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Source: *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Summer, 2005), pp. 490-501

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4138367>

Accessed: 03/11/2009 14:07

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Musicology According to Don Giovanni, or: Should We Get Drastic?

KAROL BERGER

“**M**usicology” in the broadest sense embraces all scholarly and scientific study of music and includes such well established and flourishing subdisciplines as music theory and ethnomusicology, among others. In the present context, however, I shall use the term in its narrowest sense, as synonymous with, or at least centered on, the history of the literate art-music tradition in the West.

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In the first chapter of his 1977 *Foundations of Music History*, Carl Dahlhaus succinctly identified “a problem that has constantly challenged scholarly endeavours in the arts: how to write a history of art that is a true history and not a loose amalgam of analyses of works, a history whose subject matter is indeed art and not biographical or social contingencies,”¹ in short, how to write a history of art that is both “a history” and “of art” (or, in our case, “of music”). To see what this formula requires, let us consider what it excludes.

The prescription requires, first, that we write history as opposed to what history is usually opposed to, namely chronicle. A chronicle offers

This paper was presented and discussed during the roundtable on “La musicologia europea oggi: quale identità?” at the eighth annual Colloquio di musicologia organized by the *Saggiatore musicale* (Dipartimento di Musica e Spettacolo, Università di Bologna, 20 November 2004); an Italian version of the text appears in *Saggiatore musicale*, 11 (2004). I wish to thank Fabrizio Della Seta, Laurence Dreyfus, Anselm Gerhard, and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht for their comments.

¹ Carl Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History*, trans. J. B. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983), 17.

a collection of facts; a history offers in addition hypotheses as to how these facts are related to one another. To adapt a famous example from E. M. Forster, a chronicle says, "The king died and then the queen died"; a history says, "The king died, and then the queen died of grief."² Here the relationship between the two facts, *a* and *b*, is causal-narrative. Another common kind of relationship is that of mutual implication: Facts *a* and *b* do not follow one another as cause and effect, but the existence of one implies the need for the other, and the reverse—the way, say, symphony orchestras and symphonic repertoire require one another. What these simple observations suggest is that so long as we limit our attention to a single fact or even a collection of facts, we are not writing history. History requires that we consider more than one fact and that we consider our facts within a context that allows us to interpret them (whether in terms of narrative causation or mutual implication).

What this suggests, further, is a broad (and, admittedly, extremely schematic) division within musicology between those whose primary concern is to establish facts and those who would rather interpret facts. (It probably goes without saying that we are dealing with ideal types here; in actual scholarly practice, most of us try to do both things at once, and the distinction becomes at most a matter of emphasis.) To ask about the state and identity of musicology today, whether in Europe or America or both, is to ask, among others, which of these two poles is currently in favor. (I should mention in passing that contrary to what the title of this roundtable may imply, I doubt that European musicology has, or should have, an identity distinct from, and opposed to, the American one, just as I remain skeptical with regard to any efforts to formulate a European political-social-cultural identity in opposition to that of America. In both domains, my inclination is not to exaggerate the differences between Europe and America. For one thing, the internal divisions *within* each—European and American musicology—seem to me far deeper than the division *between* them; for another, what the two have in common seems to me to prevail over what separates them. And what they do have in common is, among others, that they are internally divided, or to put it more positively, pluralist. With regard to musicology, in short, as with regard to its larger political-social-cultural context, I tend to be an "Euroatlanticist" rather than "Eurogaullist."³) Are we (whoever "we" are) today more interested in establishing what was done, by whom, where, and when, or in interpreting and hence

² E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1927), 130.

³ Cf. Timothy Garton Ash, *Free World: Why a Crisis of the West Reveals the Opportunity of Our Time* (New York: Random House, 2004).

understanding established deeds? I should probably say at once that the heroic and self-serving narrative according to which our benighted “positivist” ancestors who limited themselves to collecting facts have been replaced (presumably after 1968 in Europe, or after 1985 in America) by our enlightened “hermeneutic” selves is too much of a caricature to be illuminating. There was plenty of interpreting going on before 1968 (think of such characteristic products from the leading figures of those distant times as Bessler’s 1959 *Das musikalische Hören der Neuzeit*),⁴ and quite a few of our contemporaries continue to bring out critical editions in the morning even as they wildly speculate and interpret in the afternoon. In the history of musicology, as in the individual development of each one of us, the pendulum between establishing facts and interpreting them swings forever back and forth; at most, one might perhaps assert that hermeneutics has been lately somewhat more in fashion (but even this is far from certain, and in any case there are signs that the hermeneutic moment may be passing, as we shall presently see).

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The second half of Dahlhaus’s formula, in turn, requires that the facts we interpret be musical rather than extramusical. This assumes that we can distinguish musical from nonmusical facts. The assumption does not seem unreasonable. To begin with, musical facts will be construed by historians on the basis of documents produced by individual actions of performers, composers, and listeners: Thus musical facts include actual performances (“events”) that sound at specific places and times (and facts of this kind occupy performance historians); they include composed texts (the term “works” is potentially misleading, but so entrenched as to be inevitable), each of which may be the basis of a number of different performances (these kinds of facts have been so central to what musicologists do that we have no special name for historians interested in them); and finally, they include experiences and interpretations that listeners and readers derive from these performances and texts (the subject of reception historians). But in music as elsewhere, individual actions can make sense only within a broader context of premises and constraints established by social practices, shared activities with relatively stable and continuous, though not unchanging, aims, means by which these aims are realized, and the institutions that support the activities of all those engaged in the practice.⁵ Thus, musical facts must include not only the results of individual actions, but also

⁴ Heinrich Bessler, *Das musikalische Hören der Neuzeit*, Berichte über die Verhandlungen der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Philologisch-Historische Klasse, Band 104, Heft 6 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1959).

⁵ On the distinction between individual actions and social practices, see my *A Theory of Art* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 111–15.

the social practices in the context of which these individual actions are undertaken, practices that produce such relatively abstract items as genres. But then there are also the kinds of facts we music historians may want to consider when interpreting musical facts but that are not themselves musical: specifically, the individual features and biographies of the musical actors and the social circumstances in which they act. One might include a musician's character and identity (sexual, racial, economic, social, national, religious) and the prevailing social and political attitudes of his or her milieu—the list of potentially relevant items is endless, and the point of Dahlhaus's formula is not to limit it in any way. Rather, the point is to be sure that when musical and non-musical facts are confronted with each other, it is with the aim of illuminating the former by means of the latter, not the reverse. A Dahlhausian historian will use what he knows about the change of the prevailing political and philosophical attitudes after the failed revolutions of 1848-49 to shed light on inconsistencies in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* rather than using the drama to document and interpret the mid-century shift in the history of ideas.

The second half of Dahlhaus's formula, unlike the first one, may indeed provide a useful tool for spotting trends in recent musicology (and thus help reveal its identity). Two such trends may be plausibly postulated, or so it seems to me. First, to a number of our colleagues today it is no longer as obvious as it was to Dahlhaus in 1977 that they must use nonmusical facts to illuminate the musical ones, not the reverse. It is not that they disagree with Dahlhaus but rather that they are not as anxious to identify what they do as "music history." Instead, they see their research as a component of a larger field of "cultural studies" and, frequently inspired by the example of their ethnomusicological neighbors, do not hesitate to use musical facts to illuminate a culture they study. (Gary Tomlinson's 1993 *Music in Renaissance Magic* is a prominent example.⁶)

The second trend concerns the choice of the kind of musical facts one is interested in. It seems, namely, that we are less and less willing to accept the composer as the unchallenged central actor on the music-historical stage. This is the case even when we study the developments from the 18th to the mid 20th centuries, that is, the period during which the composer was seen to play the central role. It is not, of course, that history of music understood as history of composition has been abandoned or is likely to be abandoned anytime soon. It is, rather, that we have been paying increasing attention to the composer's

⁶ Gary Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic: Toward a Historiography of Others* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993).

performing and listening colleagues. First, since at least the late 1960s, the history of composition has been supplemented by an impressive number of studies in reception history, in what happens to the music once it leaves the minds, hands, and throats of the composers and performers. (Martin Geck's 1967 book on *Die Wiederentdeckung der Matthäuspassion im 19. Jahrhundert* is an early masterpiece of the genre.)⁷ Second, since at least the 1990s, the history of performance also has been gathering momentum, especially among opera scholars. (Here, for once, we may indeed be dealing with a trend that is particularly pronounced in the U.S., where the precipitous decline in the cultural prestige of high art and the tremendous vitality of popular music traditions—in which the distinction between composer and performer is less pronounced and the composer enjoys a less privileged position than in the literate high-art music of the last few centuries—have produced a veritable explosion of scholarly interest in popular, performer-centered, music.) In the remaining portion of this paper I will discuss a particularly radical and thought-provoking recent proposal in this area.

In an essay that appeared earlier this year, Carolyn Abbate argues for a “drastic” rather than “gnostic” conception of music and would want to see musicology's efforts redirected accordingly.⁸ (She borrows the terms from Vladimir Jankélévitch, whose book *Music and the Ineffable* she has recently translated and whose sympathy for the “drastic” she shares.⁹) She reminds us that in 1985 “Joseph Kerman argued for a disciplinary revolution: in musicology” (506), urging that it shift its attention from “positivism” (positivist musicologists prefer to collect data and establish facts rather than to interpret them) and “formalism” (formalist music theorists analyze the internal structures of individual works but refrain from contextual interpretation) to “criticism” (Kerman's term), or “hermeneutics” (as Abbate prefers to call it), or “history” (to stick to Dahlhaus's formula)—that is, to musicology centered on interpretation.¹⁰ Abbate's exemplary formalist is Charles Rosen. Within the church of hermeneutics she distinguishes the vulgar “low” denomination consisting of those who believe that meaning is encoded once and for all in the notes by the composer, and the somewhat more

⁷ Martin Geck, *Die Wiederentdeckung der Matthäuspassion im 19. Jahrhundert: Die zeitgenössischen Dokumente und ihre ideengeschichtliche Deutung*, Studien zur Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts 9 (Regensburg: Gustav Bosse, 1967).

⁸ Carolyn Abbate, “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 505–36. (Hereafter I shall indicate the specific pages from which I quote directly in the main text.)

⁹ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1985).

sophisticated “soft” denomination whose devotees understand that meaning is constantly renegotiated by listeners in the process of reception (the gnostics have no high church): “This distinction separates a musical hermeneutics craving the blessing of history or the dead and seeing immanent supra-audible content in musical artifacts from the past (low) from that which acknowledges such content as a product born in messy collisions between interpreting subject and musical object (soft)” (516). Initially, one gets the impression that her main “low” targets are Lawrence Kramer and Susan McClary, but eventually it becomes clear that she also aims higher—at Theodor W. Adorno himself with his claim to hear the state of the late modern society (dismal) encoded in this society’s music (dissonant): “Historically, . . . the move from musical hermeneutics as silly frivolity or alluring *jeu d’esprit* (as in the nineteenth century) to musical hermeneutics with laboratory standards should . . . be credited to Adorno” (527). As for the “soft” hermeneutics, the main practitioner she seems to have in mind is Richard Taruskin. For Abbate, the problem with Kerman’s revolution is that in one crucial respect formalism and hermeneutics “are twins” (530): When they say “music,” they mean “work,” the aural object we imagine when we look at the score, and they ignore “performance,” the real, not imagined, aural object, the actual “event” produced and experienced at a specific time and in a specific space. “Between the score as a script, the musical work as a virtual construct, and us, there lies a huge phenomenal explosion, a performance” (533). It is this phenomenal explosion that musicology studiously avoids. Therefore a new disciplinary revolution is called for, one that will shift our attention from works to performances.

Why is it important that we do this? It is important, Abbate argues, because it is the performance and not the work that is the real rather than merely imagined (“phenomenal” and not merely “virtual”) music (she is incontestably, tautologically, right about that); when we ignore this actually made and experienced sounding event in favor of the disembodied abstraction that is the work, we bypass the sensuous, audible, immediate experience (the “drastic”) and put in its place the intellectual, supra-audible, mediated (that is, interpreted) meaning (the “gnostic”). Thus we avoid what is of real value in music: the experience, the powerful physical and spiritual impact it may have on us. “Music in performance affects us physically, but, as Jankélévitch points out, its physical action can engender spiritual conditions, grace, humility, reticence” (529). This, too, seems to me incontestable. Moreover, Abbate defensively adds, the openness to experience would not deprive our involvement with music of all moral-political value, on the contrary: “Jankélévitch’s argument acknowledges music’s precious humanity and social

reality . . . by emphasizing an engagement with music as tantamount to an engagement with the phenomenal world and its inhabitants" (530). Avoidance of the experience of performed music "can foreclose much that is of value, both intellectually and morally, in encountering a present other at point-blank range" (532).

But why, then, do we fear experience and defend ourselves against the physical and spiritual effects of performance? To begin with, there is the professional deformation of the clerk: Meaning, not experience, is the academy's favorite coin. Abbate recalls the distinction the literary scholar Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht recently drew between "meaning culture" and "presence culture" and his persuasive argument that "one of them is perpetually in danger of appearing illegitimate in the academy—presence culture" (531).¹¹ (To which she adds: "Yet meaning culture—scholarship's privileged culture—is inadequate to deal with certain aesthetic phenomena, events like performed music in particular" [531].) But the avoidance of presence runs deeper. At the root of the hermeneutic temptation to substitute meaning for experience, Abbate suggests, lies the fear of the irrational: Performed music "can ban logos or move our bodies without our conscious will" (532). Frightened by Dionysus, we feel safer with Apollo.

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I am in fundamental sympathy with Gumbrecht's and Abbate's arguments and aims, with their insistence that we do not bypass the immediate, sensuous experience and sacrifice its carnal and spiritual effects in our professionally motivated eagerness to move on to interpreted, intellectual meaning. As Horace suggested long ago, the point of the arts is not only to edify, to make us better and wiser, but also to give pleasure. Some, perhaps most, people want to be not only good but also happy. It is encouraging to see such hedonistic notions as beauty and pleasure regain academic respectability after decades of moralistic neglect.¹² Whether or not the combined efforts of Abbate, Gumbrecht, and others will amount to the emergence of a New Aestheticism, it is certainly salutary for our students to be reminded that no matter how much edifying cultural theory they absorb, this cannot be a substitute for direct experience of the arts, and that such experience can have a human value and dignity of its own, even if it makes no direct contribution to such worthy causes as making our societies even more egalitarian than they already are.

¹¹ For a systematic statement of Gumbrecht's theory, see his *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2004).

¹² For another recent symptomatic defense of beauty, also cited by Abbate, see Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999).

And yet I suspect that there is less to this revolution than meets the eye here. To begin with, Abbate overdraws the opposition between the real performance and the imaginary work. In her view, the former is the object of immediate, sensuous experience; the latter, the vehicle of mediated (that is, interpreted, “hermeneutic”) intellectual meaning. In fact, however, the hermeneutic element cannot be wholly banished from the arena of performance: There is no such thing as pure experience, uncontaminated by interpretation.

Recall Augustine’s still unsurpassed analysis (*Confessions*, book 11, chapter 28) of what happens when we experience any temporal object (such as a musical performance). The mind not only marks attentively what happens in the present moment, it also expects what will happen in the future and remembers what has happened in the past. The experience is the gradually enriched palimpsest consisting of the superimposed layers of the constantly diminishing expected future, the ever changing marked present in which the expectations are confirmed or disproved and thus instantly transformed into memories, and the ever growing remembered past. But it is only what is marked in the present that is real, or, to speak with Gumbrecht, that has “presence”; what is expected to happen in the future and what is remembered to have happened in the past exist only in our imagination. It is simply not the case, as Abbate seems to think, that in experiencing a performance we are, or could be, completely absorbed in the present and can avoid substituting what is absent but imagined for the real sounding presence. To live only in the present, in the Now, the aesthetic model of existence followed by Kierkegaard’s Don Juan, is an abstraction, an unattainable utopia. We cannot help it: We are hermeneutic creatures through and through. Hence I repeat, there is no such thing as a pure “unmediated musical experience, which . . . is tantamount to a performance” (530). It may be true that “formalism’s rush to descriptive taxonomies or technical analyses is just as distancing [from “an unmediated musical experience”] as hermeneutics’ rush to metaphysical signifieds, tandem flights from music as performed” (531), but it is no less true that these flights cannot be completely grounded; they are not flights from the experience of performed music but rather an indispensable component of any such experience. In any experience of a temporal object, the imaginary future and past invade the real present, contaminating the immediacy of presence with interpreted meaning.

Formalism and hermeneutics will always be with us. But this is not necessarily a bad thing: Properly managed, they can actually enhance and enrich the experience of performance, not distract from it. As you listen to a performance of Brahms’s C minor symphony, your inner formalist will notice how its main themes are related to one another. An

inner voice will also mark the gradual emergence of references to the first movement of Beethoven's C minor symphony. (Is it still the formalist whispering, or has your inner hermeneut taken over? You are no longer within the charmed circle of the work whose performance you are actually attending, although the audible sounds do not yet refer to something other than sounds, which for Abbate seems to be the condition of hermeneutics.) At this point, your clearly hermeneutic synapses begin firing out of control: If you lean toward individual psychology, you cannot help thinking of the "anxiety of influence" or "melancholy of impotence"; if you are, rather, socially inclined, the sense of "cultural belatedness" of the Ringstrasse period will appear on your inner radar screen. It is an exaggeration to call any of these signifieds "metaphysical," but signifieds they are: Your thoughts have taken you beyond the sounds immediately at hand, beyond any sounds in fact. But these thoughts do not prevent you from hearing the sounds the orchestra is actually producing; nor do they impoverish the physical and spiritual effects of these sounds. On the contrary, your experience gains in depth and intensity and becomes multidimensional; you are no longer imprisoned in the Don Juan's Now. Even such a lowly, despised formalist product as a descriptive taxonomy may enrich what you hear: After having been told for years that the finale of the same Brahms symphony is a rondo, you will hear it anew when you realize that it is the sort of movement in which the recapitulation begins directly after the exposition and incorporates elements of a development as it goes along. Finally, the physical and spiritual effects of performed music (what is most precious for Abbate) would be severely blunted if we succeeded in attending only to what is present and blotted out all expectation and all memory: The exhilarating sense of a breakthrough after a struggle, a common effect of symphonies written in the wake of Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth and surely a spiritual one, is not the effect a performance of the symphony could have on someone who attended only to the present moment, without any awareness of its past.

The example I have chosen is, of course, slanted in the extreme. Not all music requires this degree of active attention to its expected future and remembered past in addition to its actual present. It may well be that much, perhaps most, music, today and in the past, in the West and the world over, requires of us not much more than a passive and rapt absorption in the present moment. Even such music, however, does not eliminate the imaginary completely: When listening to a jazz improvisation, I do not have to forget the standard on which it is based—its chord progressions, melody, words; when listening to "Casta diva," I do not have to (and could not, even if I wanted to) forget Callas's voice. Also in this kind of listening, passive and absorbed in the mo-

ment, the absent (image, concept) may and does intrude upon the present (sensation), and also in this case, far from obliterating the actual experience, it enriches it, provides it with additional depth, makes it the experience that it is: Temporal or not, the experience is always an experience of *something*, always a relation of a particular to a universal. And here as well there is no good reason to limit the absent to the imagined sounds only: The imagined visual or intellectual content can be just as enriching and just as legitimate.

Moreover, precisely because different kinds of music call for different modes of listening, with attention divided in different proportions between what is at hand and what is not (not yet, or already not), rather than calling for a blanket revolution, we should adjust our ways of experiencing, describing, and understanding to the kind of music in front of us. Whether we choose to write about performances or works should depend on the culture, period, or genre that we study: As I have suggested elsewhere, some of these (cultures, periods, genres) may be more profitably approached from the standpoint of performances, others—from that of works, still others—by considering neither individual performances nor individual works but rather social practices in the contexts of which such products of individual actions as performances and works make, or do not make, sense.¹³

All of this is not to deny that there are modes of formalism and hermeneutics that indeed block rather than enhance the experience of performed music, and that these are best avoided. Neither is it to deny that Wagner's Walther and Ben Heppner's Walther on a particular evening in a particular theater are two different objects, both worthy of musicological attention. How worthy? That depends on whether you have something interesting to say about either of them. (Obviously, not every experience you have deserves to be publicly disseminated, even if it made a deep impression on you.) But we should not exaggerate the ontological difference between these two objects. True, the former exists wholly in the imagination, the latter did exist, once, in reality. But as Abbate herself realizes by the last page of her essay, as we begin to write about it, performed music too is only memory: "There is the irony that, however responsive and attentive we are to the presentness of performance, the present pastness it must have to make possible any act of writing is not negotiable" (536). Thus if you have something worthwhile to say about them, do write about actual performances; but do not cloak your choice of the object in the spurious mantle of revolutionary heroics, do not flatter yourself with the bravery with which you

¹³ Berger, *A Theory of Art*, 111–20.

brush aside the *frisson* of danger brought about by “encountering a present other at point-blank range.”

But what would musicology look like if, disregarding such niceties, we followed Abbate’s call for a new disciplinary revolution? There can be no doubt that there are profound things to be said about the effects of performed music on listeners and performers: The proofs offered by Proust are irrefutable. (The description of what listening to music does to Hans Castorp would qualify too, had Abbate not ruled out recorded performances.) Given the everyday realities of academic existence, however, these models are not for everyone. If you feel they are not for you, yet you insist on avoiding hermeneutics, here is what you might do instead: Bring out, modestly but usefully, accurate editions of hitherto inaccessible music, collect hitherto inaccessible data and establish on their basis new facts, produce internal analyses, and then fall silent, satisfied that what you have done may become material upon which future ecstatic-aesthetic experiences will be built. To be sure, the refusal of hermeneutics is the refusal of history. Pushed to its logical consequences, Don Juan’s aesthetic absorption in the present moment is equivalent to Hume’s and his successors’ positivism of the experienced sensation as the only reality. Thus in practice, the New Aestheticism might lead us back to a mythical past from whence we all presumably came, the Old Positivism. Now, *that* would be drastic!

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ABSTRACT

In a recent essay, Carolyn Abbate argues for a “drastic” rather than “gnostic” conception of music and would want to see musicology’s efforts redirected accordingly. In the wake of the 1985 call by Joseph Kerman urging musicologists to shift their attention from “positivism” and “formalism” to “criticism” or “hermeneutics”—that is, to musicology centered on interpretation—Abbate issues a call for a new disciplinary revolution, one that would shift our attention from works to performances and thus undo what she perceives as the fatal weakness in Kerman’s position. When we ignore the actually made and experienced sounding event in favor of the disembodied abstraction that is the work, we bypass the sensuous, audible, immediate experience (the “drastic”) and put in its place the intellectual, supra-audible, mediated (that is, interpreted) meaning (the “gnostic”) and thus avoid what is of real value in music—the experience, the powerful physical and spiritual impact it may have on us. While I am in fundamental sympathy with Abbate’s arguments and aims, I believe that the opposition between the

real performance and the imaginary work—the former the object of immediate, sensuous experience, the latter the vehicle of mediated (that is, interpreted, “hermeneutic”) intellectual meaning—on which her argument rests is overdrawn: The hermeneutic element cannot be wholly banished from the arena of performance; there is no such thing as pure experience, uncontaminated by interpretation.