

Draft: Musical Performances of Platonist Types

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Abstract

The project in which Realist Musical Platonists are engaged can be roughly characterised as follows: [i.] they wish to posit the ontology that best accommodates their intuitions and discourse about musical works; and [ii.] they find that the ontological thesis that best accomplishes this is one that identifies musical works with *abstract types* of which performances, recordings and scores are *tokens*. In this discussion, I develop and defend an additional motivation to endorse Realist Platonism: the assumption that musical works are abstract types can be used to motivate an attractive account of the process of performing and studying musical works. I first articulate a version of ‘grasping’ that is analogous to the grasping of abstract senses of words in Margaret Gilbert’s Platonist account of language. Second, I assume, using this developed notion of ‘grasping’, that performers grasp abstract (musical work) types before producing tokens of them. Finally, I argue that accounts that endorse this assumption respect important intuitions, and obviate appreciable difficulties, regarding the performance and study of musical works.

1 Introduction

There are many reasons why proponents of Musical Platonism ought to be proud of their view. The purpose of this discussion is to offer a reason in addition to the ones that already have been examined in the literature. I intend to demonstrate that, in addition to accommodating many of our ordinary intuitions and utterances, Musical Platonism can also be used to address particular difficulties pertaining to the performance and study of musical works.

In section 2, I present a rough sketch of Musical Platonism, and identify reasons why one might endorse the view. In section 3, I discuss Wittgenstein’s sceptical argument, along with Margaret Gilbert’s Platonist solution. I develop, in section 4, two difficulties facing ontological accounts of musical performance, and show that each can be solved by combining considerations from sections 2 and 3. Specifically, my solution is to present an account in which musical works are abstract objects, *qua* Realist Platonism, that can be grasped by performers, *qua* Gilbert. In section 5, I advance and obviate some challenges, motivated by considering the gradualness of the process of studying musical works, to the account developed in section 4. Finally, I conclude, in section 6, by commenting on the limits of the scope of the discussion.

2 Musical Platonism

“Musical realism” refers to a family of theses, each of which is committed to the position that there is such a thing as a musical work. Realists believe that there is a referent for the phrase “musical work” when we employ it in our sentences. Of the variety of musical realist positions

that one might take, one of the most widespread is *Platonism*. Platonism is, roughly, the position that musical works are abstract types, of which performances, scores, and recordings are tokens (Kania 2012). It will not be necessary, for the purposes of this discussion, to endorse any one of the particular accounts of Platonist musical ontology that have been developed. It will suffice, rather, to treat Platonism in abstraction.

What seems to motivate people to become Platonists is that abstract types serve a highly desirable function: they help us make sense of our discourse and intuitions about musical works. Andrew Kania (2012) puts this point succinctly when he writes, of Musical Platonism, that “it respects more of our pre-theoretic intuitions about musical works than any of the other theories”. Being a Platonist is, quite simply, easy, in that one does not need to engage in feats of linguistic virtuosity to preserve the literal truth of many of our utterances and intuitions. Kivy makes this point in his (1987):

‘But for a great deal of the most valued art music of the West, since the development of a sophisticated musical notation, it seems to be true that *there are musical works, and that there are performances of them*” (245, emphasis added).

When we interpret Kivy’s intuition literally, it seems to be the case that he refers to a further entity *beyond* the concrete particulars we hear and see. Abstract types can play the roles of such entities.

This sentiment is shared by Julian Dodd (2000), who writes the following:

“On 27 May 1992 the Wynton Marsalis Septet premiered Marsalis’s *In This House, On This Morning*. Their actions brought about a *sound-sequence-occurrence*: a datable, locatable occurrence of a pattern of sounds. This sound-sequence occurrence was an occurrence of the work. Yesterday I produced another sound-sequence-occurrence of *In This House, On This Morning* when I placed a compact disc in my compact disc player and pressed ‘play’”(424).

Dodd’s quotation motivates a Platonist interpretation as well. His description of producing multiple *occurrences* of a particular work is suggestive of an abstract type that plays the role of ‘the work’, and of which the occurrences are tokens.

My aim in this section is not to win converts over to the side of Musical Platonism. Rather, my intention is to give a rough sketch of the view and point to a motivation that leads people to endorse it; namely, the fact that an abstract type plays an important role in accommodating our intuitions and ordinary language. Such types play the role of being the referents of Kivy’s mention of “musical works” and Dodd’s mention of “*In This House, On This Morning*”. What I will suggest, later, is that there is another important role, relating to the performance and study of works, that abstract types can play. First, however, I will need to undertake a brief foray into philosophy of language.

3 Another Role for Abstract Types

One of the most enduring components of Wittgenstein’s legacy is a sceptical problem that, in the words of Saul Kripke, is “the most radical and original sceptical problem philosophy has seen to date” (Kripke 1982, 60). A version of this problem can be presented as follows. Imagine that you have uttered the following addition statements: “ $1+1=2$, $1+5=6$, $4+19=23$ ”. Regardless of who you are, there will be some addition statements that you have not uttered (some numbers, for example, are so large that it would take billions of years to express them in symbols). Let’s pretend that one addition question that you have not yet answered is ‘ $56+43$ ’. That question

(‘56+43’) seems as if it does not present any special puzzle or problem; it seems that all you need to do, in order to know what answer you should give, is to apply the same rule to these numbers as you did to the ones you added previously. However, when you answer ‘56+43’ with ‘99’, you are surprised to hear me tell you that you’re wrong; the answer is ‘5’, such that, in order to answer this question by following the same rule that you followed previously, you must say that ‘56+43=5’. I explain that it’s not the case that you were following the rule ‘plus’ before when interpreting the ‘+’ symbol. Rather, you were following the rule for *quus*, such that, according to *quus*, you ought to use the rule for addition in all cases except those in which you are adding ‘56+43’. According to *quus*, $56+43=5$ (8).

To be clear, I do not begin with the assumption that you are not aware of the function (i.e., plus or quus) that you are using when adding 56 and 43. Nor do I question the rigour with which the plus or quus functions are defined. What the I doubt, rather, is the function that you were following in the past.

As Margaret Gilbert (1989) asserts, this sceptical argument provokes the following question:

is there anything about how it has been with him personally which determines what the answer *should* be in *this* case if he is to accord with the meaning he gave to ‘plus’ in the past? It begins to look as if it would be necessary for him to have done every conceivable sum in the past in order that the answer already be determined for any arbitrarily chosen pair of numbers now. But by hypothesis he has not already done so, at least not in the way the sums he clearly has done were done. Wittgenstein suggests that there is an inclination to say that ‘it is as if we could grasp the whole use of the word in a flash’ (Wittgenstein 191), regarding what happens when one grasps a sense. *Could* the ‘whole use’ really be present somehow (Gilbert, 103)?

One way that the whole use could really be present to someone is if that person has an enormously detailed mental image of the whole (infinite) table of arithmetic, which he can survey in an instant. This suggestion is not plausible; it is immensely implausible that our mental imagery is not so detailed; certainly, on introspection, my mental imagery is not so detailed (102).

A different suggestion, from Gilbert, comes from rejecting the mental imagery proposal, but, instead, maintaining that there is “a *unique kind of mental state or act*, the grasping of a sense, which simply does have as a consequence that once this act has been performed, how I ought to go on in a potentially infinite number of future cases is determined” (103). Such senses that are grasped are abstract objects. If we return to the original thought experiment in which you calculated the answer to ‘56+43’, we find that an appeal to abstract objects allows you to avoid the sceptic. For we can simply posit that you have grasped the abstract type that is the sense of the ‘+’ symbol. The fact that you have grasped this sense is the thing ‘about how it has been with you personally’ that makes it the case that you should utter ‘= 99’ after uttering ‘56+43’.¹

4 Grasping Musical Works

I argue here that we ought to endorse a view of (a.) grasping and a view of (b.) abstract musical types, such that performers can grasp abstract musical types. This view provides us with theoretical machinery that obviates two important difficulties that would otherwise face ontological accounts of musical performance. Before presenting these difficulties, and their

¹Importantly, this exposition of the Platonist solution differs from the one Kripke considers and rejects in his (1982).

solutions, I want to offer one observation about my project: my project is quite conservative, in that I aim not making any controversial and new existence claims. I have presented independent reasons for endorsing the existence of both abstract musical objects and the grasping relation (in sections 2 and 3). My claim, then, rather than being for the existence of novel entities, is for the utility of novel combinations of things already believed, by many, to exist.

The first difficulty I present is, essentially, a version of the Wittgensteinian sceptical problem discussed above: ‘is there something about how it is with me as a performer that determines what I should do when performing a work’? In a Platonist framework, we can understand ‘performing a musical work’ as ‘producing a token, the type of which is a musical work’, and ‘what I should do’ as ‘what I must do if I am to produce a token of the type’. There is a *prima facie* plausible picture of music performance, such that we understand performances of works as rule-governed activities; I am following a series of rules when performing a work. The rules are often quite clear, and we can even accommodate individual differences between performances of a work (compare, for example, the differences between Heifetz and Milstein’s recordings of the Brahms Violin Concerto), by saying that the rules followed by performers are not completely determinate, that other conventions are often followed, and that, where these supplementary conventions are not entirely determinate, there is still room for individual differences between tokens of the same type.

However, the Wittgensteinian sceptical argument infects this plausible picture. Let us say that I have performed Schoenberg’s Phantasy for Violin and Piano three times in New York, and that I am about to perform it for the fourth time in Aspen Colorado. I am about to begin my performance when a sceptic jumps on stage and asks me for the pitch-class, in PC set notation, of the note that I ought to play when beginning the piece in order to perform in accordance with previous performances. I respond by saying “10”, to which he responds “no, it’s 11”. I then point to the \flat symbol in the score and tell him that the rule I have been following to determine what sort of “b” I ought to play is the rule for “flat”. However, he responds by suggesting that, rather than flat, I have been using the rule *flarp*, such that flarp means that I should play PC 10 unless I am performing the piece for the fourth time and above 2,000 metres above sea level, in which case I ought to play PC 11. In order to continue following the same rule as before, I ought, now, to produce a \flat .

To be clear, the sceptic is not arguing that I now mean flarp rather than flat; nor is he arguing that there is anything vague about flarpness or flatness. The question, rather, is as follows: was there some fact about me in the past that determined that I was following flat? Could it have been the case that I was following flarp? What seems to be the case is that I never “gave myself any explicit directions that were incompatible with such a supposition” of ‘flarpness’ (Kripke 1982, 13). Consequently, it does not seem as though there was something about ‘how it was with me personally’ that determined that I was using flat rather than flarp. However, we can solve this problem by appealing to Platonism: analogous to the case of the ‘+’ symbol, we can suppose that there is a ‘unique kind of mental state or act’, which is the grasping of a musical work, such that when I grasp the work, I know what I must do in order to produce tokens of it. In other words, I *grasp* the abstract type of the work, and, consequently, I know what I ought to do in order to produce a token of it. I know, therefore, that I ought, in this case, to follow the rule for \flat . Also, since I grasped the work in the past, I know that I was following the rule for \flat in the past.

The second difficulty solved by asserting that performers grasp musical types is also inspired by considerations from philosophy of language. Consider the following quotation from Lycan (2008):

Could I not know the use of an expression, and fall in with it, mechanically, without understanding it? I have known undergraduates who are geniuses at picking

up academic jargon of one sort or another and slinging it around with great facility, but without understanding (81).

The answer that Lycan is trying to inspire is that *understanding* a word or expression involves more than just knowing the rules for its use. What I wish to suggest is that something analogous is true of music. Just as with language, there are musical performances in which performers seem to produce all of the sounds indicated by the composers, while following all stylistic conventions, but without really understanding the works they perform. One way of characterising such performances is to say that the performers have grasped the abstract sense of the instructions from the composer, in that they know what pitches to produce, and which stylistic tendencies to exhibit, but that they do not grasp the abstract type of the work itself. This characterisation involves distinguishing between two different types of cases: (a.) I grasp the abstract object that is the *sense* of the rule for, say b ; and (b.) I grasp the abstract object that is the abstract type of the work itself. Notice that only the second involves the grasping relation between musical works and performers, as the former only involves such a relation between performers and senses of rules.

This way of talking accommodates important intuitions and utterances about performances. We often offer observations like “she played flawlessly and correctly, but she didn’t really seem to *get it*”, “she seemed to be merely going through the motions”, or, as my violin teacher, Zvi Zeitlin, used to say “it was immaculate but without conception”. In the interest of clarity, we can formulate the difficulty under consideration as the following question: how do we accommodate the intuition that a performer can give a ‘correct’ performance of a work, but without really understanding it? And the solution offered to us by the account under consideration is as follows: in such cases, the performer has, despite having grasped many of the rules for performing a particular work, failed to grasp the abstract object that is the work itself.

5 The Study of Works

When we are studying a work, we are engaging in a long and drawn-out process that leads to our eventually performing the work. What is clear is that studying a work is not a completely binary sort of thing. Rather than suddenly waking up one morning and being able to perform, for example, the Sibelius violin concerto, there was a period of a few months, during which my capacity to perform the work was gradually increasing. This is all to say that accounts of music ontology must allow for there to be degrees of competence during the study of a work. This raises two questions. First, is the grasping of senses and types an all-or-nothing sort of thing? Second, if it is, how can we accommodate the increasing degrees of competence that are characteristic of the actual process of learning to perform a musical work?

Let’s assume, for the sake of argument, that abstract objects are either grasped or they are not. Under such an assumption, we must search for degrees of competence in places other than the extent to which a performer grasps a particular work (since the extent would be either ‘completely’ or ‘not at all’). One plausible place to find degrees involves our physical ability to carry out the instruction of a composer. The process of teaching one’s body to move in such a way so as to produce a token of the correct type can be long and arduous—even after the proper objects are grasped. My own experience studying the Schoenberg Phantasy for violin and piano is an example of such case. When I began to study the work, I spent a month studying the score, reading papers in music theory journals, listening to recordings of the work, and consulting with Schoenberg experts about the stylistic tendencies from the era when the piece was written. After grasping the senses of Schoenberg’s instructions, the music theoretic descriptions and explanations, and the various stylistic conventions, I believed, after a while,

that I grasped the sense of the work itself.² After that, I went through the long drawn-out process of teaching my body to move in such a way so as to produce tokens of the work.

Another place where we might find degrees involves cases where a performer grasps only some of the rules and conventions having to do with a particular work. I have seen concerts where performers seem to have listened to performance-practice recordings of Baroque-era compositions, adopted certain mannerisms, and then put these on display. We can imagine that, after further study with performance practice specialists, the performer will grasp more of the rules and conventions relevant to the work, and we will, thus, see gradual changes in the performances given by the particular performer. We see changes in the number of rules grasped, in other words, but where the grasping of any particular rule is an all-or-nothing state of affairs.

6 Concluding Remarks and Limitations of Scope

The basic structure of my argument is a conditional. If we accept both (a) Musical Platonism and (b) the grasping of abstract objects, then we are in a position to offer a unique account of musical performance. This is an account that solves a musical version of Wittgenstein's sceptical argument, and accommodates our intuitions regarding cases in which performers play correctly, but without really understanding the works they perform. Insofar as the consequent of this conditional is attractive, I take myself to have offered an additional motivation to be a Musical Platonist.

Although I have offered independent reasons to endorse both components of my antecedent (i.e., Musical Platonism and the grasping of abstract senses), I imagine I am quite justified in my belief that many people will remain unconvinced by these. After all, Musical Platonism is, by no means, the only realist view available, and Realism is, by no means, the only ontological approach available. Consequently, I take the full force of this discussion to be limited to a small group of people. Nevertheless, I will be quite satisfied if the preceding remarks cause even the smallest increase in enthusiasm for Musical Platonism in those who are disposed to be attracted to the view.

²I don't have the arrogance to suggest that I have grasped all of the possible rules and descriptions pertaining to the work. However, such a suggestion is not a necessary component of the account I present.

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