very different things, depending on the angle from which it is approached.

The first approach outlined by Goehr is what she calls the Platonist view. According to this view, musical works are universals, “constituted by structures of sounds” that “exist everlastingly”:

> They exist long before any compositional activity has taken place and long after they perhaps have been forgotten. They exist even if no performances or score-copies are ever produced. To compose a work is less to create a kind, than it is to discover one.²

Nicholas Wolterstorff’s view roughly aligns with this.³ For Wolterstorff, there is a difference between works and performances thereof: “[i]n music…one can distinguish between some performance of *Verklaerte Nacht* and the work performed by bringing

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² Ibid, 14.
³ Ibid.
about that performance — namely, Arnold Schoenberg’s work *Verklaerte Nacht*.” The relationship between the work and the performance is like that between natural kinds and their examples (“the grizzly” and “the grizzlies in Brookfield Zoo”); Wolterstorff proposes that artworks and natural kinds are “ontological allies”.

As a subtype of the Platonist view, Goehr describes what she calls the modified Platonist view, represented by Jerrold Levinson. Here, works still “exist over and above their performances and score-copies.” However, while according to the strong Platonist view works are not “created” but “discovered”, in the modified view they are created. For Levinson, musical works are not pure tonal structures, reducible to “a complex sequence of notes” that “exists at all times” (that is, even before they are “composed”), but are “indicated structures” — “impure, historically conditioned, temporally anchored, structures”. Works are “the result of the interaction between a person and an entirely abstract structure, such as a sequence or series of…notes.” Levinson identifies this interaction as “an act of indicating”: “it is this action that creates the link between the abstract structure and the concrete individual human that lies at the heart of such an artwork.” One thing that characterises Levinson’s view is this idea that works come into being through the relationship between the sound-structure and the specific composer who “indicates” it. It is not a simple act of indication, which is a mere pointing-to or referring, but what he calls “artistic indication”, in which the

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5 Ibid, 363.
8 Ibid, 46.
composer additionally makes the indicated sound-structure (by itself an abstract structure that exists at all times) his or her own. Chopin, for instance, “doesn’t in effect merely say: ‘here are some sounds’ but rather, ‘here are some sounds, they are now specifically mine, I embrace them, and in this exact sequence.’”\(^9\) The work’s definition involves the composer’s act. The meaning of the work as it is experienced is dependent on the “unique identity of the artist who, in the interests of self-expression, combines these brute elements — abstract notes…and who then ends up combined with them, so to speak, in the resulting work.”\(^10\) This, for Levinson, shows that it is the specific artistic situation and the act of indication that brings about works of art. It shows the difference between pure structures and indicated structures, and that musical works belong to the latter category.

A diametrically opposing view — the “nominalist” view — is one that attributes to works “no form of abstract existence… only concrete performances and score-copies exist.”\(^11\) For Nelson Goodman, works are “classes of performances that are perfectly compliant with scores.”\(^12\) Goodman’s reasoning for the necessity of perfect compliance is delightfully amusing for any musician, even though his logic is undeniably correct. If we are to preserve a work’s identity, writes Goodman, “[t]he innocent-seeming principle that performances differing by just one note are instances of the same work risks the consequence…that all performances whatever are of the same work.” Here is why: “for by a series of one note errors of omission, addition…we can go all the way

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9 Ibid, 49.
10 Ibid, 51.
12 Ibid, 18.
from Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* to *Three Blind Mice.*”

This kind of reasoning is an example that powerfully demonstrates the limits of logic when confronted with the actualities of everyday practice. Like Achilles who fails to overtake the tortoise in Zeno’s paradox, most performances would fail to qualify as instances of works if assessed by Goodman’s logic. The truth is that we *do* recognise works even in performances with wrong notes, sometimes with many wrong notes: it is a question more of cognition, which may involve a myriad of musical and non-musical dimensions (*including* the performer or program announcing the piece), rather than a question of note-counting. I believe Henri Bergson’s response to the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise can be used to illuminate the problem in Goodman’s reasoning:

It is to this confusion between motion and the space traversed that the paradoxes of the Eleatics are due; for the interval which separates two points is infinitely divisible, and if motion consisted of parts like those of the interval itself, the interval would never be crossed. But the truth is that each of Achilles’ steps is a simple indivisible act, and that, after a given number of these acts, Achilles will have passed the tortoise.

Making a few substitutions, parts of this passage become applicable to music: It is to this confusion between music and the notes sounded that the paradox of the nominalists

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14 Achilles is running to overtake a tortoise. Every time Achilles (who is obviously quicker than any tortoise, ancient or modern) reaches the point where the tortoise originally was, the tortoise has moved a tiny bit forward. Achilles can thus never overtake his slow but steady rival.

15 Henri Bergson, *Key Writings*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey. *Mélanges* translated by Melissa McMahon (New York: Continuum, 2002), 65. Bergson himself makes the comparison between motion and music in the preceding paragraph: “motion...is a mental synthesis, a psychic and therefore unextended process. ...we have here to do with a synthesis which is...a unity resembling that of a phrase in a melody.” Ibid, 64-5. Roger Scruton has also noted “the experience of a musical unity across time” in a melody, which “is itself composed of such unities: phrases and motifs...” in his *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 40.
are due; …the truth is that each musical idea is a simple indivisible act, and that, after a given number of these acts, a musical work will have been performed.\textsuperscript{16}

But for Goehr, the greatest problem with all analytic approaches of whatever stripe is that they attempt to be universal, when the concept of the work \textit{is in fact not universal}. Despite the weaknesses of these theories, though, they each bring forward a possible way of talking about the musical work. We may genuinely laugh at Goodman’s view, but the notion of perfect compliance does underwrite the modus operandi of international piano competitions and conservatory training, where playing with a high level of accuracy is taken for granted (and, according to Goehr, it \textit{is} an ideal that “has characterized classical music practice…for the last 200 years”\textsuperscript{17}). Goodman’s explanation is far from functional as a universal theory (which it clearly intends to be), but is nevertheless revealing of what the work can mean to some people.

Goehr, however, has a more convincing solution which, unlike any analytic approach, succeeds in being all-embracing precisely because it does not seek to be universal. Her famous thesis is that the work is best understood in historical terms, and that musicians only began talking about musical works in the way that we do, conceptually and with implications such as composer immortality or respect for the score, since about 1800. Replacing the question that asks “what kind of \textit{object} a musical work is” with one that asks “what kind of \textit{concept} the work-concept is”, Goehr is able to identify the

\textsuperscript{16} To be sure, there is a limit to the analogy between motion in space and motion in music: Scruton warns of “the temptation to think of the sound world as organized in the way that space is, and to situate tones and melodies in that world as the apes of our activity, moving in ways analogous to the way in which we move.” \textit{The Aesthetics of Music}, 51.

\textsuperscript{17} Goehr, \textit{The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works}, 99.
work-concept, which involves a “commitment to the Werktreu ideal”, as the factor that regulates the ways in which we have been performing and listening to classical music through the last two centuries.\textsuperscript{18} This is crucial for understanding her critique of the analytic approach. Analytic views make assumptions — they take certain genres and works as paradigmatic examples of the musical artwork (“Beethoven is the composer, and his Fifth Symphony the work most frequently referred to”), and talk of work-identity preservation as a given — without explaining why.\textsuperscript{19} And why should the identity of the work (be it Beethoven’s Fifth or some other work) have to be preserved in the way Goodman, for instance, describes? As Peter Kivy has said, authenticity is not ipso facto an aesthetic or philosophical justification for performing music in a certain manner.\textsuperscript{20}

This is where the historical approach is illuminating. Goehr argues that the work-concept is one that regulates music-making. This accounts for two things. It shows firstly why people (including theorists) see some pieces as paradigmatic or assume that the identity of a work must be preserved, and secondly why theorists don’t explain these assumptions: they are themselves under the profound influence of the work-concept’s regulating force.

Since Goehr’s book, a number of other writers have contributed to the discourse of the work-concept. Stephen Davies, for instance, has presented the view that “musical works

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 90; 285.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 83.
\textsuperscript{20} Peter Kivy, Authenticities: Philosophical Reflections on Musical Performance (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 250. Perfect compliance is, of course, merely one way of understanding authenticity, but Kivy’s message is definitely applicable to it.
are not of a single ontological type.”21 His idea of workhood involves a *continuum* — blurred boundaries and all — ranging from works for live performance to “purely electronic ones that are not for performance.”22 It is an entirely different approach from the historical one, but it successfully accounts for any kind of precomposed music, as well as for improvisation, which is connected to the live-performance end of the continuum. Where a work is placed on this continuum is determined by the *process* through which it is made into a sounding piece of music, and thus human action is a major component of the work’s ontology. He writes: “[w]orks of art are made by people… They are not natural kinds.”23

John Butt’s “What is a ‘Musical Work’? Reflections on the Origins of the ‘Work Concept’ in Western Art Music” again offers a historical approach to the work-concept. If the assumption that musical works “exist” does not hold across different cultures of today, Butt reasons, the same might be said diachronically (across different points in history): that we should not assume that “musical works” were thought of in the same way in another era, even within western culture. Concurring with Goehr, Butt is interested in “whether the interaction between ideas held about music, various social practices and the various musical objects or events at hand *together* generated the notion of the musical work.”24

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22 Ibid, 7-8.
23 Ibid.
I am in sympathy with Butt’s view that what might reflect the matter best is a balance between the extremes of assigning works everlasting existence (the “Platonist” view) and denying them any kind of power (social constructivism).

Pieces of music — whether remembered, composed in the mind, notated or sounded — are obviously human constructions through and through, but they also acquire an element of autonomy instantaneously. …If we are somehow changed through our encounter with music, something must surely somehow be ‘there’ and not merely be constructed by us on the spur of the moment. But what the argument for social constructivism does indeed show us is that what is ‘there’ is not a stable entity that endures regardless of the energy we bring to it.  

This view, along with Levinson’s and Davies’ views which put importance on the acts of composition and performance in defining the musical work, could lead to a rich area of discourse centering around the interaction between human subjectivities — composing, performing and listening — and “the music” as it comes into being in real time.

**The fall of the work-concept**

Alongside renewals of theories about the musical work such as by Levinson and Davies, the last two decades have seen attempts to chip away at the work-concept. Different writers have contributed to this “deconstruction” of the work (as Dillon Parmer puts it) from varying angles. Gary Tomlinson had warned in 1993 that “we might try to see more clearly that categories such as ‘work,’ ‘art,’ ‘the aesthetic,’ even ‘music’ itself are

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not truths given to us…but rather are themselves cultural constructions darkly tinted for us with modernist ideology."²⁶ Tomlinson’s broad postmodern vision, encompassing cultures in which such a concept is not valid or non-existent, again leads to the conclusion that simply to assume the work-concept’s universality brings with it certain dangers — in his eyes, dangers of a moral kind, insofar as it limits or distorts our understanding and treatment of cultural others as we “aggressively familiarize (colonize, terrorize) them”.²⁷

For some, the “work” all but plays villain. Carolyn Abbate, for instance, placed the work on the opposite end of the musical spectrum from performed music, claiming in 2004 that “[r]etreating to the work displaces that [irreversible, drastic] experience [of music], and dissecting the work’s technical features or saying what it represents reflects the wish not to be transported by the state that the performance has engendered in us.”²⁸ Not only is the work a different thing from the sounding music which moves and affects the listener, it is, moreover, less important. “Rather than bringing out the souvenirs and singing their praises or explaining their meanings one more time, I want to test the conviction that what counts is not a work…in the abstract, but a material, present event.”²⁹

Two further writers, Dillon Parmer and Kenneth Hamilton — both of whom are performers — have criticised the cultural work done by our conceptualisation of the

²⁷ Ibid.
²⁹ Ibid, 506.
musical work. Hamilton, like Goehr, takes a historical approach in *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*, although his book is not about explaining or defining the concept of the musical work. Rather, his starting point is the question that asks why performance practice has moved to such an extent towards passivity and sterility “from the much more varied, spontaneous, and improvisatory piano culture of the nineteenth century — when, ironically, most of our repertoire was actually composed”.30 Focusing on the history of piano performance, he discusses how the nineteenth-century aesthetic climate led to the work being thought of as a sacred entity, which attitude in turn regulates musical life today. For Hamilton, some of the ways in which “masterworks” came to be treated through the past two centuries are regrettable absurdities. I believe his view is indeed justifiable; he refers to a recital he attended in which the pianist “predictably proceeded to perform with all the spontaneity of a tenth take in the recording studio…the supposedly improvisatory ‘Quasi una fantasía’ sonatas [by Beethoven]… It was a miserable experience”.31

Parmer’s iconoclastic “Musicology as Epiphenomenon: Derivative Disciplinarity, Performing, and the Deconstruction of the Musical Work”, from 2007, is motivated by a view not dissimilar to Abbate’s. He defines the work as it is treated in musicology in the following terms: “‘works’ are de-contextualized mental constructs stripped from the specific performance situations that give rise to them”.32 It is thus nothing new today to be sceptical of the work-concept. This “weakening of the classical work concept”, as

Butt put it, has indeed done positive work: it “has, at the very least, allowed us to consider other factors implicit in the music, particularly to do with performance.” Our knowledge that the work-concept is transient and culturally contingent, as well as of the obvious fact that the work is not a material object, can be continually used to check that we are keeping music-making fresh and dynamic. Let this knowledge serve as a *memento mori* for musical works. Moving forward, then, we have perhaps come to a point where the work-concept has fallen low enough for us to engage with it face-to-face.

Both Hamilton and Parmer offer paths in this direction. Parmer follows his critique of the work-concept with a reimagining of what a work would be in a more performance-based musicology.

Rather than discard the concept [of the work], my analysis recuperates it: instead of serving as a distant object which disengaged listening subjects can apprehend in the privacy of their own minds, the musical work becomes the performance process through which music enters actuality in specific but shifting contexts of actual artistic production. In short, the musical work *is* the work performers undertake to give birth to music in actual practice.

Parmer’s view of the work-performer relationship emphasises the dependence of the work’s identity on the particular performance. Especially useful is his description of the reciprocal relationship between what he calls the performer’s sound-image and what actually comes out as the sounding performance: “each produces the other so that the

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realization of an idea into material form alters or conditions the idea that simultaneously gives rise to the realization.”36 There are resonances here with the theoretical views that pinpoint the interaction between the human and musical dimensions as a crucial part of the work’s existence.

Similarly, Hamilton’s account of nineteenth-century performance history raises an interesting point regarding the relationship between performer and musical work. He notes the presence of a certain tension in the performer’s relationship with the work — a paradox that emerged in the nineteenth century as it became increasingly common and expected for pianists to memorise the music they were playing, rather than play from the notes or improvise. According to Hamilton, “[a]s the practice of concert improvisation slowly declined, so the practice of playing from memory increasingly flourished.”37 The development and growth of the custom of memorisation was closely connected to the rise of the work-concept. Learning a work from memory came to show respect for the composer and the music. “[I]t became a sign of seriousness to have memorized the program: it showed due reverence to the masterworks presumably contained therein.”38 But at the same time, playing without the notes gave the “illusion of improvisation”. It “fostered the impression that interpretation could have the freedom and spontaneity of an improvisation, but linked to music of greater complexity and — implicitly — quality.”39 While this idea is not further developed in Hamilton’s book, we can see that it shows a willingness on the part of performers and audiences to lay claim to the positive values of two seemingly opposing phenomena, namely

36 Ibid, 35.
37 Hamilton, After the Golden Age, 80.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
interpretation of “masterworks” and improvisation. Today, it seems, we are accustomed to this contradiction. It is arguably even a tension that we thrive on, for some of the most special moments in music-making happen precisely when this illusion of improvisation is at work — sometimes, moreover, in pieces that we have already heard many times in the past. It also relates to the idea that the performer actually feels greater freedom while performing when they have memorised the music, in which case intimacy with a precomposed work and spontaneity in performance do not necessarily negate each other; on the contrary, the former is considered a prerequisite for the latter. The nature of this tension will form an important part of my discussion.

**Approaching the work via performance**

From what has been presented so far, it can be seen that the discourse about the concept of the musical work has mostly centered around abstract theoretical descriptions or the nineteenth-century history of aesthetics, composition and concert life. My work is intended to respond to this discourse *from the performer’s perspective*, by surveying the writings and recordings of twentieth- and twenty-first-century classical pianists. While my focus on pianists from the age of recordings gives this study a historical and cultural specificity and an obvious practical dimension, I aim to utilise piano performance as a source of knowledge to illuminate the nature of the relationship between the performer and the musical work; thus the conclusions that I draw will take the focus back to a more abstract realm.
My thesis is also a response to the repeated calls in recent decades for musicology to shift from focusing exclusively on composers and compositions towards putting a greater emphasis on performers and performances. Musical works had long been the centre of attention in musicological discourse, and the fact that music is actually a performed art form and a sonic event often went unacknowledged. This imbalance has been and continues to be redressed by an exponential increase in studies that analyse recordings.

But according to Dillon Parmer, the imbalance has not in fact thus been remedied, as simply analysing recordings does not solve the problem. In a recent polemic piece from 2014, Parmer writes that “academic discourse carries out an agenda that aggrandizes the scholar on the one hand by demeaning musicians on the other”.

The situation, according to this view, has changed little since 1999 when Nicholas Cook complained of theorists who “explain music without musicians”, and of “the assumption that theory exerts some kind of hegemony over performance”. One of the implications here is that the constrictive nature of analysis, if used prescriptively, is incompatible with the way in which performers interpret music; that analysis, insofar as it strives towards objective reasoning, limits the creativity and spontaneity of the performer. This invites a number of important questions. Firstly, to what extent is this true? Secondly, can the flow of knowledge from theory to performance be turned around? Parmer wrote earlier in 2007 that “performing has yet to be given its due as a primary source out of which

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institutionally legitimate knowledge about music can arise.”  
\[42\] This belatedness had gone hand-in-hand with scholars being “programmed…not only to suppress performing (how-to knowledge)…; but also to uphold as superior, as more prestigious, those forms of knowledge about music (knowledge about) which can be produced without any recourse to actual music making.”  
\[43\]

My aim in this thesis is to turn the flow around — to inform theory through a discussion of what happens in a performance. At the same time, I consider the relationship between the constrictive and creative elements which coexist in the act of performance: while this may be paradoxical in theory, using performance as a source of knowledge can show us that within a performance, the two elements (the constrictive and the creative) are not contradictory.

**Methodology**

To what extent do performers feel an obligation to interpret a work in a particular manner, an obligation that transcends performance tradition or style? (Improvisation as a practice also follows the norms of a particular culture, but I will argue that performing works comes with certain constrictions that transcend these differences between performance styles.) On the other hand, if performing works also offers pianists scope for spontaneity, creativity and/or individuality, how does it happen?

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\[42\] Parmer, “Musicology as Epiphenomenon,” 11.

\[43\] Ibid, 12.
My project is structured in three parts. Firstly, I survey what professional classical pianists have written or told interviewers about the nature of performance, and about the relationship between the performer and precomposed pieces (Part 2). In the next section (Part 3) I use recordings of pianists as another basis from which to approach my questions. I use four short excerpts from pieces by Johann Sebastian Bach and Frederic Chopin — two by each composer — centered around moments where the main theme appears after introductory or non-thematic material. Analytically, these are significant points in the structure of each piece. I ask how these moments of appearance are treated in performances — specifically, whether they are emphasised, and if so, in what ways. I connect these questions with my larger topic concerning the musical work by further asking whether there is a sense of necessity for certain interpretative decisions, and whether or how the work allows for a performer’s individuality. My analysis focuses primarily on tempo fluctuation, and involves measurements using Sonic Visualiser software. The final part of my paper (Part 4) is a discussion of the implications of my findings from the previous two sections, and aims to add to our understanding of the musical work. Here I draw on Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s model of self-consciousness and Goehr’s concept of “doubleness” (a mode of thinking which she introduces in The Quest for Voice44), as analogies to help better understand the elusive and fascinating phenomenon of performing works.

Ultimately my stance is that, despite efforts in the discourse to move away from the work-concept, acknowledgement and consideration of the notion of the musical work is

indispensable if we are to properly understand how performance operates for classical pianists. In spite of Abbate’s “conviction that what counts is not a work…in the abstract, but a material, present event”, my conviction is that the word “work” can refer to a material, present event itself, as Parmer also proposes. From writers who have pointed out the cultural contingency of the work-concept, as well as from the historical accounts of the concept, we learn to be conscious of the fact that works can only be meaningfully talked about in the specific context of western art music of the past two centuries. But within that context, the work is powerful. And although classical music’s status as high-brow art seems to have placed musical works in an imaginary museum, for some musicians, including myself, the excitement of picking new repertoire and discovering new pieces is comparable to the excitement of a child in a candy store. The delicious sweets can be touched, looked at, talked about, exchanged — but the true experience of the sweet only comes at the moment it melts on the tongue.
Part 2: Pianists Talk

“Interpretation is a synthesis of the world of the composer and the world of the interpreter.”
Claudio Arrau

“One of the crosses the artist has to bear is that the date of a recording is so rarely indicated on the record sleeve… The artist should have the right to identify his work with a certain phase of his development. It is only the continuous renewal of his vision… that can keep his music-making young.”
Alfred Brendel

“Theory, it seems, is not committed to understanding performers in the way it is to understanding composers.”3 This, written by Nicholas Cook in 1999, still appears to be true today, if we consider the way we talk about “intentionality”. We constantly hear and speak about the concept of composer-intentionality, whether in the context of historically informed performance (HIP) or in “mainstream” music-making. On the other hand, the notion of performer-intentionality is not heard of so often. Even if we do talk about the performer’s intentions, it is certainly not with the formality involved in discussions of composer-intentionality. Perhaps performers are supposed to be understood purely through the sounding performance, rather than according to what they are aiming to do. Another possible reason for the difference is that performances are the end product, not in need of further “interpretation” required for realisation into a

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2 Alfred Brendel, On Music (London: Robson Books, 2001), 17. The quote is from a chapter originally written in 1966; in a footnote the Brendel of 2001 writes that things are changing. “In recent years, serious record companies have provided the date and place of the recording…” This, however, does not take away from the meaning of the quote.
different medium (unlike the written notes of a score, which do need a performer’s interpretation to turn them into sonic events). But this depends on one’s definition of the act of musicking; for the listening experience may be translated into verbal description of the music or of the emotions or responses triggered by the music, and arguably music is not music without a subjectivity responding to it. It may be, then, that it is the unscholarly nature of concert-going and music criticism that has allowed “performer-intentionality” to escape conceptualisation. It is, in a way, small wonder that composers and performers are discriminated from one another, for their jobs are different.

But even if we do not have such a well-established concept of performer-intentionality, the performer’s “intentions” have been spoken of. To give an example, Hanslick said of Clara Schumann that her aim was “to give a clear expression to each work in its characteristic musical style”. Whether or not he confirmed the truth with Clara is irrelevant; the point is that her performances came across that way. Clara’s “intentions” have been inferred — interpreted — from the performance by the listener. It will be seen that this is analogous to the way in which the composer’s “intentions” are generally spoken of by the pianists I examine in the following paragraphs — “intentions” as interpreted from the score by the performer.

How do pianists describe their relationship to the score, work and composer? The biographies and interviews of twentieth-century classical pianists reveal not only the way in which they see (or saw) their role as the interpreter, but also the way in which

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the score, the work and the composer relate to one other. Here I explore what pianists “intend” their performances to achieve in relation to the musical work: I will discuss the performer’s intentions not for the sake of informing audiences (to teach them “how to listen to music”) or performers (“how to play music”), but to add to the knowledge of what a musical work is, through a perspective not usually utilised.

“Servant of the music”

In an interview from 1939 with Frente Popular, Claudio Arrau (1903-1991) articulated his view of the ideal relationship between performer and composer: “the interpreter has the sacred duty to render intact the thinking of the composer whose work he interprets.” He saw a difference between his own generation and the preceding one, where “the interpreters, the performers, had a concept of authorship that made them interpret in a way that was arbitrary and many times false,” and “the vanity of the performers came to loom larger than the goal of a faithful interpretation”, thus pinpointing a generational shift in performers’ values in the first half of the twentieth century. This shift, characterised by Joseph Horowitz as a move from “the personal aggrandizement of an earlier period” to “modern objectivity”, might be seen as related to the emergence of the Neue Sachlichkeit (“new objectivity”) of interwar Germany: “a new, cooler aesthetic” which “preferred practicality and self-discipline to passionate subjectivity” (Arrau was in Berlin at this time).  

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5 Joseph Horowitz, Conversations with Arrau, 112.
6 Ibid.
In “Artur Schnabel: Servant of the Music”, a tribute written by Arrau in 1952 (the year after Schnabel’s death), fidelity to the score is roughly equated with fidelity to the music: “Schnabel [1882-1951] was the first to insist on faithful adherence to the written page. In this field he was the first celebrated performer to illustrate the concept — strangely enough, a new one of its time — of the interpreter as the servant of music rather than the exploiter of it.”\(^7\) Fidelity here involves a hierarchy: the word “servant” presents the performer’s status as being “below” the music. Again, we see the idea that score-fidelity was a new value in the early twentieth century, and while Arrau’s use of the phrase “strangely enough” reveals his belief in and commitment to this value, its newness at that point shows it to have been historically contingent. (It is probably worth clarifying that “score-fidelity” is of course a matter of degree, and that the shift noted by Arrau was one from less to much greater adherence to the score, rather than a leap from total indifference to complete adherence.)

Sviatoslav Richter (1915-1997), too, expressed his belief that the score was the ultimate authority:

> I might have had doubts about the extent to which I managed to play what I intended, but I was always certain that, for each work, it was this way, and no other, that it had to be played. Why? It’s very simple, because I looked closely at the score. That’s all that’s required to reflect what it contains.\(^8\)

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According to this the *score*, and nothing else, is required for one to know what the *work* is. Richter raises two further points which concur with Arrau’s statements: that the work represents the composer’s intentions, and that the performer — the interpreter — takes on a kind of transparency before the work.

The interpreter is really an executant, carrying out the composer’s intentions to the letter. He doesn’t add anything that isn’t already in the work. If he is talented, he allows us to glimpse the truth of the work that is in itself a thing of genius and that is reflected in him. He shouldn’t dominate the music, but should dissolve into it.9

In Arrau’s words, “[a] real interpreter is somebody who is able to transform himself into something he is not.”10 Despite changes in performance style and the generational shift in attitudes described by Arrau, this ideal of performer-transparency was certainly not a complete invention of the twentieth century. Reviewing Charles Hallé performing Beethoven on the piano in 1888, George Bernard Shaw had written, “[t]he secret is that he [Hallé] gives you as little as possible of Hallé and as much as possible of Beethoven.”11 In fact, one could even go back to the 1830s, the days of Liszt’s Parisian battles with Thalberg, for an example of the critic praising textual fidelity, and by implication, composer-fidelity. Hearing Liszt play Beethoven’s *Hammerklavier* Sonata, Berlioz wrote that the virtuoso had “solved” the mysteries of the piece, which until then had been “the Sphinx’ enigma of almost every pianist… Not a note was left out, not one

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10 Joseph Horowitz, *Conversations with Arrau*, 120.
added (I followed, score in hand), no inflection was effaced, no change of tempo permitted…”12

Much more recently, a younger pianist — Maurizio Pollini (born 1942) — backs up Arrau and Richter in his definition of the performer’s role, and in his equation of the composer’s intention with the music itself.

I never gave any importance to — in fact, I saw and see very well the limited aspect of — a performance devoid of errors. This means absolutely nothing. I have struggled all my life for another thing: expressing the character of the composer, the character of the music. This has always been a more important goal — from then to now this has been a constant: To try to understand and convey the composer’s intention.13

What would Nelson Goodman say? Pollini is talking about preservation of the work’s identity through its character, not its notes. It might be added that what is meant here by “the composer’s intentions” is different from how the HIP movement, for instance, would understand the same phrase, that is, as being in accordance with the performance practices of the composer’s period. The two ways of understanding the phrase could even be diametrically opposing, since performance practice of the period in which most composers of the classical canon lived did not involve the level of textual fidelity thought appropriate by pianists such as Arrau and Richter, and indeed most pianists

12 Quoted in ibid, 171. Whether or not it is possible to imagine that Liszt neither omitted nor added a single note, the interesting thing here is the value attributed by Berlioz to the pianist’s commitment (as inferred by the critic) to discovering the meaning of the work, achieved through textual fidelity.
today. Unlike the concept of the composer’s intentions as theorised by writers such as Peter Kivy and Stephen Davies (which is in line with the HIP-mode of thinking), what the pianists under discussion mean by “the composer’s intentions” refers to a great extent — indeed, at times almost exclusively, as in Richter’s case — to whatever is conveyed by the score: “intentions” as inferred from the written text.

This kind of “fidelity” is, as one might suspect, rather complex; it is even connected with seemingly contradictory effects. Joseph Horowitz, in his Conversations with Arrau, writes that an “aspect of textual fidelity, as you [Arrau] practice it, is that your literalism produces readings that are slightly different from those usually heard.” In this case, literalism ends up going hand-in-hand with individuality.

Moreover, for Arrau, the instructions on the score are not entirely constricting. “Some people think if you apply textual fidelity, you have to be dry. There is this ridiculous either-or [of choosing between fidelity/passivity/dryness and non-fidelity/creativity/interest]. Actually, there isn’t any conflict.” Theoretically paradoxical, this is a significant insight: the score, while determining many aspects of a performance, leaves space for the interpreter’s contribution or involvement. If one were to explain this logically, Stephen Davies’ notion of the “underdetermined” nature of scores might help: that it is impossible for a composer to convey everything through

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14 These two different, potentially opposing notions of composer intentionality correspond to the disagreement among writers as to what is meant by the term authenticity.
15 Joseph Horowitz, Conversations with Arrau, 122.
16 Ibid. 121.
writing and that the performer must fill in the gaps — whatever is underdetermined.\(^{17}\) While these “gaps” might, at first glance, be viewed as unavoidable weaknesses or limitations of scores, in a different light, they are what fuel individuality of performances, because they demand decision-making, and make space for interpretation. According to Davies, “[e]ven if all the composer’s determinative indications are followed to the letter, many matters…are…left to the performer… It is for this reason that performing is creative, even where it aims at instancing a composer’s work.”\(^{18}\) But Davies does not make clear what kinds of elements of the music are determined in the score and what require filling in — in other words, the whereabouts of the boundary between constraint and freedom remains obscure. This is where an approach from the performer’s perspective can be illuminating.

Alfred Brendel (born 1931) expands on this view of interpretation as a creative act. Writing in 1966, he makes a distinction between “understanding the composer’s intentions” — which, according to Brendel, is one of the interpreter’s tasks\(^{19}\) — and “sterile ‘fidelity’”\.\(^{20}\) “What the composer actually meant when he put pen to paper can only be unravelled with the help of one’s own engaged emotions, one’s own senses, one’s own intellect, one’s own refined ears… To force or to shun the ‘personal approach’ is…questionable”.\(^{21}\) This explains interpretation as discovering a hidden “intentionality” through the interpreter’s own musical, emotional and intellectual engagement with the score. Earlier in the century, Alfred Cortot (1877-1962) put it

\(^{18}\) Ibid, 209.
\(^{19}\) The interpreter’s second task is to “give each work the strongest possible effect.”
\(^{21}\) Ibid.
beautifully: “he [the interpreter] tries to discover the man [the composer] in his work and identify the generating motive by visualizing the human moment which preceded the artistic creation.”

“Never play the same twice”

No less passionately, Vladimir Horowitz (1903-1989) points out the possibility for and importance of different interpretations of the same musical work, admittedly without exactly explaining the reason. David Dubal writes that Horowitz “had often talked…about the art of the interpreter. He said the greater the music, the more ways it can be illuminated.” Horowitz would find his conception of a piece change after not playing it for years: “[r]ecords are terrible things. You change, but they stay the same.”

“I never, never play the same way twice. NEVER!”

In a 1997 interview with Bruce Duffie, Murray Perahia (born 1947) echoes Horowitz:

BD [Bruce Duffie]: Do you leave anything for a spark of imagination at the performance, or do you play it exactly the same as in the rehearsal?

MP [Murray Perahia]: I can’t ever play a piece exactly the same, ever. So it’s always changing, really.

In addition to the possibility or even inevitability for spontaneity, the same score might be illuminated in different ways through a long-term process. Arrau gives examples of

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such experiences. “In the last movement of the Schubert C-minor Sonata there are passages I used to play in an almost graceful way. Now I feel very strongly that the whole movement is very tragic, very close to the idea of death.” Or, on revisiting the Schubert B-flat Sonata, “[t]he meaning of the last movement, which is so problematic, became very clear to me…what I mainly feel now is the ambivalence of the theme…my conviction is very, very strong.” Wilhelm Backhaus (1884-1969), too: “[e]ach time I re-play the Moonlight Sonata, for example, I feel that I am playing a new, unknown piece that must be worked out again from the first note to the last.” And Perahia:

BD: When you come back to a piece that you have known for a long time, is it like coming back to an old friend, or do you get a clean score and start over?

MP: Clean score and start over.

BD: Do you always discover new things?

MP: Always! And always I wonder how could I have played it like that, or how did I not see this.

BD: I assume it’s not the music that’s changed? [Both laugh]

MP: Music hasn’t changed, no!

The attitude of “clean score and start over” is one in which the performer actively searches for new insights into the score. The fact that a performer can see the work in a different way after a period of time has an interesting implication. Firstly, it means that

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25 Joseph Horowitz, Conversations with Arrau, 126.
26 Ibid.
28 Duffie, Pianist Murray Perahia.
the performer could not previously see the work in the later way — there is a kind of constraint in the way the work presented itself to the performer at the earlier point in time. At any stage, he or she may be experiencing a feeling similar to Richter’s certainty that, for a particular work, “it was this way, and no other, that it had to be played”, or Arrau’s “very, very strong” conviction regarding the work’s meaning.

While there is a seeming necessity as to how the work should sound, it is, on the other hand, not the only way it can sound, for coming back to the work at a different time often reveals new ideas, and in fact the performer might actively strive to discover new ways of interpreting the score. And these seemingly contradictory thought processes — on the one hand being convinced of one particular way, and at the same time accepting different interpretations — can take place within one pianist’s mind.

Glenn Gould (1932-1982), for instance, speaks of the days when he “was fighting a battle in which I was never going to get a surrender flag from my teacher on the way in which Bach should go”, and that the playing of “the Bach ‘specialists,’… — Casals, Landowska, and so on”, which involved “enormous amounts of rubato”, “to me, was not really Bach.”29 He was convinced, in other words, of how the music should sound. But he also admitted that he found himself “more genuinely drawn to the essence of Beethoven in Schnabel than I ever have been by anybody [else]”, although Schnabel’s manner of playing was different from his own: “I would play with very firm, very tight rhythmic features. But Schnabel doesn’t.”30 Thus, there is, in addition to the freedom

for a pianist to play a work differently from performance to performance, freedom for pianists to play differently from each other — though if, as Perahia says, “[y]ou’re not the same person you were a year ago”31, it may not be necessary to treat the two — difference in time, and difference in performer — separately. (In fact, Backhaus would try to explain this quasi-scientifically: “[w]hen you think that the human organism is always renewing itself and that, physiologically speaking, our cells change every seven years, it is hardly surprising that one becomes a new man at every fresh approach to a masterpiece.”32)

A relationship with the music

Returning to the extract from Perahia’s interview quoted above, no less telling is the conviction that “the music hasn’t changed”: it is taken for granted to the extent that the idea of the music changing is absurd. In other words, “the music” remains as it always was, but “new things” can be discovered in it depending on the interpreter’s attitude. While it may seem obvious that the music — that is, the piece — is not going to grow or shrink on its own, it is revealing that “the music” is talked of almost as an entity with substance and materiality. We might recall what John Butt wrote: “If we are somehow changed through our encounter with music, something must surely somehow be ‘there’ and not merely be constructed by us on the spur of the moment.”33 Rather, we are changing in the period between encounters with the music, according to Perahia.

31 Duffie, Pianist Murray Perahia.
32 Eichmann, Great Concert Artists: Wilhelm Backhaus, 12.
“The music” sometimes even takes on the composer’s name in the discussions of pianists, as can be seen in the Gould quotes from above — “the way in which Bach should go”, or “the essence of Beethoven in Schnabel”. Pollini even speaks of “[m]y relationship with Chopin”: it “has become…closer and closer to his [Chopin’s] music as time passes — I have become more and more enthusiastic. He’s a miracle.” That is, Chopin’s music is a miracle. And it is striking to what extent the composer (at least the name), the score and the music are spoken of almost as a kind of fused entity. The three-headed musical dog even seems to have agency, so much so that the pianist can have a “relationship” with it.

As we have seen, this “relationship” seems to involve a sense of interpretative necessity on the one hand and freedom on the other. Wolfgang Sandner’s liner notes written for Keith Jarrett’s recordings of the Well-Tempered Clavier are intriguing and possibly illuminating (Jarrett, born 1945, is a jazz pianist and composer). It includes a passage that implies a certain relationship between work and performer:

And Keith Jarrett? To me his interpretations appear unstrained and lively in an exemplary way: emphasizing nothing, demanding nothing, concealing nothing and withholding nothing. In one word: natural — that is, following the inherent laws of the works…

This resonates with what he quotes Jarrett himself as having said: “[t]ake…the works of J. S. Bach: In most of what I have heard in the interpretation of other pianists, I feel that

34 Finane, Illuminating the Masters.
too much is imposed upon the music. The very direction of the lines, the moving of notes are inherently expressive.”36 This is the same idea of performer-transparency which Shaw, Richter and Pollini had spelled out. According to this, the manner of interpretation is, for these performers, not negotiable. Yet, according to Sandner, this does not rule out the performer’s agency. “It has something to do with a certain kind of freedom: Not being able to do what one wants, but wanting to do what one can.”37 What this suggests (at least in my interpretation of this enigmatic turn of phrase) is a tension between the performer wanting to do something, anything, and the work allowing this to happen only at particular moments.

**The what and how questions**

Perahia provides a clearer account of a related idea. It is to do with the nature of the differences between performances of the same piece:

I can’t ever play a piece exactly the same [quoted above]… Even though I have set ideas, things I want to try to show in the music are not actually on the surface of it. I can show it [the idea] with a diminuendo; I can show it with a crescendo. It wouldn’t make that much difference. But the point is, let’s say I’m showing a dissonant chord resolving in a phrase. I’ll decide at the last minute how it’s going to go.38

On the one hand, *what* or *where* he shows — say a particular dissonance — is worked out ahead of the performance. On the other hand, *how* he shows it — say through

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36 Ibid.
37 Ibid. The original German is as follows: “Sie hat mit einer bestimmten Form von Freiheit zu tun: nicht machen können, was man will, sondern wollen, was man kann.”
38 Duffie, *Pianist Murray Perahia.*
dynamics — may change from performance to performance. Thus a coexistence of deliberation and spontaneity: the former in the “what” and the latter in the “how” of “showing” a feature in the score.

Having surveyed the language in which these pianists (and their critics) characterise their roles as interpreters, a couple of ideas should be kept in mind during the analysis of recordings in the following section. The main point is that on the one hand these pianists acknowledge that there are elements determined by the score; on the other there is the contribution of the interpreter. This coexistence of constraint and freedom for the performer seems to be happening in at least two ways. Firstly, there is a sense of necessity or constraint in that the pianist often feels certain as to how aspects of the work “should sound”, although at a different time or at the hands of another pianist, the work is interpreted differently. Pianists such as Horowitz, Perahia, Brendel and Gould all acknowledge this freedom for interpretation. The second way in which constraint and freedom coexist involves the idea raised in Perahia’s interview. This runs as follows: while the elements of the score that are to be brought out are determined in accordance with the work’s structure and decided in advance by the performer, there is a greater freedom regarding the manner in which the features are emphasised — this might even be decided on the spot during the performance.

From this it can be seen that the determined and underdetermined elements of the work (to use Davies’s terms), or the constraint and freedom — which the work respectively “imposes on” and “grants” the performer — coexist in the moment of performance, but
that their respective boundaries are explicable in terms of the “what” and “how” questions.

Is this view of the nature of the relationship between performer and musical work identifiable in recordings of actual performances? This is the consideration of the next section. My aim is to trace the seemingly contradictory elements coexisting in the act of performance, which have been described so poetically by Cortot:

What a paradoxical and touching ambition, stamped as much with boldness as with humility! What burning desire for submission… What a stirring vision, inspiring us to see in the movement of a great work of art some echo of our own aspirations, and seducing us, at times in such a wonderful way, into the belief that the soul of the composer might truly abide in ours.39

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39 Gavoty, Great Concert Artists: Alfred Cortot, 27.
Part 3: Pianists Play

In this section I use recordings of excerpts from a selection of pieces by Johann Sebastian Bach and Frederic Chopin to analyse *tempo fluctuation* at structurally significant moments in each piece: where the main theme appears after non-thematic or introductory material. My analysis is based on tempo graphs generated through Sonic Visualiser software.

I have selected Bach and Chopin for a number of reasons. They are performed often — most pianists have played the music of these two composers. This could either suggest that there are as many different ways of interpreting their music; or, on the other hand, the fact that it is heard so often could result in pianists having difficulty escaping an established manner of playing. More importantly, the music of the two composers is associated with differing performance styles. In our conceptions of appropriate Chopin performance, the idea of rubato is a *sine qua non*, whereas Bach’s music (especially in mainstream performance) is usually associated with greater metrical strictness, or at least a different kind of rhythmic flexibility from the sweeping rubato we apply to romantic music. Surveying these two composers would offer a wide ambit of performance styles.

While my primary focus is on tempo fluctuation, this is, of course, only one of the many expressive dimensions involved in piano performance: others include dynamics, timbre, pedaling, articulation. These are all utilised by pianists to create certain characters,
moods and other expressive qualities. I have chosen duration as it is the most accurately measurable dimension and allows comparison between recordings of varying quality. In addition, tempo fluctuation arguably plays one of the most significant roles in expressive music-making, and the quality and quantity of rubato are often markers that define performance styles or schools. Inevitably, the actual effect of each performance (which may include, for instance, dramatic effects created by dynamic swells) will not be reflected fully in the discussion; it is of course best for the reader to also hear the recordings of the performances under discussion.¹

Numerous studies have analysed pianists’ use of rubato in recordings to uncover distinctions between different performance styles. For instance, in a chapter from his *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance*, Nicholas Cook has used recordings of Chopin’s Mazurkas to discuss the way in which pianists shape, or do not shape, the phrase as a unit through the combination of dynamics and rubato.² Neal Peres Da Costa discusses “metrical rubato” — an expressive device involving “the rhythmic alteration of melody notes while essentially preserving the metrical regularity of the accompaniment” — along with other rhythmic devices (such as dotting and *notes inégales*), as described in documents as well as heard in early recordings.³ His exploration not only reveals the difference between performance styles then and now

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¹ The excerpts are available from this link: [https://1drv.ms/f/s!AuVuVDZrnl2TgWBISZrrmUOqR4Ji](https://1drv.ms/f/s!AuVuVDZrnl2TgWBISZrrmUOqR4Ji)

² Nicholas Cook, “Objective Expression” in *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013). Cook’s larger message is that stylistic practices are culturally contingent and rooted in ideologies that are historically constructed; his aim is to destabilise the assumption that such ideologies are universal.

but simultaneously opens up new (or at least newly rediscovered) expressive possibilities for musicians performing today.

My focus is on boundary areas, where there is no break in the flow of notes, and thus one moment — one cadence — is both an ending of a passage and a beginning of a theme. For Philip Bohlman, boundaries are fascinating areas for philosophical exploration. Writing that borders “are among the most ontologically complex spaces, in music no less than in life”, Bohlman relates the idea of boundaries to aporia — a logical threshold that cannot be crossed or resolved.4 He describes

aporia at borders functioning in three ways, drawing upon Jacques Derrida’s writings on aporia and death…: 1) the first function of aporia is that of a line that separates, hence must be crossed [in order to reconcile or move between the two sides]; 2) aporia can represent a zone of difference, of overlapping, of fullness; and 3) aporia can describe an area of impossibility and unknowability, of silence and emptiness.5

Aporia, an incompatibility that creates a boundary between two sides, might be applied to boundary areas in musical works. In the examples I have chosen, there is a distinction between the identities of thematic and non-thematic material, which creates a border at the very moment a theme enters after an introductory or connecting passage. Analytically, they are distinct sections with distinct functions and are thus conceptualised as separate entities, yet in the actuality of a performance, the boundary between them is crossed (literally, just as Achilles overtakes the tortoise). In light of

5 Ibid, 135-6.
this, boundaries in works seem to be significant moments that would potentially demand emphasis or expression.

By using such moments as starting points for analysing tempo fluctuation, my aim is to explore the connections between the score, the music, and the performance. Points of thematic arrival could be treated in more than one way: they can be, for example, slowed-down into, or cause the tempo to drop in the aftermath, or do both or neither. The key question is one that asks: in what ways are the constrictions of the score and the performer’s freedom evident in the performance of a work?

I have selected the following moments of arrival:

**Bach:**

Prelude in F minor from the *Well-Tempered Clavier* Book I, BWV 857, second half of bar 16;

*Italian Concerto* BWV 971, First movement, bar 163.

**Chopin:**

Polonaise in A flat major, Op. 53 “Heroic”, bar 17;

Waltz in D flat major, Op. 64 No. 1 “Minute”, bar 5.6

All these examples lack specific indications in the score dictating tempo changes (such as *rit.* followed by *a tempo*). The score of the Polonaise, however, has a *crescendo*

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6 The score of each excerpt is included in Appendix 1.
marked over the two bars immediately before the entry of the theme, a *forte* on the
downbeat of the entry, and a short (one-beat) hairpin *diminuendo* from there. In each
excerpt, I examine the bars surrounding the appearance of the theme in order to show
how pianists handle both the lead-up and aftermath of the event. I have intentionally
included performances from a wide range of decades from the twentieth and
twenty-first centuries, as well as (for the Bach examples) harpsichord performances and
one recording by Keith Jarrett, a musician also active as a jazz pianist and composer.

Using Sonic Visualiser — tapping along with a recording in order to generate tempo
graphs — has been revealing to a much greater extent than I had expected, particularly
in the comparison between performances. As I will discuss, it shows a remarkable
consensus between performers in certain matters, as well as divergence regarding
others. The graphs show the tempo (in beats per minute) *since the previous beat*, so that
if there is a slowing-down or broadening within a beat, the graph will have a downward
slope to the next beat; a rising slope represents a quickening of tempo within the beat
(this is also why the values only begin from the second beat of each example — there is
no “previous beat” for the first one).\(^7\) Where there is dislocation between the hands I
have taken the right-hand note as the beat, since it is the melody to which the ear is
drawn more strongly (in all these examples the melody is in the right hand).

\(^7\) My knowledge for using Sonic Visualiser was learnt from this website: Nicholas Cook and Daniel
Bach, Prelude in F minor, BWV 857

In this example, the moment of arrival, at the third crotchet beat of bar 16, involves a deceptive cadence in f minor over which the opening theme returns (this theme does not return at any other point in the Prelude). The graph (Fig. 3.1) shows the tempo for every crotchet beat.\(^8\)

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**Fig. 3.1** Tempo graph for performances of Bach, Prelude in F minor, BWV 857

At a glance, the graph shows one point where every single performance slows down: namely the lead-up to the arrival at the third crotchet beat of bar 16 and its immediate aftermath. The trough at that beat (in all performances) represents a slowing-down up to

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\(^8\) Measuring every quaver would show greater fluctuation in some performances: Jarrett, for instance, often draws out the first two semiquavers and goes quicker through the second half of the crotchet beat.
the previous beat, and a regaining of speed from the beat of the arrival, or the beat following the arrival, in Jarrett’s case.

Coexistent with this consensus regarding the location for slowing down, though, there is greater divergence between performances here than elsewhere on the graph regarding the rate and degree of slowing down: in other words, there is a significant variety in the shape of the drop among the performances. Tureck’s and Feinberg’s troughs drop deepest, whereas Gould’s subtle dip is more like a nuance. (Of course, the combination of the tempo drop with other expressive dimensions can result in a different effect from what the numbers would suggest on their own — coupled with a sudden change of dynamics, colour or articulation, a small ritenuto could make as much of an impression as a more exaggerated one with no dynamic change.) Something that is not represented in the tempo graph is the fact that Tureck clearly is using inflections in the tempo to bring out the difference in the two voices in the right hand (she hesitates before entries in the upper voice) from the second half of bar 15 to the first half of bar 16, hence the comparatively significant dip in tempo.

In addition to the degree of the tempo drop, there is variety among performances as to the span of music involved in the slowing down: where the ritardando or ritenuto starts and where the accelerando or in tempo happens. In the performances of Tureck and Feinberg, there is a ritardando beginning on the last crotchet beat of bar 15 which continues through the first half of bar 16 while Schiff’s begins in bar 16; the slowing-down in the performances of Kirkpatrick, Fischer and Richter is even longer, whereas Gould, Jarrett and Ashkenazy pull back only during the second crotchet beat of
bar 16. By the beginning of the fourth crotchet of bar 16 (i.e. within the third crotchet), all performances are back to a faster tempo except Jarrett, who emphasises the arrival through pulling back the tempo more in the aftermath than in the lead-up. The meaning, or character, of the lead-up and appearance also differs from performance to performance. In Richter’s rendition, after a dwindling of speed and volume into mid-bar 16, the theme begins immediately back in tempo, bringing with it a sense of renewed life. Schiff’s entry of the theme, after a hesitation subtler than most other performances, suddenly shifts into a softer, more mysterious world. Jarrett revels in the now-ness of the returned theme itself, not wanting to let go of the first two semiquavers in the third and fourth beats of bar 16 for as long as possible.

There are two performances that dip significantly at another point in addition to the cadence into the return of the theme: those of Jarrett and Feinberg, at the first beat of bar 15, where they both relax the tempo into the downbeat and then linger on the first semiquaver. Recall Wolfgang Sandner’s liner notes, where he described Jarrett’s interpretations of Bach as “emphasizing nothing, demanding nothing, concealing nothing and withholding nothing. In one word: natural — that is following the inherent laws of the works…” (discussed in Part 2). Sandner’s comment can only be an intuitive and generalising one, since it relates to the entire recordings of the first book of The Well-Tempered Clavier by Jarrett, in addition to the obvious fact that there is no way to empirically prove such a statement, but it effectively claims that Jarrett’s interpretation — where and to what extent he pulls back or pushes forward the beat, in

9 Wolfgang Sandner, liner notes to Keith Jarrett, J. S. Bach: Das Wohltemperierte Klavier Bach I. My emphasis.
terms of duration — is justifiable by the events in the score. At this particular downbeat (i.e. of bar 15), Jarrett’s performance underlines the somewhat unexpected progression from the dominant of F minor to the F chord which has itself turned into the dominant seventh of B flat: the A natural in the top line and the E flat in the bass come as a surprise. He is, despite what Sandner writes, emphasising it, but that is less the point. The point is that his pulling back of tempo is grounded in the harmony; the same can be said of Feinberg. It is interesting, though, that neither performer is a modern “mainstream” pianist, Feinberg born in the nineteenth century and Jarrett a jazz pianist and composer. Fischer (a pianist of the same generation as Feinberg) and Tureck very subtly pull back the same moment, as the graph shows.

Of course, to assess the success of interpretative decisions is a subjective process; to be able to find a justification in the score does not automatically render such a decision aesthetically superior. These nine particular performances of the Prelude, however, show a general agreement regarding where to slow down. It is at the point of the theme’s return, a moment in the music which is all the more powerful because of the unexpected bass note. The question of whether it is powerful because of the notes in the score, or because the performances render it powerful through expressive devices including a broadening of the tempo, I believe, does have simple answer: that it is both the score and the performance. At least in this example, one could decide to focus on the moment of thematic return, based on where it is in the score, or start with the recordings and find the moment where every performance slows down — either way, arriving at the same point in the music. But it is actually possible to begin purely with the score? I believe that one would need to have some idea of what the theme sounds
like, and be able to distinguish it from the *sound* of non-thematic material. This has implications for what we mean when we talk about a musical work. As Parmer writes, no sound, no work: “there can be no statement put forward about a ‘work’ (about its form, its style, its score, its meaning, etc.) that does not already implicate the agent of…either a real or virtual performer and/or listener who is giving account of an object [which] he must regenerate in the present to apprehend it.”\(^\text{10}\) Thus we are made aware of the dependence of the musical meaningfulness of a score on *performances*, real or imaginary.

The difference between the score and its realisation can be reinforced by returning to the idea of boundaries, and taking the analogy further to the notion of liminality. While the score provides merely a border, a *line*, dividing the preceding passage and the theme, the performances — through slowing down and drawing the listener’s attention to that moment — create a temporal *space* or spaciousness centering around the borderline: a space which can become a kind of threshold *inside* which the listener momentarily finds him- or herself. The score contains only the *potentiality* for liminality; it is a performance that can actually realise that moment as a liminal one.\(^\text{11}\)


\(^{11}\) The content of this paragraph has resulted from a conversation with Nigel Fabb. My understanding of liminality in music owes much to Prof Fabb.
Taking a look firstly at the point on the graph where the theme returns — the *ritornello* (bar 163) — there is, as in the Prelude, a unanimous drop in tempo (the graph, Fig. 3.2, shows the tempo in crotchets). All performances, to varying degrees, slow down in the previous beat; Weissenberg, Rousset and Landowska begin to broaden from the beginning of the previous bar. Cummings’s graph dips significantly on the second beat after very little preparation, thus differing from the other performances.
While Richter, Gould and Brendel maintain the slower tempo in which they have arrived, all other performances (except, of course, Cummings) regain a faster speed by the second beat. But the general tendency, as the graph shows, is to slightly drop the average tempo after one has arrived at the return of the theme. The moment of arrival is further emphasised in Tureck’s and Brendel’s performances by rolling the left-hand chord on the downbeat of bar 163. The harpsichordists Rousset and Cummings roll the chord too, but this is of course a standard expressive technique for their instrument. The effect of the rolled chord is therefore more marked on the piano, especially when combined with a *subito forte* on the downbeat as in Tureck’s case. Marking the moment can involve other techniques: Brendel and Larrocha *crescendo* into that downbeat, and Richter changes the articulation to a less detached touch for the theme.

There is another point in this graph that dips no less than at the arrival of the *ritornello*: bar 166, where there is a crotchet rest following a cadential $\frac{6}{4}$, immediately after which the theme is reiterated up a fifth. Because no note is struck on the second beat of bar 166, where I tapped that (silent) “beat” into the Sonic Visualiser software, and consequently what the “tempo” at that point is shown to be in the graph, was dependent on the manner in which the first two quavers of that bar were played in the respective performances; it was, to an extent, a decision on my part as the listener as to where I felt the beat. Rousset and Cummings, for instance, broaden the first quaver (the $\frac{6}{4}$), pulling the tempo into the second beat back more than in the other performances; they then move into the next bar without much more delay (particularly Rousset). Landowska also takes more time on the first quaver than in the crotchet rest. Larrocha does the opposite, hanging in the rest for longer than her first cadential $\frac{6}{4}$ had warranted. The effect,
through, in all cases, is one of emphasis on the imperfect cadence which sets up a sense of expectation for the next entry; the answer to the “how” question varies from performance to performance. The fact that this point in the music involves, in most cases, an even greater drop in tempo than at bar 163 suggests there is a significance to the silence: it is as though with the gap in the sound the performer is set more free — allowed to be less metronomical — for a moment. Perhaps this is an instance of Bohlman’s third type of aporia: “an area of impossibility and unknowability, of silence and emptiness” (quoted above). If this is what is felt by performers, it might indeed be showing that the performer’s freedom thrives most between the notes.

**Chopin, Polonaise in A flat major, Op. 53**

![Tempo graph for performances of Chopin, Polonaise Op. 53](image)

*Fig. 3.3* Tempo graph for performances of Chopin, Polonaise Op. 53
After the more gentle contours of the two Bach graphs, this Chopin graph (not unexpectedly) gives the impression of a jagged mountain range: untamed wilderness (Fig. 3.3). There is, nevertheless, a remarkable consensus in the peaks and troughs. The area with the least consensus is around bar 14 to bar 17: precisely the lead-up to the entry of the theme, at bar 17. Extracting two or three performances at a time shows this more clearly. Fig. 3.4 shows the tempi of Argerich, Cziffra and Pollini.

![Tempo graph for Chopin, Polonaise Op. 53: Argerich, Cziffra and Pollini](image)

While the lines representing the three performances are relatively close together for most of the excerpt, their paths split from around the downbeat of bar 14; Argerich and Cziffra come together by bar 16 but there is a distance between them and Pollini’s
slower tempo until the second beat of bar 17. Pollini begins to regain a faster tempo within the first beat of the theme, whereas Argerich’s greater momentum on the approach seems to require further application of the brakes up to the second beat. Cziffra’s *accelerando*, beginning earlier than most other performances, his *diminuendo* into bar 17, and the sense of arrival there at a *relaxed* and certainly new character, marks the moment in a very different way from Argerich’s precipitous tumbling into the theme, which resolutely bounces off a drawn-out downbeat. The tension built up through Pollini’s lead-up by his *resistance* to accelerating, on the other hand, has a grandeur to it, and the crash with which the theme enters on the downbeat of bar 17 is really something. If nodes are points of convergence, the region between bars 14 and 17 in this graph is exactly the opposite — an antinode.

Likewise, in a comparison of Horowitz and Solomon (Fig. 3.5), their respective squiggles are least well aligned from bar 13 to bar 17, both shapes at that point further differing from the three performances in the previous graph. Solomon, having wound up the speed and tension through bar 15, profoundly broadens bar 16 (particularly the third beat), after which the theme enters: immediately down to business in a quick tempo, and with an almost nonchalant lightness considering the huge preparation. Horowitz’s bar 16 has a true sense of expansion, his broadening of tempo coupled with a *crescendo* into the entry of the theme. The right-hand notes pompously arrive later than the bass on the downbeat of bar 17, giving (together with the over-dotted rhythms) the character of the theme an aristocratic zing.
The fact of these “antinodes” is simply intriguing. The shapes of the graphs are obviously not decided by anything other than the tempi of the particular performances, and the presence of the antinodes only become apparent as such when the graphs of two or more performances come together. The antinode can be said to have been caused by an event in the work — in this case, the lead-up to the theme. A moment determined by the music thus becomes a site for a greater degree of individuality and freedom in tempo than elsewhere. It is the same as in the Bach examples: while the notion that there is a sense of necessity for the performer to bring out certain structural moments of a piece may seem constricting, these performances of the Polonaise suggest the opposite, that

Fig. 3.5 Tempo graph for Chopin, Polonaise Op. 53: Horowitz and Solomon
the performer’s individuality and (hopefully) spontaneity are unleashed precisely at such moments.

Chopin, Waltz in D flat major, Op. 64 No. 1

![Tempo graph for performances of Chopin, Waltz Op. 64 No. 1](image)

**Fig. 3.6** Tempo graph for performances of Chopin, Waltz Op. 64 No. 1

Here, the majority of performances make a point of the entrance of the theme at bar 5 by either slowing down into it or relaxing the immediate aftermath of the entry, though
in most cases very subtly (Fig. 3.6). Arrau and Zadora\textsuperscript{12} put the brakes on exclusively during bar 4; Luisada, Bolet and Lipatti broaden bars 4 and 5; Magaloff and Hough broaden bar 5. Pires and Ashkenazy, on the other hand, play through this moment with minimal or no tempo fluctuation. The graph in general shows less consensus than all the previous ones. Upon closer scrutiny, though, it becomes evident that there are two more points in the excerpt where the performances tend to drop in tempo. This is especially clear in the graphs of Luisada, Lipatti and Pires (Fig. 3.7).\textsuperscript{13}

![Tempo graph for Chopin, Waltz Op. 64 No. 1: Lipatti, Luisada and Pires](image)

\textbf{Fig. 3.7} Tempo graph for Chopin, Waltz Op. 64 No. 1: Lipatti, Luisada and Pires

\textsuperscript{12} Zadora’s performance alters the introduction: the four-bar right-hand filigree written out by Chopin is extended to eight bars, and a long (about eight bars) trill is added before that. (The graph therefore shows the tempi for the music that correspond to the bar numbers in the score.) In my view, the identity of the Waltz is preserved, contrary to what Goodman would probably say.

\textsuperscript{13} I would like to point out in passing the antinode in Fig. 3.7 between bars 3 and 6.
The first of these troughs (bar 10) immediately follows the melodic apex (B flat) coinciding with the dominant chord (heard for the first time in the piece) at bar 9 and again in bar 11, and the second trough (from around bar 18) is the corresponding point in the repeat of the melody, with the high B flats at bars 17 and 19. Returning to Fig. 3.6, some performances slow down into bars 9 and 17; most linger on the B flats in those bars. Ashkenazy plays through the first peak more or less in tempo, and broadens into the one at bar 17 (with an elegant diminuendo) but does not particularly linger on the B flat. Hough resists the lingering almost altogether: his fluctuations are more or less imperceptible when listening. Luisada, in contrast, takes a veritable coffee break at each melodic peak, and the relaxing effect is particularly pronounced because of the fast speed he takes elsewhere.

In addition to the harmonic and melodic event at that point, there is a marking in the score which is potentially significant: a set of hairpins growing into and out of the downbeat of bar 10 (a crescendo hairpin over bars 5-8, and two-bar diminuendo hairpins in bars 9-10 and 11-12 respectively). While hairpins are usually taught today as a direction for an increase or decrease in volume, as David Hyun-Su Kim writes in his article “The Brahmsian Hairpin,” they are better understood, at least in nineteenth-century practice, as expressive markings which are descriptive rather than prescriptive.¹⁴ According to Kim, “[e]arly recordings by inner members of the Brahms (and Schumann) circle indicate that hairpin markings were performed with an array of techniques, including dynamics, chord-rolling, hand-displacement, vibrato, portamento,

and especially agogic inflections.”¹⁵ He identifies four “major hairpin types”, one of which seems to fit the Chopin example like a glove: “lingering (hairpin pairs, especially in lyrical passages, calling for lingering at the expressive peak)”¹⁶

It is not possible to assert from my evidence either that the “Brahmsian hairpin” was used by Chopin himself in the same way, or that the performances I have selected tend to linger at that moment because of the presence of the hairpin (might they have done something similar had they played from a score that lacked the hairpin markings?). What can be said is that in these recordings the hairpins are effectively treated in a manner very similar to the way in which Brahms’s circle seems to have treated them. The hairpins mark a moment that is particularly expressive or meaningful. Perhaps this melodic apex is, in addition to bar 5, a musical threshold, the space between some kind of growth and decay. Many of the performances certainly render this moment in the music “a zone of difference, of fullness” — characteristics of Bohlman’s second type of aporia.

From what the performances show, the combination of the melodic apex and the change to dominant harmony has resulted in performers generally taking greater liberties in tempo fluctuation than the commencement proper of the theme at bar 5 (where the waltzing left hand enters for the first time). Yet, as in Arrau’s or Zadora’s performances, slowing down noticeably into or during bar 5 are possibilities. The variety in interpretations of this excerpt relative to the other three examples immediately gives rise

¹⁵ Ibid, 56.
¹⁶ Ibid.
to two conclusions: firstly, that some pieces (such as this Waltz) seem to attract greater interpretative individuality than others, and secondly, that being performed very often (as this piece is) does not necessarily crystallise the way in which a piece is interpreted. At the same time, it can be seen that the Waltz contains certain hotspots around which performances tend to slow down, and that these places do correspond with identifiable events in the score.

*Interpretative windows?*

Lawrence Kramer’s idea of “hermeneutic windows” in music analysis — places in a work that is marked by signposts involving “harmonic, rhythmic, linear, and formal strategies,” from which “we can…go on to interpret musical meaning” — seems to provide an analogy for pianists’ interpretative acts.17 “Interpretation”, Kramer writes (still speaking about analysts’ interpretation rather than performers’), “takes flight from breaking points…on the one hand, a gap, a lack, a missing connection; on the other, a surplus of pattern, an extra repetition, an excessive connection.”18 The actual specifics of what constitutes a hermeneutic window in Kramer’s discussion (he lists three types: textual inclusions in the music, citational inclusions i.e. intertextuality, and structural tropes19) is not applicable, but the idea that hermeneutics seeks out identifiable or marked events, does. Identifiable features in the score, such as a sudden unexpected harmony or the entry of a theme, become not only points of emphasis in a performer’s

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17 Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 9. Here I use “hermeneutic” as referring to interpretation of meaning expressed through language (as in Kramer’s musicological sense), and “interpretative” for performers’ acts of realising the score as sounding music.
18 Ibid, 12.
19 Ibid, 9-10.
interpretation but also sites for individuality and expressiveness. Borrowing Kramer’s language, these points in the music might be called interpretative windows. The idea of windows call to mind lift-the-flap picture books or advent calendars, where the flap — the window that opens up to the hidden or the unknown — is not located randomly or arbitrarily. Rather, the hidden world is behind a door, a curtain, inside a treasure chest — at a surprising turn of a musical phrase, a sudden modulation, a longed-for cadence. And here there is a mutual dependence between performance and score: it is up to the former to open a window at a cadence, while it is the latter that provides that cadence.
Part 4: The Musical Work as a Process

It is December; the twilit streets of München are alive with countless little lights, each one of them adding to the festive Weihnachts-vibe like stars or angels singing in a joyous chorus. As I stroll past the stately facades of the old buildings, I cannot resist turning my head and relaxing my pace at the sight of some of the windows. I am lured towards one in particular, a show window, gorgeously dressed up with Christmas decorations, and I linger there longer than elsewhere. I am not the only one — the window has caught the attention of every passer-by who is not in too much of a hurry to notice the building’s existence. Some of them glance at the window and move on relatively quickly; others take more time to admire it; one gentleman is so impressed that he is unable to tear himself away until he has finished his coffee. I keep strolling, and see a quaint little window which I hadn’t noticed last time I walked the same street. Not many others take notice of it either; nor does it exert the same power over my pace as that handsome show window.

The Bach and Chopin examples discussed in the previous section might be understood in light of this metaphor. In all four excerpts, there are spots which, like the show window, caused all performances to pay attention by slowing down. The amount and pace of slowing down, the manner in which the tempo is regained, and the dynamic and timbral changes with which the slowing-down is combined, differ from performance to performance.
Does this happen because the music “demands it” — because it feels or sounds right? (Of course, such an idea takes for granted familiarity with the harmonic and rhythmic conventions of western classical music.) If so, the knowledge of where to slow down is of a kind that originates in the acts of listening and performing (if not necessarily physically at the piano). Unpacking this, we see a self-reflexive, circular situation arising: the music — the “sounding thing” — dictates how the newly instantiated “sounding thing” is to be shaped in time.

Related to this is the idea that tempo fluctuation at certain moments in certain pieces is implied or inscribed — programmed into the notes of the score (with no textual aid such as ritenuto). The melodic apex of the theme in the Waltz is coupled with a relatively big leap in the left hand, down to the A flat; the majority of performances slow down more at this moment than at the entry of the left hand and onset of the 4-bar waltz pattern at bar 5. Similarly, the descending arpeggio figuration in the Polonaise leading up to the first appearance of the theme requires relatively large stretches of the hand; all performances slow down here. But considering the transcendental acrobatics many pianists are capable of carrying out when demanded (by a difficult work), it should be physically quite possible to play these parts of the Waltz or Polonaise in one consistent tempo. Pianists could but they don’t; which seems to suggest, again, that it is how a passage “sounds” in our conception of it that dictates how it should materially sound in an actual performance.

Another possible explanation for the consensus in locations for tempo fluctuation is that there is a tradition or convention of slowing down at certain spots in certain pieces, or
that there are general rules within the tradition for applying tempo fluctuation. While the idea of tempo change being “programmed into the score” implies a necessity as to where the changes happen in pieces, the idea that decisions are made according to a tradition implies a higher degree of arbitrariness. But it is not so easy to draw a clear line between the two ideas. The difficulty is that when we are part of a tradition, its conventions present themselves as necessity within that tradition.

**Tradition: necessarily arbitrary**

Countless studies have shown that performance styles have differed over the years and across the (classical-music-playing) globe. Robert Philip’s study of early recordings was one of the first to explore changes in performance style through the twentieth century. After discussing the written documentation of the teachings and opinions of musicians and analysing their recordings, Philip is able to “easily” summarise rhythmic features of early performances (along with the use of vibrato and portamento for voice and instruments other than piano):

Broadly speaking, early twentieth-century playing was characterised by…the use of substantial tempo changes to signal changes of mood or tension, and the adoption of fast maximum tempos; …detailed flexibility of tempo, …accentuation by lengthening and shortening individual notes, and the dislocation of melody and accompaniment; and a tendency, in patterns of long and short notes, to shorten the short notes, and to overdot dotted rhythms.

By the 1930s, such features were no longer prevalent, replaced by “a trend towards stricter control of tempo…., more literal interpretation of note values, and the avoidance of rhythmic irregularity and dislocation” among other tendencies; Philip describes this
as a move “towards greater power, firmness, clarity, control, literalness, and evenness of expression, and away from informality, looseness, and unpredictability.”¹ The concluding sentence of his book reminds us of the historical contingency of performance style: “if early recordings teach us anything, it is that no musicians can ever escape the taste and judgement of their own time.”²

Nicholas Cook has put forward the theory that “phrase arching” (speeding up and getting louder at the beginning of a phrase, and slowing down and getting softer at the end of it) as an expressive device is a post-World-War-II (“modern”) phenomenon. He suggests a link between the “streamlined” sound of modern performances (in comparison with earlier, more whimsical performances, devoid of the large-scale organising principle of phrase arching) and contemporaneous trends for streamlining and simplicity in design and architecture, including Chanel’s “little black dress”.³

Such research either directly or indirectly points to a kind of arbitrariness of the manner of interpretation in any performance tradition. Yet looking at more large-scale tendencies of tempo fluctuation in my project has revealed certain trends that transcend historical and national traditions, namely that there is an overwhelming consensus regarding the “what” question — what feature to mark as special or important. This does not contradict the truth of stylistic difference: the latter accounts for the “how” question — how much or how suddenly to slow down, whether to couple tempo

² Ibid, 240.
fluctuations with dynamic shadings, and other such concerns that give a particular performance its unique flavour.

**Drawn to musical windows**

Three main types of event in scores seemed to attract tempo fluctuation in my analysis from Part 3. Firstly, the bars leading up to and immediately following the arrival of a theme. Secondly, in the Waltz, where the dominant chord sounds for the first time and coincides with the melodic apex. Thirdly, and not least, silences in the Polonaise and the Italian Concerto. The first type was my starting point; I had selected these excerpts because they were boundary areas that led from non-thematic into thematic material and I had expected that most performances would fluctuate in tempo at these points. Yet that expectation was not exclusively rooted in the score, for I had of course heard these pieces many times in the past. The other two types of event (apex moment and silences), in contrast, became apparent to me exclusively through listening to the recordings.

Although I thus did not set out to consider or to find out about rests, the excerpts that I analysed do seem to reveal something about silent moments in the music: in fact, the excerpts show that they are important moments in terms of the push-and-pull between the music and the performance, at least in these pieces. The opening of the Polonaise, a passage full of rests separating chords and ascending figures, and the crotchet rest in the Italian Concerto at the end of the fourth bar of the *ritornello* theme (just after the cadential \(\frac{6}{4}\)) are examples that show how performances fluctuate in tempo at moments of silence, often stretching the time and returning to the “sounding” notes later than the
metronomically marked position would have it. The magnitude of the ups and downs in the graphs of both these examples show the rests to be no less significant than the moments of thematic appearance themselves in being sites firstly for tempo fluctuation and secondly for difference between performances (this latter point applies particularly to the Italian Concerto). From the graphs, the points of silence seem to be moments where the music loosens its grip on the performance, and there is as much temporal freedom as at any points of structural significance in the score.

As I have already noted, this does not contradict the fact that there are important, if often subtler and smaller-scale, differences between performance styles. The moments that I have identified are the very places where performances tend to differ from each other most. Thus, while these moments are on the one hand seemingly binding at a level above generational and national difference, and in a way constrict the performer’s decisions, at the same time they become sites both for deviation from a steady or average tempo and of divergence between performances. In other words, the moments for greatest freedom, arbitrariness and creativity are found in spots seemingly “determined” by the score.

As stated in the first part of this paper, the aim of my project was not to call on theory to inform piano performance practice, but for performances — the reality of piano playing — to inform theory. My intention was to take the performances as the irreversible reality, the deeds done, by using recordings as the data from which I would consider the nature of the relationship between work and performance. I am proposing that the tendency for performances of pianists from a variety of generations and nationalities to
slow down at the same moments show there is *something*, which we call “the music” or “the work”, that dictates certain interpretative decisions. Fashion or tradition are not the only factors that shape performances. It is worth mentioning that the degree of freedom available differs greatly between a pianist (or indeed any musician) performing a solo piece and say a string player in a symphony orchestra; chamber music, which is somewhere in between, allows for a mixture of constraint and freedom that is different again. But these differences are all, in a way, dictated by the particular work — by its specification of factors such as instrumentation, interaction between musicians in imitative textures, or moments such as solos or cadenzas that allow for greater individual decision-making. More importantly, the potency of the work *as music* (for instance its harmonic meaningfulness, which might create a crucial moment in the structure) would apply beyond piano playing to pieces written for other instruments. Thus if we are to properly understand how performances operate, it would be counterproductive to avoid talking about the “abstract things called works”, for they are there when we perform.

Or rather, they are *only* there when we perform them.

So are the “moments” I have been looking at. A performance emphasises — through the use of expressive techniques including tempo fluctuation — the lead-up to and appearance of a theme. The importance of that moment thus arises from the emphasis in the performance. At the same time, it clearly is the work that tells the performer that the theme appears at that particular point, and becomes the basis for the emphasis.
Then, which comes first — the work or the performance?

**Performance: poietic and esthetic**

According to Cook, “the traditional approach to performance” is based on the idea that “the already existing work is to be accurately transmitted through performance to the listener”; Cook is of course challenging this assumption. This “traditional approach” would concur with Platonist views of the work, which assign the work everlasting existence. It also seems to work well with Jean-Jacques Nattiez’s model of the “total musical fact”. His theory of musical semiology involves three “semiological levels”: the poietic (involving creation), the neutral (relating to the created product), and the esthetic (interpretative) levels. The work, arising in the poietic phase, is transmitted intact as a sounding structure (the neutral level) to the listener, waiting on the esthetic end. It goes without saying that such an account would be a gross reduction of the complex interplay of processes involved in the total fact, and Nattiez is of course aware of this. “[S]ince music is an art of ‘interpretation,’” he writes, “where does the poietic process end and the esthetic process begin?” (For Nattiez, the meaning of the term “interpretation” includes both performing works and interpreting critically or verbally.)

If we conceive of the work as an entity comprised of relations that are fixed by the score, ...the esthetic process begins at the instant the performer *interprets* the work, in both senses of the word...

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4 Cook, *Beyond the Score*, 98. Emphasis mine.
6 Ibid, 72.
If on the other hand we believe that the work is not wholly “produced” unless it has been played, the poietic process extends until the performance is complete. Performance shows itself in this case to be the last stage of the poietic, as well as the first stage of the esthetic.\(^7\)

Nattiez’s view tends towards the former, because of the presence of the neutral level — the score — between composition and performance. Still, the chaotic coexistence and criss-crossing of the three levels seems to be part and parcel with Nattiez’s idea of the total musical fact. His illustration of the processes involved in a performance of Wagner’s *Ring* shows that the acts of the composer, the conductor and director, and the spectators and critics, each involve all three levels, beginning with Wagner’s interpretation of Schopenhauer, his creation of the work, the score produced by him, the interpretation of this score by the performers, their realisation of the work, the phenomenon of this performance, interpreted in turn by the audience, and so on.\(^8\)

But this, it seems, is more a conglomerate of a multitude of musical processes, rather than an integrated picture of a “total fact”. Given the number of subjectivities involved, it may be inevitable that the “fact” is not a single, unified phenomenon. But I do not think that the act of physically performing a work is felt by the performer as merely the sum of three heterogeneous processes. Likewise, a listener hears the music and reacts to it in a single act, and the criticism they produce is simply a verbalisation of this same act.

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\(^7\) Ibid.
\(^8\) Ibid, 74-7.
The three levels could be better described as being in an interdependent relationship with each other. Henrik Frisk has pointed out that both the acts of performance and of composition involve a mixture of poietic and esthetic processes.\(^9\) The artist alternates between creating and listening; hence the music, too, alternates between being created and being listened to. The situation that arises is very close, if not identical, to Dillon Parmer’s description of the reciprocal relationship between the artist’s “sound-image” and his or her realisation thereof (either in the form of a score or a sounding performance). In both models, the musical work arises as a product of the creative and interpretative processes.

Another commonality between the performative and compositional processes can be found in the concept of artist-transparency — in the fact that some composers, like performers such as Richter and Arrau, have seen themselves as “vessels” through which the music passes into the world. The Prelude to *Das Rheingold* was “revealed” to the somnolent Wagner. Stravinsky was conscious of being the “vessel” through which *Le Sacre* passed.\(^10\) (The fact that these assertions cannot be verified is beside the point; what is interesting is that this is how these composers describe their own roles, and moreover that composer-transparency is seen as a source of pride — it indicates genius, not plagiarism.) To paraphrase Cook, the already-existing work is accurately transmitted

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\(^10\) There are comparable examples outside music, such as the case of the genius mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan (1887-1920), who “used to claim that his ideas were given to him in his dreams by the goddess Namagiri, the Ramanujans’ family goddess and consort of Lord Narasimha, the lion-faced, fourth incantation of Vishnu.” Marcus du Sautoy, *The Music of the Primes: Why an Unsolved Problem in Mathematics Matters* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), 133.
through composition to the listener. But this completely upsets the poietic-esthesis model, for if not even the composer is “creating”, we are left with something like an esthesis-esthesis model. To say it in a less frivolous manner, what Wagner’s and Stravinsky’s claims indicate is a strange coexistence of poietic and esthesis processes involved in the act of composition itself: there is a sense in which the composer is finding or discovering the music from within himself or herself.

The model in which the artist alternates between the creative and receptive sides, however, leaves a couple of questions unanswered: namely, where is the “agency” of the music, and where is the predeterminedness of the musical work? These questions seem pressing, because my survey of pianists’ writings and their performances shows that the music has a potency that makes pianists talk about the work as though it is an entity with agency, and make certain interpretative decisions in performances according to the structure of the work. As Levinson and Butt have written, the “relationship” or “interaction” between people and the music is a crucial element when discussing the work-concept. It seems, therefore, that there should be an account that acknowledges the interaction between people’s musical acts and the music performed.

**The performance-work model**

I would like to suggest a model for the performance-work relationship that is analogous to the idealist philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s model of self-consciousness. Fichte distinguishes two types of objects of consciousness, or “representations” (things about which we think or are conscious). One of these types “[appears] to us to depend entirely
upon our own freedom, and it is impossible for us to believe that anything outside of us…corresponds to representations of this sort. Our imagination and our will appear to us to be free.”11 The second type involves “a truth that is supposed to be firmly established independently of us… When a representation of ours is supposed to correspond to this truth, we discover that we are constrained in determining this representation… In short,” he concludes, “we could say that some of our representations are accompanied by a feeling of freedom and others are accompanied by a feeling of necessity.”12 The former type “gives us a purely ‘made up’ or invented object” while the latter “furnishes us with an object of experience.”13 But there is a third type of representation, according to Fichte — the most interesting one, in a way. This involves “the I”: the phenomenon of self-consciousness.

Fichte describes self-consciousness as the circular relationship between the “I” as subject and the “I” as object, in which I (subject) see or think about myself (object). Here, freedom (of thinking about myself) is coexistent with a sense of predeterminedness and necessity (in which I appear to myself). There is an inherent tension: in observing myself I am actively creating myself as an object of consciousness, thus it would seem as though the observing “I” ontologically precedes the “I” as object; yet I cannot see myself unless the object exists in the first place (Fig. 4.1). “I am…an object for myself, an object whose properties, under certain conditions,

12 Ibid, 7-8.
13 Ibid, 12.
depend upon the intellect alone, but whose existence must always be presupposed.”¹⁴ Fichte points out that there is an “immediate unity of being and seeing.”¹⁵ “[I]f I may speak figuratively, there is a double series within the intellect: a series of being and a series of observing, a series of what is real and a series of what is ideal. The essence of the intellect consists precisely in the indivisibility of this double series.”¹⁶ One side cannot exist without the other in this two-fold model of self-consciousness.

![Diagram of Fichte’s model of self-consciousness]

**Fig. 4.1** Fichte’s model of self-consciousness

By analogy, the performance actively instantiates, realises, brings into being, and in that sense creates, the work. The performer, a human subjectivity, mixes into the sound of the work their own particular style, emotions, experiences, understanding. Yet there cannot be such a performance unless a potentiality for the work exists in the first place. The respective existences of the performance and the work are thus mutually dependent. It is not merely a reciprocal relationship in which the two affect or are advantageous for each other, but there is (to use Fichte’s expression) a fundamental indivisibility to this

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¹⁵ Ibid, 21.
¹⁶ Ibid. Emphasis mine.
double series. As the recordings show, the performance makes the work into a sounding event, and in doing so determines how the work sounds, but at the same time the interpretative decisions made by the performer are determined by how the work could or should sound. While there is a freedom and (by definition) an activeness in the act of performing the work, the work is fixed in certain important aspects, and thus places a constraint on the way in which it can be performed.

There is, in addition, an uncanny resemblance between the composer’s act of “discovering” the work and Fichte’s characterisation of self-consciousness. The work only comes into existence because the composer actively writes it, but the work may seem like a predetermined entity discovered by the composer within themselves. Of course, this description of the compositional process may well fail to apply to every composer’s experience. But for me, the crucial difference between the composer-work cycle (which results in the score) and the performance-work cycle is that while the former happens just once, the latter can happen any number of times.

Where do the composer’s and listener’s acts fit into the model of the performance-work cycle? They rather fit around it: the composer’s material product — the score — is what is needed in the first place for the performer to be able to kick off the cycle. The listener witnesses this cycling (Fig. 4.2). Thus the distinctness of making music from listening, or witnessing the making — as stressed by writers such as Parmer and Abbate — is acknowledged.
Moreover, the performer’s awareness of the listener’s presence also helps fuel the cycle, in such cases as described by Perahia:

BD [Bruce Duffie]: Do you play differently for the microphone than you do for a live audience?

MP [Murray Perahia]: I think yes. There’s an excitement that goes into a live concert that’s very hard to capture in a recording. Sometimes it works; sometimes it goes. It’s not to say that it’s impossible, but I do find that it’s different to play for an audience.

BD: Are you aware of them sitting on your right?

MP: Yes, you are. You’re aware of singing the song to somebody, and that makes a different experience than just playing it in a room for the microphone.17

If the performance-work cycle is flanked on either side by the poietic and esthetic processes, we could say that the cycle corresponds (in terms of its positioning) to

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Nattiez’s “neutral” level — which itself involves both poietic and esthesic processes, and in fact turns out to be a dynamic process dependent on the performer’s artistic commitment to the work. The reciprocal dependence evident in the cyclic model suggests that rather than asking which (the work or the performance) has ontological precedence, an acknowledgement that one side cannot exist without the other would reflect the nature of performance more accurately. This leads to a few further conclusions.

First, it leads us to acknowledge that we cannot ignore the idea of the musical work if we are to properly understand the nature of classical piano performance, and the status of the performer. The classical pianist, performing a work, at least during the act of that particular performance is committed to a “relationship” with the work, in order to unleash its musical potential. Second, it reminds us that we cannot assume that when we talk about works we are not talking about specific performances. We are talking about specific performers, instruments, venues, dates, even our own moods, reactions, emotions — real-life events.

Third, perhaps the resulting tension, the unknowability of ontological precedence (the chicken-and-egg situation) is not unwelcome at all: it may well be what sustains the world of classical piano performance. Lydia Goehr’s concept of “doubleness” is useful here. In The Quest for Voice, Goehr introduces this concept to understand “necessary but irreconcilable opposition[s]” (such as the opposition inherent in music’s claim to being both absolute and expressive of the extramusical world). This approach allows us
to look the paradox in the face, and acknowledge that it is only a contradiction in terms of logic: it is a reality in practice. The argument that underlies Goehr’s book claims the advantages of using a metaphorical concept of the musical as an anti-systematic restraint on systematic philosophical theory. ...“doubleness”, as I call it, serves as a successful technique by which to produce a philosophical theory that respects its own systematic limits... Doubleness supports a theory of open and critical practice. It closely recalls traditional dialectics, yet it does not depend upon establishing too strong a teleological development in which oppositions are brought to their (pre)determined synthesis. Instead, it serves more moderately to preserve both in theory and in practice the two or more sides of conflicts, sides that often serve one another by being at hand to be denied.18

Doubleness can be usefully applied to another seeming contradiction that has been a central theme throughout my thesis: the tension between fidelity to the work (constraint) and creativity of the performer (freedom). It is not a matter of which is more important, for the accounts of the pianists surveyed in Part 2 show that both the constraints placed by the work on the performer and the active creativity involved in interpreting the work are integral to the act of performing works. And not only this: it is also clear from the recordings that certain special moments determined by the score provide specific sites for the performer’s individuality. This doubleness of freedom and constraint defines pianistic interpretation, and its tension fuels the performance-work cycle. This tension is related to the paradox pointed out by Kenneth Hamilton in *After the Golden Age* — that performing from memory both represented respect towards the composer and the work

18 Lydia Goehr, *The Quest for Voice: On Music, Politics, and the Limits of Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 5. In other words, the contradictions inherent in musical practice become examples that show the systematic limitations of pure logic in general.
and gave the illusion of improvisation. So, which do they want? To ask this question would be to miss the point, for as I noted in Part 1, this phenomenon indicates an unwillingness to let go of either. As with the constraint-freedom paradox, the doubleness involved in memorising works is integral to the nature of pianistic interpretation. The indivisibility of poietic and esthetic processes in performance is a third example, in which the doubleness demonstrates Nattiez’ semiological model’s “own systematic limits”, as I have already shown.

Finally, the cycle based on Fichte’s model for self-consciousness shows the extent to which the musical work is a process. It can only become as the performance proceeds. This may serve as a reminder to performers that in the midst of a performance, the next bar, the next phrase, the next movement, is not yet there. It is potentially a liberating thought, and should encourage performers to play with the audience’s (and even their own) expectations in the moment, and to feel that they are literally making the music there and then.

The strength of the cycle model is that it accounts for the uniqueness of musical works. The subjective process necessarily involved in every instance (performance) of a work is what distinguishes the musical work (a time-bound art form) from plastic works of art. The process of creating a sculpture, for example, does indeed involve a reciprocal relationship. The sculpture is moulded according the artist’s decisions, and these decisions are in turn affected by the material or by the sculpture’s shape as it comes into being — just as Parmer wrote about performances of musical works. But once created, the artist is released from such a relationship with the sculpture; the relationship
becomes a uni-directional one in which the artist created the sculpture (past tense for ever) — a single arrow pointing from the former to the latter. It is the same with composers and their musical works. But when the musical work is passed on to the performer, the cycle comes alive again, every single time he or she plays the work.

I wish to stress that what I have described in this section is not a definition of the musical work; rather, I have tried to show the relationship between the work and the performer — a relationship only made possible by the conceptualisation of the work — based on the particular performances examined in Part 3. The model which I propose is not a universal way of thinking about music. My view is that the applicability of the model to a particular instance of music-making depends first and foremost on the attitude and commitment of the performer or performers towards the music.

Whether I have succeeded in responding to the demands of Cook and Parmer, I do not know. My theorising may have circled back to the assumption that theory is a higher form of knowledge communication, the very attitude these scholars are combating. Ultimately, though, I have aimed to address the fact that past theorising on the work-concept has generally left the performer’s perspective out of the equation to such an extent that their definitions of the musical work have remained incomplete. I have argued that the musical work has a unique, self-reflexive and paradoxical status unlike the plastic arts, precisely because it requires a performance by a human agent, who possesses no less potential for spontaneity and subjectivity than the composer. My account, as some may point out, does not reflect anything like all that goes on in the performer’s mind during a performance. Music-making, even when involving the
performance of a work, is a much more contaminated act, as Abbate for instance has stressed; interpretative decisions may be contingent upon an infinite number of variables, including who is in the audience, or what other pieces are on the program. But my discussion has been purposely limited to the domain within the act of performance that involves the performer’s relationship with the work, in order to shed light on the status of the work.\footnote{One could also further investigate a performer’s relationship with a work over time.} It would be a separate, massive, and surely fascinating project to investigate more of the connections and processes that go on inside and outside the performer’s mind during a performance. The pianist’s relationship with an unfamiliar piano or hall, for instance, involves the former having to make certain on-the-spot decisions because of the particular characteristics of — or constraints placed by — the latter.

It is an exciting notion that a live performance brings something into being anew. The freshness, the “now”-ness, the absolute uniqueness of a particular performance is something of which we need to be reminded again and again, because of its very ineffability. The danger of taking the work as an already-existing entity is that it becomes so easy to play as though tracing the tracks already trodden countless times in the past. Herein lies the need for continuously deconstructing the work-concept, so that it may be reconstructed in each performance. I call on Perahia one last time; he will now deconstruct none other than the performance — the concept of the great performance-of-a-work.
…there are marvelous recordings, wonderful performances on record. What’s wonderful about them is not even so much the realization of a great piece — though that might be wonderful — it’s the experience of great music making in, let’s say, solo recordings of Cortot, Thibaud, Casals on Bach, or Rachmaninoff’s work. It’s the inspiration of the moment that catches one, not so much even the idea that this is a great performance worked out greatly. It’s a wonderful feeling, while you’re going through it, so it’s wonderful music making! That, I think, is what one tries to capture.20

20 Duffie, Pianist Murray Perahia.
Appendix 1

Scores of excerpts

Appendix 2

List of recordings
(In alphabetical order of surname and with year of recording, where known)

Bach, Prelude in F minor from the Well-Tempered Clavier Book I, BWV 857

Vladimir Ashkenazy, 2004/5
Samuel Feinberg, 1959?
Edwin Fischer, 1933
Glenn Gould, 1963
Keith Jarrett, 1987
Ralph Kirkpatrick, 1959
Sviatoslav Richter, 1972/3
Andras Schiff
Rosalyn Tureck, 1975

Bach, Italian Concerto BWV 971, First movement

Alfred Brendel, 1976
Lawrence Cummings, 1999
Glenn Gould, 1959
Wanda Landowska, 1935/6
Alicia de Larrocha, 1971
Sviatoslav Richter
Christophe Rousset, 1990
Rosalyn Tureck, 1959
Alexis Weissenberg

Chopin, Polonaise in A flat major, Op. 53 “Heroic”

Martha Argerich, 1967
Vladimir Ashkenazy, between 1975 and 1984
Solomon Cutner, 1932
György Cziffra, 1973
Ignaz Friedman, 1927
Vladimir Horowitz, 1945
Julius Katchen, 1961
Raoul von Koczalski, circa 1924/5
Ignacy Jan Paderewski, 1937
Maurizio Pollini, 1975

**Chopin, Waltz in D flat major, Op. 64 No. 1 “Minute”**

Claudio Arrau, 1979
Vladimir Ashkenazy, between 1977 and 1985
Jorge Bolet, 1973
Stephen Hough, 2010
Dinu Lipatti, 1950
Jean-Marc Luisada, 1990
Nikita Magaloff, 1975
Maria Joao Pires, 2008
Michael von Zadora, 1929
Discography


Bibliography


Finane, Ben. *Illuminating The Masters.*


Moss, Stephen. *Shy, Not Retiring.*


**Musical scores**


