

From one aesthetic paradigm to another: towards a dual dimension of authenticity? The case of the interpretation of art music

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Introduction

Since the late 1940s, historical research into the original performance conditions of works from the past – particularly those predating the Romantic era – has, by adopting a musicological approach, led to an aesthetic that is fundamentally different from the prevailing sound environment of the time, thereby bringing about radical changes in performance practice over the long term. However, whilst the desire to return to the original expression of works seems to coincide increasingly with a quest for truth, this ambition appears to conflict directly with the very principle of interpretation. Interpretation, which emerged during the Romantic era, made the performer the very embodiment of the figure of the musician, and in doing so turned them into a creator. The fact is that historical-musicological research thus appears to present performers with a fundamental contradiction: whilst interpretation presupposes self-expression, not all works can be performed according to contemporary instrumental standards—specific to the post-Romantic era—which nevertheless explicitly rely on the necessary and sufficient principle of asserting one’s subjectivity within the musical discourse. Ultimately, the difficulty seems to lie in the irreconcilable union of two totalities. Two totalities, because there are two works—and two works that are complete in themselves: on the one hand, that of the composer, which is, however, only ever accessible through a second totality that is itself complete, namely that provided by the performer through their final act—the concert or the recording. A decisive act on two levels, neither of which is resolved: on the one hand, it completes the composer’s work whilst being unable to claim definitiveness regarding

its form; and on the other hand, it brings to a close a long process of engagement with the composer's work by harmonising choices that are necessarily interdependent, yet which nevertheless remain contingent. But with this new closure of the concept of the composed work, what, then, remains for performers? For from the paradigm of self-expression, of the authentically brilliant performer, we have shifted into the era of the historicity of works.

The realisation that these works form part of the history of music and are not out of date seems to have met a certain demand for truth. A demand which presupposes, on the one hand, a certain conceptual grounding – or, in other words, a defined framework consisting of fundamental values – and, on the other hand, certain systematic and therefore repeatable empirical methods. And this introduction of the concept of truth in fact highlights an internal tension within a concept central to any interpretative act: authenticity. Has the primacy now accorded to authenticity—understood as the degree of accuracy with which interpretative choices correspond to the composer's text, that is to say, to the act of conforming to an ontological truth established by scientific empirical research—simultaneously diminished the expressive power of the performer's purely artistic act? In other words, the alignment of the musical discourse with the intellectual content specific to the performer's subjectivity, and which stems solely from the performer? And so, what is the extent of creativity in the interpretative act today? Above all, it seems, despite everything, that the interpretative act necessarily involves confrontation and division. For interpretation highlights a dual otherness: a confrontation both with the composer—and above all with their work—and with the audience, bringing into play the central role of subjectivity, from which emerges a specific interpretation of a work that cannot be conveyed by any other means. For, as the paradigmatic context indicates, even the reading of a score involves presuppositions and prior conceptions. Romantic and subsequently post-Romantic presuppositions are, in fact, not the same as the more contemporary ones arising from this new scientific approach that has become ingrained in the practice of performers. However, whilst a new scientific approach has found its way into the practice of performance, it must be remembered that, contrary to confrontation and division, the methodical search for truth characteristic of the experimental sciences ultimately aims at consensus and conformity. The demands placed on performers thus prove to be extremely complex. This is a twofold challenge, as the performer is expected to reconcile these two seemingly antagonistic dimensions of authenticity, in a context which—following what appears to be a genuine paradigm shift—highlights their aporetic nature. This seems to have given rise to a strange paradox. For the practice of performers seems, at the same time, to have pursued the sonic ideal guiding the evolution of contemporary instrument-making—leading to a smoothing out of the articulation of musical phrases—an aspiration which, however, appears to correspond to a distinctly Romantic ideal, and stands in direct contradiction to the pre-Romantic practices known to us through research into the historicity of works. Is 'otherness'—a concept at the heart of the interpretative act—therefore being reduced, or even qualitatively diminished, by this general trend in which the institutions of art music also appear to be participating? Conversely, even if post-Romantic conditions of reception involved a significant emphasis on the subjective expression of the

performers' so-called genius, did post-Romantic performers enjoy far greater creative freedom than their contemporary counterparts?

Methodological notes

The very concept of musical interpretation arose in the wake of a certain fixation on musical notation itself. Before the Romantic era – in other words, before the nineteenth century – music was, as Joëlle Caullier explains in « L'art d'interpréter la musique, Un essai d'anthropologie culturelle », a '1 medium' that 'invited improvisation, a sign of life being experienced²'. The embodiment of the performer was first and foremost the figure of the modern conductor, the holder of authority and the sole embodiment of interpretation³. The very notion of musical interpretation was thus, from its very inception, linked to a certain philosophical context: the Romantic era. For Romantic philosophy was indeed embodied in an ideal of self-assertion: that of the subjectivity of a creative artist—or even a demi-god—modelled on individual creation and the figure of the genius. If the performer can therefore be regarded as an artist, and can thus be the subject of a 'cult' just as much as the composer⁴ even though he is not the author of the original text—that is, of the work being performed and thus at least conveyed through his performance—it is because he asserts himself; that through the vision conveyed by the performance he presents to the audience, whilst bringing the composer's work to life, he reveals the value of his own unique genius. The process of the gradual 'artification' of the interpretative gesture in the nineteenth century thus marks a genuine reversal in the way musical institutions conceive of the figure of the musician, since, as Caullier explains, the performer comes to represent the very embodiment of the musician. So much so that the person for whom people now go to the concert hall is the performer.

On 30 November 1973, the historian of science Thomas Kuhn gave a lecture, the transcript of which subsequently formed the basis of an article entitled 'Objectivity, Value Judgement, and Theory Choice'. The historian began by posing a fundamental question for anyone engaged in scientific activity: 'What [...] are the characteristics of a good scientific theory?'⁵ Kuhn thus identified five properties, which together ensure the validity of a scientific theory. The first is accuracy, which, in science, could be identified as the correspondence between the 'consequences that can be deduced⁶' of a theory and experimental observations. The second is coherence, which

¹ CAULLIER, Joëlle, 'The Art of Interpreting Music: An Essay in Cultural Anthropology', in *TUMULTES*, issue 37, 2011, pp. 190–209, p. 194.

² *Ibid.*

³ In the singular, that is to say, the act of interpretation in general.

⁴ And, particularly in the 20th century, of a cult that was perhaps even more intense.

⁵ KUHN, Thomas, 'Objectivity, Value Judgement, and Theory Choice', previously unpublished Machette Lecture, delivered at Furman University, 30 November 1973, in David Zaret, pp. 320–339 (1981).

⁶ *Ibid.*

encompasses both the internal coherence of the theory's propositions and the compatibility of the theory's content with the rest of the scientific knowledge accepted by the scientific community. The third is what might, perhaps, be translated as 'extension'⁷, that is to say, the ability of scientific theories to explain not only the phenomena for which they were developed, but also other observable natural variables. And this is echoed in a property on which Kuhn places great emphasis: 'fruitful'⁸. "A theory should yield new research findings: it should, that is, reveal new phenomena or previously unnoticed relationships amongst those already known."⁹, writes Kuhn. Finally, the last characteristic is what Kuhn calls simplicity, which could also be expressed by the term 'obviousness': if perception gives us, above all else, only a certain confusion between certain phenomena that strike our senses, then the role of scientific theories is to 'bring order'¹⁰, to link, through an explanation, or, more simply, to explain regular phenomena—which scientific activity achieves through the formulation of laws.

Yet it seems to us that these properties, which are intended to establish the validity of a scientific theory, can also be identified with what might be called perceived aesthetic properties, which are regularly invoked in order to make value judgements regarding musical interpretations. The term 'aesthetic property' is a concept found in Roger Pouivet's *Le réalisme esthétique*. For Pouivet observes at the outset that 'aesthetic properties are extrinsic'¹¹ to the objects in which we identify them, an identification that is an act of consciousness. We must therefore explain this semantic shift from a scientific term to a strictly aesthetic meaning. However, this semantic shift towards the aesthetic realm is not poetic. The use of these values within musical institutions is not solely directed towards the practice of performers. In fact, it seems to us that, rather than denoting a prescriptive scope, these properties—having become aesthetic—are perceived as anchoring the existence of expectations for us; and thus, they appear to us to be, above all, evaluative, according to a characterisation that again stems from the thought of Roger Pouivet. For, if we consider the use made of these values by institutions of art music in the broadest sense—that is to say, encompassing not only those bringing together musicians but also critics and the public—we observe that they are employed to formulate value judgements regarding performances.

We must therefore examine for ourselves what the transposition of each property entails. Accuracy may consist in what is also known as fidelity to the text, that is to say, the strictest possible reproduction of the instructions and symbols contained within the score itself. Accuracy thus implies a certain fixity, and even more so a limitation, by setting boundaries on the margin of freedom inherent in the musician's interpretative choices. Coherence, for its part, proves to be twofold. It concerns just as much the internal coherence of the elements of the musical discourse—

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ POUIVET, Roger, *Le réalisme esthétique* (2006), Paris, PUF, 248 pages., page 168.

in other words, the relationship between interpretative choices within the discourse itself, forming a single narrative thread—as it does the external coherence of the content of this narrative thread with a certain paradigmatic environment: that of the body of practices currently in use amongst performers and the values expected in the critical reception of performances¹². Furthermore, coherence—by virtue of the validation it requires in the reception of musical discourse (for coherence does indeed correspond to an aesthetic achievement, actualising the product of an intention by rendering it effectively perceptible)—is a fundamental element in the critical judgement of interpretations. It was repeatedly presented in the Romantic and subsequently Post-Romantic periods as a necessary and sufficient criterion for determining the value of a performance, as this was based on the assumption that a performance denotes, above all, a strictly subjective vision, the source of which remains the performer's genius. Simplicity, for its part, is regularly confused with the concept of obviousness. It is linked to the immediacy inherent in the very perception of the melody, and refers to the intuitiveness with which the coherence and the fluctuating continuity of the melody can be perceived. Whilst the coherence of interpretative choices must therefore be perceived, it must also be perceived naturally, through a form of preconscious process. Finally, 'extension' and 'fertility' relate to a supposed cognitive scope of interpretation. They rest on the presupposition that if the musical work is ever given to us only through an interpretation—and a single interpretation in the present moment—then each interpretation constitutes, in a sense, a sketch of the work. Thus, each sketch must enable us to better grasp the work's essential nature, conceived here as a floating totality inaccessible to subjectivity, impossible for anyone to apprehend in its completeness or purity on an aesthetic level¹³. And it therefore seems to us that a certain margin of freedom actually lies at the confluence of these aesthetic properties. Consequently, the interaction between stylistic and paradigmatic practices is not a fixed process; thus, depending on the circumstances, the meaning and scope of the aesthetic properties at play in the interpretative act are not the same. For the resolutely Romantic anchoring of the interpretative act seems to have posed a problem in musicians' practice. Indeed, the fact that the work is, above all, that of the performer seems to have led to the composer's work being regarded merely as a means to an end. Thus, if contemporary research into the historicity of works has emerged, it is undoubtedly due to a reaction aimed at considering the composers' work as an end in itself as well. And this has not failed to bring about decisive shifts in the meanings and scope of aesthetic properties. We must therefore recall that Kuhn's ambition in 1973 was grounded in a fundamental concept in the sciences: validity. And it seems to us that this is another perceived aesthetic property, the scope of which has come to overshadow the others in the wake of the contemporary history of interpretation. It seems to us that, in reality, validity has long been an indistinct aesthetic property, as it was conflated with another: coherence. However, over the last few

¹² The term 'paradigm' will be revisited and, above all, given an aesthetic definition in the following sub-section.

¹³ This is even impossible from a strictly poietic perspective—that of the musician reading the work as it appears on the page—since any understanding of a work fixed on the page presupposes prior conceptions, or even a particular style of reading, which will influence the style of the performance.

decades, validity has become an established concept in its own right, and, above all, a prerequisite, on an aesthetic level, for the very assessment of the success of other evaluative aesthetic properties. This can no doubt be explained by the emergence of a new criterion in determining the aesthetic success of an interpretation. This might perhaps be understood in the form of an injunction: ‘an interpretation X is valid if it is true’. This seems to mark a way out of romantic values, through a realistic response to a resolutely subjectivist approach to interpretation. For the truth expected of performers would thus derive from facts, obtained through experimentation. In science, the acquisition of such facts requires certain methodological practices to be made repeatable. Above all, this concern for truth reflects a decisive shift in the evolution of expectations regarding performers. For it has cloaked itself in objectivity. Previously, it seems to us that the romantic tradition’s hold on interpreters’ practice was strong enough to reduce validity to a necessary and sufficient principle: coherence. Validity—in other words, the institutional attestation of an interpretation’s aesthetic success—consisted in the successful aesthetic grasp of the internal coherence of the musician’s interpretative choices. Essentially, aesthetic success was not so much a matter of attesting to validity as of recognising a value, embodied in the true expression of an individual’s genius. Validity arose, in a sense, from its emancipation from its conflation with coherence, a sign of great value. Conversely, from now on, the fact that a performance is valid does not attest to its being of great value. This is explained by the fact that validity has become conflated with the quality of accuracy.

Post-Romantic and contemporary approaches

If one wishes to demonstrate that a paradigm is now a thing of the past, one must undoubtedly revisit a term that is essential for describing the so-called ‘golden age’ of interpretation – that is to say, interpretations recorded prior to the 1960s. This term is that of *‘historical interpretations’*. However, this designation strikes us as problematic, to say the least. Indeed, whilst speaking of ‘historical interpretations’ certainly refers to the fact that these interpretations belong to the past—thus placing them within the field of the history of interpretation in a strictly historical sense—at the same time, the term shifts them into the realm of the event. This event is, in essence, something that took place but has now come to an end. Thus, the interpretations we call ‘historical’ are, first and foremost, those that have ceased to function, to use the term employed by Nelson Goodman in *Of mind and other matters*. But what, then, has happened within this institutional environment of art music to lead us to regard certain interpretations from the past as ineffective? Thomas Kuhn explains this in the context of scientific activity: the paradigmatic framework is internalised by practitioners of a discipline through empirical application, and it is through its infusion into methods and conceptual operations that the theoretical connections constituting the paradigm permeate the minds of scientists. In the case of the scientific community, the process is embodied in the flow of academic research. It is by ‘studying’ their own practice that ‘members of the group

learn their speciality¹⁴ '. Furthermore, 'this learning process, which involves practice and action, continues throughout professional initiation¹⁵ '. But what of the case of institutions of classical music? Classical concert performers spend a number of their early years in musical institutions, such as conservatoires or academies, where they learn what is commonly referred to as music theory, as well as, of course, instrumental practice through experimentation under the guidance of a teacher – and, generally speaking, concert performers receive instruction successively from several teachers. These teachers, who are musicians themselves, cannot be isolated from the wider musical milieu. Undoubtedly, therefore, they are immersed in a certain set of paradigmatic practices. It therefore seems that we can identify a profound transformation, a veritable paradigmatic revolution in the field of musical performance. As Kuhn writes, 'identifying common paradigms is not the same as identifying common rules¹⁶ ', but rather amounts to identifying practices or sets of practices and common evaluative standards, sometimes through 'resemblance or conformity¹⁷ '. Methodologically speaking, this therefore involves paying particular attention to empirically observable similarities, the interplay of which then makes it possible to trace back to a general model. This model does not consist of an explicit 'complete set of rules¹⁸ ', but rather of a more fluid entity, perceived through 'intuition¹⁹ ', whose sufficient characteristic is that it exhibits a certain 'coherence²⁰ '.

The first paradigm we are called upon to define is thus directly linked to the very origins of musical interpretation. Why, then, not call it 'Romantic', but instead describe it as 'post-Romantic'? This can be understood in terms of developments in instrument-making, which marked a kind of break in the practice of performing works. The 20th century saw certain Romantic aspirations, which could not previously be realised, come to full fruition. Instrumental craftsmanship in the Romantic era – that is, the 19th century – is in fact closer to that of the Classical era than to the instruments we are most familiar with and commonly record, apart from explicitly historically informed performances. Our aesthetic study of these paradigms is based primarily on an empirical approach, grounded in the analysis of recordings. However, whilst the ability to record music has been fully operational since the very early years of the 20th century, the decisive milestone marking the first step in the quest for transparency regarding the rendition of recorded material was 1925, and the transition from acoustic to electrical recording. Thus, the performers we shall be studying played on non-Romantic instruments—that is to say, instruments that did not conform to 19th-

¹⁴ KUHN, Thomas, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), French translation by Laure Meyer, Paris, Flammarion, 2018, 352 pages, page 85.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, page 91.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pages 85–86.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, page 89.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

century standards of construction—but were in fact post-Romantic, and moreover entirely analogous to the majority of instruments still in use today.

It therefore seems to us that, in perfect harmony with the conceptual context that gave rise to musical interpretation – and the ideal of subjective affirmation inherent in it – the post-Romantic approach revolves around a fundamental principle. This is embodied in a fundamental variable, which is both necessary and, in itself, sufficient within a post-Romantic interpretative framework. This was expressed in the form of an instruction given by the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler to his then pupil Sergiu Celibidache²¹ : ‘It depends on how it sounds²²’. In descriptive terms, the ‘sounding’ dimension of interpretation could thus be defined as the alignment of interpretative choices with the effects they have on the listener’s perception. For post-Romantic performers, ‘sounding’ is therefore the principle to which all other variables at play in interpretation are subordinated. This primary principle, which defines the post-Romantic approach—whereby interpretative choices are primarily determined by their effects on the listeners’ perception—thus has a negative repercussion, against which the contemporary approach has firmly positioned itself, and perhaps even been partly constructed. What is first and foremost expected of a performer in a post-Romantic approach is to offer a performance of high value because it rings true; that is to say, it conveys a sense of harmony between the intention to produce certain perceptual effects and their actual aesthetic reception. This thus presupposes that the performer is regarded as an ‘authentic²³’ creator, as the pianist Claudio Arrau explicitly put it, insofar as what they deliver to the audience is a product of their pure subjectivity, of their own genius, modelled on the resolutely Romantic, demiurgic creation that gave rise to this ‘cult²⁴’, to use Joëlle Caullier’s phrase, which developed around performers during the course of the nineteenth century.

However, the sonic dimension could thus justify certain corrections – in other words, certain alterations made *a posteriori* to the composer’s own score. René Leibowitz, in *Le compositeur et son double*, had already criticised this kind of practice. Although he undoubtedly still adhered, owing to the circumstances in which he practised orchestral conducting, to a generally ‘sonorous’ approach—at any rate by adopting certain typical and contextually determined practices, particularly in the composition of the orchestra, the instrumentation with which he worked being resolutely post-Romantic—Leibowitz was undoubtedly a pillar in the quiet emergence of the

²¹ It seems, however, that Furtwängler never really had a pupil. Celibidache had in fact taken over the baton of the Berlin Philharmonic following the accidental death of Leo Borchard – the conductor appointed by the Allies in 1945 – whilst Furtwängler’s activities were suspended. It was upon Furtwängler’s return to the helm of *his* orchestra – officially resuming the post he had not formally held since 1934 – that a relationship of mutual respect developed between Furtwängler and Celibidache, with the former treating the latter as a kind of spiritual disciple until his death in 1954. The Berlin Philharmonic then appointed Herbert von Karajan as its music director, who removed Celibidache’s name from the archives. The Romanian conductor did not return to lead the Berlin orchestra until 1992, for a one-off concert.

²² Quoted in JACQUARD, Philippe (ed.), *L’atelier du maître: Furtwängler vu par les musiciens, Volume I* (1991), Wilhelm Furtwängler Society, 38 pages, page 3.

²³ ARRAU, Claudio, *Arrau parle, interviews with Joseph Horowitz*, French translation by André Tubeuf, Paris, Gallimard, 1985, 312 pages, page 116.

²⁴ CAULLIER, Joëlle, ‘The Art of Interpreting Music: An Essay in Cultural Anthropology’, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

contemporary approach, through a constant concern to return to a certain immanence of the score. Indeed, there was no justification for the conductor not to perform the score strictly as it had been written by the composer; moreover, Leibowitz noted that ‘most musicians know — whilst most music lovers are unaware — that many conductors make more or less extensive instrumental alterations within a large number of orchestral works²⁵ .’ Let us add, then, that in order to understand the sonic dimension as the primary principle of the post-Romantic paradigm, the concept of naturalness lies at its heart; this implies, on the one hand, that interpretative choices must be perceived with a fluidity akin to the movement of a living organism, and, on the other hand, that the musical discourse must be characterised by a certain figuration, which is also embodied in teaching practices.

But if we are to attempt to explain what a shift in the aesthetic paradigm might entail, then we must return to the very nature of the transformation in question. For Kuhn, the period preceding ‘the formation of a paradigm²⁶ ’ is in fact characterised by ‘frequent and in-depth discussions on legitimate methods, problems and acceptable solutions²⁷ ’. Moreover, the uncertainty inherent in this so-called ‘extraordinary’ period gives rise, within research communities, to a ‘search for rules²⁸ ’ that is far more significant than in a so-called ‘normal’ context. This is because a change in framework does indeed entail, at least initially, a transformation of explicit codes – in this case, rules. Specifically, Kuhn explains that a paradigmatic transition generally requires the rules to be made explicit, in order to introduce new ones into common practice, thereby rendering them intuitive and, in turn, making them implicit once more. Chronologically speaking, it seems to us that it is thus possible to date the first steps of the paradigmatic transition that brought about the shift in the practice of musical interpretation from the post-Romantic approach to the more contemporary approach that succeeded it in the late 1940s, and to assume that the current enduring nature of the contemporary paradigm can be traced back to the 1980s. The paradigm shift initially crystallised around a reaction against certain Romantic presuppositions that were extremely pervasive in the post-Romantic approach to performance. Whilst this decidedly more scientific and objectivist approach has now become established in interpretative practice – more than fifty years on from that decisive shift – no contemporary performer seeks an exact reproduction that is strictly faithful to what the work’s first performance might have sounded like. However, this is undoubtedly only possible because the previously explicit codes – which, in the context of performance, gave rise to genuine scientific research into the origin and original performance of the works – have formed a body of established practice. The scope for instrumental practice has changed, the framework has shifted, and performers are embracing their freedom far more fully within a context

²⁵ LEIBOWITZ, René, *Le compositeur et son double, Essais sur l'interprétation musicale*, édition définitive (1986), Paris, Gallimard, 550 pages, page 90.

²⁶ Thomas KUHN, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), *op. cit.*, p. 92.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, page 93.

that no longer requires explicit codes. The findings of research into the historicity of the works – that is, into the construction of the instruments and the instrumentation specific to the context in which the compositions were written – initially led to the emergence of an aesthetic that was radically different from the comprehensive rendition of Baroque and pre-Baroque works expected under the previous paradigm.

As Nikolaus Harnoncourt explains in the section of *Le Discours musical* devoted to instrument-making, this craft is not only shaped by history, but the history of instruments is also intertwined with the history of timbres. As Harnoncourt explains, ‘most [instruments] have gained in power; all have altered their timbre²⁹’. Firstly, given the conditions under which orchestral music was performed – the pre-Romantic era featuring concert halls with ‘far greater reverberation than we are accustomed to today³⁰’ – ‘this [meant] a much more pronounced blending of sounds³¹’. The sound thus vibrated in a much more nervous manner, with tutti passages featuring significantly tighter timbres. And then, above all, the orchestra’s dynamics have evolved profoundly since the nineteenth century. This led to a radical change in the dominant section – the one that provides the cohesion and, of course, the perception of melody within the orchestra – giving the leading role to the strings! As for the woodwinds, they have become more nuanced, a development reflected in a broadening of the possible ranges. Above all, the distribution of timbres was not the same before, not even in the 19th century. Not only were the strings less dominant – simply because they were less loud in terms of sound power – but at the same time the role of the wind instruments, the woodwinds but also, and above all, the brass, was not the one characteristic of post-Romanticism, namely to provide support for the themes assigned to the strings. In the post-Romantic orchestra, the brass instruments have a more strident, less full-bodied sound—one might say more acidic. But this is because their role is not the same. It is no longer a question of blending in, but rather of adding a sharp edge to the blend of the strings within certain chords – strings which are both significantly more numerous and smoother in the unfolding of the musical discourse. As for the percussion, it was far more prominent in the orchestra before the advent of modern instruments in the post-Romantic era, that is to say, after the nineteenth century. As Harnoncourt explains, ‘the timpani did not produce a round, voluminous sound as they do today, but a thin, clear one³²’. In fact, the pre-Romantic instrumental repertoire was conceived around a central concept: registration. On the keyboard, apart from the difference between plucked and struck strings—which marked the transition from the harpsichord to the piano—registration was paramount, and this contrast was even more pronounced at the same time as metallic parts became more integral to the timbre. A modern piano is an instrument that has evolved towards a homogenisation of chords. What has thus

²⁹ HARNONCOURT, Nikolaus, *Le Discours musical*, French translation by Dennis Collins, Paris, Gallimard, 1984, 300 pages, page 151.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, page 153.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 157–158.

essentially enabled the emergence of the contemporary approach is, by taking into account the historicity of the relationships between instruments – in other words, *the instrumental ensemble* – the simultaneous rediscovery of intersubjectivity in the conductor's practical work with the instrumentalists. And, of course, this has completely overturned the possibility of a holistic vision of melody stemming from post-Romanticism – and in particular the notion of an orchestra conceived as a single instrument – through the new disjunction that now distinguishes each section much more clearly.

Towards a dual interpretation of authenticity

One initial interpretation would be to view this paradigmatic shift as a radical reversal of values, moving from an affirmation of the interpreter's subjectivity to a return to the value of objectivity. Indeed, because the contemporary approach involves basing interpretative choices on factors inherent in the text itself, as well as on scientific findings concerning the historicity of the works, a certain scientific rigour has itself become grafted onto the sonic dimension of music. In other words, a certain objectivity has crept into purely artistic considerations — in this case, the poietic treatment of the aesthetic reception of the performance. But if we are to speak of objectivity, then we must surely identify its manifestation. Why, then, should we invoke a number of objective variables? Laurraine Daston and Peter Galison, in *Objectivity: a history of the representation of scientific images*, propose for consideration a form of relational objectivity: 'structural objectivity'³³. In this instance, it is a form of objectivity that crystallises in 'relations' such as 'logic, syntax, [or] ordered sequences of sensations'³⁴. Above all, for Daston and Galison, the aim that requires structural objectivity is to 'propose a specific solution to a problem that has already been formulated'³⁵. And, indeed, in the case of musical interpretation, the challenge was to find a justification for ruling out the possibility of making alterations to the score. This was achieved by rejecting the notion that the sonic dimension is both necessary and sufficient. At the same time—this time in the conceptual background—it entailed downplaying the importance attached to the link between interpretation and self-expression. The problem, in fact, lay in this absolute assertion of subjectivity, based on the presupposition that the assertion of an artist's subjectivity—which is essentially unique—possesses an idiosyncratic character, and that, since each subjectivity expresses itself in a fundamentally different way, it is sometimes necessary, in order to express oneself fully, to make alterations to the original text. Thus, the defining feature of structural objectivity is that it is grounded 'in structures, which alone are capable of breaking away from the private mental world of

³³ DASTON, Lorraine, GALISON, Peter, *Objectivity* (2007), French translation by Sophie Renaut and Hélène Quiniou, Dijon, Les Presses du Réel, 2012, 576 pages, page 297.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

individual subjectivity.³⁶ Moreover, Daston and Galison note that in the case of the history of science: ‘variability from one individual to another—of which sensory experience was the paradigmatic example—thus came to embody, for these scientists, the new face of the dangers of subjectivity.’³⁷ Methodologically, this therefore entailed introducing objective variables relating to the relationship between the interpretative choice itself—the principle of which is necessarily subjective—and its objective material medium, which is also necessary: the musical instrument. For, as Bernard Sève explains in *L’instrument de musique. Une étude philosophique*, music ‘is defined by [the use of] instruments’³⁸. Similarly, ‘to play is to bring into play’³⁹, for instruments are the medium which, by virtue of their construction, necessarily—albeit not entirely—determines interpretative choices.

However, it would obviously be problematic for us to reduce this role of objectivity to a complete reversal of subjectivity and objectivity in performers’ practice. Indeed, it seems clear that performers remain artists, and are fully aware that a performance is, first and foremost, a work of art. The performer who truly embodied the shift from the post-Romantic approach to the contemporary approach was Nikolaus Harnoncourt. However, it is nonetheless interesting to note that Nikolaus Harnoncourt’s primary motivation was, above all, intrinsically aesthetic. Essentially, it was a matter of rediscovering how works from the Baroque repertoire sounded best. It is therefore more accurate to say that the method consisted, in positive terms, of identifying an interpretative principle that had become inherent in the text itself: if one wishes to serve the work, then one must do it justice by means specific to the work itself. Conversely, the corollary seems to take the form of an injunction: ‘an interpretation X may be considered valid if it contains no propositions that could not have been expressed at the time the work was composed’.

It is therefore not so much a genuine affirmation of the value of objectivity; at the very least, we quickly moved beyond this in the context of interpretation, which is still regarded above all as an interpretative practice. It seems to us that this is rather a conflict taking place against the theoretical backdrop of this paradigmatic shift, between two connotations of the concept of authenticity. Authenticity is indeed a central concept used to describe and evaluate the work of performers. According to Joëlle Caullier, in ‘The Art of Interpreting Music. An Essay in Cultural Anthropology’, the performer is engaged in a quest for coincidence: that of constantly reconciling two different conceptions of authenticity. On the one hand, the first requirement is for the performer to be authentic in their own right, in line with the Romantic values of self-assertion and genius. On the other hand, the second requirement of authenticity can undoubtedly be traced back to the notion of ‘accuracy’ discussed by Kuhn in 1973. Joëlle Caullier even goes so far as to speak of a process of

³⁶ *Ibid.*, page 294.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, page 297.

³⁸ SÈVE, Bernard, *L’instrument de musique. Une étude philosophique* (2013), Paris, Seuil, 376 pages, page 86.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, page 324.

‘⁴⁰ absorption’, during which the performer ‘abstracts from the world⁴¹’ whilst linking intellectual awareness to ‘body awareness⁴²’. In practice, this process unfolds in two stages: first, the artist engages in a process of projection, imagining what their own vision of the work might be—commonly referred to as their conception—before offering a rendition through the intellectual and physical union of the act of instrumental performance. For René Leibowitz, this is because ‘the performer, in a sense, takes the place of the composer himself for the duration of the performance (...), [becoming] precisely his analogue, or his double⁴³’. It is therefore the case that two seemingly irreconcilable conceptions of truth clash, for each of these two dimensions of authenticity, as Thierry Lenain further explains in « Authenticité iconique vs authenticité artistique. À partir d’une œuvre de Francis Alÿs », in *Noesis* journal, has falsity as its enemy, and serves to ‘legitimise [...] the stigmatisation of the false⁴⁴’. Quite simply, a purely subjectivist view of truth—consisting in the correspondence between expression and the content present within the interpreter’s subjectivity—has been succeeded by a markedly more realistic approach to truth, by identifying its pursuit—as we mentioned in our initial examination of the decisive aesthetic properties in the analysis of contemporary interpretative practice—with a relationship of accuracy vis-à-vis the composer’s text.

Within the post-Romantic approach, the second requirement was subordinate to the first: asserting one’s own vision of the work took precedence over strict adherence to the content set out in the composer’s score, provided that continuity—or, in other words, a certain coherence—was perceived from an aesthetic point of view. Previously, it was therefore the dimension of authenticity—regarded as intrinsically artistic—of the performer that prevailed: an affective or phenomenal authenticity, for it was the performer who was playing, and whom the audience came to see; the figure of the performer was, moreover, accompanied by a thoroughly Romantic cult of the virtuoso, as Caullier wrote previously⁴⁵.

The concept of misappropriation : towards a search for truth?

The contemporary approach thus seems to revolve around a central concept: misappropriation. This can undoubtedly be understood, once again, in a somewhat negative light. It thus appears to take the form of an injunction: ‘an interpretation X may be considered valid if it does not contain propositions that could not have been expressed at the time the work was created’.

⁴⁰ Joëlle CAULLIER, ‘The Art of Interpreting Music: An Essay in Cultural Anthropology’, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ René LEIBOWITZ, *Le compositeur et son double*, édition définitive (1986), *op. cit.*, pp. 26–27.

⁴⁴ LENAIN, Thierry, « Authenticité iconique vs authenticité artistique. À partir d’une œuvre de Francis Alÿs », *Noesis* [En ligne], 22-23 | 2014, mis en ligne le 15 juin 2016, consulté le 28 janvier 2026.

⁴⁵ This is a reference to the introductory remark made earlier regarding the emergence of the figure of the performer, which is inextricably linked to the Romantic era.

Let us also consider that, once again, interpretation thus presents itself to us in the form of a discursive framework. Of course, the paradigmatic revolution that led to the establishment of the contemporary approach as the dominant norm was based on a critique of the assumption that the post-Romantic dimension of an interpretation could not be regarded as a necessary and sufficient variable. But more than that, the functioning of these pre-Romantic works now presupposes an institutional framework that was radically impossible at the time of their creation: the recording. David Vandiedonck, in ‘Baroque and Contemporary Music: Interpretation is Mediation’, seemed himself to touch on the subject by coining a concept, the ‘[contemporary] Baroque⁴⁶’. At the institutional level, there exists a whole world of art music. As Vandiedonck explains, ‘musicologists, publicists, performers and publishers construct “contemporary Baroque” music⁴⁷’. There is therefore a whole network of ‘mediators⁴⁸’ who ensure the functioning of this pre-Romantic music. If one wishes to define the concept of contemporary Baroque, it must undoubtedly be understood as a certain blend between the scientific rigour of research into the historicity of the works and purely interpretative aspects, linked to the post-Romantic dimension of performance. As Vandiedonck explains, concerts and recordings are artistic manifestations that bear witness to the evolution of scientific research: ‘the recording gives concrete form to the research and makes it visible: in a sense, the recording constitutes the “proceedings of musicological research”⁴⁹’. Furthermore:

Technology and reproduction are no longer regarded as factors leading to impoverishment, but rather as a necessary condition for the deepening and enrichment of works, performances and the music sector as a whole. Reproduction is seen more as a new form of production, a creation, than as a copy that detracts from the original qualities of the works.⁵⁰

But this fusion of scientific rigour and purely artistic practices adds a new dimension to interpretation. For, indeed, the practice of science presupposes a certain notion of progress. This is also what is implied by this realistic conception of the work being imbued with content that is directly present within it: through this methodical and realistic imbuing, we quantitatively increase our knowledge of it. David Vandiedonck takes the harpsichord as an example. When we listen to recordings by the pioneers of the harpsichord’s rediscovery—such as those by Wanda Landowska, Helmut Walcha, Kenneth Gilbert, or even Gustav Leonhardt’s very earliest recordings—a comparison with more recent recordings gives rise to the feeling that the older interpretation is ‘out

⁴⁶ VANDIEDONCK, David, ‘Baroque and Contemporary Music: Performance is Mediation’, *Études de communication* [Online], 21 | 1998, published online on 25 May 2011, accessed on 2 October 2025, §27. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/edc/2363>

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, §12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, §13

of fashion⁵¹ '. The contemporary approach thus stands in stark contrast to the post-Romantic approach, which was implicitly centred, in particular, on the concept of irrelevance. Within a post-Romantic framework, a performance might be the subject of a value judgement that disparaged it, but it could never have been regarded as outdated. At the same time, the importance of the notion of progress justifies artistic creation, as one necessarily depends on the other: if there is no longer any musicological research, there is no reason other than a purely artistic one to re-record the same work; and if there is no longer any performance, the results of scientific research cannot be realised in a tangible way.

However, it seems to us that the quest for truth inherent in the contemporary interpretative paradigm—through its aim to build consensus and propose replicable research methods—has, in its wake, led to a new homogeneity in aesthetic expectations of performers. It seems to us that an aesthetic property has thus come to be perceived anew when listening to interpretations characteristic of the contemporary paradigm. This property can be defined from the outset as descriptive, or 'classificatory'⁵² ', according to a typology of aesthetic properties proposed by Roger Pouivet in 'Pourquoi la beauté?', an article published in 2024 in the volume *Des propriétés esthétiques*. It would be a form of smoothness, perceived through a kind of analysis situated within a haptic dimension. In this regard, it is no doubt worth recalling that it is common, in orchestral criticism, to use the expression 'orchestral fabric', or, on a broader scale, to refer to the ways in which performers play with instrumental or vocal 'textures'. This obviously ties in with the lexical field of relief, and the interplay of contrasts which critics most often describe using terms drawn from the vocabulary of sculpture, or even geography, frequently interwoven with distinctly pictorial properties, in particular the terms 'contours' and, of course, 'colours'.

The smoothness we are discussing thus seems to be characterised by a certain homogeneity, both within the musical phrases themselves and in the connection they may maintain within the musical discourse as a whole. However, smoothness is usually defined in two respects: in this case, the visual and the tactile. Moreover, the visual aspect, in its aesthetic definition, is dependent on the tactile, as the visual dimension of smoothness depends on a form of haptic appeal. In other words, the perception of smoothness arises from the projection of consciousness onto a hypothetical tactile experience of a texture understood in terms of a certain negativity, since it presents no roughness or irregularities. How, then, might we define a musical application—temporal rather than spatial—of the notion of smoothness? And what might this definition reveal to us about the implications for contemporary interpretative practice?

Yet, from the outset, there is something extremely paradoxical about the emergence of a possible 'aesthetic of the smooth'. Indeed, interpretation—which Leibowitz initially situated within *praxis*—was fuelled throughout the entire 'extraordinary' period—to use Kuhn's term—by

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, §12.

⁵² POUIVET, Roger. 'Why Beauty?'. *Des propriétés esthétiques*, edited by Alexandre Declos and Claudine Tiercelin, Collège de France, 2024, §7.

historical research favouring a more contrasting dynamic and declarative intentions that were certainly less expansive but more dynamic. Consequently, the conceptual underpinnings of interpretative practice should in fact prove to be even less ‘smooth’ than in the post-Romantic era. Moreover, the post-Romantic paradigm relied on a modern instrumental style that was becoming increasingly ‘smooth’. The fact is, however, that whilst performers’ intentions are now more in line with research into the historicity of the works, modern instrumental craftsmanship – which remains the technical foundation for the majority of contemporary performers – has continued this general trend. More precisely, it is more accurate to define this trend as a standardisation of both sound and gesture. Nicolas André, conductor and former assistant to Kent Nagano at the Hamburg State Opera from 2018 to 2022, in an interview recorded in 2022, explained it as follows:

When a modern violinist has spent their whole life working to standardise the difference between bowing outwards and inwards, so that the distinction cannot be heard, they have been working in the opposite direction to, say, a Mozart symphony. And so, when they are asked to play a Mozart symphony and to deliberately emphasise precisely that unevenness, it is very complicated.⁵³

Thus, one could no doubt identify a certain paradox arising from this ever-increasing prevalence of smoothness: even as we seem to have rediscovered greater contrast in the dynamics and a greater overall vigour, the discourse itself appears to have become smoother, due to what might be called the discursive intentions inherent in the interpretations. If we are to attempt to explain this paradox, then we must no doubt take a detour via an ontology of the interpretative gesture in music.

Semantic determination

In 1973, when Thomas Kuhn listed what he believed to be the properties that ensure the validity of a scientific theory, his focus was thus on discourse. For what a scientific theory proposes—and what we seek to disprove through a series of tests—is indeed a given content presented in the form of a discursive statement. And perhaps the reason why the signifier of the scientific properties proposed by Kuhn is reflected in the form of perceived aesthetic properties used to formulate value judgements regarding musical interpretations is also because musical interpretation itself takes place within a discursive framework. A central issue that therefore concerns the practice of performers is where, within interpretation considered as discourse, meaning is situated. Or, on a more empirical level, which musical entities convey the meaning communicated in the performer’s interpretation? Indeed, it seems to us that this entity is not in itself determined. What is essentially at stake here is a certain division. The performer’s crucial task would thus consist, in a sense of negation, in ensuring that this division is not perceived as arbitrary — from the perspective of

⁵³ ‘An Interview with Nicolas André, conductor’, *Sofronichrist*, 22’51–23’15: <https://sofronichrist.com/interviews/>

aesthetic reception. Meaning thus depends on what is isolated or connected, emphasised or revealed, and above all on the inclusion of the content conveyed by these elements within the totality of the given work — that of the performer performing. As Bernard Sève explains in *L'instrument de musique. Une étude philosophique*, 'The composition of a work presupposes the archi-composition of musical language, the division of the sonic continuum. [...] All composition presupposes the determination of discontinuities and their material inscription on a fixed medium⁵⁴ ', in this case through the mediation of instruments.

This discursive dimension of musical interpretation is thus understood through the very context in which meaning is conveyed. For Adorno, in his notes collected in the volume *Interpretation: Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction*, the semantic dimension of musical discourse lies in phrasing. In other words, in the articulation of chords within musical phrases. However, phrasing is a matter of performance; in other words, it is specific to the performer's gesture. This is because, for Adorno, the 'musical text⁵⁵ ', received from the composer, is qualitatively distinct from 'expression⁵⁶ '. For the text is received, whereas expression is intended to be brought to life through the filter of interpretation. Expression, a concept at the very heart of the origin of musical interpretation, is therefore in itself indeterminate. If we thus observe that the semantic determination of the discourse that is musical interpretation is not in itself necessarily fixed in advance, it is because we realise that not all performers use the same methods to attach meaning to the milestones of the discourse, and to bring them into 'a higher unity⁵⁷ ', as Furtwängler had already put it. This can be understood empirically from the fact that performers do not ascribe meaning to the same musical units. It may well be a chord or a group of chords within a phrase without constituting the whole of it, the phrase itself, a group of phrases, or a more diffuse, less clearly defined passage. Moreover, these differences appear to us to be paradigmatically determined. The contrast between the post-Romantic approach and its successor is embodied in the method by which each of the two paradigms identifies a semantic entity before attributing meaning to it. In the post-Romantic era, one depicts and represents. In other words, an act of reference must take place between the identification of the semantic entities of musical discourse and the recognition of figurative content on an aesthetic level. However, this content is therefore not necessarily directly immanent to the construction of the composer's textual content. With the contemporary approach, semantic determination seems more closely linked to an interpretation denoting a relationship of 'accuracy'—to borrow a fundamental property identified by Kuhn—with the score. Undoubtedly, this leads to a greater isolation of certain musical entities predetermined by

⁵⁴ SÈVE, Bernard, *L'instrument de musique. Une étude philosophique* (2013), *op. cit.*, page 211.

⁵⁵ ADORNO, Theodor. W., *Interpréter : Pour une théorie de la reproduction musicale*, édition établie par Henri Lonitz, traduit par Martin Kaltenecker, Paris, Cité de la musique-Philharmonie de Paris, 2024, 448 pages, page 20.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ FURTWÄNGLER, Wilhelm, 'Interviews on Interviews' with Fred Goldbeck (1953), SWF D20, *Furtwängler in Paris*, 4 May 1954, 2025, Interview II, 10'53–11'01. URL: <https://furtwangler.fr/produit/swf-d20-furtwangler-a-paris-1954/>

objective factors derived from historical-musicological research. Perhaps, too, the perception of the value of naturalness has also changed. Indeed, whilst previously the metaphor of the work as an organism and the holistic conception of melody made it possible to establish a link between musical entities determined solely by the performer's subjectivity, the conception of musical duration is now less figurative. Thus, the perceived homogeneity at the heart of the perception of 'smoothness' seems to us to stem not necessarily from isolated semantic entities, but rather to be predetermined if one starts from a fixed form in an attempt to restore movement to it. This can be understood in terms of where 'smoothness' resides; for whilst it is indeed internal to musical discourse, 'smoothness' is a property perceived through phrasing. In fact, the gesture that instils the perceived movement in the phrasing is mechanical. However, in the case of a post-Romantic approach, an isolationist approach to semantic determination results not in 'smoothness', but in the perception of a certain 'arbitrariness'⁵⁸, rendering the perception of a totality incoherent, as Alfred Brendel had already remarked regarding the changes made in Willem Mengelberg's conducting. Previously, it was therefore possible to convey this arbitrariness—an evaluative aesthetic property—but the performer still had too much to contend with to produce 'smoothness'. It thus seems to us that the perception of 'smoothness'—a perceived aesthetic property which now appears to us to be not only descriptive but, in the typology proposed once again by Roger Pouivet, but this time in Chapter 5 of *The Ontology of the Work of Art*, to be both descriptive and evaluative, stems, on the poietic level, from the confluence within the musical discourse of a certain uniformity in the articulation of phrases and the predetermination of semantic entities. On a strictly evaluative level, this mechanical dimension could thus imply, in the conceptual background, an opposition between surface and construction — or, perhaps, 'archi-writing', as Bernard Sève puts it. And where the 'closure' of the work, based on a model proposed by Umberto Eco in *The Open Work*, appears in fact to be problematic, it is because, by creating the illusion of a pre-established division, it deprives the act of determination of its meaning; this act can only ever stem from an intention that can be none other than that of the performer.

We noted earlier that the emergence of the contemporary paradigm was accompanied by the assertion of a certain objectivity, which we described as 'structural', to use the term coined by Daston and Galison in *Objectivity*. Indeed, it may be possible to link this poietic homogeneity—which gives rise to the perception of the 'smooth' as an intrinsic property of musical discourse—to another form of homogeneity, present on a higher scale, which in this instance consists of a certain similarity between various interpretations from recent decades. In other words, we would be witnessing, reciprocally, a trend towards the standardisation of aesthetic expectations, linked both to the empirical evidence that certain scientifically established criteria are being met, and to the convergence of the disappearance of the carnal texture characteristic of post-Romantic performance and the trend towards the standardisation of chords within contemporary instrumental composition. In fact, 'smoothness'—now also conceived as a conformity of interpretations with one another—

⁵⁸ BRENDL, Alfred, *Musique côté cour, côté jardin* (1990), French translation by Ernst-François and Rose-Marie Podlesnigg, Paris, Buchet-Chastel, 1994, 286 pages, page 224.

could be a new outcome of this demand for truth inherent in the contemporary paradigm. This search for truth certainly presupposes a given paradigmatic foundation, in this case based on scientific findings; but, more profoundly, we would argue that any search for truth in science presupposes iterable methods. In other words, not only have these methods become embedded in historical-musicological research—which is scientific in its own right—but also within the very semantic determination of the performers themselves!

But is this homogeneity, thus identified within aesthetic expectations, truly unprecedented? If the post-Romantic paradigm placed such great value on the unique expression of a subjectivity that was, by its very nature, idiosyncratic, did it not nevertheless necessarily presuppose certain institutional and commonly shared expectations? If Sofronitsky held Rachmaninov's artistic vision in such high regard, it was because he essentially linked it to what, in his view, made Anton Rubinstein a better musician than Hans von Bülow. It has often been said that Mengelberg was the principal spiritual heir to Bülow's resolutely Romantic style of interpretation. By focusing on the musical discourse itself, it seems to us that both were clearly seeking to perform in the manner typical of Romantic performers in general, but that the decisive aspect of their approach lay in endowing musical entities—considered independently of the overall unity—with meaning. In other words, the intention was certainly to isolate complex and indeterminate semantic entities in relation to the text, much as we have described in relation to Alfred Cortot's poietic process, for example, but the challenge lay in presenting them in the best possible way, striving to bring out their intrinsic character as effectively as possible—that is, what is unique to these entities, or, more simply, these passages—without relating them to meaning, which Adorno identified as a unity constituting the semantic glue of musical discourse. Essentially, the presentation of semantic entities considered in their own right was prioritised here over overall coherence.

Upheavals in Otherness

However, have we reached a new level, in quantitative terms, in this standardisation of aesthetic expectations through this new demand for truth that has emerged in the contemporary era? Perhaps, at an institutional level, this can be explained first and foremost by a certain dynamic whereby art music is increasingly regarded as music that stems primarily from the past. Whereas the post-Romantic era posited a timeless ideal, in which works endured over time to ultimately escape any contextual determination, the dynamic of the contemporary paradigm seeks to restore the relevance of works of art by placing them back within their original performance contexts. René Leibowitz, in *Le compositeur et son double*, had already criticised the effects of this widely held conception of music as belonging to the past. Leibowitz noted that the works of Stravinsky—who was still a contemporary at the time the book was written—had to be paired with other, more institutionally established works in order to attract an audience. Leibowitz thus sought to respond to this precisely by calling for a return to Romantic 'timelessness'; yet what paradoxically emerges from this is a form of constant 'timeliness' in art music, justified by the idea that masterpieces have,

in essence, become timeless. Yet this form of relevance — which stands in opposition to the conception forged by the contemporary paradigm of what the relevance of a musical work from the past ought to be — would thus have been dissolved in the view generally held by the public and, on a broader scale, by the institutions of art music as a whole, namely that art music, commonly referred to as classical music, is music of the past, obeying formal codes that have already been established. However, it may be possible to formulate a hypothesis explaining a resolutely non-scientific basis for the predetermination of semantic entities at the heart of the ‘smooth’ that emerged in the wake of the contemporary paradigm. Indeed, the art music of post-Romantic composers held a certain relevance for performers operating within the post-Romantic paradigm. Arthur Nikisch performed under Wagner’s baton; Wilhelm Backhaus played before Brahms; Frédéric Lamond and Eugen d’Albert studied with Liszt; Willem Mengelberg, Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer worked with Mahler; Francis Planté heard Chopin play; and Furtwängler considered himself a contemporary of Bruckner. And for all these performers, the composition of works embodied in the ‘grand form’ in the traditional sense was a phenomenon of the utmost relevance. Moreover, any performance was then regarded as a process of constant re-creation of a work that was ceaselessly reworked, and whose richness was also revealed through the full range of possibilities implied by this act—which was not merely one of revival, but a truly creative one. The work of art in classical music was thus resolutely an ‘open work’, following the model proposed by Umberto Eco. In 1962, in *The Open Work*, Eco certainly contrasted the impermanence and openness of contemporary works such as those by Boulez or Stockhausen with the closed nature of older works; yet, in the meantime, a formal break had taken place. For by 1962, the ‘grand form’ in the traditional sense no longer represented the embodiment of creation in art music. However, it is possible that the fact that art music, in its most common form since the Classical period, is now regarded at an institutional level as music of the past actually encourages a form of formal fixity, and the conception that a work of art music is a closed work – again, following the model proposed by Eco. And that, therefore, the historical roots of these works—which are embedded in the history of music up to the post-Romantic era—justify a certain predetermination of a set of performance conditions, in particular through semantic determination, but also by taking into account the findings of historical-musicological research regarding both instrument-making and conditions of reception — which have, however, remained unchanged since the post-Romantic period, including in relation to works predating the Romantic era.

And then, of course, it may also be that this uniformity of expectations owes much to developments in sound technology. In particular, to a certain advancement that responds to a demand for transparency. Daston and Galison, in *Objectivity*, themselves noted that the emphasis on objectivity in science – the authors referring to a veritable ‘age of objectivity’ in the nineteenth century – owes much to the development of visual reproduction techniques, and in particular to the transparency increasingly made possible by the emergence and subsequent development of photography. Similarly, we must nevertheless note that the establishment of the contemporary paradigm, and its new demand for objectivity, took place at the same time as transparency became a

reality in the field of recording. In the field of sound reproduction techniques, throughout the 20th century – from the invention of electrical recording in 1925 to its complete digitisation during the 1980s – everything evolved not only towards fidelity to the sound of the instruments, but towards the erasure of any trace of the recording equipment from the aesthetic reception of the finished recording. No trace was to remain. For as early as 1925, sound fidelity with regard to the instruments was already high. However, the annoyance stemmed from surface noise, which was extremely pronounced in the case of 78-rpm records. From a poietic perspective, ‘the revolution will be made through the tape⁵⁹’, as Laurent de Wilde explains in *Les fous du son*. What is more, it seems to us that this transparency has become an aesthetic quality in its own right. In other words, as sound recording techniques have evolved, when we listen to a recording we are increasingly less confronted with the perceptible fact that it is, in fact, a recording. Silence—that is to say, the absence of any mediation that perceptibly confirms the fact that we are listening to a recording—could only be achieved—more or less—in full with the advent of digital recording, during the 1980s. But might we not relate this increasing realisation of transparency over time to a broader context, namely a framework encompassing a more general ideal of objectivity, and even of truth? In this instance, the quest for truth inherent in the paradigm shift. For the evolution of recording reproduction towards a gradual removal of the recording medium—rendering it ever less perceptible with each development—has indeed taken place in the wake of the paradigm shift we are studying. In other words, this ideal of objectivity and truth external to interpretative choices came to fruition at the same time as an ideal of objectivity and truth became embedded within the performers’ musical discourse. In this regard, it is important to recall that transparency was accompanied by a constant expansion of the possibilities for editing within the context of recording. The 78-rpm record was also its own matrix, as what was recorded was etched directly onto a master disc, which was then duplicated. Consequently, it was only possible to record in single takes. However, these could not exceed four minutes and thirty seconds. The single take per movement was therefore fully realised with the democratisation of analogue tape. This resonated perfectly with the organic ideal of the post-Romantic paradigm. However, the ease of access to editing gradually made it the norm in the practice of classical recording, and it seems to us that, from an institutional perspective – particularly that of music criticism – the conception of what constituted a *mistake* changed. In an era profoundly marked and even structured by the Romantic roots of performance, it was still possible, as Claudio Arrau put it, to see in wrong notes ‘the right of genius⁶⁰’. The only mistake identifiable in the post-Romantic era was to obstruct one’s own musical discourse, and to reveal a discrepancy—not in the sense of a disjunction between the content of the interpretative musical discourse and the strict content of the composer’s score, but in the sense of an inconsistency between the propositions internal to the musical discourse. However, as we have seen, a certain fixity has now crept into the dominant conception of what notation is, and thus, in

⁵⁹ WILDE (DE), Laurent, *Les fous du son. D’Edison à nos jours* (2016), Paris, Gallimard, 2019, 667 pages, page 255.

⁶⁰ Claudio ARRAU, *Arrau parle, interviews with Joseph Horowitz*, *op. cit.*, page 121.

effect, of the relationship between notation and its rendition in musical discourse. Nevertheless, it seems to us that the ever-increasing scope for the use of editing has thus been harnessed to serve a new imperative: not to produce propositions which, within the musical discourse, do not correspond to the conception of notation derived from historical-musicological research — a more rigid form of notation. However, this has also been to the detriment of the coherence of the musical discourse, which ultimately stems from the performer. And this is not without posing an identity problem, as Edna Stern explains: ‘That moment, when [you have] full control over the reverb... and can change everything, is a truly very dangerous moment, and in relation to [yourself].’⁶¹

But it seems to us, moreover, that the combination of transparency with the possibility of montage allows for a certain detachment. And this, precisely, touches on one of the poietic foundations of the smooth. We had previously identified causes for the contemporary emergence of the ‘smooth’ that lie within musical discourse itself, in this convergence of the predetermination of semantic entities and an iterative method seeking to homogenise delivery; yet it seems to us that we have here identified an institutional cause for the emergence of the ‘smooth’. Here again, montage appears as a form of escape. And, on the other hand, the increasing transparency of recording techniques seems to have—along with the loss of the grain inherent in the reproduction of recordings, a necessary condition for their aesthetic reception—enabled the ‘smooth’ to be perceived more clearly.

What, then, might performers be seeking to escape through the internal structure and smoothing of musical discourse? Joëlle Caullier, in ‘The Art of Interpreting Music. An Essay in Cultural Anthropology’, identifies the interpretative act with a particular difficulty: confrontation. Right from the article’s abstract, Caullier argues that the interpretative act ‘establishes a unique relationship; it involves an examination of otherness and transmission’. For Caullier, the interpretative act thus clearly denotes a distinctly ‘ethical’⁶² dimension. This is because interpretation constitutes one ‘of those foundational experiences that preserve the subject and enhance their creative capacities, their capacity to take into account someone other than oneself’⁶³. Why? Because what performers teach us, as they learn to receive their work, is ‘to [listen to the figure of the other] for what they have to say and not because they form part of the setting, whether visual or auditory’⁶⁴. Alfred Brendel explained in his *A Pianist’s A-Z* that he had to grapple with this engagement with otherness at every concert. For Brendel:

[When the performer] plays, they address both the composer and the audience. They have an overall view of the piece and yet bring it to life in the moment. He sticks to a planned interpretation whilst still allowing himself to be taken by surprise. He

⁶¹ Edna Stern, interview with the author (Zoom: Paris, 19 January 2026).

⁶² Joëlle CAULLIER, ‘The Art of Interpreting Music: An Essay in Cultural Anthropology’, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

remains in control yet loses himself. He plays both for himself and for the furthest corner of the hall. He commands attention with his presence, but when luck is on his side, he dissolves into the music. He dominates and he serves.⁶⁵

Beyond an adaptation, then, what we are dealing with is a confrontation. And, even more so, a division, for an interpretation ever gives us only a sketch of a work, whose singularity stems from choices that are, for the most part, trade-offs that eliminate possibilities — most often in the name of coherence, which serves as the value justifying the trade-off —, a work that will never be accessible to us independently of any presuppositions, which are themselves shaped by listening to interpretations that have already been given. Nevertheless, the fact remains that an interpretation presupposes reciprocity, an intersubjective relationship. And that, at its core, an interpretation is a communion. ‘When the wind is favourable, synthesis occurs in interpretation⁶⁶’, Brendel also wrote. Of course, a striking example of this bringing of otherness into play at the heart of musical interpretation is embodied in the wrong note. As Bernard Sève explains, the wrong note reveals a power of alteration that reveals otherness. For the wrong note betrays the life at work, creating ‘a tension specific to listening⁶⁷’. As Bernard Sève further states, the wrong note thus retains a necessary function in this interplay, embodying that risk which denotes something absolute, of which Caullier had already spoken.

However, otherness comes into play in two ways in the case of the performer, since, on a poietic level, the performer is confronted with the text of a composer whom they cannot have known — in the vast majority of cases, at least — and, above all, they must, through projection, imagine a complete picture of the composer themselves—their body of work, which, despite everything, transcends and imposes itself beyond the text, yet which must render it intelligible to an audience that can only receive the work through a dual process. For indeed, the construction of an interpretation precedes its performance, the aesthetic success of which depends as much on its alignment with the ideal nature of interpretative choices—that is to say, the form they take in the performer’s consciousness—as on the coherence perceived internally within the musical discourse in terms of aesthetic reception. Undoubtedly, by identifying this inherent difficulty specific to any interpretative act in music, Caullier simultaneously explains the growing homogenisation of aesthetic expectations towards performers within the contemporary paradigm.

Furthermore, it should be added that this paradigm shift from the ‘open’ work to the ‘closed’ work⁶⁸ also appears to be taking shape within a certain contradictory movement in relation to the practices formerly followed by composers. A ‘closed’ conception which, moreover, was initially

⁶⁵ Alfred BRENDDEL, *A Pianist’s A-Z*, French translation by Olivier Mannoni, Christian Bourgeois Éditeur, 2014, 2012, 156 pages, pp. 72–73.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Bernard SÈVE, *L’instrument de musique. Une étude philosophique* (2013), *op. cit.*, page 308.

⁶⁸ In considering the composer’s work.

ideological in nature, which is why we describe this understanding of authenticity as ‘strict’. However, Louis Allix, in ‘Authenticity as a Norm of Musical Interpretation’, an article published in *Savoirs En Prisme* in 2013, observes that composers, for their part, did not hold ‘fixed conceptions regarding the tools at their disposal⁶⁹’, continuing, for example, to transcribe or even modify their own works after their first performances, including during and after the Romantic period. Allix thus returns to what we have termed the ‘openness’ of the work, the scope of which appears to be significantly greater amongst composers, as evidenced by their practice of repeatedly modifying their works, most often in response to how they were received. This ideal of so-called ‘total’ authenticity would therefore be utterly ‘unattainable’ in Louis Allix’s view. Thus, the new poietic methods of semantic determination might appear as a form of *ad hoc* catch-up, through which, as Allix further states, ‘we must therefore be content with attempting to recreate the sound of the period, that is to say, essentially playing on historical instruments and reading the original score, whilst adopting the interpretative style of the time⁷⁰’. And this seems an ambition all the more difficult for performers to fulfil given that ‘the set of notes constituting the work to be performed is not always perfectly definable⁷¹’, and because, prior to the Romantic era and its new standardisation of musical notation, “scores were far less precise than they are today⁷²”, which implies that one “must also be familiar with the specific conventions of the period regarding accidental alterations⁷³”.

However, it is still possible to object to this quasi-vitalist conception of interpretation on the grounds of its strongly romantic or post-romantic presuppositions. This emphasis on the interpretative act is, in fact, largely based on a strong link between the value of a work and its enduring nature, which in turn presupposes a removal from time and context. The musical work of art would thus possess an ahistorical scope, and its power of otherness would consequently be diminished by the use of objective variables that impose certain limits on the expression of the performer’s subjectivity. Similarly, for Caullier, the main obstacle to the confrontation and division implied by the interpretative act is not an internal conformity within the practice of interpretation, but rather a conformity implying a broader social scope, relating to the very structure of our relationship with art—that of the ‘society of entertainment⁷⁴’ or the ‘society of the spectacle⁷⁵’, as identified in models already established by Guy Debord or Jacques Ellul. This would therefore

⁶⁹ ALLIX, Louis, « L’Authenticité Comme Norme De l’interprétation Musicale ». *Savoirs En Prisme*, n° 02, septembre 2013, pages 173-98, page 183

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Joëlle CAULLIER, ‘The Art of Interpreting Music: An Essay in Cultural Anthropology’, *op. cit.*, page 200.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

amount to a standardisation of the modes of reception of interpretation that would threaten the semantic scope of the interpretative act itself, the value of which derives from the success with which the expression of subjectivity—or even of genius at work—produces meaning. However, returning to the semantic dimension specific to musical interpretation, it must be recalled that, even though the post-Romantic paradigm involved giving free rein to the expression of the performer's subjectivity, the performer nevertheless encountered necessary limits within it, and allowed similarities between interpretations to be perceived, despite the principle of absolute division that it might suggest. Furthermore, technical developments – both in terms of instrument-making and recording conditions – whilst we have demonstrated their decisive influence, do not appear to have, on their own, imposed a new form of conformity in musical interpretation. Above all, whilst a shift towards greater scientific rigour may be regarded as progress, is the interpretative gesture actually altered if subjective expression is now constrained by a move towards a form of the work that may be closer to what the composers' intentions might have been? Perhaps this approach should then be regarded as a tangent, a curve tending to increase our understanding of what the form of the work cannot be, as well as of what was impossible given the circumstances of its composition, whilst never being able to provide a definitive, positive answer regarding any potential knowledge of the implicit intentions that vanished with the composer. Rather than speaking, as Louis Allix does, of the quest for 'total' authenticity—the attainment of which indeed seems utterly impossible—we would instead explain the contemporary paradigm through a form of restriction and a now stricter conception of authenticity, understood here primarily as fidelity or exactness. So, how might we justify the ethical importance of otherness in the act of interpretation without, at the same time, denying this realist notion of progress in our understanding of the works, as highlighted by David Vandiedonck in his definition of the contemporary Baroque?

Ultimately, it is no doubt the case that this quest for truth, which is underpinned by a demand for factual accuracy, comes into direct conflict with a fundamental aspect of the interpretative act. The contemporary approach appears to be a response to Romantic values, to subjective assertion taken to such extremes that, in the name of expressing genius, it can override fidelity to the composer's score. The reaction was therefore to attempt a return to strict authenticity with regard to the score and the original conditions of the work's performance, through a certain scientific rigour – in this case, through a quest for factual accuracy – that is, by empirically seeking facts that would enable an expression conceived as being truer, in this instance by being closer to the original conditions under which the works were performed. Undoubtedly, a new variable that has been introduced into the practice of performers is thus a demand for reliability: we place a certain trust in the performer, not merely to make us hear the work better or differently – in a manner analogous to how Brendel conceived the fruitfulness of an interpretation – but also to make us hear the work correctly, in the right way. This implies an additional dimension, not merely cognitive, but more profoundly ethical. For it suggests a requirement regarding the very stance adopted by performers.

However, the very assumption that an ethics of musical interpretation might exist poses a significant problem. Indeed, how could we possibly attempt to establish any *a priori* principles

whatsoever for the practice of interpretation, when it is itself the result of subjectivity at work, the content of which is necessarily idiosyncratic? We previously defined the interpretative act in accordance with the theory of the functioning of works of art proposed by Nelson Goodman in *Of mind and other matters*, according to which, for a work to function, it must be capable of changing our perspective both on itself and on the world around us. However, the paradox of this potential cognitive scope of the interpretative act – a point already raised by Alfred Brendel – is that interpretations function whilst simultaneously reducing, or even reducing works to, a mere sketch. The problem posed by an ethics of interpretation is therefore that it would involve providing maxims of action for a type of act whose very principle is to confront an inaccessible totality, the work being known only through the filter of certain preconditions, in order to deliver a sketch that is, in itself, incomplete. But then, perhaps, we might approach the question from the opposite angle: if interpretation necessarily involves confrontation and division in order to function, then any interpretation that takes the path of disengagement in an attempt to restore conformity or consensus cannot be fully regarded as valid. Once again, this implies asserting a decoupling between scientific validity—understood in terms of accuracy or, in other words, strict authenticity—and artistic validity proper, or, in other words, the genuine attestation of a phenomenal authenticity. And if certain contemporary developments imply that strict authenticity cannot be dismissed, then it must be maintained that the demands placed on performers must preserve the expression of phenomenal authenticity.

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