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# VERSIONS, DUBS, AND REMIXES: REALISM AND RIGHTNESS IN AESTHETIC INTERPRETATION

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“Rightness” has been the watchword of Michael Krausz’s work over the past decade. Across two books and a range of articles, Krausz has asked: which interpretation of a cultural text, if any, is the single *right* one? Resisting any simple or quick answer, Krausz has tried instead to sort out the methodological presuppositions of possible answers to this question, notably to detach ontological commitments (“realism” and “constructionism”) from interpretive ideals (“singularism”/“multiplism”).<sup>1</sup>

Krausz’s subtle and illuminating analyses go a long way toward clarifying the real differences between competing interpretations. In the musical context that will mostly concern me here, his work also presents serious challenges to realist conceptions of the musical work and singularist conceptions of musical interpretation. At the close of his essay “Rightness and Reasons in Musical Interpretation,” Krausz writes: “the understanding of musical interpretation should begin not with a realist view of works of music, but rather with an understanding of musical practice. Whichever posture one favors regarding the ontology of works of music, one cannot make musical phenomena intelligible independent of the historically constituted practices in which they are found and fostered.”<sup>2</sup>

Taking these words to heart, I want to extend Krausz’s examination of musical ontology and interpretation by drawing attention to the historical conditions of classical music practice (the practice of European art music since around 1750) and by situating this practice in relation to non-classical musical practices. If we look at music in this broader context, we will see that the firm distinction between “work” and “interpretation” breaks down, and that the realist conception of the work and the singularist criterion for interpretive “rightness” lose their footing. I take my remarks here to provide an extension of multiplist and constructionist themes in Krausz’s work, to spin these themes into a kind of *remix*—a notion central to the view I develop here.

The questions I ask are basic ontological and epistemological ones. What *is* an interpretation? What *is* a text? What is the relationship between an interpretation and a text? How might your answers to these questions differ depending on whether your ontology is realist or constructionist? Alongside these, I want to press a set of broader cultural and historical questions. How might focusing on the small class of artworks on which philosophers of art overwhelmingly tend to focus (namely, the “high art” of post-Renaissance

Europe) implicitly lend credence to some hermeneutic and ontological claims? How might a focus on other sorts of artworks lend support to a different set of claims?

First, consider the question: what is an interpretation? The ordinary answer to this question is implicitly realist and singularist. It runs something like the following: Some primary object out there is called a text. Some secondary thing is called an interpretation. And the aim of interpretation is “to get the text right.” This aesthetic view is analogous to the traditional epistemological picture, according to which there is a world out there and, as inquirers, our aim is “to get it right.” Nonetheless, if we examine these epistemological and aesthetic scenarios together, we find some intriguing differences and similarities.

In the epistemological case, “getting the world right” is never a matter of simple mirroring; instead, it always involves translation and transformation: that of physical objects or states of affairs into beliefs or sentences. Insisting upon the *aesthetic* character of this epistemological translation from one domain to another, Friedrich Nietzsche asserts that knowledge and language are inherently “metaphorical” in the etymological sense of this term: to carry over or across.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the case of aesthetic interpretation would appear to allow for a more direct and literal way of “getting right” its object or text. If the object is a photograph, you might re-photograph it, as the artist Sherrie Levine has done with the photographs of Walker Evans, Alexander Rodchenko, and others. If a literary text, you might rewrite it word for word, a practice that Jorge Luis Borges describes in his well-known story “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” which tells the tale of an early twentieth-century author who sets out to write “a few pages which would coincide—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes.”<sup>4</sup> As the narrator and Menard himself acknowledge, given the temporal and contextual differences that separate “text” and “interpretation,” even such repetition never quite manages “to get the text right.”<sup>5</sup> “To compose the *Quixote* at the beginning of the seventeenth century,” remarks Menard, “was a reasonable undertaking, necessary and perhaps even unavoidable; at the beginning of the twentieth, it is almost impossible. It is not in vain that three hundred years have gone by, filled with exceedingly complex events. Amongst them, to mention only one, is the *Quixote* itself.”<sup>6</sup>

It would be a mistake to dismiss such examples as mere pranks, for they exemplify fundamental features of the work of art in the age of mechanical and digital production and reproduction, and raise important issues concerning the original and originality, recording and repetition, and so forth. More to the point, they help us to see that interpretation never is or can be a matter of “getting the text right,” that even the most faithful interpretation will involve something other than simple repetition.<sup>7</sup> Interpretation always involves transformation—or, as Nietzsche polemically puts it “forcing, adjusting, abbreviating, omitting, padding, inventing, falsifying, and whatever else is of the *essence* of interpreting.”<sup>8</sup> To put it another way, no interpreter of a text (with the possible exception of the classical music performer, whose practice

we will examine in a moment) ever cares to reproduce the original, which, after all, already exists. Instead, he or she cares to bring something new into the world, namely a new text that transforms (by selecting, highlighting, rendering in a different medium, etc.) the original text. And I think that this basic fact puts realism and singularism under strain.

The focus, in philosophical aesthetics, on works of “high art” in the modern European canon lends undue credence to the realist, singularist view. For complex historical, political, and economic reasons, modern European works of high art are extraordinarily and unusually fixed and stable. In literature and music, for example, the modern work is fixed in writing, signed by an author, and protected by copyright. Some stable and bounded *thing* is called *the work*. And for another complex set of reasons, the modern European tradition has separated and hierarchized the practices of creation and of criticism. Parasitical on the work of the creative genius, a class of literary critics or musical performers exists whose interpretive productions are secondary and beholden to the original work of art.

Contemporary musical aesthetics has largely taken for granted these conceptions of the work and of interpretation. Despite their differences, nominalists and Platonists alike take the musical work to be a kind of thing or object—for the nominalist a score, for the Platonist an ideal type—and “interpretation” to be a matter of fidelity to this object. Yet the notion of music as embodied in fixed objects is an anomaly in the history of music. The notion is characteristic only of about two hundred years of Western art music—a tiny slice of musical history and geography that in no way exemplifies music in general.<sup>9</sup> Throughout most of human history, music has existed without reference to a fixed object; and throughout most of the world (the West included), it still does.<sup>10</sup> That the *thinghood* of music is merely a contingent byproduct of the economics of musical life in modern Europe is arguable: music became a thing only when composers and musicians were forced to sell their wares on the market, which favors fixed and exchangeable objects that are the legally protected private property of an author. The concept of “the musical work” would appear to be an exemplary instance of what Karl Marx calls “the fetishism of commodities” and what Georg Lukács calls “reification”: the process by which the products of human, social activity take on a life of their own and confront their producers as autonomous objects with a “phantom objectivity.”<sup>11</sup> This characteristic of modern life is facilitated by the division of labor (for example, between composer, conductor, and performer) and by the elevation of the product over the process, the abstract over the concrete, and the objective over the subjective (for example, the score over performance).

The “reification” of musical practice—the transformation of a process into a thing—has its philosophical analog in musical Platonism and score-nominalism. Faced with the obvious sensuous facts that (1) music is a temporal art, (2) musical performances are ephemeral, and (3) no two performances are alike, modern musicians and philosophers have sought the identity of the musical work in a conceptual abstraction outside of and beyond the

irreducibly physical, sensuous, temporal, and individual character of musical performances. What began as a mnemonic aid for performance—the score—became an autonomous entity that governed performances and to which they were held accountable.<sup>12</sup> This is precisely the Platonist move that Nietzsche and Wittgenstein warn us against: the preposterous inversion by which the concept “leaf” becomes the cause of particular leaves—or, in the musical case, an abstract non-musical entity becomes the cause of musical performances.<sup>13</sup> But the inversion will be seen for a conception of music standing on its head. Only musical performances exist, each one different from the next to a greater or lesser degree. Only a “family resemblance” among performances allows us to identify anything like a musical “work,” a designation that will only ever be a conceptual abstraction.<sup>14</sup> Music is a becoming, not a being, a process, not a thing. We can try to halt this process by producing an abstract, transcendent object that serves as the model for performances; and “interpretation” can be taken as a matter of performing in fidelity to this model. But performances will always reassert process and becoming by introducing variations; and “interpretations” will always be—whether desired or not—creative.

This becomes more evident once we consider pre- and postmodern works of art. Take, for example, the *Iliad*—not the written text attributed to Homer but the fluid and anonymous oral poem that—over centuries, was continuously added to, subtracted from, and reworked.<sup>15</sup> In this case, no single text, no “original,” exists. And interpreters (the successive poets) are not “getting right” some original text but inheriting a version and reworking it in performance. In the twentieth century, this is more or less the way the jazz canon works. The jazz “standard” is merely a rudimentary chart or prompt for improvisation; and improvisations respond to other improvisations instead of to any “original.” Not one “Body and Soul” exists, but thousands. The original (written by the comparatively obscure team of Edward Heyman, John Green, Rob Sour, and Frank Eyton, and debuted by Gertrude Lawrence and Jack Hylton’s Orchestra) is buried under stronger versions (for example, those by Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, Thelonious Monk, or John Coltrane); and the “interpreters” are the authors of new texts.

These examples begin to suggest a constructionist answer to the questions “what is an interpretation?” and “what is the relationship between interpretation and text?” In the epistemological and ontological context, the constructionist dissolves the firm distinction between self and world, subject and object. The world is not some independent given thing out there that our job as knowers is to represent adequately. Instead, subject and object, self and world are terms in a symbol system (Nelson Goodman), web (Richard Rorty), text (Jacques Derrida), or discursive field (Michel Foucault). Similarly, in the aesthetic context, the constructionist undermines any firm distinction between interpretation and text. For the constructionist (Nietzsche or Derrida, for example), the text is always itself an interpretation, a reworking of materials already on hand; and any new interpretation is an interpretation of an interpretation, with no ultimate or final *Ur*-text underlying this process. On this

model, then, the question about interpretation is not the realist question “is it right (in the sense of ‘faithful’)?” but the pragmatic, constructionist questions “is it interesting?” “is it new?” “is it useful?” “is it important?”

When we survey the practice of what we ordinarily call aesthetic “interpretation,” I think we find that this is precisely what “interpretations” do and precisely what we want from them. What does the literary scholar do? Via a host of conventions, he or she mixes literary with analytical prose to produce a new text. What does the art critic do? He or she translates the visual into the verbal and supplements descriptive with evaluative prose to produce a new text. And these “interpretations” are judged not according to how faithfully they reproduce the original but according to whether they show us something new, interesting, or important.

In this regard, I want to take up and extend Goodman’s notion of the “version.” For Goodman, all knowledge and inquiry (scientific, aesthetic, etc.) is a matter of inhabiting and producing “worlds” or “versions,” which have the peculiar characteristic of being without an original, singular, or common base. According to Goodman, no single, given World exists but only ever different “worlds” or “versions,” which are themselves constructed from other “worlds” or “versions.”<sup>16</sup> Among other virtues, Goodman’s notion of the “version” is felicitous here because it links with an important musical use of this term. In Jamaican dancehall reggae during the late 1960s, the term “version” referred to the instrumental B-side of a reggae single. These B-sides were to be played by a DJ in a dancehall as the backing tracks for a “toaster” who would rap (or “toast”) over them. It did not take long before producers such as King Tubby, Errol Thompson, and Lee “Scratch” Perry began to think of the “version” (or “dub”) as its own entity. Their “dubs” drastically reworked the original tracks, fragmenting the vocals or dropping them out entirely, foregrounding a single element (such as a bass line or a hi-hat rhythm), splicing in portions of other tracks, or highlighting studio effects (such as echo and delay).

In contemporary electronic music, this practice has been considerably extended via the notion of the remix. In the early 1980s, remixes maintained a fairly strict fidelity to their original tracks, and served primarily to make them more dance-friendly by extending them and foregrounding the rhythmic elements. In the past decade or so, the practice of remixing has become much more radical and creative. Remixes often radically overhaul the original material such that only select bits are maintained in the new versions. Some remixes bear no audible relationship whatsoever to the original (for example, Oval’s 1996 remixes of tracks by Tortoise).<sup>17</sup>

Why deem such tracks “remixes” or “interpretations?” Why not call them new “originals” or “texts?” In the first place, these tracks come with the designation “remix,” which, like any title, sets up audience expectations—in this case, that one track (the “remix”) will be heard in relation to another (the “original”). Secondly, regardless of its sonic properties, the remix is economically and legally tied to the “original,” for, in current practice, the remixer is paid a flat fee, while the original artist maintains the copyright (and collects

royalties) on the remix.<sup>18</sup> Finally, such extreme cases call attention to that fact that, in the age of recording and digital sampling, so much of contemporary music is a matter of sonic recycling that every track is a sort of remix.<sup>19</sup> As the producer Kevin Martin puts it “neither the artist nor the remixer are ‘creators’ in the traditional sense”; rather, both “act as ‘filters’ for a sort of cultural flow.”<sup>20</sup> In the digital age, notes Brian Eno, “the artist is more curator than creator. An artist is now much more seen as a connector of things, a person who scans the enormous field of possible places for artistic attention, and says, ‘What I am going to do is draw your attention to *this* sequence of things.’”<sup>21</sup> In short, the artist is an interpreter and the interpreter an artist.

Within electronic music culture, the measure of a remix is not “is it faithful to the original?” (Nobody wants that, for the original already exists. Why repeat it?) Instead, a remix is evaluated by answering the questions “where does it take the original?” “what’s left of the original?” “is it interesting?” Again, I suggest that this is what any interpretation does and always has done. If this is the case, then the focus of interpretation will be shifted away from the realist, singularist aim of “getting the text right” to the constructionist, multiplist aim of transforming a text itself an interpretation.

To the classical music aficionado and the traditional philosopher of music, the musical practices of versioning, dubbing, and remixing may appear exotic and exceptional. My contention is that these are contemporary instances of the age-old practice of music making, a practice obscured by a focus on the classical aesthetic. From Homer through John Coltrane, Grandmaster Flash, and Oval, music has always been a matter of transformative performance, of reinterpreting texts that are themselves interpretations. Theodor Adorno and Jacques Attali argued that musical recording reifies and commodifies music to an even greater degree than does the classical score.<sup>22</sup> Yet sampling and remix practice demonstrate the contrary: that recording makes possible a new kind of musical practice, a new *musica practica* that anyone with rudimentary playback technology can engage in. As Chris Cutler and Mark Poster have argued, art in the digital age recapitulates (albeit via different technology) the folk mode of production exemplified by oral poetry, with its focus on performance and the continual transformation of inherited, all but anonymous, public texts.<sup>23</sup> If this is what music is and means, then philosophers of music have been asking the wrong questions about music and coming to the wrong conclusions about it. At best, they have been “philosophers of classical music” who have taken the exception to be the rule.

To conclude, I have tried to argue for the following claims. Realism and constructionism differ significantly about what they take a work of art and an interpretation to be. Interpretation never is what the realist takes it to be, namely, a faithful rendering of an original text. Instead, interpretation always transforms the text via translation, selection, supplementation, and deformation. Interpretation is always a constructive, artistic, project that challenges the firm distinction between the work and the interpretation, and challenges the hierarchy that places the first above the second. On the constructionist model, the question about interpretation is not “Does it get the original

right?” but “How does it render the original otherwise?” and “Is this interesting? New? Significant?” Along the way, I have insisted that the exclusive focus on European high art, with its unusually fixed and stable works, has given undue credence to realism and singularism and that a focus on different aesthetic objects and practices can begin to lend credence to the constructionist conception of what a work of art is and what an interpretation is. Finally, I have suggested that a “philosophy of music” worthy of the name would come to see classical music as the exception instead of the rule. It would begin to examine music more broadly and to take as primary not fixed abstract objects but the fluid process of physical, temporal music-making and remaking.

## NOTES

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6. “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” p. 41.

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13. Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies," p. 83; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), pp. 17–18.

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15. Seth Schein, *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), ch. 1.

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