

CHAPTER 14
IN PRAISE OF SYMBOLIC POVERTY

AMONG AFFLUENT residents of Hong Kong there is a cynical belief that two maids get half as much done as one, three maids a third as much, and so forth. Slanderous or otherwise, this belief reflects the common experience that it is hard to get things done and proportionally harder the more people are involved; hence managers. And because we usually use words to specify what we want done, the problem becomes one of translating words into actions. That is where the trouble starts. When the words don't work, we try to fix them by means of more words. We use words to explain what we mean by words. We try and find words for every situation or combination of situations. We try to anticipate every contingency. We fail.

The very idea of translating words into actions should, perhaps, have been a warning of where things were going wrong. We generally assume that one language can be translated into another. Yet we know that thoughts formulated in one language may resist formulation in another or turn into different thoughts in the course of reformulation. If that is the case of translation between different languages, how should it be less the case of such different spheres as words and actions? Instead of thinking of one thing—a mission, action plan, or set of procedures—that can exist in the form of either words or actions, we might do better to think of two quite different things—words and actions—that we attempt, in an often improvisatory manner, to match up against one another. And, of course, they frequently don't fit.

I have already slipped in a musical metaphor, and it seems to me that music reveals the problem with singular clarity, as well as suggests what the solution might look (or sound) like. A piece of music consists of an extended sequence of actions involving a number of agents.' Within those musical cultures that employ written symbols—as most do, in one way or another—notation specifies these actions, whether directly or indirectly. Writers on the Western classical tradition often celebrate the sophistication of its staff notation, meaning by this its ability to specify musical relationships to a high degree of determinacy, thereby enabling the design of highly elaborate and often extended compositions. Our confidence in the determinacy of the notation is such that we sometimes speak of the performer "reproducing" the score, meaning this not pejoratively but just as a simple statement of how things are. It is only when you compare Western staff notation to other notational systems that you realize quite how much it leaves undetermined.

I can make the point by briefly outlining the notational system for the Chinese long zither or *qin*. It is a tablature, meaning that it specifies what the performer should do (by contrast, staff notation is more like a picture of how the music sounds, so it specifies the actions less directly). The earliest form of this notation (up to the tenth century) actually used words: the oldest surviving *qin* score includes such directions as "put the middle finger about half an inch on the tenth *hui* [stud] Hide the middle finger, and afterwards press it on the thirteenth *hui*, about an inch [down], in the form of a hook Lift the second finger slowly" (Kaufmann, 1967, p. 270). Conventionalized ideograms were subsequently substituted for words, but the principle remained the same: each movement of the fingers is itemized, resulting (according to the diplomat, crime novelist, and *qin* expert Robert van Gulik) in twenty-six different types of vibrato (van Gulik, 1969, p. 2). In other respects, however, *qin* notation falls far short of the determinacy of staff notation: in particular, it represents the music as simply a sequence of notes, without saying anything about the rhythm or tempo.

To a westerner, this appears an astonishing deficiency, such that one might question whether the notation really encapsulates the composition at all. But who is to say that the omission of rhythmic specification is a greater deficiency than staff notation's inability to distinguish between different kinds

of vibrato? (Classical composers occasionally specified "vibrato," or more commonly, "non vibrato," but the idea of composing vibrato has no place in the Western tradition.) The truth is that both staff notation and *qin* tablature are radically incomplete, making constant demands on the performer's tacit knowledge of what is normal or appropriate within a given musical context or style. (The point is not that Western composers do not care about the shaping of vibrato, but that they rely on the performer's tacit knowledge of what vibrato to use in what context.). The difference is simply in what is specified and what is left unspecified.

It is a general principle, then, that musical notations specify some things but not others. Considerations of cognitive economy mean that it could hardly be otherwise; if you try and specify everything, you will overwhelm the performer with information overload, and besides, you cannot anticipate every contingency, every situation or combination of situations -especially when several performers are playing together. But that is to put it negatively. The positive way to make the point is that, far from being deficiencies, the gaps in the notation represent opportunities for creative interpretation and interaction between performers. And the reason we go on listening to "the same" music is that, in performance, it isn't the same at all: every performance combines the security of the familiar (the "reproduction" aspect) with the shock of the new, or if not that, then at least the sense that you never know exactly what is going to happen until it has happened. In short, it is the gaps in the notation its symbolic poverty-that give it its value as a way of specifying the series of social actions and interactions of which any performance consists. In the case of jazz, this is quite obvious because a lead sheet is so schematic; nobody would be tempted to see it as more than a blueprint for a process of real-time interaction between the performers. You can't play jazz by just playing your piece, so to speak, because the essence of jazz improvisation is that you respond to the other, and so, as Ingrid Monson puts it, "To say that a player 'doesn't listen'. . . is a grave insult." (Monson, 1996, p. 84). But the same applies, for example, to a string quartet playing Mozart. The quartet may well play exactly the notes that Mozart wrote. And yet they don't play them exactly as he wrote them because every note in the score is subject to the contextual negotiation of intonation, precise dynamic value, articulation, timbral quality, and so forth (and it is, quite literally, this process of interpersonal negotiation and accommodation that you are hearing when you listen to music). For example, the performers stay in tune not because each independently conforms to a common standard (such as equal temperament), but because each constantly accommodates her playing to that of the others, so that "in tune" is an emergent concept. Mozart writes a C, say, but it is the performer who makes it into exactly *this C* played just so, and in this way you might say that the performer erases what is specified in the score as much as she reproduces it. (Like words and actions, what is written and what is played are two different things.) And because all this depends on the interaction between performers, it is just as much of an insult to accuse a classical musician of not listening as it is in jazz.

Music, then, reveals with singular clarity just how people can work together, and how it is possible to design a framework within which they will so-one that can give rise to a highly elaborate and distinctive output (Mozart's String Quartet in G Major, K. 387, say), even though local decisions are constantly being delegated to the individual and made on the spur of the moment. It is easier to understand this design process if we think of musical scores not as texts to be reproduced in performance, but rather as scripts that choreograph a series of ongoing social engagements - or to put it another way, as prompts to action that is in certain respects clearly envisioned, but in others, unpredictable and creative. And my claim, of course, is that the same applies to any form of complex, planned activity. Let me give a specific example from my experience as Dean of Arts at the University of Southampton, when I was trying to introduce faculty-wide standards in relation to things like teaching quality evaluation and academic load management. The obvious approach is to introduce standardized documentation that forces people into specific, predetermined procedures. People may accept this, but they do so grudgingly: you may win conformity this way, but you don't win people's hearts and minds, and so there is a limit to what can be achieved. The other approach is to specify the goals and leave each

academic department (or, in some cases, each individual) to find ways of realizing them: this promotes ownership, it may win hearts and minds, but it results in a level of procedural diversity such that, as a manager, you can have little confidence that your objectives are being achieved in any consistent manner, if at all.

Procedural consistency or hearts and minds? That is like choosing between a musical notation that specifies virtually everything and one that specifies virtually nothing, or between a score by Brian Ferneyhough and so-called free improvisation ("so called" because no improvisation can be completely free, just as even Ferneyhough can't and doesn't specify everything the performers do). The vast majority of musical culture speaks (or sounds) against the necessity of such black-and-white, either/or choices: it shows how you can communicate not just broad goals but highly determinate frameworks for realizing them, without prejudicing the initiative and creativity that gives people an investment in their work -not least because creativity and initiative are as real when they operate on the small scale as on the large, as can be seen from the comparison between the strictly delimited freedom of a Mozart quartet and that of jazz. His K. 387 shows how you can at the same time script action and interaction, give people a part to play, and ensure the common ownership of the outcome that is so positive a feature of chamber music. Mozart's music may not tell you exactly how to manage people in such a way as to reconcile corporate goals and individual freedom-the solution to my academic management problem was, like most solutions, a combination of modest, local, and contingent measures-but it is lasting testimony that such reconciliation is possible.

Music, in short, shows how you get things done, not through the hopeless attempt to anticipate and comprehensively specify people's actions, but by finding ways to prompt their performance in real time. In this way, you invoke people's tacit knowledge, their ability to interact with one another and to improvise, within a shared sense of direction and purpose. And in doing this, you are making the most of symbolic poverty.

NOTE

1. In what follows, I talk mainly about ensemble music. But, as any concert pianist will confirm, even solo performance involves interaction with the audience and in that sense, multiple agency.

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