

# Performance and authenticity in the arts

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# Performance and authenticity

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SALIM KEMAL and IVAN GASKELL

Religious transcendence has provided one sense of authenticity for the arts. People maintain that great works are informed by a religious dimension, are ultimately “touched by the fire and ice of God.”<sup>1</sup> In an older conception, people expected the authority of the Book, the Bible, to be matched by the finest literary expression in the King James version, providing language with its best use.<sup>2</sup> Consonantly, in the Qur’ān, speech and communication invoke a connection with truth in the analysis of its language. Only the unique literary quality of the holy book fully matched expression, subject-matter, and truth and so could claim authenticity as the holy word. Others wanted art to parallel religious practice. In the Florentine renaissance, paintings emphasized a subjective immediate experience of God and faith as a felt emotion when such immediacy also became important to ordinary experience.<sup>3</sup> The descriptive narrative interest and spontaneity of works had to fit the emotional and intellectual needs of spectators, drawing them to participate rather than commanding their awe.<sup>4</sup>

The reference to religion occurs in Athens as it does in religions founded in Jerusalem. Greek drama has one source in religious festivals, which give performances their purpose. This role may have become muted by the time of Aristotle’s *Poetics*: – although the gods placed people in circumstances that led to tragedy, Aristotle was more concerned with the structure of tragic drama – nonetheless the *Poetics* did not entirely remove religious reference from the arts, and it still addresses questions, of the origin of the value of arts, to which religion provides one answer.

Transcendence, performance, and authenticity bear subtle relations to each other; and Jerusalem and Athens are important sources of concepts of authenticity. The present collection can offer only a

particular perspective on that source: the reflections in the first section, on performance, religion, and authenticity, raise questions about three aspects of that complex tradition. First it considers the role of performance. The *Poetics* has been among the most influential texts in forming our understanding of literature and poetry, and hence of our conception of authenticity in art. Yet that influence has not always followed Aristotle's own emphases. Perhaps this is because its influence has been indirect, through particular commentaries rather than directly through translations, and was sometimes based on misunderstandings.<sup>5</sup> In "The Poetics of performance: the necessity of performance, spectacle, music, and dance in Aristotelian tragedy," Gregory Scott proceeds through a close study of the surviving text to show that performance was crucial to Aristotle's conception of tragedy in the *Poetics*. This explanation raises a number of issues about traditional accounts of literature and poetry that other scholars might develop. We might consider what implications the centrality of performance in the *Poetics* has for other aspects of Aristotle's definition of tragedy, and how those elements, developed through the influence of the *Poetics* on later writers, poets, and playwrights, unconsciously carried resonances of a text about performance into literature and poetry.

From the primacy of performance in Aristotle's *Poetics*, this section turns to a second aspect of the relation between religion and performance: prayer. To say that works of art bear a religious reference says too little since religions often disagree about the meaning of authentic access to divinity. Luther wanted to strip worship of the church's customs, rituals, robes, priests, and so on, in order to give individuals a direct and authentic access to God through prayer. Similarly, the Chapel at Ely Cathedral as it now stands, freed of its stained-glass windows and minus the heads of saints, shows the Roundheads' aversion to some kinds of worship. In the second essay, "The 'confessing animal' on stage: authenticity, asceticism, and the constant 'inconstancie' of Elizabethan character," Peter Iver Kaufman takes up some of the issues raised by understanding prayer as performance, among other things to consider its claims to authenticity. Righteous people "needed only occasional instruction to climb to heaven," according to Roman Catholic practice, Kaufman suggests, while Calvin, Luther, Bucer, and Zwingli urged that only a serious faith in Christ's atonement for sinners generated righteousness. "Without a profound sense of their dreadfully depraved characters, the faithful would not be able to

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comprehend the immense mercy of God.” Only an appropriate mode of worship generates a sound sense of authenticity. Spectating on the rituals of the church had to give way to the performance of prayer in order for worship to gain authentic access to divine mercy. The contrast between ritualized worship and an authentic access to God that gives prayer performed by individuals its validity, appears also in drama. Puritan theatrics, based on a particular concept of worship, show us how to stage performances. Hamlet’s soliloquies have occasionally rightly been performed as prayers, Kaufman points out, suggesting how *Hamlet* stages a distinctly puritan habit of mind, through which Shakespeare explains the potential of the stage performance to reform his spectators.

While the second essay reminds us of the complexities in art’s religious reference, the last essay in this section provides a different perspective by examining a set of arguments for the connected but distinguishable experiences of authenticity in religion and aesthetics. In “Art, religion and the hermeneutics of authenticity” Nicholas Davey turns to one of the leading contemporary German philosophers, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and his study of how the two modes of experience “interfere” with one another. Davey contends that although Gadamer raises this issue and a set of pertinent questions, he does not explicitly resolve the issue – though his readings of Heidegger suggest how to do so. In strikingly clear exposition and argumentation, Davey emphasizes concepts of “the withheld,” signs, and symbols, and provides a complex and subtle argument that reaches beyond Gadamer’s stated position to explain the answer hinted at in Gadamer’s work.

These three essays together consider important elements of a traditional account of authenticity. But by explaining the relation and distinction between aesthetic and religious experience, the last chapter also introduces questions about a distinctively aesthetic authenticity. The traditional conceptions of authenticity can seem a dull objective in these more plastic times. In one non-religious version, it gives rise to something always alien, always only remembered. Looking for *the* new true criterion, nostalgia for an authentic unified polis, or worry that an expanded canon can close minds to essential truths, all seem deeply conservative reactions, seeing in rapid recent changes the likelihood of a fallen state. All these may also misrepresent their origins. There never has been *the* criterion completely governing the complex weave of lived values. Nor did the polis guarantee intimate unity. Thucydides records the nu-

merous currents that formed the Greek response to invasion, and the last days of Socrates witness the deadly debates constituting the Athenian polis.

Other versions of authenticity emerge from a deep shift in understandings of art. Davey's essay shows how the aesthetic realm can become autonomous of religion. Not only has morality now often replaced religion, but art shares in the "disenchantment" characteristic of modernism, that separated the good, the true, and the beautiful. Authenticity in art cannot depend on values originating externally, in the moral or religious realm. Consequently, its traditional reference to religion cost authenticity its purchase in considerations of art. One solution has been to propose that authenticity must have a different sense to still be applicable. Previously art sought authenticity by reference to the divine origin of all things. Now authenticity retains a parallel with the traditional structure by still referring works of art to origins; but that reference is not external: art is authentic the more clearly it is autonomous, when its value is distinctive to its aesthetic character. Every art presupposes rules and standards by which it is made possible, and the authenticity of a work turns on its relation to and development of that origin. Art deals with aesthetic values, which require us to consider the object for itself, rather than for some further religious, moral, or pragmatic values it might serve.

This autonomy of art, the basis of its authenticity, still allows us to consider the power that particular art forms have to generate aesthetic values. Painting, music, and literature will still have their own integrity, depending on their material, instruments, and techniques. We now distinguish time-based arts from others; in significant ways we can separate performance art from music, drama, and other arts that we perform; and we continue to accept that the different arts have their own expectations, their own procedures for development and assessment, and their distinctive ways of transgressing rules.

To explore these issues, the second part of this book, "Understanding, performance, and authenticity," develops an argument that begins with a classical discussion between Michael Tanner and Malcom Budd on "Understanding music." We may listen to music; but we may argue that for our listening to have integrity, to be true to its object, we must understand the music we are listening to. Michael Tanner points out that people are hesitant to claim that they understand music, perhaps because they are uncertain of what they



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think about issues in musical theory, or about the use of musical terminology, or about the connection between theory, musical terminology, and the usually “emotional” vocabulary in which they articulate their experience of music. Aspects of the disquiet people feel about these issues seem particular to music because of its discontinuity with the rest of our experience, and his essay argues that “[g]ranted that music is not a language, understanding it is a matter of seeing why it is as it is.” Accordingly, “[o]ne has not understood [Schubert’s Great C Major Symphony] unless one grasps at every moment the way in which the thematic material is undergoing constant transformation; if one does grasp that, in the fullest detail, and is exhilarated by its progress, then one has understood the movement.”

Malcolm Budd proposes another sense of understanding music. His brief early comment on “the question of the adequacy of our language for describing musical experience” suggests that his argument is motivated by a particular approach to a “specifically musical understanding.” He urges that “the truth of the matter is that what much specifically musical vocabulary enables one to do is to name or describe phenomena that someone without a mastery of the vocabulary can hear equally well.” Yet ultimately “the musically literate listener is in a more desirable position than the illiterate listener, not with respect to experiencing music with understanding but in his capacity to make clear both to himself and to others the reasons for his musical preferences. At a level of explanation beyond the most crude the musically illiterate listener is not only condemned to silence: he is not in a position to comprehend his own responses to music.”

Through considerations of what it means to understand, both these papers identify what makes for the integrity of an experience of music. If an ability to explain preferences is a necessary part of our understanding of music, then a musically illiterate response is inadequate because it does not articulate the relation between the experience of music and the origins of that music in the modes of its construction. In the next essay, “Musical performance as analytical communication,” Fred Maus develops issues of understanding music. It seems hard to doubt that analytical awareness or understanding contributes decisively to the clarity and intelligence of performances. Conversely, listening to a musical performance can be bewildering if the audience cannot integrate aspects of the performance into a comprehensive understanding of the music. Maus

recalls attending a teacher's solo piano recital, which he found bewildering. "Another member of the audience, greeting the performer afterward, said that he wanted to talk later about one of the pieces on the program, to hear the pianist's ideas about it. I was surprised to overhear this remark, and wondered if it had been tactless. If one heard the performance, and still needed to talk to the performer about his ideas, did that not imply that the performance was a failure? Would a good performance not communicate the performer's ideas adequately, all by itself?"

To understand this difficulty in establishing the connection between understanding the work and its performance, Maus begins with the "standard" account. This says that analysis discovers facts about musical works; performance means communicating facts about these works; and the facts that performers "bring out" about music are usually the same as the facts that analysts discover. But there are practical problems with this standard conception, Maus points out, and difficulties also in the account of "listening to music" that it depends on. Noting that "in an actual performance the composer's decisions blend with those of the performer, and often there is no way to tell, from listening, where the composer's creativity leaves off and that of the performer begins," Maus proposes that a more fruitful way of understanding performed music is to examine the analogy between performance and composition. "Performers are not fundamentally similar to analysts; rather the activities of performers, like the activities of composers, invite description and interpretation by musical scholars." We should then see performance as composition rather than as analytical communication, and our experience of the work will be the more true the better we incorporate these factors into our understanding.

In the next essay, "Performance authenticity: possible, practical, virtuous," Stan Godlovitch turns to another issue of authenticity in performance that has been important in studies of music. In detailed discussions recently, theorists have insisted that performance practice must respect the musical values of the original compositions, including the instruments they were originally written for. This could imply that if listening to music requires understanding it, and that depends on treating performance as composition, then we will gain an authentic grasp of a work only when we appreciate its original musical values by playing the music on original instruments according to something like an original "mind set." Skeptics have questioned whether such authenticity is ever possible, and God-

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lovitch concedes that their doubts would undermine the pursuit of authenticity – if that pursuit is conceived in certain ways. We do not try to reproduce exactly a past we cannot have access to but rather seek to recover practices and their results. This does not promise that we can experience what an audience experienced in the past, but still gives us leave to think we can play music as they did and hear what they did.

The possibility of even this weak sense of authenticity raises questions about its purpose. Godlovitch suggests that authenticity carries its own warrant, since it connotes a quasi-moral “genuineness” and integrity: “without excessive melodrama, might we say that performance authenticity trumps the alternatives because . . . it involves being true to the music?” he asks. This makes explicit some of the motivation to understand music and its performance that drove the earlier papers in this collection; but there are problems with so bald a statement, of course, since it is not clear why the “original” musical values must be the authentic ones. Godlovitch discusses issues of authenticity, and finally goes for a “thick” reading, using concepts that are “empirically much richer, more amenable to broad empirical characterization.” Authenticity in performance, he concludes, is “bound up in the dynamic of an ongoing and largely experimental and exploratory practice to find out more about what we are and once were like.”

To some the understanding of authenticity in terms of original instruments has seemed unnecessary, being unduly reductive of our capacity for experiencing aesthetic objects, of their location in the intersubjective and material circumstances of cultural practices, and of the notion of authenticity itself. Joseph Kockelman’s essay examines authenticity by returning to the issue of understanding music discussed in the first two essays in this section. He too wants to understand authenticity in terms of what we are and what music is. Where Tanner and Budd recognized that music was not a language or that language was inadequate to musical experience, but Tanner insisted on the use of musical terminology to understand music and Budd concluded that the musically illiterate listener “is not in a position to comprehend his own responses to music,” in his essay Kockelmans asks a further complex question: “given that each genuine work of music in some form or other makes present some meaning, why is it that this meaning cannot be articulated by means of language? Why is it that whatever one says about a given work of music can never be a substitute for my listening to the work? Why is

it that whatever a given work makes present cannot be made present in any other ways?"

People have asked this set of over-lapping questions about the intransitivity of works of art generally; Kockelmans develops his question by reference to "absolute music" – "instrumental music of high quality written since the eighteenth Century," which "manifestly has no function beyond itself" – and by turning to discussions of the ontology of art works, especially in Heidegger's essay "The Origin of the Work of Art." "To answer the question of what art is," Kockelmans urges, "we must turn to that being in which art manifests itself, the work of art," where "the truth of beings comes-to-pass." He goes on to explain the latter by reference to "conservation" and "beholding" a work, proposing that specific works, while they are being performed, present the listener with a world or "totality of meaning." From this background, he argues that it is impossible always to be able to speak about the meaning which works make present: their temporality, their being a form of play, their origin in the past in most cases, the articulation of their structure, their references to their own world, the excess of meaning they contain, their necessary wholeness or unity, all show themselves in our responses to works – and they appear in a distinctive manner in music, which goes to explain the particular character of our appreciation of music.

Through the vocabulary of ontology Kockelmans develops an important feature of our grasp of musical performance and seeks to explain the autonomy of music. The latter again points to authenticity: the structure in which a work of art is shown to be possible for itself rather than for some other purpose it can be brought to serve. The essays in this section examined relations between our understanding of music, its performance, and authenticity. The next section develops the notion of authenticity in relation to other performative arts: poetry and performance art.

This third part, on authenticity, poetry, and performance, begins with Alex Neill's subtly argued essay on "Inauthenticity, insincerity, and poetry." The essay develops the concept of authenticity by raising issues about insincerity. Taking inauthenticity to mark a flaw or failing, Neill asks whether works of poetry can be inauthentic because they are insincere – when they express sentiments that the poet does not feel. The question is complicated by the fact that such insincerity might not be discernible, and Neill's focus is on whether and how such "indiscernible insincerity" might yet matter in our

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engagement with a poem. This focus allows him to bring considerations of criticism into the ambit of authenticity and, through talk of origins, to expand the notion of expression beyond questions of the importance of the poet's intention to our understanding of the poem. He concludes that a poet's insincerity may be critically relevant, even when it is not discernible within the poem itself; and where it is relevant, it marks a flaw in the poem.

In Peter Middleton's chapter on "Poetry's oral stage" the section turns to consider one of the most famous of modern poetry readings, which included Allen Ginsberg reading *Howl*. Recognizing that a verbal performance transforms the written text, Middleton asks what point do poetry readings have in contemporary culture? What accounts for their popularity? He wants to uncover how the meaning of a poem is affected by performance, that seems to make performance indispensable to complex written texts. These concerns allow him also to raise theoretical issues about poetry. Literary theory would say that the real life of a poem begins when the text is ready for analysis by its readers, apparently seeing little significance in oral performances. Yet it is an inadequate understanding of poetry, Middleton suggests, depending on a model of reading, which most contemporary literary theory implicitly adopts, that "owes its outline to the epistemological project of Kantian philosophy as it has been mediated through its encounters with science, positivism, and linguistics." Looking to the case of poetry reading, acknowledging its distinctiveness from the merely literal text, "will show why recognizing the inescapably intersubjective, plural condition of reading is necessary for an understanding of the meanings which contemporary poets are allowed to produce.'

In clarifying this account of reading, Middleton develops – in a different medium – an account of the compositional elements of performance that Maus proposed for music. The "poet *performs* authorship," Middleton says, "becoming in the process a divided subject," and "suffus[ing] a text with the person and their relation to the listener." By situating poetry in this context, Middleton is able to draw in a number of threads. For example, he points to the basis of moral argument in "authentic feeling" as a model for the "local, momentary attempt to draw listeners in closer." By explaining that poetry readings are not simply "logocentric" he is also able to consider the implications of more recent critical theory. He is also able to argue that far from being a "mere regression to a . . . babble of sound," its oral performance is an authentic feature of poetry and

fulfills its potentialities. Contemporary poems and poets use the resources of reading “projectively just as composers anticipate performance in their scores,” and readings embody a collective effort that produces “something out of written texts that is still unarticulated.”

The last essay, “True stories: Spalding Gray and the authenticities of performance,” by Henry M. Sayre, also takes up issues of sincerity, truth, and performance. He first considers the performance piece *Swimming to Cambodia* by Spalding Gray, and the moment “where the fabric of its authenticity – the warp and weft of its reality and truth – appears to unravel before your eyes.” This is the moment when we can see through the film, when we must face its artifice and find its status as a representation of truth quite undermined. The film “looks real, but it is not. It is even less real than this ...” This moment of constantly deferred reality points also to our own spectator’s position, which “is even more fragile” than Gray’s because it does not belong in “the show.”

These illustrations lead Sayre to examine the many resonances of the notion of performance and its relation to truth and authenticity. This is the dark side of performance, where it lacks measure, when it is only a performance, only an appearance and not clearly related to truth. In this hall of mirrors, which has been “the situation of the artist,” “if authenticity is the name of what argues against this predicament, it is, today, a name usually invoked as an absence, as something that has ‘withered away’ ...” Sayre questions the power of the concept of authenticity, its relation to truth and evidence, and, in the case of photographic media – photography, video, film – points to the self-contradictory nature of authenticity. Art is close to artifice; performance is alienated from its origin; narrative is constructed: the notion of authenticity may here point to our recognition of this febrile state rather than consisting in an escape from performance into origins. Or perhaps in “story telling,” in relating life, we can still hope to find the authenticity of performance.

This worry about the dark side of performance and authenticity brings the issues of this volume to a resolution without seeking a grand answer. The collection does not seek to present a focused argument for a particular conclusion but tries, instead, to mark an arena for debate and thought about performance and authenticity. This introduction sets out, briefly, some of the themes these essays contain; but it does not do justice to their complexities. Even this short linear presentation already points to the interplay between

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essays. The chapters develop varied themes, sometimes replaying them in diverse media and in diverse voices to display the potential for further debate. They consider music, poetry, and drama, performance, understanding, and authenticity, issues in the voices of criticism, history, theory, philosophical aesthetics, in analytic and continental vein. They show the overlaps between music and poetry, that considerations of the one can illuminate the other, and together strongly suggest lines for further reflection on and questioning of performance and authenticity.

### NOTES

- 1 George Steiner, *Real Presences. Is There Anything In What We Say* (London, Faber, 1989), p. 223, and Roger Scruton, *The Philosopher on Dover Beach* (1989).
- 2 See Ward Allen, *Translating for King James, Notes Made by a Translator of King James' Bible* (Nashville, Tenn., Vanderbilt University Press, 1969) for an account of the aesthetic interests that informed the translation.
- 3 See Frederick Antal, *Florentine Painting and Its Social Background* (Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986).
- 4 See for example *The Enigma of Piero*, by Carlo Ginzburg (London, Verso, 1985).
- 5 See Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (London, Duckworth, 1979) and John Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1962).