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Performing Civility: International Competitions in Classical Music

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Chapter 4

The presentation of musical self

Violinists might not seem to have much in common with surgeons, police officers, and prizefighters. But, according to Goffman (1959), these are all exceptional statuses that avoid the problem of “dramatization realization.” What he means by this is that in most professional roles, individuals have to “infuse” their activities with signs to convey what would “otherwise remain unapparent or obscure” (p. 30). Among his examples are the baseball umpire who is sure to pronounce his calls instantaneously “so that the audience will be sure that he is sure of his judgment” (p. 30) and the Vogue model who perfects her stance and facial expression to “portray a cultivated understanding of the book she poses in her hand” (p. 33). Violinists, he claims, do not need to sacrifice action for expression in this way because “some of the acts which are instrumentally essential for the completion of the core task of the status are at the same time wonderfully adapted, from the point of view of communication, as a means of vividly conveying the qualities and attributes claimed by the performer” (p. 30).

Goffman might have thought otherwise if he had ever attended a music competition. This social establishment generates the problem of dramatic realization for musicians by bringing their techniques of impression management under the microscope. And this is not, as the saying goes, for training purposes only. How effectively one manages self-presentation in these highly unusual circumstances carries long-term consequences. In entering an international competition, musicians volunteer to undergo a public labeling ritual in which

there are only two outcomes. If the candidate becomes a prize winner, this signals to the general public that the player might become one of the great talents of his or her generation. It is more likely, however, that the candidate will become an also-ran, which can damage the player's reputation and self-identity as an artist; this outcome can be interpreted to mean that the performer, while accomplished, was found to be "unmusical," which in the classical music world amounts to a "statement of doom" (Kingsbury, 1988:65).

If this risk were not enough cause for anxiety, competitors must also cope with the fact that they have little knowledge of or control over the criteria used to determine the final ranking. Jury deliberations are closed and the calculation of scores remains secret, shrouding the evaluative process in mystery. All performers can be sure of is that the audience is unlikely to practice tactful inattention if they slip while conveying a fostered impression. The rationalized judging process demands that these slips be noted because they provide the most objective and quantifiable reasons for a candidate's elimination from the contest.

For better or for worse, the labels bestowed on candidates at the conclusion of competitions are only temporary. Those fortunate enough to become laureates know that the title enters its half-life as soon as the competition holds its next cycle. Until then, they must handle a symbol of competence that is not just unstable, but also a mixed blessing. As many laureates come to learn the hard way, the mention of a recent competition prize tends to push audience expectations unrealistically high and critics' expectations undeservedly low. Rather than liberating musicians from the problem of dramatic realization, winning a competition ensures that they will be haunted by it until the title is finally overshadowed by other accomplishments.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine performative de-fusion from the point of view of competitors by considering how they approach performing in this most treacherous

of environments and why they do it in the first place. To articulate how competitions constrain musical agency, I will draw from interviews with fourteen competitors in which they describe all aspects of their experience, from seemingly mundane matters such as what goes into deciding the repertoire to play and the clothes they wear while competing to more thorny issues including jury politics and how competitors understand the function of competitions in today's music world. These conversations reveal that for young musicians, decisions about the means of symbolic production are not only technical matters; they also constitute their musical self and display their moral character.

To get into the mechanics of musical self-presentation, we must first determine what it means to be a “good performer” in the broader sense of the term. In the next section I demonstrate how the performing musician is culturally constructed through images of musical genius. These “musical personae” (Auslander, 2006) are powerful background symbols because of their association with iconic historical figures. But this power can be harnessed to answer the problem of dramatic realization; the successful embodiment of any one of these idealized images gives competitors expressive control, allowing them to define the situation to their advantage. However, as I will show in the concluding section, competitions create an especially infelicitous environment for presenting the musical self, let alone an idealized version. Not only do competitors find themselves compromising their deeply held musical ideals; the structure of the event undermines the performer's best efforts toward fusion, the very achievement that it is meant to celebrate.

Performing genius

While the concept of genius, not to mention art, is a product of modernity, the cultural logic of artistic genius has a much longer history that stretches back to ancient Greece (Murray, 1989). Kris and Kurz (1979) have persuasively demonstrated this cultural continuity

by revealing the striking uniformity in biographies of Western artists through the centuries. Even the earliest historical records show that “certain stereotyped notions were linked with [the artist’s] work and his [sic] person – preconceptions that have never entirely lost their significance and that still influence our view of what an artist is” (Kris & Kurz, 1979:5). Many of the recurring motifs they identify have become the mainstays of Hollywood biopics: the chance discovery of the artist’s talent at a very young age by a distinguished person; the overcoming of obstacles put in the way of the prodigy’s chosen profession; the artist’s ability to imitate nature so perfectly that it is mistaken for reality; the artist’s use of virtuosity to embarrass critics or to take revenge on miserly clients.

Although Kris and Kurz were primarily concerned with the myths and legends surrounding visual artists such as painters, sculptors and architects, their analysis can be applied usefully to musicians. But before I can proceed with such an undertaking, a complicating factor must first be addressed. Since the nineteenth century, musical creation has been divided into two specializations: composition and performance. The increasing complexity of musical form and notation might have made this bifurcation a practical necessity, but culture helped to justify and precipitate the separation of the two roles. The hierarchical configuration of composer, performer and listener advocated by the work-concept ideology (Goehr, 1992) remains firmly entrenched in musical institutions to this day.

However effective it is in bundling the tasks necessary to get work done (Becker, 1982), this division of musical labor introduces a problem of performance for both musical actors. Lacking the requisite technical proficiency, composers must trust others to comprehend their texts and present them in an accurate yet compelling manner. Performers, on the other hand, must convince the audience that they have fused with the work so

completely that they “play as if from the soul of the composer.”¹ Overcoming these twin problems is difficult enough when the composer and the performer are able and willing to collaborate. But they are further compounded in the performance of historical masterworks, which constitute the majority of the repertoire for classical musicians.

Another consequence of this transformation of musical practice is that the concept of musical genius has been completely taken over by the composer. Music scholarship has actively contributed to this cornering of the genius market, as much enslaved by the work-concept ideology as the average concert-goer. As a result, the pantheon of musical genius is now thought to be populated only by master composers, even if restricting the definition of genius in this way requires some creative misremembering of musical history. For example, two of the most famous icons of musical genius, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven, are generally recognized today as the creators of masterworks that are among the greatest achievements of Western Culture, even by those who might not endorse Matthew Arnold’s (1965) sense of that term. But this was not how Mozart and Beethoven were known to their contemporaries. Whatever notoriety they enjoyed in their lifetimes had just as much to do with their electrifying performances on the keyboard (or violin) as it did with the musical creativity demonstrated in their compositions.

In the world of classical music today, extraordinary performance ability continues to receive exalted praise and sometimes inspires cultish admiration. Why not apply the “genius” designation if the usual trappings are all present? It might seem odd that a sociologist would suggest reclaiming the notion of genius for the performer when previous work on the subject (DeNora, 1995) aimed to expose it as a social construction designed to serve political ends. But my goal is not to rehabilitate a deservedly controversial concept or make any

¹ J.A.P. Schulz, “Vortrag,” (1775/92) in Sulzer, *Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste*, quoted in Hunter (2005).

essentializing claims; it is to understand the cultural logic of the images of genius that continue to circulate in the music community. I argue that genius “tropes” are best understood as collective representations that define and concretize musical ideals for both the audience and the musicians, and, furthermore, that it is in reference to these potent symbols that the problems of performance and of dramatic realization can be eclipsed.

In the next section I will reconstruct four such genius tropes, focusing on those that appear most frequently in the context of international music competitions: the prodigy, the fire-breathing virtuoso, the conquering hero and the intellectual.² Following Kris and Kurz, I will use anecdotes about famous historical figures to illustrate the trademark characteristics of each type. Anecdotes are particularly well suited to convey these “stereotyped episodes,” regardless of whether they are historically accurate or apocryphal; like jokes, they have an obvious yet pleasurable point, which serves to make a social type more comprehensible. After outlining the four genius images, I will address the challenge of putting them into action.

The prodigy

In music, as in mathematics and chess, the fascination of child prodigies is their selective precocity; an otherwise “normal” child becomes extraordinary once placed in front of the keyboard, chalkboard or chessboard. Public demonstrations of startling virtuosity anchor this image of genius, but while these breathtaking displays are necessary, they are not sufficient qualification, which is why they are usually accompanied by stories of other superlative musical skills. For example, Mozart became the archetypal prodigy not only because he caused a sensation performing at courts across Europe but also because he was capable of feats such as writing out the entire score of Allegri’s Miserere without a single

² This list is far from exhaustive. For an unsystematic yet vivid discussion of many other performer types in the history of the piano, see (Schonberg, 1987[1963]).

error after hearing it only once (Melograni, 2007:37-8). Incidents such as these serve as premonitions of what the child will become.³

It is often said of prodigies that their technical ability outstrips their musicality. While this remark might at first come across as mean-spirited criticism, it actually points to the very quality that makes a prodigy's performance compelling, namely, that his or her ease and facility with the instrument does not necessarily reveal a consciousness of what he or she is doing. For less convincing prodigies, this becomes a liability because it makes them susceptible to the accusation that they are simply over-rehearsed. They are decried as "trained monkeys" and "windup dolls," or pitied as the hapless victims of coercive "stage parents." In contrast, the more convincing prodigies are awe-inspiring because this "lack of consciousness" quality is uncanny; they seem to be moved by something else.

To use Kivy's (2001) terms, the prodigy should be placed within the "passive" notion of genius that comes from Plato. Here creativity is not an act of will, but a temporary madness. The poet's inspiration is a divine gift that happens to him. In this state, the poet is not himself, but is, essentially, "possessed." This entails a loss of self or personhood: "the god speaks through the poet; so it is not the person of the poet but the 'person' of the god that makes the poetry" (Kivy, 2001:73). The same notion is reflected in the contemporary practice of referring to prodigies as "gifted children." Historically, however, the association with the divine had more sinister overtones. Often described as "monstrosities," the original meaning of prodigy was "something extraordinary from which omens are drawn."⁴ Although prodigies

³ I take Feldman and Goldsmith's (1986) point that although there is an "intuitive connection between them" (p. 16), the terms "prodigy" and "genius" should not be used interchangeably. They distinguish prodigies, who show an extraordinary capability for an existing field, from geniuses, who are credited with transforming a field both fundamentally and irreversibly. He argues that some prodigies may become geniuses, but that this transition is contingent on exogenous factors. While I appreciate the desire to pin down a precise definition for each phenomenon, this is exactly the essentializing concept of genius that I do not wish to employ or refine. In contrast, my focus is the common associations and "intuitive connections" that amount to cultural constructions of genius.

⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed.

are no longer associated with prophecy, they can still acquire the aura of a sacred figure. For example, the young Yehudi Menuhin is credited with having created a “frenzy” in the classical music world; audience members were regularly “rushing up to him at the end of the performance, desperate just to touch his garments, as though he were a saint” (Sand, 2000:155).

Kivy credits Schopenhauer with adapting the Platonic notion of genius to the modern age, stripping it of its supernatural overtones while preserving the idea that feats of creativity come from the loss of self. For him, the genius shared the madman’s inability to function in the mundane aspects of everyday life. But rather than being possessed by a god, it is the object of knowledge in which the genius loses himself. Schopenhauer also drew a stronger connection between the genius and the childlike. For him, both share liberation from the “dominance of will” (Kivy, 2001:75). Echoes of this notion persist to the present day. Prodigies are commonly described as “born to play,” as though they are essentially helpless toward the compulsion to master the instrument. For example, when the four-year-old Jacqueline du Pré first heard a cello on a radio broadcast, she is said to have declared to her mother without hesitation, “that is the sound I want to make” (Wilson, 1999:16). Accordingly, standing in the way of a prodigy’s fate is tantamount to child abuse: “If you have a child who is in this world to play the violin, and you decide this child is not going to learn to play the violin – you have killed that child, if not physically, then certainly emotionally and spiritually” (David Henry Feldman, quoted in Sand, 2000:149).

The fire-breathing virtuoso

The fire-breathing virtuoso⁵ is another case of “possession,” but here it is demonic rather than divine. The aim of the virtuoso, a Faustian genius, is to make music an immanent

⁵ I must thank competitor 7 for this wonderfully evocative term.

experience. Here the artist is seen as a magician, an ambiguous figure whose “magical powers” (i.e., superhuman virtuosity) inspire both adoration and fear (Kris & Kurz, 1979). Extraordinary technical skill and the physicality of music-making are used to startle and astonish the audience. Musical experience becomes a matter of “shocking the listener, making him hear as he had never heard before, of taking over his musical senses” (Sennett, 1977:201). This approach to performance requires a cavalier attitude to musical material for two reasons. First, the score is not believed to have a direct affinity to the music; it is the musician who, like a magician, brings the music to life (Sennett, 1977:199). Second, the gymnastics and contingencies of enactment are the real focus of the performance. Spectacular effects and feats of virtuosity enhance the immediacy of experience while the sheer force of personality overwhelms the musical material. The same music played by anyone else simply is not the same piece. As Franz Liszt famously quipped, “le concert, c’est moi.” The less convincing of this type are accused of being charlatans peddling cheap tricks and pandering to vulgar tastes.⁶ But the more convincing virtuosi force even the most skeptical critics to concede that their performances are unforgettable, albeit due to a mixture of charm and repulsion.

The archetypal fire-breather is the nineteenth-century violinist Niccolò Paganini, who not only revolutionized violin playing, but also became the gold standard by which successive virtuosi were measured. Indeed it was after seeing him perform one night in Paris that the nineteen-year-old Liszt set out to become the “Paganini of the piano,” and that label was applied to him for most of his career (Gibbs, 2006). Although Paganini’s international career lasted only six years, in this short time he became a legend. In addition to his peerless

⁶ Weber (2004) has argued that the term “charlatan” only acquired decisively negative connotations in the nineteenth century when a repertoire identified as “classical” attained canonic status and a hierarchy of taste distinguishing “serious” from “light” was established. In the previous century, it was used pejoratively by learned musicians to describe itinerant, self-trained musicians whose success threatened their professional status.

technique, which he demonstrated to full effect in his own compositions, Paganini was an unequalled showman.⁷ As Sennett (1977) describes,

All his work on stage was focused on drawing attention to himself. The audience at a typical Paganini concert might witness the violinist break one, two, or finally three strings on his violin, so that by the end of a difficult concerto, all the notes were being played off a single string ... Paganini liked to appear suddenly in front of the audience from a hiding place within the orchestra, rather than waiting in the wings offstage; once visible, he would wait one, two, or three minutes, staring silently at the audience, bringing the orchestra to an abrupt halt, and all at once begin to play. Paganini loved best to start with a hostile audience, ready to boo him, and then reduce them to blind adulation by the force of his playing. (Pp. 200–201)

From the moment he burst onto the concert stages of Europe, Paganini had a strong association with the macabre. Many of his signature compositions were based on Gothic themes (e.g., *Le streghe*, “The witches”) or acquired suggestive nicknames (e.g., Caprice no. 13 was known as *Le rire du diable*, “The devil’s laugh”). These noir references were further dramatized through his physical appearance, which had become gaunt and cadaverous after many illnesses, including a wasting disease. Offstage, the mythology surrounding him thrived on rumors of “demonic possession, of murder and imprisonment, and of profound sorrows and destitution” (Gooley, 2005). After his death, his diabolical image was further cemented; because of his reputation for immorality and his refusal of the Last Rites on his deathbed, the

⁷ Gooley (2005) has explored the possible influence of comic opera and Italian theatre on Paganini’s performing identity and compositions during his formative years (1795-1815) in Italy. He argues that the image of Paganini that has dominated music history is actually a reinterpretation of the theatrical dimension of his music colored by German Romanticism and mediated by the culture of the *Bildung*; before 1828, reviewers tended to employ neoclassical references and metaphors. Gooley shows that when properly understood, Paganini in his comic mode is also demonic. Through theatrical devices such as imitating animal sounds and human voices, Paganini, like a magician, “conjures out of the wooden box a multitude of mimed voices that have a phantasmic quality because they are semi-articulate, half-heard, fleeing and reappearing, laughing, and crying” (Gooley, 2005:416).

Church authorities refused him a Christian burial until the Grand Duchess of Parma finally intervened. While his musical contribution continues to be overpowered by his image, Paganini's impact on music history was decisive: "With his gaunt and gangling appearance and his demoniac temperament, Paganini almost single-handedly forged the romantic mystique of virtuosity as a superhuman, even diabolical endowment" (Taruskin, 2005:254).

Superhuman virtuosity does not appear only in diabolical form; it has also been described through the symbolism of the machine. This discourse emerged at the height of the Industrial Age, especially in reference to the piano, which served both as a metaphor and an agent of capitalism and instrumental rationality in its design, production and distribution. But it was not only the musical instrument that was represented in this way:

[T]he virtuoso pianist was himself likened to a machine and thereby rendered at once superhuman and not human at all ... The mystery of machines, and of virtuosos performing on a musical machine, fed from contemporaneous fascinations with and anxieties over the brave new industrial world. The saving grace of musicians in this respect was that they demonstrated a magical ability to out-machine the machinery. (Leppert, 1999, emphasis added).

Clearly, the image of the artist as magician is not confined to a traditional or religious cultural context. Indeed, the machine metaphor has kept it alive to this day, although instead of the pistons and cogs of the steam engine, today it is computer technology that inspires salvation and apocalyptic discourses (Alexander, 1998).

The conquering hero

No mere conduit for a supernatural power, the conquering hero is a force to be reckoned with. This type of performer is a powerful figure who dominates the instrument, masters the repertoire and commands the audience's attention. To borrow Kivy's (2001)

terms again, these characteristics place the hero within the Longinian concept of genius in the Kantian mode: “genius as nature’s rule-giver to art” (p. 118). In marked contrast to the Platonic genius, who is passive and “possessed,” this performer is an active “possessor” of power and agency, who makes things happen. The hero’s music results from sheer force of will, which often entails breaking the rules of musical and social convention. Accordingly, the less convincing performers of this trope are accused of being self-absorbed and reckless egoists, brutish tyrants or delusional divas. But the more convincing are lionized for communicating their noble spirit, which puts the listener directly in touch with the sublime in art.

The archetypal musical hero is Beethoven, both the music and the man. As Burnham (1995) has shown, the hero trope has dominated critical and scholarly discussions of Beethoven’s middle-period compositions, especially Symphony No. 3 (*Eroica*). This work has been understood as the ultimate expression of the conditions of selfhood because its heroic quality is found on three levels. First, it is a portrayal of heroism, inviting programmatic interpretations of struggle and triumph. Second, the work is itself an act of heroism; by composing this symphony, Beethoven is transformed into “The Man Who Freed Music,” single-handedly revolutionizing Western music. And third, the symphony is experienced phenomenologically as an act of heroism; the music enlists the listener’s identification to such an extent that it becomes her own victory. While social resources and cultural transformations provided fertile ground for the construction of Beethoven’s reputation as a genius (DeNora, 1995, 2006), few have “given the rule to art” on the same level as Beethoven. The values of his heroic style have become core values of music: “For nearly two centuries, a single style of a single composer has epitomized musical vitality, becoming the paradigm of Western compositional logic and of all the positive virtues that music can embody for humanity” (Burnham, 1995:xiii).

In Beethoven's biography, the hero trope is often conveyed through a "triumph-over-tragedy" disability narrative (Gray, 2009) in which Beethoven overcomes his deafness to become the most important composer of all time. But the interpretive work of establishing this master trope in his biography was not accomplished purely through his reception history; Beethoven also helped to construct himself as a heroic agent in his personal and professional life. In a famous letter to his brothers from 1802 (commonly referred to as the *Heiligenstadt Testament* because of its writing style), he expressed a heroic resolve to overcome his affliction.⁸ He also cultivated a distinctively aggressive and visceral style of playing the piano that challenged aristocratic notions of decorum (DeNora, 2006). His rebelliousness in music-making carried over to his interpersonal relations. He was, in short, uncouth, flouting the rules of social etiquette. Anecdotes about his rude behavior abound, describing not only his cruelty toward servants and condescension toward fellow musicians, but also his arrogance toward the aristocracy as well. His unconventionality therefore took on an ideological tone (see DeNora, 1995; Kivy, 2001).

In the nineteenth century the hero trope was commonly rooted in a militaristic symbolic framework. For example, Richard Wagner described Beethoven's *Eroica* as an emulation of Napoléon (Burnham, 1995). Popular virtuosi were frequently found to resemble the military icon's face and figure, including the violinist Alexandre Boucher, who did actually bear some resemblance (Kawabata, 2004), and the pianist Franz Liszt, for whom this

⁸ "Born with a fiery Lively Temperament susceptible even to the Diversion of Society, I soon had to keep to myself, pass my life in solitude, if I attempted from time to time to rise above all this, o how harshly then was I repulsed by the doubly sad Experience of my bad Hearing, yet I could not say to People: speak louder, shout, for I am deaf, alas how could I acknowledge the weakness of a Faculty which ought to be more perfect in me than in others, a Faculty I once had to the highest degree of Perfection, such Perfection as only few of my calling surely have or have had - O I cannot do it. Therefore forgive me if you see me withdrawing when I should gladly join you. My misfortune afflicts me doubly, since it causes me to be misunderstood . . . But what Mortification if someone stood beside me and heard a flute from afar and I heard *nothing*; or someone *heard a Shepherd Singing*, and I heard nothing. Such Happenings brought me close to Despair; I was not far from ending my own life - only Art, only art held me back. Ah, it seemed impossible to me that I should leave the world before I had produced all that I felt I might, and so I spared this wretched life." Translation reprinted in Weiss and Taruskin (1984).

claim was more of a stretch (Gooley, 2000). That today we are unable to recognize any physical resemblance between Liszt and Napoléon, and would find such a claim preposterous, only serves to demonstrate the power and historicity of culture structures. It was also in the decades after the French Revolution that the “warhorse” metaphor emerged in musical culture. This term continues to be used, especially in the context of competitions, to describe large-scale, highly virtuosic compositions that place particular interpretive and technical demands on the performer. Gooley (Gooley, 2000, 2004) argues that this term has actually drifted to the musical work from its original source – the performer, whose dramatic and virtuosic performance evoked battle imagery quite independent of the content of the musical text performed.

The “warhorse” metaphor is an unusual relic. Most military references and representations have faded from the world of classical music. But the hero remains a powerful symbol, especially in the context of international competitions. As we saw in Chapter 2, commentators frequently adopt the symbolic framework of sports in their coverage of competitions, which tends to portray successful candidates as champions. This is more than a writer’s rhetorical flourish; Van Cliburn received the hero’s welcome of a ticker-tape parade down 5th Avenue in New York City when he returned from his triumph at the 1958 *Tchaikovsky Competition* in Moscow. Competitions also pay tribute to musical heroes in being named after them. For example, it is fitting that Poland hosts a *Paderewski* competition and Finland a *Sibelius* competition, considering the instrumental roles these musicians played in the nationalist projects of their homelands. Mstislav Rostropovich is one of the few to receive this honor in his lifetime. In his case, the Paris-based competition was named after him three years after he was forced into exile for sheltering the dissident novelist

Alexander Solzhenitsyn and writing an open letter to the press objecting to the Soviet government's treatment of artists.⁹

The intellectual

In contrast to the fire-breather's cavalier attitude toward musical material, the intellectual's approach is one of reverence: "the text is the only guide to what the music should be" (Sennett, 1977:198). The intellectual lives by the mantra of "letting the music speak for itself." To impose one's personality, or to take liberties with the musical markings, is seen as hubris. A near-fanatical obsession with faithfulness to the score drives the intellectual to control every interpretive decision. Nothing is left to chance or whim, because this would compromise the integrity of the compositional structure. Every aspect of performance must be deliberate, conscious and painstakingly researched; problems are to be solved by studying the score, an approach sometimes facetiously referred to as "consulting the oracle" (Taruskin, 1995:55). The aim of this performer is for music to be a transcendent experience. In revealing the truths contained in the score, the attentive listener is transported. While the more convincing of this type are hailed as brilliant minds, the less successful are accused of alienating the audience with their dry, emotionless performances.

A paragon of the objectivist approach to music that usually characterizes historical performance (see Taruskin, 1995), this type of performer has been the cult figure of the twentieth century. The most famous examples are pianists such as Glenn Gould, Alfred Brendel and Maurizio Pollini. As Schonberg (1987[1963]) describes, the intellectual advocates a thoroughly modern style that is "objective, literal, severe, impersonal, dedicated

⁹ Rostropovich was known to his fellow musicians as "Slava," which in Russian means "glory." Cellists would say that he more than earned this nickname by commissioning over 100 new works for their instrument. But his advocacy of human rights is what earned him the admiration of the general public. For example, almost every obituary printed mentioned the impromptu concert of the Bach Suites he gave in front of Checkpoint Charlie the day after the Berlin Wall fell. His work in the humanitarian realm was not always of a musical nature. In 1991, he created the Rostropovich-Vishnevskaya Foundation, which provided medical supplies to children's hospitals and improved access to health care for children in Russia.

to an accurate blueprint of the architecture of the music. Color, charm and emotion mean less than a stringent exposition of the form and relationships of a piece. The modern style takes Stravinsky's injunction to heart: don't interpret me, just play the notes as I have written them" (p. 482). Although anything that smacks of entertainment is banished from concerts, audiences flock to these solemn occasions, listening "as though attending a holy rite" (Schonberg, 1987[1963]:483).

Playing with tropes

As collective representations, the four images of genius described above are no doubt familiar. Indeed, a good measure of their communicative power is how easily they are recognized. But while my analytic reconstructions are necessarily presented in generalized terms, performers could never approach them in such a formulaic fashion. Tropes can only be engaged creatively and obliquely; otherwise they become cardboard stereotypes. Even more important, the genius "script" must be individualized according to the particular performer's technical skills, personality and cultural context. Performers who emulate a particularly successful incarnation of genius too closely are in danger of compromising their claims to authenticity. The practice of modeling oneself on an admired musician is all too transparent to other instrumentalists, as can be seen in this competitor's remark:

There are a lot of people I know who formulate their repertoire around an icon, like [Vladimir] Horowitz, or Cliburn, for example. A lot of people are so influenced by Horowitz, they want to do everything he did. I always think that's a little strange, personally. (Competitor 2)¹⁰

¹⁰ The common practice in ethnographic work is to assign pseudonyms to research subjects and interlocutors to protect their anonymity. Since this would be too thin a veil to conceal identities in a social world as small as classical music, I have assigned numbers to the competitors I interviewed in imitation of a practice occasionally adopted by competitions.

In other words, imitation may be the most sincere form of flattery, but when it comes to icons of performing genius, the imitation can only go so far. For another respondent, derivative performances warrant disapproval not because they expose a musician's lack of imagination, but because they do a disservice to the art:

You don't want to give a carbon copy of [Vladimir] Horowitz's *Appassionata* when you're playing in a competition. People know that Horowitz played like that. We don't need another one. We need a person who's found their own voice, who's found a way to approach this music in a new way that nobody has ever done before. (Competitor 11)

Underlying both of these comments is a high valuation of originality in interpretation; I will return to this theme below and in subsequent chapters.

In individualizing genius, a performer is not restricted to the boundaries of a particular script; genius types do not function as mutually exclusive and rigid categories in which players must place themselves (or be placed) definitively. Different tropes can be engaged in different contexts, or in different stages of a career, without bringing the musician's integrity into question. Indeed, this sort of versatility is taken as a sign of greatness. All the performers discussed as archetypal examples were seen as embodying most – if not all – of these four tropes during their lives; perhaps this is why they remain such prominent figures in music history. In competitions, it certainly behooves the candidate to evoke more than one genius trope over the course of the event. The convincing embodiment of a particular image is usually trumped by the concern that a competitor might be one-dimensional.

Evoking more than one image of genius is a performative feat in any case, but the performer can increase the chances of pulling it off by selecting those scripts that are amenable to transition. The child prodigy, for example, is a totalizing trope with a built-in expiration date that, once passed, leaves the performer little choice but to cultivate a new

impression from scratch. In contrast, the fire-breathing virtuoso and the conquering hero are extremely compatible tropes with overlapping meanings. Virtuosity gives the fire-breather the power to dominate or “mesmerize” the listener (DeNora, 2006), while the hero’s habit of breaking social convention can bring the performer’s morality into question. Goethe suggested a strong connection between the two when he identified Paganini, Beethoven and Napoléon as sharing a “daemonic” quality that set them apart. Far from the diabolical demon of medieval Christianity, which was “armed with prongs with which to torment our fallen selves” (Mellers, 1989:173), Goethe understood the daemonic as “that which escapes our rational speculative ability” (Harpe, 1949:373), bringing him closer to the original Greek meaning of *daimon*. Demonic forces are essentially good; they constitute the uniqueness of an individual, spurring action and providing the source of creativity. But if they are not properly channeled, they can become destructive: “Because they are forces that strive for expression and expansion, ever proposing to man [sic] the unattainable, they tend also, for that very reason, to disorder and chaos, hence to destruction” (Harpe, 1949:374). The conquering hero, then, can be seen as the successful conversion of the demonic force to clear purposes, while the fire-breather is one who has not mastered them through reason but has instead become enslaved to them.

The flexibility of the genius image is not the only factor affecting the transition between types; the audience must also be inclined to accept the change. If the performer was especially successful in embodying a particular image, she risks being typecast by the public. But before she can begin convincing the public to see her in a new light, she must first foster a new impression, which requires cultivating the means of symbolic production at hand. The variety of performative resources available and the varying significance of expressive equipment to the performer are the topics to be dealt with in the next section.

How to do things with music

In social performance theory, the means of symbolic production include the material things required to make vivid symbolic projections. Goffman (1959) referred to this as “expressive equipment” in role performance. For example, a convincing display of medical expertise depends on everything from the clinical setting to props such as stethoscopes and white lab coats to the physician’s posture, manner of speaking and facial expressions. In a music competition, the means of symbolic production available to competitors generally fall into two categories: musical and visual. I will address each category in turn.

The musical means of symbolic production

Unlike a singer, whose instrument is her own body, the instrumental musician relies on technology – the musical instrument – to produce her “voice.” For pianists, this dependence is an occupational hazard. Because travelling with a piano is a logistical nightmare, they have no choice but to adapt to whatever instrument is on stage at the concert venue and make the most of it. At competitions, the organization running the event is responsible for providing and maintaining the piano used.¹¹ One might think that competitors would accept this arrangement for the sake of fairness; if everyone performs on the same instrument, it eliminates a source of variation that complicates comparison. But the playing field is not so easily leveled. Whatever instrument is selected will inadvertently disadvantage some candidates. Piano construction is relatively standardized compared with keyboard instruments of the nineteenth century (Hamilton, 2007), but a Bösendorfer is still quite a different piano from a Yamaha, and preference for one over another tends to be regionalized.

¹¹ Technicians are on hand throughout the competition to tune pianos immediately before performances and, in the case of the *Cliburn*, to inspect pianos in hosts’ homes to ensure that they are up to standard.

Larger, more prestigious piano competitions have responded to this problem by providing a choice of instruments from one manufacturer (e.g., both Hamburg and New York Steinways) or a selection from different makers. But even this provision does not solve the issue of fairness; it merely transfers it over to the piano selection process. Competition officials are supplied with stopwatches to ensure that all candidates receive the same amount of time with the instruments, and selections are recorded (with signatures) in a well-protected notebook. For the candidate, the freedom gained through the expansion of choice is tempered by the burden of responsibility for a choice made under duress. The time allotted for candidates to make their choices is not enough to gain an intimate familiarity with an instrument, which means that they will not know until well into the performance what the piano can really do. In the hours leading up to that moment of truth, all they can do is wonder if they made the right choice.

String players, on the other hand, have the luxury of bringing their own instruments to competitions because they are relatively portable. However, this is not necessarily to their benefit, because not all string instruments are created equal. Competitors realize that they put themselves at a serious competitive disadvantage if they play on an instrument of inferior quality. For this reason, many borrow better instruments from teachers, violin shops or patrons. In the interest of fairness, some competitions have begun to take into consideration that not every competitor will be playing on a Stradavarius and that ignoring this disparity would introduce a bias against competitors from countries where economic or political conditions have made decent instruments hard to acquire. The *Rostropovich Cello Competition*, for example, has implemented an “instrument inspection” at the beginning of each cycle. Upon arrival, every competitor’s instrument is inspected by the competition’s luthier, much like the medical examination that precedes participation in the Olympics. The luthier’s assessment is recorded in a journal that is copied and distributed to the jury for

consultation during their deliberations. The *Rostropovich* not only takes this disparity into consideration; it also has gone a step toward correcting it. One of the prizes occasionally awarded by the jury is the use of a high-quality instrument for up to three years.¹²

While string players might be able to bring their own instruments to competitions, they cannot always bring their own pianists. Recognizing that most of the standard repertoire programmed for the “recital round” requires a piano accompaniment, competitions normally provide a staff accompanist for candidates whose usual musical partner is unable to attend. This provision introduces an occupational hazard similar to that of the concert pianist described previously. Staff accompanists are invariably overworked and underappreciated, and the time they have available for rehearsal is constrained not only by the schedule, but also by the organization’s rules. These are hardly ideal conditions to forge an artistic relationship, let alone one in which high stakes are involved. And yet many candidates prefer to let the competition choose the other member of their “performance team” (Goffman, 1959), even when they can afford the expense of inviting their own pianist.

For one respondent I interviewed, it was to avoid blame. Pianists can make or break the performance of a piece. For example, on one occasion I witnessed what Faulkner and Becker (2009) call a “train wreck”; an accompanist not only failed to catch the indicated tempo but could not adjust, giving the duo no choice but to stop in the middle of the piece and start again from the beginning. If the staff accompanist makes such a blatant mistake, it reflects poorly on the organization that hired him or her. But if the candidate was the one who invited the pianist, he is faulted for poor judgment on top of whatever penalty is incurred for a failed performance. Even if mishaps of this sort are avoided, playing in competition can strain what is otherwise a fruitful professional relationship. The odds are that most candidates

¹² The cello awarded in the 2005 competition was by Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume, dated 1852, on loan from the Le Fonds Instrumental Français.

will not advance to the final round, and yet the pianist must still clear his or her schedule of other engagements in case the partner is one of the lucky ones to progress. Few are willing to ask such a favor of their colleagues when other arrangements can be made, especially when the candidate is the only one who stands to gain from a positive outcome in the competition.

For musicians, the musical instrument is experienced phenomenologically as an extension of the physical body and a catalyst of the musical self. But when it comes to performing in competitions, the symbolic equipment that is given the most consideration is the choice of repertoire. First and foremost, competitors must demonstrate skill in the interpretation and communication of musical meaning. It is for this reason that competitors take so much care in selecting musical texts. A skilled performance of a musical work requires technical proficiency, a clear conception of the meanings contained in the score, a sensibility for the style, and an ability to adjust to the musical environment in which it will be performed. If any of these is lacking, the performance is likely to fail. When selecting what to play in a competition, the performer also has to take into account a host of other factors: what repertoire has been overplayed, what is currently “in their fingers” at performance level, what can be resurrected quickly, what best features their technical and musical strengths and what will show the greatest range of their abilities. And when weighing up these factors, they must bear in mind that they are playing not only for an “ordinary” audience of “real people,” as competitors call them, but also for a jury whose level of technical expertise is presumably high. I say “presumably” not out of spite, but because jury members do not always play the instruments they judge. Those who do are not necessarily more sympathetic with the competitor’s plight for having “been there”; as I will discuss in the next chapter, an intimate knowledge of the repertoire and instrumental technique can make a juror even more sensitive to the constructedness of fostered impressions.

Repertoire choices can also be made to cue the listener and to steer the typification process. Genius tropes can only be engaged if the musical texts performed support the desired image by supplying the performer with the appropriate meanings to embody. For example, a pianist wanting to come across as a fiery virtuoso will do better to program repertoire that is full of dramatic contrasts and that showcases visibly impressive acrobatics. Often this is not the most profound music, but it can be effective in the right setting. One competitor explained to me how particular compositional features provoke desired listener responses:

There are some pieces that are just good for competition. Like, for example, the second Kabalevsky cello concerto. It's a really stupid piece. But a lot of cellists have figured out that it's excellent for competitions, because it starts out with all these pizzicatos, and it's really intense. Then there's all this fast stuff. It's like, "Rrrrr, fast! Rrrrr, fast!" And everyone's like "oh, wow!" because they haven't heard it before. They're like, "Oh! They're playing this interesting piece, and it's so impressive!" (Competitor 10)

Although it has become increasingly common for piano competitions to remove restrictions on repertoire choices in the recital round, pianists still tend to gravitate toward the usual suspects when it comes to competition programming. "So many pianists play *Islamey*," one respondent complained, referring to the virtuoso showpiece by Balakirev. "[It's] the biggest piece of garbage in the world. But everybody puts it in their first round [program] because it's the hardest thing ever written. It's just a piece of trash, but it's really impressive. And if somebody can hit the notes in that piece, wow." This respondent went on to explain the calculated risk involved in performing these notorious "knuckle busters" in competitions:

There are some pieces which are known to pianists that if you play them perfectly, it's an automatic ticket into the next round. If you miss a note, it's an automatic ticket out of the first round. That would be like the Brahms *Paganini Variations*. It's one of the

hardest solo pieces, technically, out there. If you can play it perfectly, you pretty much guarantee you'll get into the next round. (Competitor 2)

Virtuosic repertoire is also effective in indexing the prodigy image and, to an extent, the hero trope as well. But when a musician prefers to register as a “cerebral” or intellectual performer, the program will contain quite a different assortment of music. Flashy or entertaining repertoire is shunned. Instead, the performer might organize a concert according to a concept, feature works by twentieth century avant-garde composers such as Schoenberg or Boulez, or take the risk of performing a single work that is as demanding of the audience's attention as it is of the performer's interpretive imagination (e.g., J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*).

However, to describe repertoire choice purely in these terms exaggerates the strategic aspect and reduces the complexity of meaning involved in deciding what to play in competition. Programming involves not only the selection of musical texts, but also their arrangement into a meaningful sequence. Take, for example, this competitor's explanation of how he decided what to play for a first-round recital:

I programmed those three pieces because they were related. They were all in the grand Romantic spirit, but also, the first piece ends on a G. And the second piece begins on a G. The second piece ends on a B-flat major chord. And the third piece begins enharmonically on the same thing. In the history of performance, Rachmaninoff produced this generation of pianists that would modulate between pieces. They'd end a piece, and they'd probably bow, and then they'd start in the key that they'd finished and work their way to the key of the next piece, and then they'd start the next piece. So there's some kind of precedent for having that sort of harmonic link between the pieces.

And probably nobody was listening for that or noticed it. But I noticed it and I enjoyed it. (Competitor 7)

These comments demonstrate how a short program can hold multiple layers of meaning. On the surface, the competitor's choice of repertoire was quite conventional, consisting entirely of works from the golden era of solo piano literature. Because pieces in the "grand Romantic spirit" provide a mixture of poignant and virtuosic writing, they are ideal (and popular) choices for competitions, even when candidates are free from the restrictions of a repertoire list. But the program also held together on a deeper level. The succession of pieces was determined by a musical logic, specifically, the beginning and ending tonality of each work. While admitting that this was probably imperceptible to most audience members, the performer felt it added another dimension to the program. It was also personally meaningful because it aligned him with a particular historical tradition and with a performance icon whom he admired.

Even more revealing than the musician's choice of repertoire is how it is performed. The performer's character is most exposed in the interpretation of musical texts. Because of the inherent ambiguities of notation, musical scores are not a series of instructions that can be followed to the letter. Adorno's term for musical performance is translated as "reproduction," but this is misleading if taken too literally. Elsewhere he emphasized that the musical text is "merely a coded script which does not guarantee unequivocal meaning" (Adorno, 2002:412). In other words, performing music is inherently and necessarily an interpretive act. It requires the ability to grasp patterns of musical signifiers in an abstract manner and realize them in a contingent performance situation.

This is not simply a matter of refining motor skills and performing stereotyped actions. As the musicologist Nicholas Cook (1990) explains, what distinguishes the

accomplished musician from the novice instrumentalist is the coordination of motor sequences with the analytical capacity to interpret musical texts. Indeed, an appreciation of the fundamental connection between the two is the basis of a musical training. For musicians, the technical aspects of musical performance are never simply practical solutions to navigating an instrument. They are the means through which musicians embody an interpretation of musical structure: “To adopt a fingering is to take up an interpretative stance in relation to the music in question” (Cook, 1990:81). This principle applies equally to every technical decision, from bowings and articulation to tempi and phrasing.

Because each piece requires countless decisions of this kind, the presentation of a musical text is at the same time a revelation of the self. One respondent expressed this point poetically by substituting “voice” for “self”:

The sound you create should be transferred from inside of you. It should be your voice that is transferred to music. And if it’s so, it’s kind of personal, and that’s really good.

That might be really unique, which is the most important thing. The sound you produce should be, you know, your own voice. (Competitor 4)

In locating the voice “inside,” this competitor employs a modern conceptualization of selfhood that Elias (2000) called *homo clausus*, meaning “closed man” or “closed personality.”¹³ Here the individual is understood to be “a little world in himself [sic]” existing “quite independently of the great world outside”; he experiences his “true self” as contained deep within him, surrounded by “an invisible wall” that divides his “being” from “everything outside, including every other human being” (p. 472). Elias never denied that *homo clausus* was the dominant self-image in modern Western societies, but he was deeply critical of philosophers and social scientists who took it as a given. If the self-in-a-container provided

¹³ For an extended discussion of the history of this concept in Western thought and its place in Elias’ work, see Mennell (1992).

the conceptual starting point, society could only be defined as a “collection of individuals completely independent of each other, whose true essence is locked within them and who therefore communicate only externally and from the surface” (p. 474). Competitor 4 might not have been building a social theory, but the implications of the *homo clausus* concept are reflected in his comments. In valuing the “personal” so highly, it is implied that intimate communication is difficult to achieve. And in emphasizing the “transference” of the “voice,” music is presented as a conduit for the self, a way to breach the invisible wall and unlock the core being within.

The self does not always transfer to music easily; a term from vocal performance can help to explain why. In the German tradition, the voice- category, or *fach*, does not just refer to vocal range (i.e., soprano, alto, tenor, and bass) but also to what “kind” or timbre of voice (e.g., a soubrette as opposed to a character or high dramatic soprano). These vocal elements, along with body type, age and experience, determine which operatic roles are best suited to a particular singer (McGinnis, 2010). The *fächer* are more than technical designations used to form opera companies; they are also strongly associated with personality types, both on and off stage. While instrumentalists have not developed anything analogous to the *fach* system, a similar pattern can be identified; performers describe gravitating to certain kinds of repertoire and feeling a special affinity for works that resonate with their self-concept in the same way that singers prefer roles that lie in their *fach*. This is not to suggest that the performer’s personality always needs be a perfect fit to what is seen to be in the score. Indeed, pieces are sometimes chosen because they allow the performer to reveal qualities that are suppressed in other social situations. For example, playing Rachmaninoff gave one respondent license to be uncharacteristically extroverted:

Rachmaninoff is just ... everything is just *raw*. [laughs] His music is something I strive to be but can’t in a normal situation. I cannot just let my insides flow out like that. I

tend to be on the reserved side; I try to be polite and nice. But his music is everything but that. So I think it brings out the side of me that I wish to be, and that I am allowed to be in a performance situation. (Competitor 6)

In this way, the musician can explore any number of “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986) through performance.

Modern selfhood is so fundamental in the world of classical music that its logic extends beyond the individual musician to string quartets and chamber ensembles as well. “A group needs to have a unified sense of self as an ensemble,” Competitor 12 insisted. “That’s why most groups don’t sound good in the first year. They haven’t figured out yet who they are, what they sound like, and what they believe in.” While self-knowledge of this kind is “important in any performance situation,” it is tested most severely in competitions. “They’re judging you and they want to know who you are. If it’s unclear, then they probably won’t want to hear more of you.” For this respondent, competing as a member of a group was “harder than going in as a soloist,” and it is easy to understand why. Musicians join ensembles at the very end of their formal training or as fully established professionals. The group’s collective self is therefore still very much in its formative stages when put to the same test as a soloist who can draw on a lifetime of experience. It is for this reason that the age limit for chamber music competitions is higher than for their solo counterparts.¹⁴

The drawback of this understanding of the musical self is that it precludes any degree of “role distance” (Goffman, 1961). Musicians demand from themselves a total identification with the impression fostered and uphold this extreme standard of authenticity even when it makes them especially vulnerable. For this reason, elimination from a competition can be

¹⁴ These conditions also make it possible for the prodigy genius type to apply to quartets composed of adult players. It is the length of time the ensemble’s collective self has had to form that is relevant and not the age of the individual players.

nothing other than a form of personal rejection. “I feel like I show my personality and who I am when I play,” one respondent explained. “It’s very much me, it’s very honest. So if they don’t like it, to me that means they don’t like me. So I take that very personally.” Another respondent agreed, recalling how a disappointing result in a competition temporarily extinguished any desire to play her instrument. “These things are so depressing if you don’t do well,” she sighed. “Everybody takes them differently. I think people get depressed, especially really intense people. How could you not? You take it as a self-worth issue.” This last comment about self-worth should not be dismissed too quickly as the whimpering of a neophyte tending her bruises; it is pointing to something quite different. For these respondents, entering a competition means volunteering to be judged in the broadest sense of the term. Because the moral element of performance is inseparable from the aesthetic, they take the outcome of a competition not only as a commentary on their level of musical achievement but also as an evaluation of their character. As we will see in the next chapter, they are not wrong to do so.

The visual means of symbolic production

In earlier years, many competitions used a curtain to obstruct the jury’s view of the candidates and identified competitors with numbers, as is the current practice in orchestral auditions (Alink, 1990) and brass band competitions in the United Kingdom. Today, music competitions are never blind. Even the preselections, which used to be conducted through submitted audio recordings, are now commonly videotaped. It is therefore not just the aural aspect of musical performance that is put to the test in music competitions; the visual element, in all of its complexity, comes into play as well. Leppert (1993) has correctly argued that the visual element in art music – the “sight of sound” – is usually overlooked in music scholarship:

Music, despite its phenomenological sonoric ethereality, is an embodied practice, like dance and theatre. That its visual-performative aspect is no less central to its meanings than are the visual components of these other performing arts is obvious in musical theatre – opera, masque and so forth (though this linkage is little discussed in musicological literature) – but the connection between sight and sound in other sorts of art music remains untheorized. (P. xxi)

Leppert makes this connection in his research by analyzing the representation of music-making in visual art. In the following section I will attempt to make the connection by analyzing the meanings displayed visually by musicians in the competition context.

Although Leppert is right to point an accusatory finger at musicologists, they are not the only ones guilty of overlooking the visual means of symbolic production. Classical musicians are just as notorious for downplaying this aspect of performance. As the true inheritors of nineteenth-century Romantic aesthetics, performers aim to be “simultaneously transparent to the work and vividly present to the audience” (Hunter, 2005:362), but the vividness is to be achieved through the creativity of interpretive nuance, not the theatrics of visual display. When asked about the visual aspect of presentation in competition, many respondents initially thought that I was asking about concert dress, which they clearly considered a frivolous matter. “I don’t think about it too much,” one respondent said dismissively before going on to suggest that appearance is a gendered concern:

I’ve always had the impression that girls had to think about it more because they have more choice as far what they can wear. I mean, guys just wear suits and tuxedos. Some of them wear strange things. There’s a French pianist who always wears red socks or something with his black tuxedo. I’m personally not interested in making those kinds of

statements. I just try to do whatever's traditional, nothing to distract from the music.

(Competitor 7)

Another respondent agreed that interest in concert dress is a distraction, but blamed the media for making it an issue:

Such a huge deal is made about [competitors'] gowns in the newspaper: who's wearing what, how much it's worth, and blah blah blah. I have to say I'm not very into it, compared to some people. It's important to look good, but you don't have to go obsess about it. You should have a gown that fits you, that flatters your figure. I had a gown like that. I wore it for three years for every single important concert until somebody told me that I was wearing the same gown in every photo. I thought if some random person noticed this, maybe I should get another one. So I got a purple gown and wore that for a long time. (Competitor 3)

Contrary to the gender stereotype, this competitor did not describe taking pleasure in fashion, but put in the minimum effort required. Another respondent went a step farther, arguing that an unconventional or striking appearance in competitions was not only shallow, but also offensive:

The judges are not looking for some kind of circus-type to perform or to make people laugh. They want to find somebody who's sending a message which is impossible to deny. But the question is: how do you send the message? Through throwing your hands around, fancy dresses, or a haircut, and making this your most important thing?

Because the judges of good competitions are world-class musicians and professionals, I think it's really difficult to convince them with superficial effects like dresses or smiling all the time. You can do it, but it's dangerous. Because they are serious musicians themselves, and they're looking for natural music, mostly. (Competitor 4)

Through comments such as these, where the visual is trivialized and gimmicks are condemned, competitors endeavor to show that they are serious musicians whose highest priority is the “music itself” – what Green (1997) calls the “inherent” meanings of the score, and what I have called the musical system of collective representations. But even the staunch purist will begrudgingly concede that the audiences relies rely to some extent on gestures and facial expressions to interpret musical meaning, whether or not they should. Studies in the psychology of music suggest that this is in fact the case, and that performers neglect the visual dimension at their peril. For example, Williamon (1999) demonstrated through a controlled experiment that an audience will score the identical solo cello performance lower when a music stand partially obstructs the view of the performer. Neither is the jury’s evaluation immune from the influence of the visual. Da Costa Coimbra and Davidson (Da Costa Coimbra & Davidson, 2001) found that physical appearance figured as strongly as musical expression in the assessment of college-level vocal recitals. Jurors made judgments about the performer’s personality and sense of self based on the nonverbal information displayed through “stage presence” – her manner of walking on stage and bowing, her body’s demeanor in the physical labor of producing sound, her style of dress and her facial expressions. According to Tsay (2013), musical professionals might claim to rely more on sound than sight in making judgments about musical performance; but in the series of experiments she devised, they were more accurate in selecting actual winners of live music competitions on the basis of silent video recordings than with sound recordings or recordings with both sound and video.

Some might argue that physical appearance is more important for singers than for instrumentalists and that the jurors of vocal performance are perfectly justified in examining the body of the singer because that is the instrument. Others, such as Green (1997), would point to the cultural expectation for singers to have visual appeal. I have found that the visual

element is just as important in assessments of instrumental performance. Instrumentalists themselves read a great deal from the nonverbal communication of the performer and use this information to anticipate the quality of performance before a note is even sounded:

A juror once told me that he could often tell who would make it to the next round and how people were going to play just by the way they walked on stage and bowed. Yeah, just by the confidence that was displayed. I don't disagree, actually. A lot of times you see somebody come on stage and you just know it's going to be good. [Laughs] And sometimes you see somebody come on and bow and you just know it's going to be terrible. [Laughs] And then there are those times when somebody is completely unpredictable, when their playing blows you away and you never thought it would.

(Competitor 2)

This remark suggests that even though occasions for classical music performance are highly ritualized (Small 1998), the manner in which prescribed actions are performed can communicate a great deal about the performer. A number of interviewees were acutely aware of the impression that their demeanor could make on listeners:

I feel like anything I can do to make the judges feel confident in my playing is only going to help me. I just want to do whatever I can from the beginning to put them at ease so that they sit back and be, like "Oh, this is going to be good!" Because then, before I even start, it gives me a little bit of an edge. They're not waiting for me to screw up because they don't think I'm going to. (Competitor 10)

I always smile when I bow. Even if I have a bad performance, I make sure that I smile to the audience to acknowledge them, as if saying thank you very much for listening. It's not supposed to be the smile of "I performed really well; hence I'm going to smile now." It should be as though it doesn't matter if it was a bad performance. There are

people who frown after a bad performance, and it puts the audience in a solemn mood too. (Competitor 6)

This communication is not just directed toward others. The impression displayed through stage presence is performed as much for the self as it is for the audience. For one respondent, it did not matter if the competition was held in a small room containing only a small panel of judges. Some elements of stage presence were essential:

I wouldn't bow. But I would walk out as if I were on stage, like I was about to bow.

Because it helps me too. All of that helps me feel, like, okay – this is “go” time! This is not casual. This is for real. (Competitor 10)

Concert traditions are among the first lessons of a musician's training, which typically occur in early childhood for pianists and string players. After learning the format of the ritual (entering and exiting the stage, how to acknowledge applause, etc.), the developing musician gradually personalizes these stereotyped actions by incorporating the advice of teachers and by imitating admired performers. One competitor fondly remembered the pointers given to him by his very first teacher, many of which he still used. For example, he was careful not to “run to the piano as if it were a security blanket” when entering the stage, which helped to remind him that he “shouldn't feel vulnerable” when doing something as simple as walking. By the time they reach the stage of international competitions, these mannerisms have become almost second nature, which explains in part why competitors invariably insist that stage presence should come “naturally.”

But as Competitor 4 perceptively remarked: “You have to be natural, but it's not easy to be just natural, right? You have to become natural, through the experience of hundreds of concerts and competitions.” In other words, “being natural” is not a default state, but an achievement; it is an ongoing, reflexive process. Performers can hardly be blamed, however,

for marshaling out a discourse of naturalness because it is essential both to their claim to authenticity and to their aspiration to performance genius. These are also an inheritance from Romantic aesthetics. The notion that the performer should be able to grasp music's expressive content instinctually, or by "sudden inspiration," became common in nineteenth-century treatises on music (Hunter 2005). We should hardly be surprised that contemporary musicians extend the ideal of spontaneity and instinctive sympathy to other aspects of performance. For example, one respondent expressed clear reservations regarding the attempt to attach particular meanings to various gestures, as though stage presence were a form of picture acting:

Some people, who have too much time on their hands, analyze what kind of signals you're giving to the audience. Like if you bow away from the piano, you're being a little more self-centered. Whereas if you bow with your hand on the piano, you're acknowledging the fact that it's not just about you, but the piano is also part of the picture. Then there are the signals you give when you're actually playing the piano. It got a little too technical, so I don't even remember – I can't really care too much about it. But I heard that when you're playing and looking up and to the right, you're paying attention to the musical things you want to come out of your performance. While if you look up and to the left, you're listening more to your sound and making sure that your technique is right. Something of that sort, I can't remember. I wasn't sure I bought into it, but it's interesting. (Competitor 6)

This respondent could not emphasize enough how much he resisted a "stage presence by numbers" approach on the grounds that it was mechanical and calculated. He shared with other respondents a belief that the onus is on the performers to do more than manipulate the audience by pointing to certain meanings; they must embody them with sincerity.

But the performers need not worry quite so much about becoming too calculating, because a great deal of visual symbolic production is beyond their control. As Goffman (1959) established, the presentation of self involves expressions both intentionally “given” and unconsciously “given off,” and the audience typically relies on the latter to gauge the reliability of the former. Along with dress, facial expressions and other manipulable devices of stage presence, the performer’s body is itself a text that is read by the audience. The expressions given off through physical characteristics can either reinforce or compromise the image conveyed by the performer. For each of the genius tropes discussed above, there are cultural expectations of how the performer should look. And, although they are never set in stone, certain visual signifiers help the performer to “look the part” of a given trope.

For the prodigy, the critical sign of credibility is a small body. For example, a respondent who started studying the cello at age three believed that her petite stature went a long way toward explaining her early success:

I did some smaller competitions in my town ... I think I won them because I was ... little, basically. I was sort of like a freak show, because I was just so small! (Competitor 10)

The delicacy of the female prodigy’s body is often further emphasized with a carefully manicured appearance. This produces a doll-like effect, which we can see in Sand’s (2000) description of the first time that she saw the violinist Sarah Chang, then six years old, at a master class with Dorothy DeLay at the Juilliard School in New York:

Sarah was wearing a white party dress, white stockings, and white patent shoes, and had her hair tied back with a pink satin bow. She was tiny and totally charming. (P. 161)

The smallness of a male prodigy's body, on the other hand, merely emphasizes the tender age of the performer, making his effortless execution of demanding repertoire all the more astonishing. For example, one respondent confessed that he was both impressed and discouraged by a YouTube video of a prodigy brought to his attention by his teacher:

He was eight years old, and he played like he was thirty-five! His feet were still dangling from the chair, and he was playing this Liszt piece with such facility and artistry. It was right after my lesson. And I was thinking – why am I watching this? I want to quit. Because if there are eight year olds out there who can play like this, and I'm struggling to get my lesson repertoire ready in time, I mean, why am I doing this?
(Competitor 11)

Sometimes the cultural expectations for the prodigy trope are so strong that they are forced on performers against their will. For example, the violinist Joshua Bell complained that the press kept printing articles claiming that he was fourteen even after his eighteenth birthday (Sand 2000:157). But no matter how much the public wants a young prodigy, this sort of fiction can only be sustained for as long as the performer's physical appearance supports it.

For the fire-breathing virtuoso and the conquering hero, the performer's physical characteristics serve merely to underscore the body language that displays the defining meanings of each trope. For this, the performer is almost entirely dependent on the properties of the musical instrument to provide the opportunity structure for meaningful visual display. Historically, the piano and the violin have held the greatest symbolic potential. In the nineteenth century the piano served as a perfect metaphor and vehicle for bourgeois subjectivity because it was “a self-sufficient, all-conquering machine” that could replace an entire orchestra; “on no other instrument except the organ (where issues of portability and repertoire limited the possibilities) could one person impose his or her will more completely

on the music” (Winter 2004:17). As discussed earlier, DeNora (2006) has argued that Beethoven subverted aristocratic values and provided an object lesson in heroic agency by demanding a more visceral and aggressive approach to the keyboard in his piano repertoire. Liszt continued this legacy by taking violent performance choreography to a whole new level: “By amplifying vertical gestures into the keys, introducing stormy embellishments, and mimicking the musical drama with facial expressions and physical movements, he made virtuosity an agonistic spectacle of domination and triumph that invited listeners to imagine the performance as a battle, the virtuoso as a valiant warrior” (Gooley 2000:62).¹⁵ For the violin, it was the ballet of the bow arm that evoked power, military heroism and masculinity for nineteenth-century audiences consumed with the cult of Napoléon. The new “Cramer” bow design, which was straighter, longer and sharper-tipped than the previous model, was easily transformed in the popular imagination into a rapier or sword wielded by the violinist like a general commanding his troops (Kawabata 2004).

Contemporary audiences might draw on different symbolic systems than their nineteenth-century counterparts, but the significance of the musician’s performing body has hardly diminished. Musicians who play instruments such as the bassoon, the tuba or the triangle might be virtuosos comparable to their counterparts on the violin or the piano. But because they have a limited possibility of gestural display, or have associations with symbolic codes that are at odds with the virtuoso image, they compromise the performer’s claims to this trope. The organ is an interesting case in point because it was once a great virtuoso instrument. Today, however, the organist has a great deal more difficulty engaging the fire-breather trope. This is in part because of the organ’s association with the church, the

¹⁵ Beethoven has a well-deserved reputation for being the “keyboard strangler” whose ferocious pounding of the keyboard invariably damaged the delicate wood-framed instruments of his day. It is less well-known that Liszt was just as notorious a “string-breaker” and “keyboard-shatterer.” When he performed in public concerts, Liszt kept two pianos on stage because one instrument was unlikely to make it through the entire performance. For contemporary accounts of Liszt’s creative acts of destruction, see Gooley (2000).

Mephistophelian's semiotic opposite. But it is also because the placement of the organ console usually hides the performer's body from the audience's view.¹⁶

However, the instrument is not the performer's only resource for producing a spectacle. Dress can also provide potent signifiers for the fire-breather trope. Contrary to conventional wisdom, flamboyant wardrobe has not become the exclusive reserve of popular entertainers such as Elton John, Liberace or Lady Gaga. For example, one interviewee responded to the question about the visual aspect of performance by launching into an extended description of a pianist who was not afraid to cultivate a striking appearance. In contrast to the competitor quoted above who shunned musicians who made "fancy dresses or a haircut" the most important part of their "message," this respondent expressed both affection and respect for a flamboyant pianist whom I will call "Alexander":

Alexander is an amazing pianist who likes to dress up for an audience. He never wears all black [which is traditional concert attire]. He prefers to wear a yellow suit with an orange tie. There's a popular story about when he competed in a Liszt Totentanz competition while in music school. He enters the stage wearing all black, which the audience finds very strange because that's way too conservative for him. Everybody is whispering "What? Huh?" until we all realized he was wearing a black cape. The Totentanz, you know, is a piece inspired by the Devil. So, right before he starts, he whips off the cape and throws it on the ground – to reveal that he's wearing all red! This is a huge gimmick that completely disgusts some people. Others who know him a little better think it's charming.

¹⁶ The instrument with the least chance of engaging the virtuoso trope is the probably the kazoo. Indeed, the ridiculousness of this scenario has been exploited by Peter Schickele under his comedic compositional persona, P.D.Q. Bach.

Few competitors take the visual element as far (or as literally) as “Alexander”; Ivo Pogorelich is an obvious example. After striding onto the stage in leather trousers and a white ruffled shirt for the 1980 Chopin Competition, he played so “wildly and passionately” in the eyes of one New York Times critic that he seemed to “ignor[e] the score”; by flaunting this “sacrilegious style,” he offended some jurors enough so that he did not advance to the finals (Darnton, 1980:A1). The controversy surrounding Pogorelich’s elimination will be discussed at more length in the next chapter. But the story about “Alexander” deserves further consideration here because it is instructive in showing how to achieve a congruence of meanings in various elements of performance.

First, there was the obvious symbolic connection between the musical text and concert dress: the (Slavic) performer wore a Dracula costume to play a piece about the dance of death. On a more abstract level, however, “Alexander” was conveying the fire-breather image, and in this endeavor he could not have devised a more fitting tribute for the archetypal virtuoso who composed that musical text. Instead of a cape, Liszt would throw his gloves and his handkerchief in front of the piano as he entered. This sort of gesture, as well as Liszt’s distinctive use of his body while playing the piano, polarized the audience just as effectively. Furthermore, the spectacle is integral to the performance experience. As the respondent describing “Alexander” went on to explain,

There’s one thing that’s for sure about Alexander, which is that the visual, his character, his poise, and his personality completely affect the way that audiences perceive him ... Alexander without his visual is kind of hard to imagine. He’s the ultimate performer with his wardrobe and his gimmicks and everything. You can’t just stick him on a cassette tape and say “this is Alexander” because that’s not really who he is. (Competitor 2)

Just as “Alexander” cannot be captured by an audio recording, Schumann wrote of Liszt that he had to be seen as well as heard “for if Liszt played behind the screen, a great deal of poetry would be lost.”¹⁷

The intellectual trope might not require the same sort of theatrics as the fire-breather, but the visual is just as emphasized, ironically, because it is so stubbornly neglected and conscientiously denied. For this trope, typical signs of credibility include a slightly unkempt or bookish appearance or, even better, eccentric habits. For example, Glenn Gould’s off-stage eccentricities contributed a great deal to his legendary status. A recluse who would sleep through the day, Gould refused to shake anyone’s hand for fear of contamination and would continue to wrap himself up in a beret, earmuffs, a scarf, overcoat and leather gloves throughout the summer months. But eccentricities are hardly confined to off-stage behavior; the intellectual can also display an expressive body language at the instrument no less theatrical than the fire-breather’s. Gould, for example, would sway, hum audibly, and beat time with his free hand while playing. Mannerisms of this sort can come across just as dramatically (or as affectedly) as those of the virtuoso:

The greatest is when pianists vibrate [imitate a string player’s vibrato technique on a piano key]. That crosses the line. It annoys the heck out of me. You can’t vibrate on a piano! And they say “Can’t you hear it?” No! You can do it on a clavichord, because the hammer mechanism actually touches the string. But on a piano, it’s more like an idea to help you envision or hear the phrase. (Competitor 11)

Some intellectuals eschew exaggerated body language, keeping a still body at the instrument and using an economy of motion to produce sound. This sort of highly controlled physical presentation is often described as an abstention from the visual element of performance. But

¹⁷ Quoted in Gooley (Gooley, 2004:11, n.8)(2004:11, n.8).

it is more accurately understood as a tremendously expressive signifier of the modern, severe and puritan style that this performer wishes to represent. That so many are “blind” to the signification of the intellectual’s visual performance does not indicate its absence. Rather, it serves to demonstrate how automatically its meaning is grasped.

Gender, on the other hand, is not so easily overlooked. Underlying the visual signifiers produced through comportment and physical appearance are the meanings given off by the social characteristics of the performer’s body; these can also reinforce or undermine the image conveyed. The following section will focus on how cultural expectations regarding gender performance complicate the embodiment of musical genius.

Gender and musical genius

The discourse surrounding classical music is centered on the ideal of autonomous musical meaning, which should render the social characteristics of the performer irrelevant. But the effects of gender, age and race cannot be avoided, especially in live performances where the audience can gaze on the body of the performer. As Green (1997) has argued, the gender of the musical performer is not merely an extramusical association; it enters into the interpretation of musical meaning, becoming intrinsic to the listening experience. Male and female musicians have different relationships to their audiences because the bodily display involved in the performance of music is enmeshed in gender ideologies.

In Green’s view, the acceptance of women in public musical roles has depended in large part on whether musical performance has symbolically resonated with or challenged institutionalized gender roles. Although the degree of gender exclusion varies according to a host of factors including the type of instrument, the performance context and the style of music performed, some general patterns can be identified across genres and historical

periods. The female singer, for example, has been socially acceptable because she generally affirms patriarchal definitions of femininity as “susceptible, natural, desirable and dangerous” (p. 54); because she makes music with her own voice, she remains “subjected to the vicissitudes of the body” (p. 86). The female instrumentalist, on the other hand, is disruptive of femininity. Her competence with musical technology offers instead “a femininity which controls, a femininity which alienates itself in an object and impinges on the world” (p. 54). The male instrumentalist, in contrast, enjoys the privilege of being “metaphorically transparent” to the audience because the qualities of instrumental performance affirm his masculinity (p. 54). His gender only provokes comment when he enters a performance context that is overly feminized. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this is hardly a danger in competitions, where the masculinized realms of sports and combat have become the dominant symbolic frameworks.

Female competitors are well aware not only that their gender is “visible” to the audience, but also that their physical attractiveness is factored into the listener’s experience. “I think that appearance is so important,” one respondent admitted in an interview. “If people are tone deaf in the audience, which is a lot of people, you have to make them want to look at you for some other reason. So if you look bad, I mean, then you’re just done!” she laughed. “Then no one wants to look at you!” However, selecting concert attire is no laughing matter. As she went on to explain, many elements have to be considered: “I try to find something that is fashionable, looks good, makes me look good, makes my body type look good, but is not too sexy. Because I don’t like that either. A little bit is OK.” Finally, there is the fear of standing out for the “wrong” reasons: “I was happy that a lot of the girls [in this competition] wore pants [trousers] because I was worried about the fact that I wasn’t wearing a dress or a skirt.”

This last comment should not be dismissed too quickly as a girlish preoccupation with being the odd one out. Patrons of classical music are notoriously conservative, both in the sense of conforming to traditional gender roles and in the sense that respect for important occasions is believed to be demonstrated through formal attire. And, as Green has argued, female musicians often compensate for the disruptive effect of performing instruments through a bodily display that affirms femininity. Indeed, since the nineteenth century, successful female instrumentalists have been described as beautiful women and fine players. Apparently, then, Competitor 7 (quoted above) was right; the visual aspect of performance is more of an issue for women. But this observation, while accurate, is also an oversimplification because it overlooks the female musician's dilemma. In satisfying the cultural expectation of an appropriately feminine appearance, the performer can draw more attention to her bodily display, which often compromises her authority as a serious musician. Listeners tend to doubt the ability and the commitment of the female performer who comes across as investing too much effort in her appearance. Visual presentation is therefore a complex calculation of risk involving many factors:

I never know what to wear [in competitions]. Because I want to show respect, and be formal. But sometimes you're playing the first round at ten in the morning. You don't really want to wear just pants and a shirt, but you don't want to wear your ball gown either, you know? Because it's ten in the morning! And if there are two rounds on the same day, do you change? Or do you wear the same thing? Because sometimes people say that of course you change, because it's a different round, and it helps give you a mental distinction between what had just happened and what is going to happen next. But then you wonder if the jury is thinking [grumbling] "this is not a fashion show."
(Competitor 10)

Appearance is not the only aspect of performance in which a delicate balance of femininity must be found. In terms of their playing, female musicians garner praise less for being genderless at the instrument than for achieving a desirable combination of masculinity and femininity. One respondent had mixed feelings about succeeding in striking this balance:

Everyone has told me I play like a man. That I look feminine, that I look lovely at the piano, and that I sound like a man. On my good days. On the one hand, I take it as a compliment. On the other hand, I say no! I sound like me, not a man or a woman. But honestly, there is a degree of truth to that, I'm sorry to say. There is a type of playing that's very nice and pretty and emotional, but it's very powerless. (Competitor 14)

This competitor's comments indicate that the gendering of musical performance runs much deeper than physical appearance and bodily display. The influence of patriarchal gender ideologies in this respect is almost as striking as the longevity of Romantic legacies. In her discussion of Marie Pleyel's exceptional career in mid-nineteenth-century Paris, Ellis (1997) shows how this pianist similarly elevated herself to the status of "honorary man." Through her playing Pleyel produced an image that "conform[ed] to the Romantic concept of genius as containing simultaneously the masculine and feminine elements of control and passion" (p. 377). Critical response was so enthusiastic that reviewers "ran out of superlatives" to describe her playing (p. 359). But if Pleyel's acclaim was so great that she was often favorably compared with Liszt, why has she not enjoyed the same legendary status? No doubt the careful reader will have noticed (perhaps even resentfully) that up to this point, all of the archetypal performers discussed have been male. This raises an important question: is this an accident of history, or are images of musical genius inherently masculinized?

For some time feminist scholars have argued that traditional images of genius ought to be rejected on the grounds that they are contaminated beyond repair, having been used for

too long to entrench and justify male domination (see Battersby, 1989). In terms of musical genius, some tropes have certainly been more culturally available to women than others. Among the genius scripts discussed here, those described as “passive” have been less problematically engaged by women. Historical examples of celebrated female prodigies are as abundant as contemporary ones (e.g., Nannerl Mozart, Fanny Mendelssohn, Midori, Han-Na Chang). Female musicians have had also moderate success in engaging the virtuoso trope.¹⁸ As Ellis (1997) has shown, nineteenth-century (male) critics often enthusiastically praised the technical accomplishments of female pianists. In their reviews, metaphors describing the female pianist as a prophetess or priestess were hardly in short supply, suggesting that women were considered suitable vessels for musical truth. But such praise was directed mainly to the performance of a feminized Classical repertoire that had acquired a canonical but subprofessional status.¹⁹ When women attempted to “translate the oracle of such Gods as Beethoven, Mendelssohn, etc.,” they were usually accused of putting on airs and ridiculed for tackling repertoires beyond their comprehension.²⁰

Romantic aesthetics provides some cultural support for the female musician in the role of vessel, but the same cannot be said for the role of creator. For this reason women have encountered much more difficulty engaging genius scripts that present them as powerful agents and possessors of will, a pattern most powerfully demonstrated in the low

¹⁸ Indeed, the term *virtuosa*, used to describe female musicians of extraordinary talent, came into use as early as the sixteenth century. Adding more evidence to Green’s (1997) argument, the professional singers in the *concerto della donna* of Duke Alfonso II of Ferrara were among the first women to acquire this designation. While the term *virtuoso* referred to extraordinary talent in composition *and* performance in male musicians, its female counterpart, the *virtuosa*, refers only to performance. See *Grove Music Online*, s.v., “Virtuosa” by Ellen Harris (www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/49405), accessed 17 June 2007.

¹⁹ Male pianists also specialized in Classical repertoire in the nineteenth century, but they too occupied a degraded status. Ellis (1997) quotes an intriguing article from 1861 in which music critic Gustave Chouquet used the intriguing term “fingerless virtuoso” to describe this kind of pianist, ranking him third in a four-tier hierarchy of professional competence. (First in his estimation was the virtuoso who composes, followed by the virtuoso who only performs others’ compositions; the Classical pianist was superior only to the accompanist, an entirely supportive role.) The image of the “fingerless” virtuoso is a striking contrast to caricatures of Liszt with grotesquely elongated fingers, or Dantan’s bust of Thalberg with octopus-like hands that had sprouted extra fingers. This suggests to me that the pianist’s “fingers” could function as a symbol of virility and masculinity.

²⁰ Nineteenth-century critic Stephen Heller, quoted in Ellis (Ellis, 1997:371).

representation of women in composition. Green (1997) argues that composition has been the most gender-exclusive of musical roles because it emphasizes the “cerebral” aspects of music: “once women begin to compose, it is hardly any longer the body that features in the activity at all, for composition involves a metaphorical display of the power of mind. This cerebral power conflicts with patriarchal constructions of femininity to the extent that, when it is harnessed by women, it produces a threat to the sexual order” (p. 88). The same can be said of the intellectual trope, which similarly emphasizes the power of the mind in the interpretive creativity of the performer as well as the objective approach in performing. A woman engaging this trope therefore risks contradicting patriarchal notions of women as subjective, irrational, and emotional.

Nowhere are gender ideologies more apparent than with the hero trope. In the nineteenth century the cultural resistance to the heroic female performer stemmed in part from the gendering of certain musical instruments as female. A woman playing the violin or the piano in a public setting risked offending the taboo on homosexuality (Kawabata, 2004) or hermaphroditism (Ellis, 1997), a danger that could only be attenuated if she was seen to be imitating (though not embodying) a masculine display of strength, power, and virility. But such meanings were best displayed through musical texts that feature military and heroic topoi. And, as we have seen, this repertoire was generally off limits for women pianists on the grounds that it demanded a physicality that compromised feminine decorum (DeNora, 2004, 2006) and was simply beyond their comprehension.²¹ On the violin, a handful of Paganini’s female contemporaries performed the tremendously popular military concerti of the day, but only one earned herself the title of “Joan of Arc” among the “Scipios,

²¹ The boundary between gendered repertoires was not just informally produced and policed; it was also institutionalized in music education. As Ellis (1997) describes, the Paris conservatoire selected quite different works for the competitions that concluded each year of study.

Alexanders, and Napoléons of the violin.”²² Otherwise, the sight of a female violinist was unsettling for nineteenth-century audiences. In spite of their skill, they were described in reviews as ungratifying, improper and ill-suited to the instrument (Kawabata, 2004).

If the female performer was seen in terms of conquest, it was in terms of her sexual power. A woman could conquer her audience through coquetry, her musical performance becoming an “act of seduction” (Ellis, 1997). Since the concept of coquetry no longer holds much currency in postfeminist sexual relations, it is helpful to recall Simmel’s (Simmel & Wolff, 1950) definition:

The nature of feminine coquetry is to play up, alternately, allusive promises and allusive withdrawals – to attract the male but always to stop short of a decision, and to reject him but never to deprive him of all hope. The coquettish woman enormously enhances her attractiveness if she shows her consent as an almost immediate possibility but is ultimately not serious about it. (P. 50)

In musical performance the successful coquette was said to possess a masterful control over emotion in herself and others. She could arouse feelings in the listener through the sincere portrayal of emotion without giving in to excessive sensibility, a quality that was also attributed to the fire-breathing virtuoso: “his extraordinary powers give him the appearance of spontaneous feeling and the ability to arouse momentary feeling in others” (Sennett, 1977:202). The less convincing coquettes were accused of manipulating the audience or being overly emotional. If the association with such feminine traits was not enough to undermine her authority, the insinuation of calculation, a cardinal sin in the era of Romantic aesthetics, was equally polluting. Again there is a striking similarity to the virtuoso, whose authenticity was brought into question through accusations of manipulation in the form of

²² *Allgemeinen Wiener Musikzeitung* (1843), quoted in Kawabata (Kawabata, 2004:100).

charlatanry. These parallels suggest that, in reference to female soloists, the hero and virtuoso tropes were elided, producing a uniquely feminized image of the performer as seductress or siren.

An infelicitous context

As discussed in the Introduction, “fused performances” (Alexander, 2004) are those rare occasions when all the elements of performance fall into alignment and meanings are conveyed as effortlessly as they are interpreted. In musical performance, fusion requires two reciprocal processes: a cultural extension of musical text and musician to the audience, and a psychological identification of the audience with the performer on stage. So far as performers are concerned, the first part of the equation is their responsibility. To this end, performers spend endless hours in rehearsal refining those elements of performance in their power. Practicing, however, is merely improving the odds. While the means of symbolic production can be organized in the privacy of the practice room, experimentation with the *mise-en-scène* can only occur in front of an audience. Every performance occasion will present its own set of contingencies, which is why competitors avoid performing new repertoire in competition at all costs. This is not merely an issue of accuracy. Fusing with a text involves an intense familiarity that can only be developed over time. As one respondent explained:

I think a piece can be played in a perfect way once the piece becomes you, yourself. But it takes time. I have to feel with a piece as though I composed it myself, somehow. I just have to know it so well. Then I can say my word in the competition with this piece. But if the piece is new, every performance is a new experience, and different things happen in different performances. Once you’ve been on the stage with this piece ten times, there are certain things you already know, like your own concept of this work and its place in the whole program. (Competitor 4)

Another respondent expressed the same idea but through a revealing military metaphor:

One thing I would not play in competition is something that is not battle-tested. That means it's been through its one or two bad performances ... It's been through those awkward moments. Any piece that is in that category should not be played in competition. I mean, what's the point if you want to play your best? That's why people recycle pieces over and over again. (Competitor 12)

However, the challenge is that, even when "recycling" repertoire, the performer must never give the impression of its being so rehearsed that it has lost all traces of spontaneity. A respondent in the process of preparing for a competition explained,

I'm going back to all the old pieces I've played in the past. When you haven't played a piece for a while, you have to go back and start from the beginning, learning all the notes to make sure it's secure. But at the same time, you have to try to keep this freshness in your mind about the piece. Because, even though you've played it for so long, it still needs to sound fresh. It can't sound like it's been practiced, and that you've played it for so long. It needs to sound new and invigorated. (Competitor 11)

Over and above fusing with the text, performers aim to establish a connection with the audience. To this end, they develop a heightened sensitivity to audience response. While the listeners need not always be at the forefront of his or her mind, the performer is constantly interpreting and reacting to the quality of the listeners' attention as he or she is playing:

If you're playing something slow, or something soft and introverted, and people start making noise, you think that they're not interested. So you do something interesting to get their attention. Or maybe you play softer. But if they're very quiet, and everything is quiet, then it's a wonderful feeling. Somebody told me once that a standing ovation is

not the greatest compliment an audience can give. The greatest compliment is silence while you're playing. Then they're really listening. (Competitor 7)

Another respondent emphasized the world of difference between a passive silence and the intense quiet of engrossment:

When you're making a special moment, the audience responds and sends their vibes back to you. When you feel that, you want to be more creative. Because when you play a concert, you can either play note perfect or you can take chances. You decide in a split second whether you can do well enough without taking chances, or if you want to do something that is so special that it would make a unique, unforgettable moment. It's the difference between a good concert and a great performance. That happens probably one in ten concerts. And it depends on the audience. If they don't respond, if they just sit there, even if they're quiet, you just don't get the vibes and you just don't feel the atmosphere. There's no adrenaline going. You can play a perfectly fine recital, but it won't be special. (Competitor 3)

While this respondent described the cultural extension to the audience in terms of metaphysical "vibrations," another described a synchronization of bodily processes:

[Sometimes while you're playing] you sense that the audience is breathing with you. You can feel that "ah." You can almost hear it sometimes. [My quartet] just played this concert with this really friendly audience, and at the end of this movement, there was this huge sigh from the audience. We've experienced that before, but this was really unusual. It was an audible sigh. And we were like, [gasp] "OK! That's amazing!" You can tell if people are really with you. You can feel it in the room. (Competitor 12)

These comments provide a striking illustration of what DeNora (2000) calls musical entrainment, which refers to the process of regularizing or modifying the body and its

processes in relation to musical elements. In his mechanistic model of ritual interaction, Collins (2004) argues that it is precisely this synchronization that charges ritual participants with emotional energy.

Competitions might seek to reward those musicians who can achieve this intense connection with the audience, but the performance context they provide almost guarantees that it will never happen. It is the jury, not the performer, who has the power to define the situation. And, when the usual power dynamics of the concert ritual is altered, fusion is undermined. In competitions that adopt the format of auditions, the performer loses almost all control over the *mise-en-scène*. Not only is a repertoire list imposed to restrict the choices of texts that can be performed; the jury also decides how much of each selection will be heard and in what order. Indeed, until the 1990s, competition rules often reserved for the chair of the jury the right to interrupt performances at any time by ringing a bell. The recital format grants more control to the performer, but the power dynamics remain tilted in favor of the jury. The validation that normally comes with a ticket-buying audience is canceled out by the jury, whose results ultimately determine whether the performance is successful. As one respondent described,

[In a competition] you're trying to represent yourself and to be yourself in a different way than in a concert. Because at a concert, people come to hear you, so you don't have to prove something in the same way. You just want to give them a transformative experience. They've already made the decision to come. But competitions are different. They're deciding if you're worth giving a prize to [forced laugh]. They're deciding whether it's worth it for other audiences to hear you. And that just feels bizarre.

(Competitor 13)

Indeed, the jury's results are sometimes so powerful that they can retroactively de-fuse a performance. Competitors can all tell stories about first-round performances in which they felt that they played their best and received an enthusiastic response from the audience, only to be eliminated the next day. In the struggle to interpret this contradiction, competitors cannot help but doubt if their experience of fusion was only on their part, or just a figment of their imagination.

In addition to bringing the performer's legitimacy into question, the presence of the jury also draws unwanted attention to the constructedness of the performance, not only for the audience, but also for the performer. Regardless of the competition's format, the awareness of evaluation produces a hyperreflexivity that prevents "flow." In his original formulation of this concept, Csikszentmihalyi (2000) described the experience of flow as a "process of delimiting reality, controlling some aspect of it, and responding to the feedback with a concentration that excludes anything else as irrelevant" (p. 54). As he explains, flow involves a "lack of dualistic perspective," where action is perfectly merged with awareness; it is interrupted "when awareness becomes split, so that one perceives the activity from 'outside'" (p. 38). The competition context is an environmental condition that often produces exactly this interruptive effect, problematizing the flow process by transforming heightened awareness into a debilitating self-consciousness:

It's difficult because you don't play in competitions every day. Once you do, you think it's so important because it might change your career. But all these thoughts are actually killing you, which is not so good. The atmosphere at competitions makes you think "I'm being judged. I hope they like me, I want to be liked." Your every note is heard. If something happens, like you play one wrong note, you think you're going to get kicked out. All these thoughts come into your mind. (Competitor 4)

There are times in competition when I feel like it's a recital, where I feel like I'm playing for an audience and there's an energy with them. Those times I play well. But [chuckles] it can be hard to get the idea of the jury out of your mind when you play. As musicians we're often pretty harsh critics on ourselves. We wouldn't be where we are if we weren't. So it's hard while you're playing to make yourself stop analyzing and not kill yourself for missing that low F in the Hammerklavier fugue! (Competitor 7)

[Playing in a competition] feels noisy because people are judging you. It's very different from playing in a concert. In the best competition situations it's felt like a concert because I [felt] like people [were] just sitting back and listening. But the energy of being judged in a very particular way in a competition feels very noisy, and I have to try to get those voices or that energy away so I can just play. It's like an internal battle. (Competitor 12)

Many competitors admit that, to a certain extent, the competition/recital distinction might be a false dichotomy. A recital audience can be highly critical, a competition audience can be warmly receptive, and the competitor's playing should have the utmost integrity and commitment regardless of the occasion. But experientially, what sets apart the competition from every other musical environment is the weight of the jury's (auditory) stare.

The awareness of judgment and the anticipation of results cause a great deal of frustration because it leads many to compromise their own musical values. In an effort to regain some of the control they have lost, competitors begin anticipating reactions and catering to what they perceive to be the jury's tastes and inclinations. "With a competition you're adapting the repertoire to what you think the jury will want, and that kind of sucks," Competitor 2 complained. "If I want to give a recital, it's up to me. I do what I want ... Whereas for a competition, I'm thinking, 'Well, I can't do that because they might think this,

and I'm not like that.” He went on to explain how repertoire decisions became more calculating: “There’s a need to show your chops early, so it’s known that you have ten fingers right away. You have to program so that you have something technical in at least your opening round. You can’t play a Brahms Ballade, a Mozart Sonata, and a Bach Prelude and Fugue and expect to get through. The jury will be thinking, ‘Well, I don’t know if this guy can wiggle his fingers fast enough.’” For a performer raised on Romantic aesthetics, such manipulation constitutes a major threat to authenticity. The other ethical compromise described by this competitor is the recasting of technique as an end rather than a means. By focusing on technical accuracy, the competitor tries to exert control over one of the more objective criteria of evaluation. But the emphasis on enactment over interpretation only renders the fusion of performer with text more difficult.

Another way that competitors try to regain dominance is by performing obscure repertoire, such as contemporary music, music by women composers or rarely performed pieces. The logic behind this strategy is reasonable enough: if a jury is unfamiliar with a work, they are more likely to listen to the composition than focus on the details of execution. While this strategy gains some freedom for the performer, it can easily backfire. If the performer strays too far from conventional repertoire, the performance can become meaningless. It will not matter how expertly or honestly a work is performed if its meanings are incomprehensible or have no resonance for the listener. To be identified as the embodiment of an ideal performer, the audience must be able to decode the musical meanings conveyed by the performer, and the jury must be able to identify what made his or her interpretation outstanding. One respondent explained the issue succinctly:

If I had a really conservative jury, I would never risk playing something written after 1950. Not because they wouldn’t appreciate it, but because a lot of these people don’t

know what they're listening for. They're just waiting to get it over with so they can hear some Chopin or something. (Competitor 2)

Contributing further to the performer's feeling of powerlessness is the lack of transparency in competition institutions; as discussed in Chapter 2, the importation of civil codes has only partially restructured this artistic institution. Deliberations therefore remain private and the judges' scores are never released to the public. This procedure would raise fewer objections if conflicts of interest did not occur with such striking regularity. The situation that most irks competitors is when jurors have their own students in the competition. Because those who are best suited to judge competitions are often the most sought after teachers, it is nearly impossible at an international level to assemble an impartial jury in which none of the members has no relationship whatsoever to the competitors. Competition organizations have responded to this problem by implementing rules that force jurors to abstain from voting for their own students. But rumors of corruption and favoritism persist because they can never be disproved; norms of public accountability are weak in the music competition world and there are few channels for resolving grievances. For their part, candidates know full well that politics can work for or against them:

Let's say someone hates my teacher and they are on the jury. That's not good. Let's say someone loves my teacher and they're on the jury. That's good for me. If I know some people on the jury, is that going to help me? I hope so. [Laughs] Honestly, I hope so ... If I were a judge, and I saw my old friend out there playing, no matter what I'd want to think it's better than it is. Even if you say I have to be objective, it's so hard. I know people in the competition and if they're my friends, I want to think that they'll do really well. So I can imagine it's the same for them. I wouldn't hold that against a judge. It's life. This is life. Politics is life. It's something you kind of get used to. (Competitor 9)

There's going to be political situations in any competition you go to. So if you're making your decisions based on that, then you can't do anything. Nothing out there is completely fair. I just hope for the best. Sometimes it's unfair in our favor. [Laughs] You can't do anything about that either. I've had politics work for me and against me ... I was in a competition two years ago, and of the sixteen semi-finalists, fourteen studied with members of the jury. A lot of those people were incredible pianists, but at the same time you couldn't ever distinguish who was legitimately there and who got in because their teacher's on the jury... It's not something that I really want to dwell on. I just accept it and move on. [Laughs] (Competitor 2)

Because they are just as likely to benefit as suffer from this arrangement, competitors can never publicly criticize the institution. Any accusation of corruption could delegitimize their own achievements, jeopardize their current professional relationships or establish them with an undesirable reputation for being jealous and ungracious. I will return to this issue in the next chapter to discuss it from the point of view of the juror.

Given all these factors, it should come as little surprise that a discourse of cynicism prevails amongst competitors. But it would be grossly unfair to dismiss this as sour grapes, or to explain it away through what Geertz (1973) called a “strain theory” of ideology. Competitors are more accurately described as organic intellectuals of the Bourdieuan variety. When asked why they enter competitions, respondents did not describe personal motivations, but launched into an explanation of reputation building in the field of music. Competitor 3, for example, believed that the “problem” with the music world today was that there was “really no other way” to start a career. “When you read about [Arthur] Rubinstein or [Vladimir] Horowitz, they didn't need to enter competitions,” he said with a hint of jealousy. “They just came to America and were famous the next day! I was really amazed with how these things used to happen. Even ten years ago you would hear of conductors like [Herbert

von] Karajan or [Lorin] Maazel promoting young artists. But nowadays it just seems like if you want a big career, you have to go to a competition one way or another.”

This argument can easily be translated into Bourdieu’s ([1980]1993) terminology: with the disappearance of traditional “symbolic bankers” such as impresarios and conductors willing to offer their accumulated symbolic capital as security, aspiring professionals are turning to other sources, such as competitions, to acquire symbolic capital. But with the rapid proliferation of competitions since the 1950s, the prize has become a devalued symbolic currency:

It used to be that once you won a competition you were a world-famous pianist. But today there are hundreds of competitions in the world. So what if you won a competition somewhere in Italy? No one cares. It doesn’t create the opportunity to play in the great concert halls because there are so many competition winners. (Competitor 4)

Because there are so many more competitions these days, winning one doesn’t really mean anything anymore. There are so many winners of competitions. Even if you win a big competition, it doesn’t necessarily secure a career. That’s why people resort to doing so many. (Competitor 6)

These remarks suggest that for competitors this credential not only has been diminished, but also nowadays has little guarantee of having any symbolic value.

But the discourse of cynicism is anchored in more than bitterness for the investment risk they feel little choice in bearing. Many competitors also hold a principled objection to what the institution represents, arguing that it encapsulates all that is profane in the world of music:

For me, competitions are just a way to gain money and opportunities. Everything to do with music I learn everywhere but competition. Developing as a musician happens at school with my teacher, with my colleagues, with my roommates. The competition is something we do because we have to, especially as pianists. (Competitor 2)

I think a lot of the competition circuit is geared towards the players who are not really interested in music as art. They're interested in it as this athletic thing where they show their virtuosity and prowess and get attention for it. It's about the competition, about being better than someone else, about winning and getting the attention and prestige. It's not about, like, exploring this really interesting aspect of this piece. And it's not about art. The people who really care about the art do some competitions because you have to, and because it helps raise your standard of playing. But you can only take so much of that. At some point you realize that it's kind of silly. (Competitor 10)

Some find comfort in the knowledge that most music professionals describe competitions as lotteries. If considering a competitor for a concert engagement, a fellow musician would be more concerned with the standard of playing than how many prizes have been collected. But the same cannot be said of the general public. Rather than trust their own ears and musical instincts, the average listener at competitions can defer to the authority of the judges. Competitors worry that the audience has come to place too much faith in prizes as indicators of talent:

The fact that there are so many competitions also implies that a lot more people are listening to them. They're aware of what's going on in the circuit. Hence, if somebody looks at your biography and sees that you haven't won a competition, then they might not take your performance as seriously. It's very difficult, actually. People say that you

can't make a name without winning competitions, but then even with prizes in your bio, sometimes you don't get anywhere either. (Competitor 6)

Even worse is the common analogy to sport. For example, one respondent complained that nearly every time he entered a taxicab with his instrument, the driver asked about his current world ranking, as though classical music were organized like tennis. As we saw in the previous chapter, musicians consider the sports metaphor both a misinterpretation and a polluting framework for describing musical endeavors, and they see competitions as the main source of this confusion.

English (2005) has argued that the cynicism surrounding the competition prize is functional. Adopting a hardline Bourdieuan position, he characterizes the competition event as an act of collective cultural misrecognition that serves to perpetuate the “economy in reverse” that defines all forms of cultural production. In becoming the focus of disputes over who has the right to award cultural value and whether it has been accurately gauged, the competition prize both “test[s] and affirm[s] the notion of art as a separate and superior domain, a domain of disinterested activity which gives rise to a special, nontemporal, noneconomic, but scarce and highly desirable form of value” (p. 52). The problem with this sort of argument is that it casts competitors as willing conspirators in the production of false belief who deserve to be ensnared in its mechanisms. Whether a musician publicly criticizes the institution or refuses to participate, he or she cannot avoid colluding with the *illusio* of artistic practice; both postures play into to the scandal of refusal that raises the visibility, and therefore the power, of the prize in the cultural field.²³

²³ Aside from my general objections to the Bourdieuan perspective, I would argue that English can only make this argument because he fails to appreciate the difference between live competitions artists voluntarily enter early in their careers (e.g., Cliburn), and awards for which established artists are nominated on the basis of work produced for other occasions (e.g., the Tony, the Booker, the Oscars, Turner, etc.).

In contrast, I would argue that the discourse of cynicism serves a different function: it provides a profane context for the performer to transcend. It is easy enough to imagine how this dynamic contributes to the construction of the images of musical genius discussed earlier. Indeed, each trope can be characterized as a form of transgression: the child prodigy is “out of the usual course of nature” (Feldman & Goldsmith, 1986:3), the virtuoso crosses “the limit of what seems possible or what the spectator can imagine” (Gooley, 2004:1), the hero rebels against the rules of musical and social convention (Kivy, 2001) and the intellectual penetrates the boundaries of subjectivity. Here, the competition provides an institutional location for the transgression to take place, be witnessed and receive recognition. What is less obvious, perhaps, is that the same dynamic applies to competitors who have had as many disappointments as successes. Here, competitors transcend the profane context of the competition by redefining the goal of participating. For some this means using the competition as a deadline, motivating them to prepare a large amount of repertoire at a higher level. For others it means using the competition to introduce themselves musically to a member of the jury that they would not otherwise be able to meet. For many it means using the competition as an opportunity to learn:

There are so many good things about competitions if you take away the competitive aspect of it. You get to socialize with other pianists, which was wonderful when I was growing up. You can hear so much. You have [an] opportunity to play for teachers, and you get written criticisms that are sometimes very helpful. (Competitor 7)

Our quartet is such a better quartet because of doing two European competitions last summer. We play more precisely, and it has raised the level of awareness in our playing. There’s nothing that quite does that like a competition ... Competition environments force you to deal with fears about yourself and your playing. That can be really hard to shake off, or to transcend, to say I do have the confidence to be entirely

myself, or we have the confidence as a group to be ourselves, to bring forth who we are. (Competitor 12)

The intense scrutiny of judgment, and the experience of rejection, can also play an important role in the construction of musical identity. Often it is through the soul-searching prompted by disappointments at competitions that musicians determine their musical values and what sort of life in music they truly desire, which may or may not conform to the career paths set out in the competition circuit.

Ideally, the result of a music competition should be redundant; it should merely reinforce an already convincing social performance by bestowing an award or a title. Occasionally, it works out this way. For the performer, however, it is impossible to imagine a more unforgiving environment for performing music or an institution more inclined to cast doubt on his or her self-identity as an artist. As such, the competition provides a natural breaching experiment for musical performance, identifying what is taken for granted in more felicitous circumstances.

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