

---

ANNA CHĘĆKA

THE COMPETITION  
AS AN 'EXCHANGE'  
OF VALUES:  
AN AESTHETIC  
AND EXISTENTIAL  
PERSPECTIVE

The title of our conference raises an interesting question: what, in fact, is the object, or rather the subject, of the 'test' to which it refers? To answer this, let us first consider the assertion that in a competition it is music that is put to the test. However great the rhetorical force of the phrase 'music put to the test', an immediate rebuttal can be made on the basis of the subjectivisation of music, as well as the notionally elusive, but intuitively felt, defencelessness of music itself as the subject of a test. The threat of the test is less alarming when we clarify that we have in mind not the musical work as such – what contemporary Platonists (Peter Kivy, Julian Dodd) would call a 'type' – but its performance, and indeed one of the many potential 'tokens' of that type. But another problem arises here. After all, interpretation is a personal – not depersonalised – statement promoting values; it stands between them (*inter-pretium*) and negotiates their *raison d'être*.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary aesthetics, on the one hand dominated by analytical philosophy and on the other dubbed unscientific by representatives of the scientific paradigm, prefers to deal with the work of art as a structure-object, safely disregarding what is individual, subjective, marked by singular existence. Hence the contemporary aesthetician more often seeks to make pronouncements about beauty from an externalist perspective, belittling the individual, personalist perspective. Not only could one legitimately find fault with the neglect of concerns to do with the listener's individual experience, but one could also criticise the marginalisation of the experience of the performer, who transfers the work from a state of potentiality into the soundworld of a concrete 'here and now'. The performance competition reveals to us the existential fragility of that experience and offers a perfect opportunity to reconsider questions linked to the relationship between the work and the performance. It renders justice to that which is individual and worldly, and at the same time protects those values which bind an individual interpretation to their source (the composer's work).

In this article, I investigate artistic and aesthetic values, the presence of which in the work or the performance I regard as a fundamental, although frequently marginalised, aspect of contemporary art philosophy. I also analyse the arguments that persuade some present-day scholars (Jerrold Levinson, Carolyn Abbate, Stan Godlovitch) to strongly accentuate the role of the performer and the performance, and even to place the individual performance above the work as notated in the score. In practice, such thinking can lead to a cult of the person performing, one that takes on particular significance in the case of performance competitions. In such instances, a difference of aesthetic opinion between the audience, the critics (who often favour a performer with a strong personality) and the jurors (typically concerned with respect for the composer's intentions) becomes manifest. Finally,

---

1 I refer here to the reflection of Władysław Stróżewski: 'Thus interpretation, etymologically speaking, means establishing values between two sides, transferring one value to another, or creating a suitable equivalent to one value in another'. See Stróżewski, 'Czas piękna' [The time of beauty], in *Wokół piękna. Szkice z estetyki* [On beauty. Sketches from the field of aesthetics] (Cracow: Universitas, 2002), 276–277.

I pose the question of the engaged aesthetic attitude of the listener, which in the context of a competition constitutes a particularly crucial condition of musical experience. It is thanks to that experience that the listener becomes capable of issuing a full value judgement on the performance.

## I.

Let us begin with a problem that – at least in part unjustly – polarises the standpoints of many contemporary music philosophers and musicologists. It amounts to the construction of a strong opposition between the work (as a task for the mind) and the performance (as an object of live experience). Within this context, a classic alternative often arises: the work versus the performance. In a slightly different version, this alternative takes the form of a choice between the composer and the performer. A naïve and simplistic interpretation would be that in the competition context the audience takes the side of the performance and the interpreter while the jurors defend the work and the composer's intentions. Carolyn Abbate sharpened the work/performance alternative by boldly enquiring in her article 'Music: drastic or gnostic?' whether music is at all present in musicological reflection today. In her opinion, 'between the score as a script, the musical work as a virtual construct, and us, there lies a huge phenomenal explosion, a performance that demands effort and expense and recruits human participants, takes up time, and leaves people drained or tired or elated or relieved'.<sup>2</sup> Here Abbate invokes the ideas of Vladimir Jankélévitch, who referred to the 'drastic' sphere of music, ignored by musicologists, namely its intense experiencing, pre-reflective, sensory immersion in the sounds of a live performance.<sup>3</sup> That kind of experiencing constitutes genuine contact with music that is present 'here and now'; its opposite consists of intellectual, gnostic speculation, the ultimate product of which is a precise definition or, quite simply, verbalised, learned thinking. The drastic/gnostic antithesis perfectly accords with other oppositions between academic '-isms', which boil down to a conflict between the detached study of a self-contained sound structure and embroiling music in experiences, narratives and images external to it. The accusation of 'gnosticism' is effectively and convincingly rebutted by Karol Berger, who softens the opposition between 'drastic' and 'gnostic' by noting that we are thoroughly hermeneutic creatures. Consequently, we seek meanings and interpret even when we are ostensibly concentrating on pure sensations, on the actual experiencing of music 'here and now'. Berger writes: '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

<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Abbate, 'Music – drastic or gnostic?', *Critical Inquiry*, 30/3 (2004), 533.

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, tr. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

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'.<sup>4</sup>

This kind of opposition, highlighted by Abbate, between the learned 'culture of meaning' and the spontaneous 'culture of experience', proves to be merely hypothetical, at least when we remain within the sphere of the latter. That is because we never experience entirely without reflection.

One could hardly find a clearer illustration of this state of affairs than a monographic performance competition. Let us use as a reference point the International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition. The participants in this legendary competition pay tribute to the 'culture of meaning' since they refer to Chopin's scores and to a more or less unified performance tradition. At the same time, they remain within the domain of the 'culture of experience' because their appearance on the stage in each round of the competition represents a play for the listeners' attention, aspiring to take hold of their musical experience. From this perspective, it is something of an exaggeration to call for a shift in attention to performance as the object of musical experience. The Chopin Competition, in an obvious way, strengthens the link between the moment, experienced thanks to the performer's 'here and now', and the work as the source of all aesthetic emotion. What is more, the link between the work and the experience of the performance becomes perhaps the most crucial concern of the jurors passing judgement on the quality of competition performances.

The same example of the competition could be used to neutralise another current dispute in contemporary music philosophy. I have in mind here the dispute between concatenationism and architectonicism that erupted following the publication in 1997 of Jerrold Levinson's *Music in the Moment*.<sup>5</sup> The philosopher Peter Kivy, attacking Levinson's book, demonstrated at the time the advantage of silent study of the score (architectonicism) over the relishing of music performed 'here and now' (concatenationism).<sup>6</sup> Levinson, for his part, consistently lauded music in the moment, which invalidates a notional division into experts and musical laypeople because immersion in the musical 'now' is a feature of the perception of every sensitive listener. However, anyone observing this dispute would easily arrive at the conclusion that those activities – the silent contemplation of a work as a structure and immersion in the musical 'now' – cannot be judged against one another; as a consequence, one ought not to come out unequivocally in favour of either. Depending on the situational context, the mood or the individual needs of listeners, reading a score might provide them with deep aesthetic and intellectual satisfaction, while a live and artistically unsuccessful performance would leave the same

---

4  
Karol Berger, 'Musicology according to Don Giovanni, or: Should we get drastic?', *The Journal of Musicology*, 22/3 (2005), 497.

---

5  
Jerrold Levinson, *Music in the Moment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

---

6  
Peter Kivy, 'Music in memory and music in the moment', in idem, *New Essays on Musical Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 183–217.

listeners with a sense of dissatisfaction or even aesthetic distaste. Let us repeat once again that the music competition, seen from the dual perspectives of those being evaluated (the performers) and those doing the evaluating (jury, critics and audience), is in equal measure a celebration of both the musical present (Levinson's 'music in the moment') and the music encoded in the score as a potentiality (Kivy's 'architectonicism').

It is time to sum up the first line of argument here. Although Abbate and Levinson rightly fear reducing music to structures – and thus to 'silent' listening via the 'mind's ear' – they involuntarily adhere to the cult of the performative, spectacular and worldly in music. Yet an accusation of 'worshipping performativism' would be an exaggeration, since both scholars are clearly responding to the 'insensitive musicology' so prominent in the literature, which is characterised by a focus on the work and the score and by clinical methods of analysing the former. Thus, the voices of Levinson and Abbate should be perceived against the backdrop of what provoked them in the first place, namely theories that marginalise live musical experience.

Theorists' excessive concentration on the work and disregard of the performance as a musical work of art were the motivation behind Stan Godlovitch's thinking as expressed in his book *Musical Performance*. He states in the introduction: 'work-centred accounts may treat performance purely functionally as merely one means to reveal the work in sound, thus reducing it to a kind of messenger mediating between composer and listener. More formal accounts of works may portray performance as simply token instances of the work type while underestimating the significant fact that works massively underdetermine their performances.'<sup>7</sup> Even at this stage, it is clear that adopting Godlovitch's point of view could have crucial consequences. From this perspective, the division between the work as 'type' and the performance as 'token' is annulled: the performance itself becomes a type, one that reorganises musical ontology in a critical fashion. According to Godlovitch's view of ontology, we should distinguish the composition or 'frame-work' from the work proper. He offers the following explanation: 'The former [i.e. compositions or 'frame-works'] are given to us by composers and are usually in score, while the latter [i.e. 'works proper'] are what performers collaboratively create in performance in using compositions. In this sense, performers contribute in making the musical work which is, necessarily, underdetermined by its composition.'<sup>8</sup> Without doubt, Godlovitch's findings correspond to the practices of the newest music and the concept of the open work, and in that respect they do not invite rebuttal. However, the author wishes to regard every performer – therefore each participant in the Chopin Competition – as a co-author of a work, given that, as he would have it, performance is simply an elaboration of stories. I think that Godlovitch is right to fight for the performer's

7  
Stan Godlovitch, *Musical Performance: A Philosophical Study* (London: Routledge, 1998), 7.

8  
Ibid.

independence, and he also rightly emphasises the performer's role as a co-creator of the work of art. What I find rather worrying and contradictory, however, is his desire to separate interpretation from that which he himself calls its foundation. Thus, he clearly favours listeners and tends towards strengthening their relationship with the performer. What is surprising here is his eschewing of the question of the values that ultimately determine whether a performance is deemed a work of art. From his standpoint, the connection with the composition/frame-work is also lost as a source of potential interpretive values. Godlovitch writes: 'Performers need their listeners, but do not need any one (or even any) composer. Where works are intended as musical and not mere theoretical exercises, composers need performers. Performers are thus in a privileged position of musical brokerage regarding what counts as standard repertoire and how it is delivered.'<sup>9</sup> He goes on to add that performances 'become autonomous independent artworks'.<sup>10</sup> So from this perspective the performer does not just help to create the value of a work, but is an independent creator of it. Adopting that perspective in the context of a performance competition seems particularly problematic. Although the idea of a competition is to identify an outstanding musical personality, that purpose is not served by the radical personalism proposed by Godlovitch. Although a performance competition does do justice to performativism and teaches listeners to delight in what they are hearing here and now, it does not negate the source of the musical work of art. The competition – to a greater extent than concert life – takes care to preserve the frame of reference for a performance with regard to the source that is the composer's work. Hence the need for a revised form of personalism that takes account of the question of the values present in the work and in the performance.

## II.

In seeking such a revision, let us begin with a straightforward transferral of the premises of Godlovitch's personalism to the domain of the competition. The basic frame of reference here is not the composer's intentions, but above all the rich personality of the performer. We may immediately add that from this perspective a competition will be won by a strong, even narcissistic, personality, enamoured of himself or herself as much as beloved by listeners, which is perhaps the weakest point of the radical version of personalism. A narcissist often thrills crowds, whose enthusiastic appraisal of his or her playing is not infrequently at odds with the assessment of the jurors; this can produce a whiff of scandal around a competition. However, as Godlovitch reminds us, personalism requires thought to be given to the stage ritual and to forms of communication, a crucial feature of which is the mutuality of

---

9  
ibid., 50.

---

10  
ibid., 51.

relations between performer and listener. It is not entirely clear what would constitute a reliable indicator of the mutuality of that relationship. Applause? A standing ovation? Or perhaps the award of an audience prize?

I have no intention of defending the virtues of radical personalism, since I find them rather dubious. What I would propose instead is a milder version of that concept, in which the relationship between the work and the performance remains that between type and token. The performance competition thus continues to be a bastion of the traditional Platonic perspective, and the idea of a work to which various performance visions aspire also persists. Moderate aesthetic personalism seems to me to be particularly well suited to the competition situation. It comes to the defence of the person of the performer, but it does not ignore his or her *raison d'être*: namely, the role of messenger between composer and audience. Messengers who forget that they are there to serve cannot give lustre to the message. Neither can they trust the strength of the message: instead, they prefer to seize the limelight for themselves, momentarily electrifying the audience but generally by a short-term investment in the market of fleeting sensations. For me, the temporality of the 'success of the narcissist' is the most compelling evidence of the weakness of radical personalism. Moderate personalism rejects stopgap investments, and its dividends are truly disinterested, devoid of income, as George Steiner undoubtedly would put it. Aesthetic dividends result from the rejection of all self-interest. Originality – which distinguishes performances singled out from the perspective of moderate personalism – reminds us of the 'pulse of the distant source'.<sup>11</sup> It reminds us, as Steiner writes in *Real Presences*, about the 'dur désir de durer' of a work of art.<sup>12</sup> After all, the etymology of the word 'originality' bids us think of a return to source, in form and in content. Hence the moderate personalism postulated here supposes that the music competition exists in order to reveal universal, objective, absolute qualities that are continually acquiring new dynamism and refulgence through their embodiment in the person of the performer. Yet they are also 'archaic', since we hear in them the rhythm of the source beating in the distance.

Moderate aesthetic personalism is also sympathetic to the Platonic perspective, as it rejects relativism or extreme subjectivism with regard to the treatment of values. From this perspective, individual performers are a condition for the emergence of beauty, a personal medium through which the beauty of the composition manifests itself: they are a *sine qua non* of the coming into being of beauty, though they do not reveal it by themselves.

The music competition seen from the angle of moderate aesthetic personalism becomes an absorbing metaphor of life. It reveals a kind of nostalgia for the absolute and, from a broader, existential, perspective, a nostalgia for infinity. Art, in the felicitous moments

<sup>11</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 28.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

of peak aesthetic experience, can be the discovery that – as Wiesław Juszczak writes – there is no death, ‘there is no wall at which we die’, there is only infinity, a limitless horizon of meanings, continuously opened thanks to the talent of the artist.<sup>13</sup>

### III.

When philosophers of art wish to render justice to values, they head towards the classic division into what is artistic and aesthetic. It is generally agreed that artistic values are the defining and constituent features of the work of art. Thus, the perception of artistic values in a performance allows one to regard it not just as a faithful reading of the composer’s work, but also as a work of art. Meanwhile, aesthetic values – as Roman Ingarden and Stanisław Ossowski argued<sup>14</sup> – manifest themselves thanks to the aesthetic experience of the receiver, who with his or her sensitivity, imagination and knowledge responds to the quality of the performer’s interpretation. Let us note, therefore, that aesthetic value is a fruit of the relationship that arises between the work of art and its beholder. So in order for aesthetic value to manifest itself in the context of a competition, there is a need for inter-subjective dialogue. The two sides of that dialogue, the listener and the performer, open themselves up to the presence of the *Other*. Let us consider the enriching presence of that *Other* in musical experience on several levels. The first *Other* is the composer. A careful interpreter follows the composer’s lead, internalising his or her message and imparting to it a personal stamp. Secondly, from the listener’s perspective, an *Other* is also the performer acting as a translator of the meanings of the score. Thirdly, and finally, for the listener and the performer, the musical work is evidence of the presence of an *Other* whom we should harbour within, internalising the message that it communicates to us.

Thus, a performance competition may be regarded as a special kind of attempt at inter-subjective dialogue, in which the person who enters the stage is only ostensibly the one who is put to the test. A less obvious test concerns each one of us – listener, juror and critic – and our ability to provide an answer to the message of the *Other*. At this point, we touch on the social-ethical dimension of the responsible listener. During a competition, the listener, the juror and the critic test their own abilities to focus attention on a performance despite possible fatigue or distraction. If either the person’s disposition or external factors make it impossible for them to follow the performer’s musical message, it also becomes impossible for them to issue a responsible aesthetic verdict. During a competition, therefore, the ‘test’ is symmetrical for all those fully involved in it, although it putatively concerns only those who are performing on the stage.

---

13  
Wiesław Juszczak,  
*Wędrowka do źródeł*  
[A journey to source]  
(Gdańsk: słowo/obraz  
terytoria, 2009), 519.

---

14  
See Roman Ingarden,  
*Przeżycie, dzieło, war-  
tość* [The experience,  
the work and value]  
(Cracow: Wydawnictwo  
Literackie, 1966), 137–161,  
and Stanisław Ossowski,  
*Dzieła* [Works], vol. 1:  
*U podstaw estetyki*  
[At the foundations of  
aesthetics] (Warsaw:  
PWN, 1966), 282.



In a literal sense, however, the competition tests the elements that constitute the pianist's artistic craftsmanship: expressivity, virtuosity, authenticity, coherence of interpretation and faithfulness to the score. A test of this sort (to put it colloquially, an 'exchange' or 'market' of values) assumes the existence of a scheme of reference, a set of reliable criteria for evaluation, which enable the listeners to compare and gradate the values of performances. The reality of a competition can be cruel to values, in that it can sometimes diminish them or even extinguish them when a performance that we admire and fully appreciate occurs next to one that is even more excellent. In his essay on relative value, Roman Ingarden emphasises that a value put to the test is sensitive to the appearance of another value, although he adds that this has no effect on the valuable object itself.<sup>15</sup> The metacritical perspective is kind to value. Unfortunately, artistic practice, and the reality of a competition in particular, is far removed from ideal models, if only because the fate of the values that are put to the test is determined by the perceptual capacities of the receivers. When competition performances reach a very high standard, sometimes even approaching the axiological optimum, some critics have difficulty in discerning outstanding personalities among the performers. The standard is very high, the pianists often play immaculately, captivating the audience with their beautiful, beguiling tone, yet the critics still wait for a revelation and fail to notice the one occurring 'here and now'. They sell their soul to the notion of something that they liken to a legendary performance, bitterly concluding that today, in contrast to competitions from decades ago, there are no great personalities. One should ask whether that unsated appetite or – to put it more forcefully – that 'impaired aesthetic hearing' is not the result of an imperviousness to the brilliance of a performance's values. Perhaps being continually in the bright light of values paradoxically renders the listener immune to their action. It is certainly easier to notice lustre against a monochromatic background, thanks to the effect of contrast. This question warrants the attention of music psychologists.

In normal concert life, this situation, inimical to the full appreciation of values, would not occur. In the reality of a competition, however, the desire to behold perfection makes the audience continuously anticipate some 'aesthetic added value' that the winner's performance ought to display. Perhaps that is what the jazz pianist Marcin Masecki, observing and briefly commenting on the Chopin Competition, had in mind when noting with distaste that competitions arouse in the audience what he saw as a state of unhealthy exaltation and anticipation of incredible events.

I would describe this state somewhat differently: a longing for the lofty, and a nostalgia for the absolute. A competition perceived in this way becomes a personal transcendence of life. It is not surprising, therefore, that when it ends we feel dependent on the events that have isolated us for a few weeks from the banality and

<sup>15</sup> See Roman Ingarden, 'Uwagi o względności wartości' [Remarks on relative value], in idem, *Studia z estetyki* [Studies in aesthetics], vol. 3 (Warsaw: PWN, 1970), 209.

ordinariness of life, offering a 'hiatus' from the serious business of living. I would even add that a continuous state of aesthetic experience (and the competition has ensured us of this thanks to the high standard of performances on offer) has meant that we feel more human, that we feel ourselves to be better people. Let us remember, however, that the aura of aesthetic experience, which, as Ossowski and Ingarden observed,<sup>16</sup> is democratic and conditions both the receptive and the performative concretisation of the work of art, also covers the participants in the competition. Their performative efforts unite pragmatic, purposeful activity (the kind that in ordinary life characterises our daily routine) with that 'suspension of reality' and 'hiatus' from serious living. It is all the more true, therefore, that the experience of being *in music* – an experience accessible to performers – distils the essence of humanity. The competition's 'to be or not to be' heightens that perspective in the human, and no longer the artistic, dimension.

It is also worth drawing attention here to the issue of the historical variability of the artistic value revealed in a performance. In the opinion of the Polish scholar Zofia Lissa, artistic value is changeable in character and depends on the perceptual capacities of the person perceiving it. This approach is quite surprising, as it brings Lissa's thinking close to those contemporary approaches which elect not to see a lasting source of value in the work. Within this context, Lissa proposes a kind of musical perceptualism, linking the value of the work to the audience's ability to perceive that value: 'Reception changes over time. We know that towards the end of the nineteenth century Chopin's sonatas were held in disregard. For that epoch, Chopin was solely a composer of small forms. It was only the twentieth century that discovered Chopin's sonatas and ballades. So the variability of value arises even within the bounds of a single compositional oeuvre'.<sup>17</sup>

For Lissa, another argument in favour of the changeable character of value is the example of the works of Bach, underappreciated during the baroque era but then discovered by romanticism. Consider too the converse: the fashion for Telemann among audiences of his day versus the now restrained enthusiasm for most of his works. It would appear that Lissa unjustifiably relativises and subjectivises value also due to a lack of distinction between aesthetic and artistic values. As she would have it, a test of the value of a work is the recognition that it receives among listeners. Such is indeed the case with aesthetic values, which are gauged by the listener's aesthetic experience. Artistic values, meanwhile, which may be perceived from a purely cognitive perspective without the participation of aesthetic experience, do not depend on the changing tastes of listeners. We may hazard the following conclusion: if Lissa was right, music competitions should be turned into festivals, as then they would reveal the public's fashions and preferences, and with them also changing and ephemeral values.

16  
See Ingarden, 'Wartości artystyczne i estetyczne', in idem, *Studia z estetyki*, vol. 3, 266–287, and Ossowski, *U podstaw estetyki*, 282–300. See also Bohdan Dziemidok, 'Ingarden's theory of values and the evaluation of the work of art', in Bohdan Dziemidok and Peter McCormick (eds), *On the Aesthetics of Roman Ingarden* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1989), 71–100.

17  
Zofia Lissa, contribution to a discussion on creative output, in Stróżewski, *Wokół piękna*, 346.

It would seem, however, that the essence of the competition is the discovery of new embodiments of lasting values or, to put it differently, the continual expansion of the horizon of meanings of a musical work. So let us ask one last time what function is fulfilled in this process by the interpreter – the one who, standing *interpretium*, imparts new lustre to the values. In so doing, he or she takes a significant risk, particularly when assessed by people who are seeking to ascribe a precisely defined 'meaning' to a musical work of art.

#### IV.

Putting values to the test gravitates disturbingly towards finitism, in what comes close to a sort of 'eyeglass' method. In science, finitism presupposes the possibility of cognising the truth, of attaining a cognitive goal. In art, meanwhile, finitist aspirations represent both a pipe dream and a trap, although almost everyone unwittingly succumbs to them at one time or another. This occurs, for example, when we fight tooth and nail for the 'truth' of a work of art, to fully decipher the composer's intentions encoded in the score or perpetuated by tradition. Another manifestation of that kind of thinking is the treatment of a work of art as something whole and complete, and thus as immanent. In an extreme version, such a conviction assumes the form of the nominalism of Nelson Goodman, who asserts that the score precisely delineates a collection of correct readings of all the work's parameters. The replication in performance of those instructions of the composer that Goodman considers to be stipulated supposedly ensures that we obtain an inviolate image of the work and can even recover the score from the performance.<sup>18</sup>

However, instead of an essentially noble fidelity to the score, a belief in the whole and complete nature of the work of art may give rise to an exaggerated need to create only a correct interpretation. The delusion nurtured by an advocate of the immanent perspective may be a wish to approach the qualitative plenitude that potentially lies in every work. Yet can a single performance achieve qualitative plenitude? Should a work not be treated rather, in Ingardenian fashion, as a certain 'ideal limit' to which various good performances aspire? Trusting in immanence often manifests itself as relinquishing the dialectic of freedom and necessity that is proper to artistic activities in favour of necessity alone and nothing other than a correct interpretation. This results from perceiving the work of music as a closed reservoir of meanings, which performers must come to know in a full and proper way if they intend to transmit to the audience both faithfully and reliably the message encoded by the composer in the score. In such instances, the test of value conducted from the finitist-immanent

---

18  
Nelson Goodman,  
*Languages of Art: An  
Approach to a Theory of  
Symbols* (Indianapolis:  
Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), 183.

perspective proves uncompromising, since it turns values into facts and attempts to make objective statements about them.

Yet a test of value may also gravitate towards infinitism and transcendence, since the value of each and every new musical interpretation has an opportunity to show its new refulgence, to manifest itself increasingly more fully, as if confirming that beauty in the Platonic understanding is rooted in the world of ideas. Such a possibility is implicitly assumed by Roman Ingarden, given that he calls the musical work an ideal limit to which various good performances aspire, although always departing from it to some extent. Let us continue that line of thought, assuming, after George Steiner, that approaching the essence of music enables us to formulate an answer to the question as to what humans are: 'to ask "what is music?" may well be one way of asking "what is man?"'<sup>19</sup> A person playing music – seen from the perspective of competitive rivalry – embodies most pathetically a test that concerns not so much ephemeral beauty in sound as the actual subject: the individual enriched by music and imparting to the music him- or herself and his or her humanity. Such a test has not just an aesthetic dimension but also a deeply existential one. So regardless of all attempts to maintain a distance from the idea of the competition as a test of oneself, competitor-performers, offering music a home within them, at the same time reveal themselves to all the competition's observers. They also agree to the documenting – in the form of recordings – of fleeting manifestations of their own presence on stage, in which, besides loftiness and beauty, human impotence and even defencelessness may manifest themselves. Thus, Steiner, seeking to redefine the categories of aesthetic experience, reminds us of the *real presences* in the work of the art of Mystery. He certainly has in mind the unfathomed Mystery of the work, which tells us about ourselves, but also the open horizon of the work's meanings. He suggests that we should transcend immanence and be capable of assuming the 'responding responsibility' of an interpreter with regard to a work (Steiner deliberately uses in this context 'a dated word [...] *answerability*').<sup>20</sup> Let us follow that trail a little further. Interpreters who are 'really present' in their performance on stage in a competition impart to the music their existence, respond to it with their life. At the same time, we, as more or less committed observers, so often fall into the trap of endless commentaries. Vision is fed by re-vision; critical commentary begets commentary. The competition situation of putting music to the test is burdened by a particular responsibility for the premature and rash labelling of performers and for establishing a hierarchy of interpretations. Hence not only jurors but also critics should be characterised by a constant readiness to verify their own points of reference. By no means am I stating that a critic should be undecided or unsure. Yet a golden mean should be sought between authoritarian certainty and programmatic distrust with regard to one's own points of

---

19  
Steiner, *Real Presences*, 6.

---

20  
*Ibid.*, 8.

reference. In the case of the latter extreme, critics are incapable of hearing their own inner voice, their critical sense; they do not trust the impulse that enables us to open ourselves to value and to have an aesthetic experience. An incapacity for aesthetic experience means an atrophy of the sense of value, and consequently the critic's demise. The problem is that a critic sometimes feigns confidence instead of admitting to indifference laced with concealed boredom. And that very indifference, imperviousness to value and sharpening of aesthetic appetites beyond human capacities should be sought in one's private life, in a critical examination of one's conscience. I consider that this equally applies to competition jurors and to all listeners responsible for their judgements.

Not just intellectual self-control, but also sensitivity helps critics to identify the point at which too great a distance is created between them and the performer being assessed. At that point, a relationship characterised by dialogue is replaced by one of asymmetry between '*me*' and '*the performer*'. In this relationship, '*I*' become a preacher or a capricious young madam whom no one can please, while the performer turns into an imperfect wooer or penitent. The unbridged gap between the bored critic and the insufficiently interesting personality of the performer is frequently based on a sadomasochistic relationship between one who is stronger (the judge) and one who is weaker (the judged). Critics easily and (often) without reflection don the mantle of authority. They tower over the judged, ruthlessly labelling them and establishing a hierarchy of performances, before the *jury* manages to issue its verdict. They discover – so often with delight – that almost anything may be said, since there are no discernible limits to verbal expression. In addition, the public expects this, particularly those who are less well acquainted with musical matters and seek a guide, an adviser, an authority. Writing 'off the cuff' about what has happened (and especially commenting 'live' on competitions) can be particularly dangerous when the comments are addressed to ordinary listeners and popularise a niche cultural event. It must be a comprehensible opinion, and ideally entertaining to boot. The danger is inherent in the domain of language, when a critic bandies about attributes relating to 'dull' and 'uninspiring' personalities, to 'academic performances' against a background of 'somewhat more interesting or even electrifying renditions'. At such times, even complimentary terms can sound ambiguous, as when a participant gives a 'savage' performance of a concerto in the finale – but wins. In such instances, music is put to the test in a bold, rhetorical game. It turns into news, tasty tidbits. There is a danger of fulfilling George Steiner's prophecy: at the end of the day, a musical headline will fade, inscribing itself in 'an epistemology and ethics of spurious temporality'.<sup>21</sup> Thus music, athletic feats and indigestion play on the same stock exchange of fleeting sensations. Steiner's diagnosis is disconcerting. In his opinion, contemporary critics often forget

---

21

ibid., 26.

about their obligation to internalise value and that they should themselves be responsible interpreters. At such times, the performer ceases to be judged and dependent on the critic's good or ill will. He or she becomes the critic's partner, because both of them, albeit in different ways, interpret the musical work.

Rivalry in music and joint responsibility for it are keywords that do not need to antagonise or create a distance between expert and layperson, critic and performer, or juror and competitor, but instead have the potential to build a space for dialogue – and not only in the aesthetic domain.

---

#### ABSTRACT

In a music competition, victory is never unequivocal. Such a competition is a rivalry not just of artistic personalities, but also of the aesthetic values manifested through performances, which are measured and compared, often leading to relativisation. The performances of one candidate can be devalued compared with those of others. So are we dealing more often with the devaluation of one performance compared to another, or with the instability of the assessment criteria and changing circumstances to the issuing of the value judgement? While questions of an aesthetic nature can be considered in isolation from the interpreter of a musical work, that does not apply when we look at the 'value exchange' of a competition from the perspective of a gifted and sensitive performer engaged in rivalry.

---

#### KEYWORDS

piano, competition, value, experience

---

ANNA CHEŃKA is a philosopher and pianist. She currently works as an associate professor in the Department of Aesthetics and Philosophy of Culture at the Institute of Philosophy, Sociology and Journalism, University of Gdańsk. She completed piano studies at the Academy of Music in Gdańsk (Master's degree in 1998, with honours) and studied with Bernard Ringeissen in Paris on a French government scholarship (in 1999). In 2002, she recorded the CD *The Soul of Music*, with works by Bach, Chopin, Brahms, Rachmaninoff and Debussy. In 2005, she completed her PhD studies in philosophy (dissertation on metacritical aspects of the evaluation of musical performance). She has published two books: *Dysonanse krytyki. O ocenie wykonania dzieła muzycznego* [Critical dissonance: Evaluating performances of musical works] (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2008) and *Ucho i umysł. Szkice o doświadczeniu muzyki* [Ear and mind: Sketches of musical experience] (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2012). In 2014, she completed her postdoctoral degree in philosophy. She has also published articles in *Estetyka i Krytyka*, *Sztuka i Filozofia* and the series *Punkt po Punkcie*.