

## Rethinking Music Critique

*At the age of 76, Florence Foster Jenkins finally yielded to public demand and performed at Carnegie Hall on October 25, 1944. So anticipated was the performance that tickets for the event sold out weeks in advance. Jenkins died a month later, seemingly also because of the destroying critique.*

### 27.1 Boiling Down Infinity

We have learned in previous chapters that performance conveys a doubly infinite message: the infinity of interpretative perspectives as they are realized in music analysis, gesturality, and emotive expressivity, and the variety of performative shaping expressed in the infinitesimal vocabulary of performance fields.

Critics are very probably not aware of such a variety of backgrounds that may produce concrete performances. In particular with respect to (analytical) interpretation, they preferredly stick to the traditional canon of how the structure of a composition should be viewed and interpreted or analyzed. Of course, it is not clear whether music critics should be cognizant of possibly new interpretations, but once they have gone into their business, a creative dealing with analytical problems should be mandatory.

One may understand that this is not necessary *ante rem*, but after the event, a re-reading of the text should be considered, be it only for comparative handling of the present performance: Could it be that the artist discovered a new interpretation of the given text? In practice, the selection of an analytical interpretation (in the best case, auto-incompetent critics excluded...) is just a matter of limitations of time, energy, and interest, besides ignorance of the infinite variety of interpretations.

As to the infinity of performance nuances, this is beyond the vocabulary of music critics and it is also beyond the present measurement technology for such data: In a common concert, no performance field reconstruction is feasible. So critics are *nolens volens* limited to describing performance by use of common language expressions (“elegant diminuendo blended by a mysterious pedaling cloud...”), which beyond their imprecision cannot relate rhetorical expression to semiotic expression.

So is feuilletonism inevitable? Or rather: Is such a bad feuilletonism inevitable? Is it necessary to play the game of a unique “best” performance whose expression has to move along unreflected paths of prejudices? The alternative would be to embed one’s judgment in the potential infinity of analytical interpretation and expressive performance. And to keep this embedding omnipresent in the critical discourse. We argue that the most precious role of a music critic would be that of putting the infinity of perspectives of a musical work into evidence in every concert or CD review. These would be the crucial points:

- Infinity of analytical interpretations,
- infinity of expressive performances,
- infinity of correlations between expressive rationales and expressive rhetorics (shaping of the performance field and other stemmatic details).

Our discourse is not about bad or good quality in these specifications, in essence, the only quality is to teach us something about the work in question and about the relativity of each perspective. Suggesting a boiled-down finitistic or even unicornd view of art is a destructive reduction and hinders every understanding or progress in the arts.

## 27.2 Glenn Gould’s Politically Incorrect Performance

Glenn Gould’s performance of classical works from Bach to Webern is a testbed for a valid music critique. His also technically spectacular performances have evoked strong reactions that unveil a number of deficiencies in common critique styles.

Whereas Gould’s Bach performances may be non-conformist but still acceptable and adequate for Bach’s compositions, his performances of Beethoven’s sonatas are beyond the supportable deviation from common taste. The famous critic Joachim Kaiser has described in [58] the most famous “mis-performance” of a Beethoven sonata on the example of Gould’s presentation of op.57 *Appassionata*, hear example ♪ 1:

*Bei Goulds Wiedergabe des allegro assai dürfte es sich um die verrückteste, eigensinnigste Darstellung handeln, die jemals ein Pianist einem Bethoven-Satz hat angedeihen lassen; und das will etwas heißen. Gould hält es für richtig, demonstrativ langweilig und gelangweit den*

*Kopfsatz so zu bieten, als ob ein Beethoven-Verächter seinen Plattenspieler nur mit halber Geschwindigkeit ablaufen ließe. Tranig langsam, langweilig und gelangweilt, die Triller während des pp im Schnecken-tempo, während der Fortissimo-Stellen etwas rascher, quält sich die Musik vorbei. Man meint, der Pianist imitiere ein Kind, das mit erfrorenen Fingern die Appassionata vom Blatt spiele. Nur selten vergißt er dabei, daß er ja vergessen machen wollte, der genialische Glenn Gould zu sein.*

This critique is strongly based upon the commonly accepted reading of the Beethoven text as a passionate message that calls for temperament and stormy dynamics in performance, and not for analytical cool vivisection of such a vital piece of literature. In Kaiser's characterization, Gould's production is like a "child with frozen fingers in a sight-reading performance." Here, the different and aberrant performance is incorrect, even forbidden. It is a norm that the politically incorrect Gould violated and thus made the sonata ridiculous; Kaiser even comments that the sonata "remains silent" when confronted with such a misreading.

The basic hypothesis behind such an outrageous indignation is that Kaiser knows what and when and how the sonata (which is personalized here) would have communicated, and that crazy Gould just destroyed that known and accepted message. Kaiser invokes an installed performance grammar, which requires a passionate forte seventh degree cascade towards the piano on the dominant in measures 14-16 of allegro assai. Instead, Gould descends like a noble, bored lady and snobbishly sits down on the boring dominant fermata. No passion whatsoever.

The same, even more ridiculous deformation can be observed in Gould's performance of sonata op.106, *Hammerklavier*, see example ♪ 27. This case is even worse because one just thinks that Gould did not understand a single word of the text, that he simply was too ignorant for the performance task.

What happened? And why is Gould's Bach so much more successful? Evidently, Gould's microscopic performance method works for Bach, but not for Beethoven. Why does this microscopic view fascinate and illuminate Bach's work whereas it virtually kills Beethoven's sonatas? The point is that in Beethoven's work, there is an inbuilt performance grammar that is not engraved in the score but stems from the performance tradition as such—an oral tradition so to speak, an element of rhetorical communication that transcends written code. Instead, Gould reads the same code from the Bach and from the Beethoven scores and effectively demonstrates that there is a huge defect in Beethoven's written code; it is quite trivial, at least locally, and the written script is simply boring.

Gould has effectively given a quasi-mathematical demonstration that the same performance strategy cannot be applied to Bach and to Beethoven. The same analytical insight and the same rhetorical shaping yield completely dif-

ferent results for these composers. To me, this is a sensational lesson to teach a characteristic difference between Bach and Beethoven.

This is very clear in the descending seventh passage on measure 14, which runs on semiquavers after a triggering triplet of quavers at the end of measure 13. Gould effectively takes the double temporal rate of the semiquavers with respect to the quaver triplet, without any tempo increase, without any dynamic profiling, just letting us see the anatomy of this triadic descent structure. The common reading [139] of this passage is that of an explosion:

*Die Explosion (a tempo, Auftakt zu T.14) erfolgt im niedersausenden Dominant-Arpeggio und f-Sextakkord (T.15), wird aber sogleich abgedämpft durch einen C-Dur-Sextakkord, p, T.16.*

With Gould, there is no explosion, just the written text, cleanly played but antagonistic to any such musical drama of which an explosion would testify. The common reading classifies this sonata as a musical drama and asks interpreters to integrate this semantic into their performance. Gould plays the *Appassionata* minus the commonly implied drama. The question here is whether this dramatic character is implicit in the score structure or whether it is an external determinant that has been added by historical standards—which Gould filters away to lay bare what he believes is a poor structural essence [45].

Let us therefore analyze the specific performative shape of the passage in question. To begin, its agogics is profiled against the temporal neighborhood, i.e., not only is the indication “a tempo” valid from the last three quavers of measure 13, but in measure 14, the resumed tempo is again increased. The dramatic performance contains an increase of tempo, and within that level, also an increase of tempo toward the middle of the descent. Further, the dynamics is not only the *forte* at the end of measure 13, but the target tones of each descending intervallic movement of the descent are played louder, maybe to a *ff* or *sf*. As a whole, this descent (with its added ascending tail in measure 15) is not simply a musical structure, but more an explosive *gesture* whose very beginning goes to the top pitch, falls down, and bounces back to the dominant fermata. This is not a written rationale, but it is a semantic unit that can easily be deduced if gestural semantics is to be included in the performance shaping. It has become evident from recent research that gesture is crucial to the understanding of Beethoven’s compositions, see [47] and [93].

So Gould’s experiment would demonstrate that Beethoven requires gestural rationales beyond analytical ones. Meaning that Beethoven’s compositions have a performative added value of gestural nature that is far from dominant in Bach’s architectural music. Observe, however, that this gestural character is not on the level of the interpreter’s gestures, but it is a rationale in the performance grammar, a semiotic layer that is added to the score system. Summarizing, Gould’s politically incorrect performance withdraws from the common dramatizing approach and gives us a unique insight about Beethoven. This does not however imply that Bach has no gestural subtext, but if it had one, then it would be a completely different one, more like a puppet’s gesture—

the puppet being Glenn Gould—when being manipulated by God, the supreme puppeteer, if I am allowed to draw a very theatrical image.