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PREPARING BEETHOVEN FOR LIVE PERFORMANCE: THE 'ALCHEMY PROJECT'

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Over the last decade, *performance studies* emerged as one of the most rapidly developing research areas in contemporary musicology. Indeed, there has been such an unprecedented flourishing of activity in this area that various writers speak of a transformation in musical ontology and argue that the concept of music as a score-based work, which has dominated twentieth-century musical thought, is steadily giving way to a conceptualization that sees it as in essence a performance art. This development has been variously related to 'the shift within musicology as a whole towards reception history' (Cook 2007: 184), and to the establishment of theatre studies as a discipline independent from literary studies, reminding musicologists, to quote Nicholas Cook, 'the extent to which signification is constructed through the very act of performance, and generally through acts of negotiation between performers, or between them and the audience' (Cook 2001: ¶ 13).

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² The AHRC funds postgraduate training and research in the arts and humanities, from archaeology and English literature to design and dance. AHRC Research Centres provide a focus for collaborative research in areas of strategic importance. Although the social and natural sciences have long had access to funding to establish centres of research expertise, it was not until the launch of the AHRC's Research Centres Scheme that researchers in the arts and humanities have benefited from a similar opportunity. For further information please visit www.ahrc.ac.uk

The large majority of research in musical performance has been quantitative in nature, and the main areas of investigation include: the practice strategies of performers, the motor skills involved in playing musical instruments, the psychological and social factors that influence the way performers work, as well as the acoustical properties and gestural elements of so-called expressive performance (e.g. Rink 1995, 2002; Parncutt and McPherson 2002; Davidson 2004, 2005; Williamon 2004). Analysis of changing performance styles has recently emerged as another major area of investigation and since it relies exclusively on recorded performances as primary source documents, some researchers regard it as part of a larger project identified as 'musicology of recording' (Cook, 2007; Philip 1992, 2004). In spite of this rich variety of research topics, certain issues still remain neglected within contemporary performance studies: one of these concerns the perspective of professional performers, and the other concerns live performance, 'musicology's perpetually absent object' in the words of Carolyn Abbate (2004: 514). The *Alchemy Project* is the first research project to bring together these two neglected areas.

To be sure, various researchers have voiced their concern about the absence of performers within disciplinary discourse. Cook, for example, has written: 'Much as I applaud the efforts that have been made in the last decade or two to develop a musicology of performance, we are vulnerable to the claim that the voices of performers have not really been heard, that theorists have it as it were taken it upon themselves to speak for performers in a kind of ventriloquism' (Cook 2005: ¶ 23). And John Rink, in this connection, has cautioned researchers that '[w]e can be sanguine about the future of performance studies perhaps only to the extent that performers themselves come to assume greater priority within the discipline (Rink 2004: 41). It is well known, of course, that musicology has long regarded performers as notoriously inarticulate 'doers', particularly since the publication of Kerman's 1985 book titled *Contemplating Music*. It should be emphasized that some performers have indeed written about their art, and in that sense they are not as a rule inarticulate doers. However, most of this literature does not involve disciplinary concerns – an imperative to contribute to performance studies by presenting the performer's perspective to theorists and practitioners of music alike – and consequently does not find acceptance in musicological circles as presenting a legitimate knowledge producing perspective.

One of the motivations behind the Alchemy Project has been my dissatisfaction with the way performers and performances have been represented in the dominant disciplinary discourse.³ There is, in my view, an effort in performance studies to assimilate musical performance to something else, and to represent it as belonging in a domain in which the researcher can exercise his or her theoretical expertise. This effort is evident, for example, when Cook writes that the recent interest in the study of music as performance is 'part and parcel of the shift within musicology as a whole towards reception history...performance is self-evidently a form of interpretation, *in just the same way as* [emphasis mine] are critical and historical writing about music, iconic representations, or TV and film adaptations' (2007: 184). Another attempt to subsume performance under the familiar is the introduction into performance studies of a term, namely 'acoustic text', which is used in referring to recordings and recorded performances. This is clearly the expression of a textual culture, which seeks to 'read' performances and develop a textual understanding of them: as such, it attempts to establish an ideological continuity between the academically valued mode of knowledge production and presentation, namely the writing and dissemination of texts, and musical performance. Such a stance at once obscures the fact that for the performer, musical performance originates in an aural culture, celebrating a system of values that do not require meaning to be primarily read but heard, where it is music-making that drives any related linguistic discourse that might ensue from it. The term 'acoustic text' also erases the temporal uni-directionality and singularity of performance in that it presents it as equivalent to a written text, or a musical score, in terms of its history of becoming: in other words, it causes the researcher to forget that the author of a written text exercises a very different kind of control over the final artefact that is publicly available than the performer who *makes* a live performance, which in my view is still the golden standard in the art of musical performance. The Alchemy Project aims to represent performances and performers within the disciplinary discourse in their own terms, by articulating the characteristics of the practice of performing live on stage, where performers make performances within a temporal environment that is bound up both with the logic of indeterminacy and the necessity of uninterrupted flow. One of the characteristics of this practice has been articulated by Susan Melrose, who mentioned 'eventful articulations, and chasing angels' in reference to the temporal order of inventive practices, which includes the temporality of live musical performance. Melrose wrote: 'The time specific to what I call *chasing angels* is fragile. Expert practitioners cannot be sure that they have "caught one", except on those occasions when the decision made is applauded in the time of the emergent event. In

³ For a more detailed discussion of the way the dominant disciplinary discourse misrepresents performers, see my 'Recording the Performer's Voice' in M.Doğantan-Dack (ed) *Recorded Music: Philosophical and Critical Reflections*. London: Middlesex University Press, pp.293-313.

addition, an angel tends to be not-yet-seen, but recognizable when she appears, as well as always singular. This is a curious epistemological burden. It is equally the case that angels are marked by luminosity, rather than by substance...rather than in a materially-single substance or site. Because they are not located materially *somewhere*, they disappear, as quickly, in the same event, and troublingly' (2003). It is this kind of angel time, among other things, that Alchemy Project aims to explore.

The main area of investigation of the Alchemy Project can be identified as performance epistemology and, by implication, epistemology of music. The specific aim of the project is to explore the cognitive and affective factors that shape live performances from the perspective of professional performers in the context of a piano trio; to compare and contrast these with what happens in rehearsals and workshops such as this one; and to understand and theorize about the way performers continue to learn on stage, which indeed can be conceived as their work place. The project also aims to present live music making as a site of knowledge production, providing the initial step towards counter-balancing the almost exclusive focus in contemporary performance studies on a 'musicology of recording' by emphasizing the importance of live performance in the chain of musical knowledge production.

In this connection, there are several challenges the project poses to received and established notions about music performance. One of these concerns the way researchers have been conceptualizing live performance: Accordingly, the purpose of all preparatory processes is to get the musicians ready for the final stage of public performance, where an interpretation that is fixed in its details during the practice sessions and rehearsals is unfolded for an audience. Indeed, it is this conception that has led researchers who aim to understand how performers work to focus exclusively on the processes involved in practice sessions and rehearsals, and to neglect issues relating to performing live in public. Performers, however, do continue to learn on stage, and it is the new knowledge thus acquired that becomes the basis for future superior performances. In other words, there is a kind of expert musical knowledge that simply cannot be acquired in the practice room. Pianist Sviatoslav Richter, for instance, is known to have said that it was only at his fourth public performance of Mozart's Piano Sonata in A minor that he achieved what he considered a satisfactory interpretation (in Neuhaus, 1993: 206). For most researchers, the four performances by Richter would simply constitute 'different' performances, the expressive properties (dynamics, nuances, timing) of which can be quantified and compared, whereas for the performer himself some of the differences would be qualified as constituting 'new knowledge'. Because of the absence of research about the perspective

of professional performers on performing live in public, the expert professional knowledge involved and generated in these contexts, which is not directly available to non-practicing third-party researchers, has not been articulated in the musicological literature. One of the aims of the Alchemy Project is thus to articulate this knowledge and to challenge the dominant conception of live performance by arguing that from the performer's perspective, it represents only *an intermediary arrival point* in the 'life' of a piece of music, rather than a final, fixed state.

The second challenge the Alchemy project poses for the dominant discourse and ideology in performance studies has to do with (documenting) the way performers talk about and conceptualize their musical experiences: some of the terms performers use for this purpose, such as 'intuition', 'magic', and 'alchemy' are still regarded as too subjective, too elusive, and basically metaphoric to fit the agenda of a positivistic, empiricist musicology. Nevertheless, terms such as 'intuition', 'magic', 'artistry', as well as rich metaphors and imagery, are frequently used by performers to refer to and articulate real experiences and we cannot simply dismiss them if we want to understand how performers work. Hence, the Alchemy Project, by documenting and analysing the performer's discourse, aims to elevate it the status of an epistemological tool, yielding knowledge not only about performance psychology but also about musical works.

For instance, in our conference abstract for this workshop, I have used the word 'magic' in relation to what we aim for in our performances, and I wish to emphasize that I do not use it to refer to a mysterious phenomenon. I rather use it in referring to:

- 1) The ease and flow we would ideally experience as we play a certain piece of music, which in turn is associated with spontaneity and absence of expressive restraint. It also indicates a certain intensification of our consciousness of the present moment, resembling the experience of 'flow';
- 2) Certain changes that takes place in our - and hopefully the listener's - relationship with the music we play, such that habitual, automatic response patterns become de-automatized, and we become conscious to a heightened degree of the shaping of the musical details even if it is music we know by heart. We become aware of our own act of listening, as distinct from our ordinary hearing and listening activities, and we actually can hear our audience listening. Such a 'magical' performance makes us acutely aware of its own temporality.

The title of the project, 'Alchemy in the Spotlight', is related to the processes of knowledge production in the context of live performance. The term 'alchemy' is intended to capture the aesthetic

impulse that drives performers to continually seek to turn the ordinary and common into something special and exceptional while on stage. During a live performance, the cognitive/affective world of the performers and consequently the interpretation of the music they perform often undergo certain qualitative transformations. These transformations are related to such phenomena as increasing expressive freedom, increasing affective involvement, unplanned creative interpretative choices, claiming ownership of the music, and most significantly, certain alterations in time-consciousness; all of these are processes that are peculiar to live performance contexts as distinct from the processes involved in rehearsals and practice sessions, and the resulting performance is aesthetically different from, and often surpasses what has been achieved in rehearsals. It is precisely the knowledge acquired through these transformations, and not merely the preparations leading up to a performance, that becomes the basis for future superior performances. Achieving them in live performance is a prerequisite for attaining the level of skill we observe in expert, or as some researchers call it, 'eminent' performance. The title 'Alchemy in the spotlight' refers both to such transformations performers experience, and also to the process of researching them by identifying and exploring their essence.

Another unusual aspect of the project is that going on stage is conceived as a positive affective experience allowing the public performance to become a site where qualitative transformations can take place, in turn leading to the acquisition of new knowledge that simply cannot be acquired in the practice room. Recent research, by contrast, has largely concentrated on negative affective experiences in relation to live performance, grouped under the term 'performance anxiety', which in my view limits the inquiry into performance epistemology. To be sure, performers do differ in terms of the ideal performing conditions they prefer. One end of the spectrum is represented by pianist Artur Schnabel who loved playing for audiences, and came alive on stage. At the other end is pianist Glenn Gould, who quite openly suffered on stage and ultimately left it for the recording studio. For many professional musicians, however, performing live is a positive affective experience they look forward to. Furthermore, as the context of live performance is highly affective in nature, the knowledge acquired on stage is, I would argue, stored in long-term memory similar to other affective experiences, and differently from the experiences we have with the music during rehearsals. Hence, the Alchemy project counter-balances the recent research by examining the role of positive affective experiences. It also counter-balances the focus on solo performance practice in the majority of contemporary performance studies by addressing issues that arise in the context of chamber ensemble practice.

Finally, I would like to briefly introduce the piece that we will work on this afternoon: Beethoven's Piano Trio Op. 70 No. 2 is an extraordinary and forward-looking piece. It was composed in 1808, when Beethoven was also working on the 5th and 6th symphonies. It involves structural experiments and excursions, harmonic ambiguities, two Allegretto movements in the middle superseding the Classical slow-movement-and-scherzo paradigm. In spite of this, it is very much overshadowed by its companion, Op. 70 No. 1, 'the Ghost'. If available number of different recordings is any indication, it is also the least performed. All three of us feel a deep fascination for this piece; we are struck by its strange beauty, by its daring but gentle language. We are in the early stages of getting intimate with it, and we hope you enjoy the workshop.

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