

# MUSIC LESSONS WHAT THE PHILOSOPHY OF MUSIC CAN TEACH US ABOUT NOMINALISM

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## Abstract

This paper addresses the problem of the identity of musical works and defends the view that these can rightly be understood as independent from performances of them against both Goodman's nominalist view of musical works and several claims, fashionable among contemporary musicology, to the effect that such an independence is either a conceptual mistake, or legitimate only when applied to post-classical musical contexts.

## Keywords

Aesthetics, Philosophy of Music, ontology of art, musical works and performances.

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Until fairly recently, aesthetics has been regarded as a lesser area within the analytic tradition, surely as a consequence of the prevalence of the logical-positivistic, sceptic view, even outside its hard core representatives, that beauty, art or taste were not susceptible of serious philosophical analysis, or, more bluntly, that aesthetic statements were simply pseudo-propositions, devoid of cognitive meaning. People like me owe it to a very few people, and especially to Nelson Goodman, who, with his impeccable analytic credentials in other fields, published in 1968 his by now classic *Languages of Art*, a right, to put it in Peter Kivy's humorous but very realistic formulation in an essay published as a tribute to his memory, the right not to blush when we tell a philosophy colleague, "I do aesthetics". Interestingly, we also owe it to people like Kivy the more recent right to the recognition of such a thing as the philosophy of music (actually, one of the most flowering areas of the philosophy of art at the present time).

As was the case with Kivy, although he was about to write on a subject outside the philosophy of music, I mention this as a foreword to the task that usually better expresses a philosopher's respect and admiration for another, which is, as you all know, the task of criticising one of his views.

In this paper I would like to show how the contemporary philosophical debate about the nature of musical works can help dissipate some notions that are sometimes taken for granted or

obvious in general discussion about music. These are Goodman's view of what a musical work is, and what I will call, for lack of a better expression, the historico-musicological view, associated with Post-Modernism and the New Musicology movement, of music in general (not necessarily of musical *works* as such, since, as I will make clear, the questioning of the very concept of a musical work plays a major role in this bulk of views and theories).

I shall start by stating Goodman's definition of a work of music, pointing out its nominalist inspiration, and presenting a number of arguments showing its shortcomings and conflicts with the current understanding of what a musical work is, by specialists and non-specialists alike.

In the second part, I will try to clarify the tenets of the culturally influential cluster of views I called historico-musicological, and to show an unexpected alliance with nominalism, mainly in sharing the belief that works are (roughly) their score and directly depend, for their existence, on actual or foreseeable performance, and can be said to have a kind of subsidiary existence outside the production of the required sounds, but can only have the status of an heuristic to help us talk about very general features of the music. I will criticise this view and try to show the inanity of the kind of historical-musicological examples given in support of the tenet that only performances "really" exist, mostly involving the indeterminacy of older musical notations.

My main conclusion will therefore be that musical works (by roughly the same reasons as other artworks such as plays and other human products such as game rules, blueprints and criminal procedure codes) can be shown to undermine any strict nominalist ontology.

An important *caveat* must be introduced from the start. Throughout this paper, and in consonance with the authors and views I will address, I shall circumscribe the kind of music under discussion to the so-called western classic tradition, from the Middle-Ages (so far as some kind of musical notation has survived) until now. I hope this will be understood as the selecting of a type of music that more suitably raises the specific philosophical issues to be discussed, and not as a stylistic point about the higher value of such music (a view, however, I do not pretend to decline).

I

In *Languages of Art*, Goodman, talking of course of music within a narrower tradition of relatively sophisticated notation (that would be, from Baroque on), proposes we identify a musical work with the class of performances compliant with the score of that work. Thus, Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* would be, not any idea or set of ideas in the minds of Wagner or anybody else who knows or has heard the opera (the view put forward by idealists such as Croce and Collingwood), nor any platonic universal consisting in the sequence of elements selected by the composer from the eternal realm of musical (logical) possibilities and made public through the writing of a set of instructions for its performance – the score – (a view held by platonists of various kinds, like Jerrold Levinson and Peter Kivy) but, very simply, all correct performances of *Tristan* put together, and nothing else. So, we get a nominalist account of the nature of musical works, that states that these are, after all, groups of perfectly respectable spatial-temporal objects, namely, the various physical sound occurrences that happen according to the composer's instructions for a performance of his work to take place.

It's true that Goodman uses the expression "class of" in this definition, but, as is known, for him this is a concept that doesn't involve any commitment with realism, since he believes the term "class" to be a roundabout way to talk about the empirical fact that some things, from cats to performances of *Tristan*, are similar to each other. Some doubts about the strategy of explaining away the concept of class by means of a reduction to the concept of similarity will emerge when I present Richard Wollheim's criticism to the definition.

I shall ignore the most notorious consequence of Goodman's definition, which is the demand it imposes on a performance in order for it to be compliant with the score, which is nothing less

than perfect note-by-note rendition of it by the performer. The counter-intuitive shock-effect of admitting that almost all performances of all works aren't, strictly speaking, performances of them at all due to a few wrong notes or rhythms (or even a single one) has to face the strong theoretical defence Goodman puts up in the form of a sound slippery slope argument.

On the other hand, I would like to make a very brief preliminary point regarding a hint of ambiguity about the formulation of Goodman's definition as to whether or not it is meant to include all *possible* performances of the work. I will only point out that, while an affirmative answer would seem to be most convenient, since it would take out much of the sting from a group of counter-arguments to the definition that I will present right away, the fact is that neither the letter of it, that doesn't mention any possibility clauses, nor, more importantly, the spirit of the whole of Goodman's ontological stand seems to back up this admission of *possibilia* (performances to be, that would also count as part of an existing, actual musical work). This would generate, at least as far as I can see, an unwanted drift away from the strict nominalism that appears to be Goodman's. Anyway, since I intend to discuss this kind of strong nominalist view of works, and also am no friend to an intentional fallacy in the interpretation of philosophers' writings, I shall abide to the literal reading of the definition.

Moving on to the counter-arguments proper, we will notice they are mostly of the *reductio* kind. The first group concerns the impediments that Goodman's definition would cause on consensually true predications about works of music, such as "was first drafted in 1832 in Wiesbaden" or "remains one of the most performed works in the symphonic repertoire", or "has never been performed", which would imply, respectively, that a class of (at least some actual) performances of a work could be created at a certain time and place, contemporarily with the work itself, that the work (a class) would be getting bigger as time went by, and even, that all works that have never been performed simply don't exist.

But surely, the fact that Wagner finished *Tristan und Isolde* in 1859 cannot mean (fortunately) that the class of all its performances was finished by that time. And the preference of public and pianists for Chopin's G minor Ballade does cause the work to be very frequently heard in concert halls and recordings, but it certainly doesn't affect the size of his op. 23. Similarly, it would be extremely odd if the fact that I have just finished my latest part-song, and eagerly await its first performance should entail the non-existence of my composition. Indeed, taken literally, the definition would cause the trivially true statement "many works of music never got to be performed" to be a contradiction, and the traditional complaints from composers of all times about this very truth in respect to their own efforts, to be regarded as nonsense. A somewhat amusing and related consequence, pointed out by several critics of the theory, is that all unperformed works from all times or places would turn out to be one and the same work, since they would all exemplify the very same class, namely, the null class.

An other objection affects even the rejected "possible performances" interpretation, and is based on actual cases: sometimes we know about the past existence of works, which, due to the definitive loss or destruction of their scores, will never be able to be performed. In this case, there are problems even about *possible* performances of such works. Further, it may be, at least in principle, that a composer writes an extremely expressive work, but that it makes such superhuman demands on performers in terms of technique and orchestral coordination, p.ex., that it will happen that it *never* actually receives a single performance that bears the attribute of being expressive, but only, as the fruit of the hardest labour from the best musicians, a few, very rare, acceptably note-correct renditions. A contradiction is generated if we follow the definition, since it was our premise that the work *is* expressive, but, owing to practical contingencies, none of its performances is, and perhaps even can ever be.

In general, I propose, we can say the principle of substitution *salva veritate* would not be observed, in such simple cases as "Mozart is the author of *Don Giovanni*", where substitution of the

name that denotes the work by the Goodmanian equivalent phrase (the class of...) would involve ignoring the efforts of the thousands of singers, players, directors and staff responsible for the multiple performances of the opera since the eighteenth century in favour of Wolfgang himself. Also, as far as I can see, a move to the claim that contexts like this are referentially opaque, and thus an exception to the principle of substitution, would be unfounded.

Another argument, presented by Nicholas Wolterstorff, draws on Leibniz's Law to focus on the natural, sometimes huge dissimilarities between performances of the same work: two different things (performances) cannot be identical with a third (the work); therefore, the work cannot be identical to the class of its contrasting performances. This objection can seem somewhat unfair in ignoring the intuition that what is being asked of performances is not strict identity with the score (the exact nature of such an identity would even be probably hard to imagine), but compliance with it, which is compatible with various dissimilarities between performances in aspects where the score isn't determinative. But, first, these differences can and usually do exceed the narrow limits of the composer's expressed intentions, and, more importantly, the fact is that the theory identifies the work with the class *made up* ("concretely") of all those performances, not as an universal or type that can be instantiated *but not identified with* particular divergent performances (that being the exactly opposite, platonic, view on the subject). As such, I would say that the gist of the objection stands.

A final line of criticism, followed by Richard Wollheim, for example, focuses on problems of individuation, in particular, the criterion under which a given set of performances can be said to be of a particular work. If we ask what makes the several performances of *Tristan und Isolde*, performances of *that* work, the intuitive answer will surely be that there should be something which every one of them stands in a certain relation to. Well, this answer is made unavailable if you identify the opera (or should I say, musical drama) with its performances: nothing else exists, in fact, besides these (that's the spirit of Goodman's nominalist proposal). So, we will have to appeal to the resemblance between them as the criterion that fixes all of them as performances of *Tristan*. But this criterion has to be confronted with the empirical fact that those performances differ from each other. The only ways out seem to be the following two:

1) To say that the similarity called upon is restricted to a certain set of relevant parameters; this is clearly circular, since it presupposes we can identify from the start which parameters of the performances will be relevant, in which case resemblance isn't the real criterion, and we are instead appealing to a previous, independent idea of what constitutes the work to be performed (common understanding would say, the score).

2) To claim that the different performances of the opera have more features in common between them than when compared with any other musical performance. This apparent way out allows us to tell that those performances are *not*, p.ex., performances of *Die Walküre*. The problem is that, if the amount of similarities should really settle the matter, then, since there will surely be subsets of the set of all performances of *Tristan* that show a greater amount of similarity between them, as opposed to other subsets, there is nothing to stop us from identifying each one of these numerous subsets with performances of actually different works, however connected by a lesser amount of similarities (perhaps *Tristan 1*, *Tristan 2*, etc., or maybe *Tristan as interpreted and performed in this way*, etc.).

So, this is where, as I said earlier, Goodman's strategy of explaining away classes via the concept of resemblance proves either circular or inadequate, besides being counter-intuitive as regards the common explanation of the relation between performances and the works they are of, which seems to be possible only by reference to a previously, independently existent work, capable of being repeatedly performed at different times and places and in various ways. This is what Wollheim meant when writing at exactly the same time as Goodman in *Art and its Objects* (and moving on to Richard Strauss):

“To say that [...] certain performances [...] are of *Rosenkavalier* because they resemble one another seems precisely to reverse the natural order of thought: the resemblance, we would think, follows from, or is to be understood in terms of, the fact that they are of the same[...]opera”. (p.10)

## II

This part of my paper tries to bring together a set of views on the ontology of musical works common among scholars working at the intersection of musicology, the psychology of music and philosophical aesthetics, and to focus on a general claim, which can be loosely associated, as far as the more specifically philosophical approach is concerned, with the work of Lydia Goehr (although I should not want to attribute to her the whole of the somewhat synthesized position I want to discuss), the claim being about the structural contingency of the very concept of a work of music, which would be a historical-sociological phenomenon that came into being at the start of the nineteenth century (mainly with the ideology connected with “Beethoven, the creative genius”). Along these lines, an attack is mounted on the allegedly ahistorical and formalist point of view of analytic ontology, and on the whole discussion of the concept of musical work, which wouldn’t historically apply to the productions of composers working before the Romantic paradigm. These didn’t think of themselves, we are told, as composing musical works at all, in the sense of something whose integrity, instrumentation or even authorship should be eagerly observed. Rather, they composed on commission, under a patron, for specific occasions, didn’t expect the fruits of their labour to last very long in the repertoire (that is, didn’t work for posterity, like Beethoven), were quite comfortable with almost any change, cut and arrangement of all or part of their compositions to fit practical, financial or any sort of strictures to their being performed at all - although we could ask, if this was so, what on earth was really being performed. But that is exactly the point: there were *no* works, and that is what explains the flexibility of the artists and the performers attitude towards the pieces.

Furthermore, this view seems to be strengthened by conclusions, on the part of musicologists sympathetic to Goehr, regarding early music, especially music from the Middle Ages and on the first steps of musical notation. Examples from this period are used to show that a work concept involving a text fixed for all times by the composer, as opposed to that of improvised music, simply didn’t make sense, and so, no piece of notated music could be said to be neither a musical work nor pure improvisation. Both these are just anachronistic conceptual impositions on such music.

At this point you will probably be wondering what all this, which is actually part the hard facts of musical life before the nineteenth century, and part theoretical conclusion of a musicological sort about those facts has to do with nominalism. Well, the truth is that this historical-musicological position stretches the point far beyond the Beethoven frontier, and supporters of the New Musicology movement, often hostile to the analytic method in favour of historical, deconstructionist approaches, have for some time now questioned that talk of musical works as entities independent from performance, makes any sense.

The grounds for this generalization of the critique of the work-concept have to do with views that question the legitimacy of judging performances faithfulness to the score, due to the insurmountable distance between it, necessarily incomplete in various parameters, and the real intentions of their composers, pointing out cases in which sought, till their deaths, to change or improve certain works, often going to extreme modifications, so that it isn’t possible to conclude that one of the steps ever got to be *the work*. Also, given the lack of solid criteria, besides interpretation, to distinguish, in a score, what is essential to the work and what is contingent, they conclude that the text, even putting aside all cases where it comes to us in different, frequently contradictory versions, does not define the work. Another claim is that the “work” is transformed, in its

own identity, by the historically changing performance practices and social attitudes towards them, its only mode of existence consisting in its present reconstructions (if any), either sonic or just ideological (usually, both).

Thus, for them, as I said, talk of musical works is just a heuristic to be used for convenience, but that doesn't correspond to anything existing in any strong sense. It is music that really exists, but musical works are not a part of that entity as to be put on a par with performances and improvisation, that is, real music-making. I expect it will now be clearer that such a view can be understood as a nominalist denial of the abstract existence of musical works.

I shall now try to show that the general claim need not lead us neither into nominalism, nor to giving up philosophical inquiry about the nature of musical works as independent from its performance. That will be done by first addressing the medieval example intended to establish the claim for music before 1800, and then these last arguments supporting the generalization of the claim.

Let's get some substance into the arguments from the dawn of notated music. The fact is that a piece from that period, for instance, a *trope* or an *organum*, would be notated by its author following a very incipient method that didn't really fix the pitches of the music (sometimes, just their relative pitch), and would most often include cues about, p. ex. which item of plainsong should be inserted at a certain place. Many times, these were supposed to be heavily ornamented, so that what we get, the proponent of the view says, is a mixture of several different ways of music making that produced what people sang, played and listened to for centuries, that couldn't be conceptually more different from the typical note-by-note performance of a Brahms symphony today.

Now, to the reply. To my mind, this is a radical and unwarranted philosophical extrapolation from difficulties that are congenial to every historical inquiry about cultural practices that are different from our own. As Kivy says, in every musico-historical context, there have to be criteria, more or less flexible, but intelligible, that allow people to decide if a musician does or not succeed in trying to sing *the same song*, at a time after its original occurrence. And this means we are in the presence of what he calls a work-performance proto-ontology, or "the repetition of the repeatable", however small or arbitrary this repeatable minimum in a piece of music may seem to us (I shall pass by talk about necessary conditions *stricto sensu*). It seems only natural to recognize such minima in every musical culture, even more since the appearance of musical notation.

The natural objection would be that differences between performances of works in the full-blown, Romantic sense, though real, are so small when compared to those between performances of notated medieval tropes or *organa*, heavily reliant on the performer's "reconstructive memory" of what isn't notated, and on his habits of improvisation, embellishment, etc. allied to a notational system whose functioning is so foreign to the one we are accustomed to, that our concepts of the work and what counts as a performance of it become inadequate. The fact would be that, even backed-up the corresponding oral tradition, such notation under-determines performances to a point that compromises any possibility of a performance in our note-by-note sense.

This objection fails through the same mistake it claims to detect in the view that our identificational minimum applies to all musical cultures: the imposition of modern categories to music from other times. It is false that early notations under-determine, in the strong, non trivial sense, performances of the compositions they notate. What we must understand is what *those cultures* considered as determinative, performable and able to be notated. In fact, a notation, *jointly* with the accepted conventions for the performance of *what they notate* fulfil the conditions for a work-performance ontology. If the differences between possible ways to perform a trope sound to us so great that it seem unlikely, or arbitrary, to say they are *of that very same trope*, that is only due to our musical habits, nurtured in a different set of conventions. To medieval musicians, they would surely count as performances of the same piece, meaning by this what they meant, just like performances of the Liszt Sonata by Arrau and by Pollini are to us of the very same sonata.

The mere distinction between correct and incorrect performances, or, what amounts to the same, performances that clearly are of the same *organum* and those that are not, means that the notation of a period, along with the conventions mentioned, are fulfilling the conditions for the determination of performance that pertain to *that* period, and therefore, the presence of the work concept. What is determined may be very little to us, but musical works are of many types, some of them very thin in properties, to use Stephen Davies' phrase (just think of sparseness of the conditions for something to count as some kind of performance of *La Bamba*, *Silent Night* or *Happy Birthday*). Even if we turn to music of purely oral transmission, such as folk music, or, more to the point, the music of the troubadour period, we can still talk about works in this manner: even the *avant-garde* minstrel knows when he is singing an extravagant *version of song A*, and when he comes up with something new by using features of songs B, C and D, while at the dinner table the troubadour that "originally" composed *the song A* bites his teeth as he compares in his mind A with what the minstrel is perpetrating before him.

The arguments for generalizing the claim to the thesis that neither were there musical works prior to 1800, nor were there ever is understandably easier to refute. In fact, it is surprising, from a philosophical point of view, that its many variants have gathered such a widespread support from musicological quarters.

To the alleged incompleteness of the musical texts as laid down in the form of scores, the answer is the same as the one just given to the alleged incompleteness of primitive notations. Davies points out that musicologists, of all people, should be weary of confusing the natural indefiniteness of scores, as regards tempo, articulation or figured bass, which nevertheless fully determine a specific work, and the incompleteness of a score, which can be said to happen in a proper sense only in such cases as those where it fails to determine at least one constitutive feature of the work (such as a Mass by Josquin in which the alto part were missing).

As to the impossibility of telling the essential/constitutive from the contingent, it seems rather that's exactly the task of musicology, daily performed by taking editorial and interpretative decisions in the publishing of scores about which doubts exist, based on good scholarship and, inevitably, inductive reasoning. This shouldn't be used to question the very concept of musical work, examples of which are able to be performed around the world thanks to those efforts.

This leads us to the problem of different versions of the same work approved (or in doubt) by the composer, and to the idea of a musical work as never really being finished. To this last claim, we can only say that if the composer intended a work of his to be performed in a specific version, his previous hesitations or afterthoughts on what is publicly held to be the work are not very irrelevant. And, if there isn't any kind of sanction on his behalf as to which version should be performed, then, depending on the level of differences between them, we could as easily defend, like the authors under discussion seem to prefer, that there is no musical work at all, as that there are several, or just that there are various versions of the same work. Of course the preferred first is the one which most obviously clashes with the reality of the theoretical and practical attitudes of the musical world, that always treats the case in the latter manner. In these cases where, despite all the best efforts of scholars, ambiguity prevails as to what features the composer (or the conventions of his musical culture) would determine as constitutive, we always have the option, which is again the practice of the musical world in analysis, performance or recording, simply to index the performance to the relevant version of the work.

Finally, the thesis of the transformation of the work by its future history, and thus, by its present performances or ideologies about it has a sensible side to it, and a not so sensible one. The first has to do with the consequences that beliefs, attitudes and practices about the work after its composition can have on its context-dependent features, like "being taken by the early romantics as a model of successful handling of symphonic form", usually called *artistic* in contrast with other, *aesthetic*, features (such as expressing sadness or being unduly prolix). The truth of

this does not, however, endanger the identity of musical works across time, just like admitting that the passage of time can affect such properties of, and attitudes towards, works of painting or architecture represents no peril to the identity of oils and cathedrals.

The second side of the thesis is not correct, since it claims there is a causal interaction from performance to work. In order for this to be possible, a criterion would have to be available for the identification of performances independent from the one used to distinguish works (namely, the ones to be supposedly affected by specific performances), on risk of circularity, since, according to the view, performances change works in features that are not secondary. But this, as you may remember, brings us back to the problems of appealing to criteria independent from the work, in particular, to the most likely candidate, the resemblance between performances that would tell us of which work they are supposed to be ( and to the consequent “reversal of the natural order of thought” criticised by Wollheim in the quotation ending my critique of Goodman’s definition of musical work).

The historico-musicological view’s insistence on the reality of performances as opposed to the unreality (the heuristic function) of the abstract musical work, that sometimes leads its proponents to implicit nominalism and some counter-intuitive extremes as far as common musical thought and practice are concerned, seems to me to be motivated by a confusion between ‘work of music’ and ‘music’ that may derive from the illusion of an incompatibility between an ontology of objects (to include possibly abstract ones - works) and an ontology of events (performances). That may be the problem lying behind the apparently harmless statement that only music ‘really’ exists, not works. I suggest, there are more things in the realm of music than are dreamt of in this philosophy.

Besides pointing out the inadequacy of Goodman’s proposal, I hope to have cast some doubts about concepts that often pass for common-sense in thinking about music, and also to call the listener’s attention to the philosophy of music, a flowering field in contemporary aesthetics, by showing it to have a perhaps unexpected but interesting bearing on a major metaphysical theme.

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