PERFORMANCE AND THE EXISTENCE OF ART

Take any piece of music, or a dance, or a play. Does it exist whether or not it is in the actual process of being performed? Does it exist only in the performance, or does it exist before and after the performance? Does performance add to its existence?

Existence nowadays is discussed in terms that are technical and usually obscure, even to professional philosophers. This essay will concern itself much more with performance than with any specialized discussion of existence; where the latter term occurs it should be understood as it is used in ordinary speech. In fact, for most of my present purposes we could do without the word existence altogether. If we think of the difference in music between a composer and a performer, we can ask: which of these two is really the artist, or are both really artists?

The Greek philosophers frequently arranged their discussions in this same form: all X is either (1) A, or (2) not-A, or (3) a combination of A and not-A. So we can entertain three possibilities. One is that the composer alone causes the work to exist; another is that the performer alone causes the work to exist; the third is that both jointly cause the work to exist. In the philosophy of art all three possibilities are to be found. I shall give them names for ready reference, and call them respectively the Matrix Theory, the Recipe Theory, and the Collaboration Theory.

The Matrix Theory holds that the work of art exists, that the composer alone has caused it to exist, and that he alone is the artist. C. E. M. Joad\(^1\) suspects that the play Hamlet exists (or subsists) apart from present, past, and all possible performances, and also apart from the pages upon which its words might be written or printed. The play does not need to be read, to be enacted, or even to be thought about in order to exist. And then there is Igor Stravinsky who, with a very steady hand, pours contempt upon the virtuoso conductor who would speak to us about “his fifth or his seventh, the way a chef boasts of a dish of his own concoction.” According to Stravinsky the virtues of a performer are always and only these two:
fidelity and sympathy toward the composer’s intentions. According to this Matrix Theory, the composer makes the piece or the playwright makes the play and there’s an end to the making. Performance goes on outside the level of creative activity. Perhaps performance is merely a specialized way of beholding the work or appreciating it, but at any rate the work does not exist potentially so that the performer has power to actualize it, the work simply exists and the composer caused it to exist. He is its first and only cause. The work is a Matrix in the sense that it is the unique and necessary archetype of which each performance or rendition is merely an approximate copy. The work is the master, and all performances are prints which can do nothing more than report to us with some accuracy what features of the master have been impressed upon them.

The Recipe Theory takes the opposite view and holds that the work of art exists, and that the performer alone has caused it to exist. Professor Gilson says, “Unless it is actually performed, music simply does not exist.” And again, “Like a Platonic idea, the ideal original of a musical composition is nothing more than a notion of the mind. Strictly speaking, it does not exist.” The performance is like a cake which Stravinsky’s chef has produced from a particular recipe, his own or someone else’s. The recipe is the design or the composition, and the process of making the cake is the doing, the performance, and the real object.

Less casually, every performer knows that he is a maker or a builder, and not merely a sounding-board or a vehicle for the creative efforts of other people. In drama, a director “builds up” a scene and an actor “develops” or even “creates” a character or part. In music a performer “builds up” his repertoire; he tackles a work which he cannot yet play and he works upon it; with thought and practice he makes it take shape in his hands and before his own dazzled ears.

This is all studio language, and I am sorry about that, but it is not meaningless. If studio language does not translate into coherent talk, then perhaps we should spend more time with art and less with talking. The performing artist is familiar with these imperfectly described experiences, and he is also aware that he always has the last word up there on the concert platform.

Third is the Collaboration Theory, of which there are two current formulations. One is that the composer in some way performs and the performer in some way composes. There may be differences, but at some point their functions are interlocked. Two hundred years ago there would have been no doubt about this, but in our time the two operations have become specialized, and it is not the usual thing for one person to be obviously both composer and performer. Composers in our century are more explicit in the detail of their score-writing, thereby greatly
reducing the performer’s scope as a free creative worker, although there is evidence of a change going on in this regard. Performers in our century are confronted with formidable repertoire problems which require a lifetime to overcome, leaving little time for developing their skill as composers.

The second formulation of the Collaboration Theory is that composing and performing are distinguishable but continuous functions. The work exists, and it manifests growth or development through stages. These stages might be conceived as running from an idea in the composer’s head to his written sketches to his fully worked-out score to the performer’s rehearsal and finally to his uncorking of it in public presentation.

I shall come down in favour of a Collaboration Theory in which are combined elements from both formulations of it. But first we should examine the extreme positions, since they can give a good idea what to look for in the middle.

In the Matrix Theory, which holds that the composer alone causes the work to exist, a big ontological problem arises with a frightening countenance. In what sense can a work be said to exist unperformed? Most of us are satisfied that it exists once it has been recorded in such a way that we can either hear it or play it again. But we cannot refuse to accept a composer’s word if he tells us that a work exists in his head, ready to be set down in notation, provided no Person from Porlock raps on the door. Some composers write out their music at a great speed, and they seem to have done most of the creative work in their heads before they even started to write. This is one of the senses in which music is a purely mental affair, something of a Platonic Idea, as Professor Gilson says. We cannot even say that the act of writing notes on score paper adds anything to the existence of the piece.

A related problem is presented by folk music that the collectors have not yet laid hands upon, that exists in a purely aural tradition untranscribed and unrecorded. We only know that such pieces exist because we have heard them performed by others, who in turn have heard them performed by others.

Of course, there is no infinite regress here, but the absolute first origins of an ancient folksong are usually impossible to trace because of the variants and local versions from which it stems. Like God Save the Queen, many folksongs prove upon examination to be composites: a phrase of this, a phrase of that, a dance rhythmic figure put in here, an alteration to fit some topical allusion in the words there. Like God Save the Queen again, a folksong has no single composer whose mental act placed into sequence the notes comprising the tune’s contour. The work in such a case came into existence by seeping into our collective consciousness, and it exists nowhere else.
I am picking my way daintily around the problem of existence, but when I think of this special case, the untranscribed folksong, I begin to suspect that all music and not just some folk music exists in this same way: as accumulated in our collective consciousness. But it is not easy to think of this as an existence at all.

If the Matrix Theory is correct and an adequate account of the matter, then a performance is merely an experience which causes us to remember the Platonic Ideal work, and there is no basic difference between our singing a song out loud and our running over it in our heads.

Another consideration that threatens the Matrix position is that there are performance arts in which composition takes place right in the physical flux of performance. Although there have been attempts to devise systems of notation for dancing, the fact remains that choreographers do their creative work directly upon the bodies of the dancers with whom they work. Here there seems to be no real difference between working out the design details of a piece and rehearsing it for its first performance.

Some composers of music work in much the same way while rehearsals for a first performance are in progress; they make alterations and revisions because they can hear better what can be done with their scores when they are being played. This drives performers to despair and copyists to drink, but it suggests a point of the first importance: it seems now as if composing and rehearsing can be grouped together and called preparation as distinct from performance, which we may call presentation. It seems that preparation and presentation make up a distinction more basic than the familiar one between composition and performance.

In the Recipe Theory, which claims that the performer alone causes a work to exist, we come against a fascinating contemporary problem: electronic music. In electronic music there is no performer and at no time in the preparation of a work is a performer required. If we make a recording of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony and sell it in all the shops, there will have been a performance somewhere along the line. That performance may have been altered and improved out of all recognition by technicians who know how to gratify the sound-crazy customers, but it will have been a sure-enough performance. But in electronic music the usual thing is for the composer to impose his tonal design directly upon the physical means of recording and reproducing the work. There is no chef, there is no cake; we eat the recipe and eat it raw. Composition alone is the preparation, while presentation is just a matter of keeping the machinery in good condition and working a switch.

The Recipe Theory might be triumphant, at least on the surface, except for this example of electronic music, which we really must take seriously. The absence
of a performer does not make non-music of electronic music; it merely shows that yet another kind of worker is technologically obsolete. If we listen at home to a broadcast or a recording of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, there is no significant factor present that is absent if we listen to an electronic composition. We made the performer obsolete long before composers started composing directly into machines, since if all the performers in the world were vaporized the rest of us could still sit at home listening to music on records. Preparation would be over and done with, but some kind of presentation would continue. And if this seems all rather far-fetched, well, it is later than you think.

A final word on electronic music. Professor Gilson, when he says that the performer alone causes the work to exist, cites the painter Eugene Delacroix who, Gilson says, knew some of the greatest musicians of his day. Delacroix asserts that painting is a more difficult art than music because the painter is not only the composer but the performer of a painting; in our words, he prepares and presents it. The task of the musician is easier because the two tasks are shared between composer and performer, according to Delacroix. But the composer of electronic music operates exactly as the painter does in this respect; he is exactly as much a performer as the painter is. This point is overlooked by most of the people who condemn the whole idea of electronic music.

My objection to the Matrix Theory has mostly been this, that there are works which exist without their having been caused to exist by a particular composer or group of composers. Folksongs are examples, and there may be others. My objection to the Recipe Theory is that there are works which exist without a performer, where by "performer" we mean someone without whom the work could not be made present to us.

In the Collaboration Theory, according to which the composer and the performer jointly cause the work to exist, we find that the distinctions between them become blurred. The two elements in our distinction become mutually dissolved, but this is a risk that we accept when we make any kind of mixture.

There are, of course, familiar instances where one and the same person is apparently both composer and performer, where preparation and presentation are one and the same act. This is Collaboration in its most intimate form, if one believes that the word "collaboration" is fitly used in a case where one person performs two distinguishable operations to a single end. I do not. I take "collaboration" to mean two or more persons performing either the same or different operations to a single end. So I want to get rid of the two special points that often arise when we talk about the particular nature of performance art. One of these is the point that some
musicians, dancers, and poets can extemporize in public. The other is that most musicians and nearly all poets can perform their works in their heads by means of silent reading.

Extemporizing is a kind of musical thinking on one's feet, and nearly every musician can "fake" or keep music coming by means of fingers or voice. On the whole this accomplishment is overrated. A good extemporizer achieves coherence by having a fund of formal gimmicks at his disposal, and he drops his thematic material into them as he sees fit. This is not more than a pleasing and impressive parlour trick except in the hands of a very few musicians, and of these few, not many would rest their hopes of immortality upon the quality of such doodlings if they were transcribed and published.

Of silent score-reading I am as suspicious as I am of extemporizing, largely on the evidence of some contemporary scores I might mention, in which it is not credible that the composer could have more than an approximate notion of what actual sound combinations the scores might prescribe. Undoubtedly the silent reading of the score is within the abilities of most musicians; but what is in question is this: of a work I have never before heard, even if I composed it, can I have a mental image if the work is complex and if it is new and original? Music students are taught that they must see with their ears and hear with their eyes. This is fair enough, but the ability to set down in notation what we hear, and to hear what we read in notation, is based entirely upon past tonal-visual associations. A new and original feature in a new score has not yet been heard, and there are no exact tonal-visual associations upon which a composer can base his prediction.

This is to say that we could give a musician the score of some orchestral piece by Joseph Haydn, for example, a piece he could never have heard in his life, and we could rely on him to read the score and hear a performance in his mind's hearing. Or we could ask him to write an andante for strings and woodwinds in the style of Mozart, and he should be able to do so with some assurance that his instruments will actually produce the approximate tonal combinations his little score prescribes.

If the instrumentation is familiar, and if the style and syntax are conventional, then silent score-reading can be done and the mind's ear will hear the piece. But composing at the forefront of an art's mainstream of creative activity is something altogether different. The musician writing an andante in the style of Mozart is merely doing an academic exercise, valuable and attractive as the result may be. But for the art of music, what Mozart did has been done and nobody could do it again or better. Imitating Mozart is something the musician may have been re-
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required to do at some stage in his training. What a composer composes is what nobody has done, what nobody has heard. If the work of a composer is genuinely novel, original, and unique, then in its most significant aspects it has never been heard before. What has not yet been heard by the fleshly ear cannot at all be heard by the mind's ear, since inner hearing arises only by derivation and association from the outer sense. It cannot arise spontaneously.

In almost any piece there is much that is familiar-sounding and lies within the established current creative tradition. The composer may hear all this in his mind while he works, and exercise control over it. He can hear its rhythmic patterns and, at least in sketch, its melodic outlines. But the mind's ear is almost deaf to specific tonal colours and their combinations. The composer's control of these elements of a piece is the result of his hearing sounds made at rehearsal or in performance.

Unfortunately I could not justify my suspicions if a composer assured me that he can hear everything and hear it in detail while he works at composing. I cannot get inside him to check on this. But my suspicions remain, and I will think that such a composer is turning a romantic myth to the advantage of his reputation with the lay public. Other composers will keep silence because he just might have a gift they lack, but which they do not want anybody to know they lack. When a composer hears his work performed for the first time, or even rehearsed, he can conceal his surprise. We do not see his inner ear shaking hands with his outer ear and exclaiming: "So that's what it sounds like!"

My sceptical treatment of extemporizing and silent score-reading is meant to call in question the view that one person, composer or performer, operating in one capacity, is the sole cause of the work's existing. No conclusion on the matter is possible, but the unreliable evidence makes the whole picture unconvincing, with equally bad arguments on both sides, for and against the one-person-one-act theory of art. My own view is that there are two clearly different operations involved in all performance art, and that usually two or more people share in them. In the rare cases where only one artist is in evidence, he in fact works in two different capacities, and in this odd way I suppose he may be said to collaborate with himself.

Our distinction between preparation and presentation should help to make this clearer. When I was discussing the Matrix Theory, I mentioned the example of choreography as an art practised directly upon the flux of the physical medium, where there is no fully worked and recorded design made prior to rehearsal. This is a kind of preparation in which the collaboration between composer and performer is vividly illustrated. On the level of preparation the two elements of the Collabora-
tion Theory are mutually solvent; they are indistinct where they overlap, even though they are clearly different at their extremes, as we shall see. The presentation of a work is unique, final, irreducible. But in the preparation of a work there is a dialectical interchange between composer and performer, where the limits of each function cannot even faintly be traced, even if one person is working as both composer and performer.

Ordinarily, when we think of a performer, we think of that exalted figure whose skills place the work before our senses. What we call a performance we rightly separate in our thoughts from every effort that went into preparing it. A good performance seems altogether spontaneous; it seems to have arisen before our senses out of nowhere. But it came from somewhere all right—from a somewhere in which sustained and intense effort has taken place, and will continue to take place until the same performer presents the same work again. At the moment of presenting a work, of performing it, the performer is alone on the cold Olympian height; his command is absolute, as Stravinsky complains. The performer is as much on his own when he presents the work as the composer is when he initiates and sets forth its basic plan. But between these two solitudes is the whole range of their complicated and elusive collaboration, where at some point the performer takes a hand in the composing and the composer in the performing.

No two presentations of a work are exactly alike, and some of the differences between presentations of a work are deliberate while others are not. They are deliberate when they are the result of decisions made during preparation and applied during presentation. They are not deliberate when they are the result of decisions made in preparation: where these decisions are made, always the performer is working in some degree as composer, or the composer is functioning in some degree as performer, or both. We will bring our thoughts to preparation, keeping in mind that presentation is the aim of all preparation, but that each
presentation is a unit, somehow perceived by us as apart from the process of preparation.

I can think of four different cases which between them seem to include all the possible relationships between composer and performer, as they collaborate in the preparation of a work for presentation.

The first is the case where a composer presents his own work. We have already seen that this seems to threaten the Collaboration Theory. But I am not speaking of the sense where a musician extemporizes or reads a score in silence; I am speaking of the more ordinary sense where a composer mounts the first presentation in public of a new work. He alone will be responsible for the preparation of the work, its rehearsal as well as its design. This will be true if it is a solo sonata, and it will also be true if it is an opera for full orchestra and large cast with himself as conductor. As composer he will set down the work in notation, having in mind his own technical limitations as a performer, and the limitations of all the resources he expects to have at his disposal for the performing of the work. These will include working space for the musicians, the acoustical properties of the hall, and even the budget. The mannerisms of particular players and singers will invade his recollections as he writes. And when he comes to practise or rehearse the work, he will continue to modify and refine it as changes are indicated under rehearsal conditions. As composer he produces a design at which, as performer, he continues to work. There are technical problems of reach, range, and agility which may demand modifications; but there are also internal, structural problems that may become apparent to him only while he is working at the piece in physical sounds. It may be that his habit is to compose at the keyboard, and this is a special case where a kind of rehearsal is carried on even before the first draft is complete. It may be that he composes rapidly and at his desk, with no aural check upon what he is doing, and this is a special case where he draws upon past associations of sounds previously heard, either in rehearsal, in performance, or in casual doodling on an instrument. In his memory, rehearsal of a kind has taken place before he has settled to the task of making his first sketches.

Even if we regard the one person, in this way, as both composer and performer, we see that the two operations overlap; they shift backwards and forwards, and cannot be exactly located within the growth of the work during its preparation.

Then there is the case of a first performance in which the performer is not the composer. But let us suppose that the composer and the performer will actually meet to discuss the piece and the details of its preparation. The performer might see several points where he wants to suggest certain definite changes. He tries them,
and the composer may or may not agree; he might reject them or suggest other possibilities. These in their turn are tried. If the performer initiates a change, then he is composing; he alters the design of the piece, however slightly. And he does this in other ways than proposing re-arrangements of notes. All indications of loud and soft are relative, as are matters of balance and inflection in music; the composer has only a tentative and imperfect control over them. In all decisions concerning such subtle matters, the composing and performing functions are clearly intermixed, whether we think of the composer's point of view or of the performer's.

In our illustration, the performer might say: "This way?" and try a short passage on his instrument or his voice. The composer might then say: "No, this way!" and put forward, in physical sound, what he intended or what he suggests. Who is now the composer and who the performer?

Another case is the situation that might arise if a newly discovered piece is being prepared for its first performance. The composer's identity is unknown because he is dead or otherwise unavoidably detained. Here the performer functions as proxy for the composer; he makes adjustments and alterations in text and in those less tangible features that identify the performer's relationship to the piece, such as inflection and dynamics. But he assumes this responsibility all on his own, continuing the supervisory work of the composer along the line of growth of the piece in preparation, until in the final stages he works almost not at all as composer and almost entirely as performer.

It must be plain that I identify the composer's task with the design of the work and the performer's with the doing of it. But these two tasks, designing and doing, are both open-ended in the case of performance art. That is to say, we know where one begins, and we know where the other ends: a composer's work begins with designing and a performer's work ends with doing. Where the composer's work ends and where the performer's work begins—these are variable, and perhaps infinitely variable, even if we are thinking of just one particular piece to be performed. Somewhere in the course of preparation the task of designing passes into the doer's hands, even if to a small degree; at some stage the designer has to do some doing—he has to work in actual sounds, likewise perhaps only to a small degree.

Finally there is the ordinary case where a performer adds a piece, new or old, to his repertoire. From not being able to play it he works at it until he can play it, and this is his preparation. He may or may not talk with the composer. He may or may not listen to other presentations of the piece, or other pieces by the same composer. If he does either, then the decisions he makes in preparing the work will no doubt be influenced. But unless he makes himself a proxy for the composer,
adapting the design of the piece to his practical skills and his practical skills to the piece, the presentation will appear like something preserved in a glass case. It will make of the work a bit of sterile authenticity for the adoration of fantastic adherents to a cult, people who want to make museum art of what they call the “real” Bach, the “real” Stravinsky.

Here we can notice a difference between two basic attitudes many people have towards the art of performance. On the one side there is execution and on the other interpretation. The performer who merely executes a work often embalms it as well. The performer who interprets the work shares in the composer’s task, and this is why in a really arresting performance the work seems to have been created out of nothing by the performer, even if it is only an old chestnut like the Moonlight Sonata. The interpreter, while he presents the work, seems to be hearing it himself for the first time. This happy state of things requires that he should have given the work lavish care in preparation, because this seeming spontaneity can grow only out of diligent conscious effort.

To put it bluntly, the performer not only can but should speak of “his fifth or his seventh,” and even of “his” Beethoven. If he has not made the work noticeably his own, then who needs him? In social matters we are ruled by discretion and judgment refined through experience, and the same is true in artistic matters. The performing artist ought not to overwhelm and devour “his” Beethoven, but must treat him with consideration and respect. After all, the composer is the cause without which there would be no piece to be presented or prepared. But the performer is the cause without which the piece would not be presented in the physical sound which is its essence and its destiny. This is no small claim for the performer.

With practice and careful thought the performer prepares the work; he builds up “his” performance, and continues to work at building between successive presentations of it. Paderewski said that he learned his pieces on the concert platform, and we know what he meant by this: not that he made his very first stumbling efforts at sight-reading the piece in public, but that from each presentation he went on with further preparation in the light of the experience he had of the piece while presenting it. “His” Moonlight Sonata was never exactly the same in two performances, and of two performances neither could have been said to be more Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata than the other, or even more Paderewski’s. Where the variants were the results of deliberate choices thought out in preparation, here Paderewski can be said to have worked at the composer’s task and continued the composer’s activity. The performer is, in this limited sense, creative and not merely re-creative in his relation to the piece.
This completes my argument for a Collaboration Theory of the relation between composer and performer, and I think that in its main features it works with all the performance arts. In setting it forth I have deliberately skirted a number of issues, issues that philosophers might think much more respectable than these practical matters of designing and doing in art. The analogy with which I am now going to conclude is meant to hint at an approach to those respectable issues, and perhaps also to clarify the foregoing.

In a number of significant ways a composer is like an original thinker who formulates a hypothesis or a doctrine. The performer is like a commentator or teacher who expounds it. I will use the word "doctrine" in no precise sense, and will suggest that a piece of music exists in the same way that a particular doctrine exists; and that the original thinker and the expositor of a doctrine are joint causes of the doctrine's existence, just as the composer and the performer are joint causes of the existence of a piece of music. We have already argued that a piece of music cannot exist merely as an idea in somebody's mind, nor can it exist as the physical score on which its notation is recorded. In the same way a doctrine is not merely an idea tucked away in somebody's mind, nor is it the paper upon which it is written or printed. The Moonlight Sonata, poor thing, exists. But in what way can its existence be compared with the existence of a doctrine?

The Moonlight Sonata's existence is not like that of Plato's Republic. Nor is it like that of Plato's whole doctrine of Ideas. But in Book X of the Republic there is a specific treatment of the doctrine of Ideas, and I think that the Moonlight Sonata exists in the way this specific treatment exists. In a biographical way of speaking, the original outline of each was the product of a specific act of mind and hand.

Nobody can say with assurance what manner of existence this might be that a piece of music shares with a particular statement of doctrine. In my own view, all music is a form of discourse about a real world that exists and is such that music is the kind of discourse proper to it. One can reject this idea. One can even deny that any discourse is in any way "about" any real world. Yet I think we can agree to disagree on remote presuppositions and at the same time allow that the performer of a piece and the expositor of a doctrine work in similar ways.

At first one might think that the Matrix Theory applies in the case of expounding a doctrine, and not the Collaboration Theory. The original thinker made the doctrine and there was an end to the making; the doctrine is a Matrix and the expositor gives only his impression of it, more or less faithfully.

But when we expound a doctrine, we work on it just as a performer does...
who works on the design of a composition. This is true whether we are expounding an abstract proposition, a natural law, or a practical technique. If we merely repeat the words of the original, or casually paraphrase them, we do better to send our listeners to the original passage of the original thinker. In expounding a doctrine we try it in various contexts, some of which will not have occurred to the original thinker. We illustrate the doctrine with examples of our own contriving. While we are reading the original passage and contemplating it, we make various decisions and revisions directed towards the moment when we shall present it.

If the thinker is among us we might go to him and develop the doctrine dialectically with him, just as a performer might with a composer. The original thinker might even delight us by remarking that we have expounded his doctrine more clearly than he had originally been able to set it forth, or that we have uncovered implications of which he was unaware.

If the expositor does not actively take part in the creative preparation of a doctrine, then his presentation has no place in the pedagogical scheme of things that is not better filled by the book itself. The original thinker has already acted to some degree as his own expositor in the selecting and arranging of language for uttering his doctrine in the first place. On the level of preparation, the thinker and the expositor have overlapping tasks. On the level of presentation, the expositor should frankly put before us "his" Plato, "his" Newton. If the expositor as "performer" has not made the doctrine his own, then we do not need him.

NOTES
3. This is not Stravinsky's view. See Poetics of Music, p. 125.
5. Ibid., p. 60.