

Weblogmusic: Taking the Mediatized Stage

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ABSTRACT

1. INTRODUCTION

While modern citizens are busy keeping up with communications technology, they are missing out on many human elements in communication like presence and authenticity. While some say we will get used to life mediated by screens and some prefer to wait for technology to get fast enough so we can recreate some of those human elements, there is value for artists in exploring the expressive potential of liveness as a unique dimension in a performance. Aesthetic concepts are established to show what is lost when a performance is mediated, what it gains from the of mediatization, and how mediated, once-live events can establish a newkind of authenticity within a performance, even if their authenticity is lost. A number of web-based mediated performances are analyzed to demonstrate the nature of creating performances for mediatized environments.

2. CONCEPTS AND RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Substance and Music

Not all music can be compared using the same terms. We generally consider this to be a good thing: some music focuses on melody, other music is expressive through timbre. When an uninitiated listener encounters a new form of music and evaluates it in the same way as commercial popular music, he or she may find little of value and dismiss the piece, saying it is not very good music or perhaps not music at all.

Reflecting on some innovative compositions of the mid-twentieth century, author and theorist Umberto Eco revealed a useful tool for finding the value of such works. Speaking of “open” works (whether they are chance-based or simply subject to many interpretations), Eco says, “the form of the work of art gains its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood.”[1, p. 3]

Similarly, philosopher Stephen Davies differentiates between compositions that are *ontologically thin* such as lead sheets (only specifying a melody and chord changes) and

compositions that are *ontologically thick*, ones that are fully scored in detail.[2, p. 180] I have found it useful to evaluate works on a continuum of *substance* between the ontologically thin and thick [3] and to extend this model farther to accept that part of the substance of a performance may lie outside its purely content, even in the case of performances we consider to be purely musical.[4]

For example, I played Tom Johnson’s clever and humorous composition *Failing, A Very Difficult Piece for Solo String Bass* [5] for a class, and one student had trouble finding any value in it at all. In the piece, the solo bassist is given text to read while playing, and this becomes increasingly challenging throughout the work. The spoken text explains the premise of the work and muses whether a “perfect” performance is impossible because the performer would have failed to *fail* at any point. Assessing this work using the criteria for pop music, it is indeed disappointing: it has no steady beat or significant tuneful motives and no rhyme or “hook” in the text. It is a bad “song.” The student encountered the work with the wrong set of expectations, ignoring the exciting anticipation of failure and the stages of revealing the nature or the piece, and the whole self-referential conundrum it presented in its performance situation.

This approach can be used to discuss works like John Cage’s *4’33”*,[6] in which the score merely instructs the performer to be silent, and many of Anton Webern’s compositions, known for their brevity. Neither can be fairly evaluated by the number of notes it contains, whereas one might use duration as one measure of substance in music by Mahler or Wagner. For Cage, one might find substance in the clever approach of turning a mirror on the audience for all its sonic content or in the specialness of witnessing one live performance, knowing there will never be another exactly like it. For Webern, one might appreciate its reserved, deliberate textures and articulations. Great substance can be found in Webern’s pitch structures if one inspects them.

In between works like these and traditionally composed symphonies lie works like Earle Brown’s “December 1952.”[7] It contains many more markings than *4’33”*, but because there is no key to interpret the markings, the demand on the performer(s) is increased. Not only must the performer(s) the execute instructions as with any composition, but they also must devise a way to interpret the markings on the page to determine what notes to play. One might say that “December 1952” is ontologically thin as a composition. On a concert, we would say that a large portion of the substance was contributed by the performer.

Summary

There is more to a musical performance than the notes we hear.

2.2 Stage Presence

Explanations of *stage presence* usually mention a performer's ability to "captivate" an audience(s attention). While this may be achieved in many ways, at its heart is simply *presence*: what stimuli indicate the performer's presence before an audience, catching and then keeping (or otherwise shaping) the audience's attention? In everyday life offstage, a person slouching in the corner is easier to ignore than someone standing tall in the center. This applies to performances as well, but in musical performance there is always one extra element: Traditional musical instruments require the performer to *move* in order to play them, and the ways in which they move communicate much to the audience, demonstrating the difficulty of a passage or modeling how the audience should feel during a passage.

This clearly varies for each instrument, e.g., vocalists needn't move very much, and organists often face away from the audience or are hidden from sight. However, these shortcomings are often felt and compensated for, e.g, vocalists employ facial expressions and otherwise superfluous hand motions, and organist will at least come out to bow for the audience. When an organ console can be placed on stage, having the performer face away from the audience means the audience can better see the performer's hand and feet: the parts whose movement are critical for making the music happen.

The cello creates a lively intermedial counterpoint between the actions seen and the notes heard. When the bow moves horizontally, we hear notes. When the left hand moves toward the bridge, the notes we hear are higher overall. However, these relationships are not linear as they are on a keyboard instrument. The speed of the bow controls loudness, and the portion of the bow used at any time affects tone, but the most visually obvious parameter, the direction of the bow's movement, is not as significant. While the left hand's position shifts most pitches in a general way, it is still common for pitches to go down as the hand stays still or moves closer to the bridge, as the player is switching to a lower string or an open string. This visual portion of the substance of any traditional performance comes naturally and often does most of the work to evoke a satisfying stage presence.

In computer-based performances, however, this portion of the substance is absent unless it is purposely built into a performance. When one keystroke can trigger any number of sounds and that keystroke can be so subtle a movement that it goes unnoticed, or if it is hidden behind a computer display, a live electronic performance can be as awkward as a composer sitting on stage during his own acousmatic composition. Technology-based performance begins with a deficiency of substance manifest in stage presence.

Three performances using a Monome demonstrate this well.[8] First, an informal demonstration video [9] shows that much music can be made without much substance contributed by the performer, since several keystrokes each

trigger two-measure long loops. A performance by Edison [10] uses a split screen to show a close-up view of the Monome and an audience's view of the whole stage. It is clear that much more substance is contributed by the performer, since many more keys only trigger one note at a time and the performance is dense and complex. The audience view might only serve as a stamp of authenticity, demonstrating that a real human performed this piece in real time, alone. It doesn't provide much substance from moment to moment, but its contribution to the performance is significant.

A Monome performance by Deadalus [11] bears striking differences from the previous videos. The musical performance isn't as dextrous as Edison's. There is only one camera angle, from the audience's perspective, but the Monome is tilted slightly toward the audience to recapture some of the effect of Edison's close-up view. Much of the substance in this performance is contributed by Deadalus's musically superfluous motions, dancing to his own music, modeling how to feel in each moment, perhaps using posture and facial expressions to demonstrate that he is engaging in a dialogue of music and dance with the live audience, and at times highlighting the fact that he is not touching the Monome at all sometimes. In these moments, it is not dull as in the Monome demonstration video, but exciting, perhaps virtuosic, that he can set a process in motion and let it run unattended for so long with pleasing musical effect.

An increasing number of technology-based performances are making efforts to reconstruct this obviousness of causality.[12] While making one-to-one relationships between actions and results clear may seem to be an obvious solution, it still lacks the subtle and complex counterpoint of the cello performance, for example.

Summary

The nature of the instrument and the performance situation are (once-given) standard dimensions to build substance in a performance.

2.3 Mediated Presence

As in Edison's performance (which was shot in a studio), a large video screen might be used in large venues to show close-up views of the action on stage. In this case, the mediating screen delivers most of the substance of a performance, and, as with Edison, the view of the whole stage functions primarily as a stamp of authenticity, verifying that you are in the same room and same moment as the events you see on screen. Additionally, your unmediated view from the stands might also provide as a wide shot to appreciate *mise en scène* or large scale lighting effects, turning your naked eye into just another camera angle. Philip Auslander takes this approach to prove that the live and mediated versions of performance are of equal value to modern audiences.[13] Further, Julio d'Escrivàn argues that audiences will become accustomed to live performances by unmoving laptop performers, counting them as equal to fixed media acousmatic music without missing any of the traditional elements of stage presence.[14]

I feel it is a more important to realize that, whether or not we will value mediated performances and live performances void of extramusical substance the same as traditional forms of live performance, it remains that we *are* capable of telling the difference, feeling engaged with the performance in different ways. This means the elements of *liveness* can be shaped expressively as another dimension in the structure of a live performance. It is a new field in which to build expression; we would be wise to explore it.

It is worthwhile to consider how and when we sense the presence of others when communicating through mediated channels. When we read a letter, it is common to imagine the author there with you, performing the message in that moment, even though we know the author is likely not thinking of us at that time; he or she may be asleep or may have a different opinion by the time you read the letter. We often feel the same way when reading e-mail, unless we start getting quick replies as in a “real-time” chat—something changes. Our sense of presence and the cues that evoke it are different for each channel. Instant message and SMS applications have begun indicating that the person on the other end is typing, even if it doesn’t show what they type in real time. In the Second Life online virtual world, a person’s humanoid avatar will move its hands as if it were typing in the air. These application developers recognize that something is being lost compared to the unmediated experience.

Beyond that, you might now feel as I do that it is important for us to notice these sacrifices of liveness even if we don’t protest them, so that we are more aware of ourselves and what makes us human. Some part of our human heritage has allowed us to feel differently in front of a stage and in front of a screen, and to ignore that difference is to give up part of our humanness.

Peggy Phelan has said,

To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance’s becoming... becomes itself through disappearance.[15, p. 146]

Elements of a performance (like stage presence) are lost when they are mediated by technology. Some music survives mediation better than others, which is probably one reason why telephone ring tones quoting Mozart are more common than ones quoting Varèse. Pitch and rhythm carry a larger portion of substance in Mozart’s music, and those parameters survive mediation through small monophonic speakers tucked away in pockets better than the timbre and other cues of vastness. However, both suffer a loss, and the more faithfully an element *can* be reproduced, the less substance it probably carries.

Further, mediation is not transparent. Besides sacrificing some content, it imposes artifacts that we can see and hear. Jean Baudrillard has argued that when live events are mediated by close-up screens, they become *hyperreal* [16]: they can be experienced, enhanced, and manipulated beyond the limits of real experience, and this added value simultaneously makes the mediated version the preferred version of reality and erodes our sense of authenticity in

the events, because we know the mediated version is disconnected from reality. For example, visual elements superimposed on the field during a sports broadcast provide rich information about the event, but they may make it feel like a video game without real human players. When an event has lost certain elements and gained others through the mediation process, Baudrillard says the event has been *mediatized*.

Summary

Some elements are lost through mediation; others are gained. Some forms of music suffer more than others, depending on where the substance lies.

2.4 YouTube[17] Symphonies

A number of artistic projects have used non-real-time video streams in a variety of ways. While one of them actually bears the name YouTube Symphony Orchestra, the existence of other unique works based on non-real-time video streams suggests that the term *YouTube symphony* might be used to indicate their genre. The original YouTube Symphony Orchestra project culminated in a traditional orchestral performance in Carnegie Hall directed by Michael Tilson Thomas, but the unique factor was that auditions were submitted via YouTube and evaluated by YouTube users.[18]

Other projects are “born digital” and remain that way. *In Bb* [19] (a play on Terry Riley’s *In C* [20]), invited performers to submit videos through YouTube, playing freely in the key of B-flat major, avoiding metric patterns and dense textures, and optionally playing along with a provided audio track for inspiration. In performance, the viewer clicks to play any videos at will, starting at any time, with any number of them playing at once. In contrast, *Thru-You* is an album of songs created from videos that were already on YouTube, not created for this project.[21] The artist cleverly edited and mixed the solo videos into tightly-produced ensembles. The result is not malleable or influenced by the viewer like *In B-Flat*. Even in the case of the YouTube Symphony Orchestra, because of YouTube’s role in the process and because it sponsored the whole project, the process generated great amounts of video material, allowing the full performance to be recreated in a fixed-media “mashup” using several original born-digital audition videos.

These works highlight the limitations of this form of mediation (non-real-time solo videos) and some sacrifices that can be made to overcome them. The YouTube Symphony project only used the media to substitute for live auditions, and then the resulting videos became material for future fixed-media projects. The composer, conductor, and later the video editor retained full control. *In Bb* uses the video content directly in the final product, but the musical must avoid meter or density, in order to avoid cacophony. Pads and drones add up nicely especially if they share a tonal center, but rhythmic coordination, form, expressive changes in intensity, and harmonic shifts are all given up: most of the things that make for memorable moments in a performance. The composer allowed freedom to perform-

ers but only within a narrow, safe range. *Thru-You* delivers a satisfying “born digital” result, but the editor has taken full control again, so much that the contributors apparently didn’t even know they were being used in this way. The result, while entertaining, is the same every time. It is now fixed media void of liveness. Other approaches that allow for user interaction and rhythmic coordination resort to looping step sequencers, so users may specify what happens during the *next* cycle, sacrificing expression, interaction, and variety as a result.

Summary

There is rich potential for mediated performance as a genre, without merely being a substitute for unmediated performance. However, it involves embracing the effects of mediatization and strategic sacrifices.

3. WEBLOGMUSIC

3.1 Overview

Weblogmusic (<http://weblogmusic.org>) is a web-based platform for born-digital improvising ensembles, using the asynchronous and episodic but still conversational structure of a weblog (“blog”) to shape the performance process. The project contains a number of *mixes*, each of which is a unique performance realized in a web browser window. Each mix contains several *tracks*, each containing one performer’s contribution. In performance, four tracks are randomly selected from within the given mix and are played in tandem, forming a quartet ensemble. Each performance functions both as a live performance and as a pedagogical tool for improvisation, as the viewer is welcome to play along with the improvising ensemble.



Figure 1. The mediatized concert “stage” of Weblogmusic. Four solo video tracks are randomly selected from within one mix and are played in tandem, subject to re-ordering, dropouts, and other glitches of video streaming, to yield a unique performance every time in the viewer’s web browser. Pictured here are Ulrich Maiß, cello (top left), Joseph “Butch” Rován, clarinet (top right), David Bithell, trumpet (bottom left), and Eric km Clark, violin (bottom right).

3.2 Approach

Instead of attempting to overcome the limitations of this heavily mediatized form, trying to sweep its artifacts out of view, Weblogmusic embraces the rigid and sometimes faltering properties of the mediation as a compositional element. Unpredictability in loading times for each video and glitches in playback due to fluctuating data bandwidth contribute to make each performance unique, even if the same four tracks happen to be selected for two different performances. The rigidity of asynchronous collaboration, the reshuffling caused by network glitches, and the fact that no one can tell which video came first all work together to playfully challenge our sense of causality and authenticity.

It embodies a value of promoting awareness of mediatization in our human encounters instead of pretending that communication only consists of notes/words on a page. It also promotes a value of letting human behaviors find their own ways to “grow” within these synthetic structures, for we may discover new aspects of ourselves and our communications.

3.3 Structure and Process

Weblogmusic uses Wordpress [22] for its basic episodic structure and YouTube as a streaming server. This removes significant bandwidth and storage demands from Weblogmusic’s own server and eliminates the need for custom-coded in-browser video recording and transcoding software. It does require that contributors manually upload their videos to YouTube, but YouTube’s interface for this is well polished and need not be reproduced just for this application.

Six musicians were originally invited to initiate signature mixes (by contributing the first track for the mix) and to contribute additional tracks to each others’ signature mixes. They are:

- David Bithell (trumpet and electronics) [23]
- Eric km Clark (violin and found percussion) [24]
- Ulrich Maiß (cello, electric cello, percussion, and power tools) [25]
- Andy McWain (keyboards) [26]
- Kevin Patton (TaurEx sensor-enhanced electric guitar) [27]
- Joseph “Butch” Rován (clarinets and electronics) [28]

Although the first track may not always be heard in a performance of a mix, its influence is manifest in all future tracks, because they are either direct responses to the first track or responses to those responses to the first track. In this way it is the foundation or perhaps the DNA of that mix, making it unique.

When recording each additional track, the performer sees and hears what any viewer would see and hear: a random selection of previously recorded tracks from that mix (sharing the same root inspiration), and the performer records himself or herself playing new material as the other tracks

play (in headphones, for the sake of isolating each track as it is recorded). While recording a track, the performance is subject to the same unpredictable loading order, delays, and other glitches as any viewer would see, and those unpredictable phenomena may take a role in shaping the track being recorded, which may in turn influence future tracks. For example, if one track is briefly paused (due to faltering network speed) during a rhythmic motive, that rhythm has been transformed in an unexpected way, and the performer who is recording at the time may choose to echo that motive as he or she heard it, causing the temporary glitch to take an active role in transforming musical material.

3.4 Aesthetics

Weblogmusic captures the intermediality of performance (i.e., the visual stage presence elements in addition to musical sounds) by juxtaposing camera angles of each performer in his or her own “natural habitat” or at least in a setting depicting their personal style or mood. Each is on his or her own “stage” and those stages are brought together into this new venue.

The performances play on the viewer’s sense of causality and authenticity. Not only is it impossible to determine which elements occurred first and evoked other tracks to respond, but there is no official, authoritative version of the performance. Each track a performer records is a “fork” in the evolution of the mix, and it will later be recombined with tracks that were responding to tracks in different forks. It is meaningless to attempt to see a performance that is free of network quirks, because they are a welcome part of the composed environment, and similar quirks have likely interfered with the creation of the tracks that are played. Further, there is no “master copy:” one could play all tracks of one mix simultaneously, but this is a reality that has never existed. It is the sum of all intertwined forks, parallel pedigrees of causality. The only authoritative performance is the one in the viewer’s web browser in the moment it is being watched, even though the viewer knows that it is only a subset of all tracks recorded, causality can only be guessed, and network glitches are interfering with its creation and delivery. This conundrum of authenticity is native to the world of mediated performance. Whereas we see elements of authentic human presence lost through mediation, in the right environments, these mediated materials can gain a new kind of authenticity, as the mediated content plays a dynamic role in the performance as if they were original content created for that purpose.

3.5 Future Developments

Until now, Weblogmusic has been populated by a controlled set of invited contributors, all musicians, in order to populate each mix with tracks of reliable quality and full sonic content. We are now welcoming other types of performers to contribute, whether it is primarily sonic or visual content, as long as it can be done in real time.

We have also received requests to access individual tracks or smaller groups of tracks for pedagogical exercises including practicing improvisation with a fixed, repeatable

accompaniment and sketching out electroacoustic compositions for acoustic instruments without having to worry about writing notes and recording a live performer before building the accompaniment, whether fixed media or interactive. We are investigating ways to accommodate these uses as well, in the interest of building a community of adventurous and curious performers.

4. HOW TO CONTRIBUTE

We are seeking new contributors to the existing mixes, and after contributing to some mixes, a performer may propose to create a new mix, in which he or she records the first track, laying the foundation for all future tracks. Performers may be musicians, dancers, visual artists, poets, or practitioners of any activity that can be done with artistic expression and be recorded live. For details, see <http://weblogmusic.org>.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Through performances like the ones discussed here, I am hopeful that humans will cultivate a sensitivity to the human elements that are lost in mediation, lest we forget how to be human by the time technology solves all our problems. Human values of presence and authenticity can allow us to find ways to be human *despite* the mediation of so many screens between us. In environments like Weblogmusic, performers are finding ways to be expressive and human by embracing these quirks, remembering our values of human connection, and discovering new ways to build creative works that are native to these synthetic worlds, instead of accepting them complacently as substitutes for real human connection.

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