■ MUSICAL ONTOLOGY: A VIEW THROUGH IMPROVISATION*

Alessandro BERTINETTO

1. Introduction

■ The contemporary debate in philosophy of music about the ontological status of musical works seems sometimes to have little to do with actual musical practices and experiences. As Lydia Goehr observed (1992) the danger is here very high that the competing theories remain unrelated to the actual practices they should explain. It is difficult to understand why elaborating complex conceptual systems for answering the ontological question "What is a musical work?" is worthwhile, if, aside from discrepancies between scores, which may be often rectified through philological examination, the identification of a certain performance as performance of a certain work is normally not problematic in the central case. Better and more interesting is to search for aesthetic reasons that can explain why, to which degree, regarding which aspects (and so on), a certain performance is good, bad, exciting, innovative, moving, insipid and so on, and to be preferred to other performances of the same work.

Some ontologists insist that this is not the point at issue. Musical ontology, they argue, is not in the service of artistic criticism or of aesthetic practices. It is a philosophical matter that is to be pursued *per se*. I do not deny that this can be done. Moreover one could think that evaluative questions could be satisfactorily answered only with the support of a convincing ontology. Still, it remains unclear how a convincing ontological back-drop can perspicuously explain evaluative questions, when ontology is not linked to the concrete historical musical practices in which its concepts (work, song, track, performance, etc.) really arise and work (cf. Ridley 2003: 210).

Considerations of this kind induced scholars to reflect on the methodology of musical ontology (cf. Kania 2008a and Stecker 2009) as well as to examine the relation i) between musical ontology and musical practices, sometimes grounding the first on the second (Davies 2009), ii) between fundamental musical ontology and more specific musical ontologies such as rock- or jazz ontologies, maybe doubting about the usefulness of both (Brown 2011), and iii) between ontology and aesthetics of music, sometimes treating the first as an "idle distraction" from the second (Ridley 2003: 220) or even as a "pseudo-problem" (Young 2011).

I do not consider musical ontology as a pseudo-problem *per se*. Still, I favour the view that, in order not to become entirely divorced from the reality it should explain, thus reducing itself to an "idle distraction", it should be tied to *real* aesthetic and artistic practices. Yet, this seems to beg the question, because in an ontological inquiry one of the points at issue is precisely which are the *real* aesthetic and artistic practices. Anyway, I think that as a starting point, it is not problematic to accept the view that in order to be tied to *real* aesthetic and artistic practices a musical ontology should be acceptable from the perspective of those who make and listen to music and not reduce itself to hair-splitting analysis of mere conceptual philosophical artefacts.

The main reason for my suspicions regarding a large part of contemporary musical ontology is precisely that it regards music in terms which are at odds with musical aesthetic and artistic practices and with the basic ordinary intuition that music is a performance art with takes different shapes and uses different techniques and materials, but it is mainly an activity of producing sounds to be heard. A large part of the ontology of music is formalistic and objectivistic: it regards musical works (MWs) as kinds of objects, whether abstract or concrete, which are to be understood as formal structures. The problem with this view is that this is not enough to explain our musical experience: music is not only heard and understood in terms of objects, facts or structures, but also in terms of events, activities or processes, that take place or occur here and now.

In this paper I will offer a programmatic hint of how musical ontology can accommodate this ordinary intuition. In order to do that, I will take into consideration the practice of musical improvisation. The focus on improvisation, instead of on works, is useful to reshape the discourse of musical ontology in non-formalistic and non-objectivist terms. Since music entered the realm of the fine arts, around the end of 18th-century, improvisation was thrown out of music, as something that, due to the absence of planning and discipline, could not be reconciled with the discipline of art (Nettl 1998: 7). For this reason improvisation has been neglected in musicology as well as in philosophy of music. Although, to tell the truth, in the last years improvisation is regaining attention in philosophy of music and in musicology, the models that contemporary musical ontology builds to explain what a musical work (MW) is make understanding the significance of improvisation for music very difficult: improvisation does not fit well for the construction of an ontology of MWs as structural objects.

Yet, those models, whether or not metaphysically mistaken, are highly counterintuitive and do not capture the musical experience of the common listener. Hence I suggest that we regard the link between musical ontology and improvisation the other way round. Instead of understanding musical improvisation on the basis of the contemporary debate on the MWs' ontology, the strategy I will suggest here is to reshape musical ontology in light of a philosophical exploration of improvisation. Still, a preliminary caveat must be given to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings. I am not committed to identifying music with improvisation: I will rather argue that improvisation exemplifies important facets of music that musical ontology should not disregard.

I will proceed as follows. In section 2. I present a simplified account of the main theories of musical ontology on the market and of some objections commonly raised against them. In section 3. I criticise the way formalistic ontology explains improvisation. In the sections 4. and 5. the main argument for considering musical improvisation as central for music ontology is prepared and outlined in a programmatic way.

2. Musical Ontology. A Sketch of the Theories

Three main views in contemporary musical ontology are the following ones:

a) The 'Platonist' or 'Structuralist' concept of MWs as types.

b) The 'Nominalist' view of MWs as classes of performances that are compliant with a score.

c) The 'Continuist' theory of MSs as objects with different temporal parts.

a) According to the Platonist view, MWs must be distinguished from their performances, because we can assign a set of properties to the work and a different set of properties to the performance of the work. MWs are ideal types and do not exist in our spatiotemporal world like their tokens, that is, performances, do. Hence MWs, as types, are discovered, not created, by composers (cf. Wolterstorff 1975, Kivy 2002 and 2004, Dodd 2007).

b) According to Nominalism, all that exists are particulars. In music only the concrete performances exist. Hence, as famously argued by Nelson Goodman (1976), music must be conceived in terms of compliance between a certain performance and the characters in a notational system, the score. MW is the class of the performances that comply with the score. So scores are the central elements of this theory.

c) According to Continuism, MWs are concrete temporal objects (cf. Rohrbaugh 2003). Continuists argue that if MWs were abstract types they could not enter into causal relations; hence we could not even refer to them. Nonetheless MWs are not compliance classes between performances and scores, because we want to refer to works without referring to their performances. MWs are rather historical temporally and modally flexible objects that come to be, can change and can disappear. They have temporal parts–their performances–which are their occurrences and which can be correct or incorrect. Hence, the criteria of identity of MWs are normative and depend on the practice in which each work takes its place. The reason why we are used to thinking about MWs as more or less unchangeable entities is that in our cultural practice MWs are often scored and the score 'freezes', as it were, possible temporal transformations.[1]

Each of these theories has been criticised for different reasons.

a) I will mention three objections against Platonism.

x) Platonism goes against our intuition that MWs are created, not discovered by the composer. It hardly explains how we can consider a MW – say Mahler's *Tenth Symphony* – as unfinished. It does not account for modal flexibility, that is, for the common view that MWs could have been somewhat different from how they actually are (see Rohrbaugh 2003 and Benson 2003: 60).

y) Platonism generally considers structures as the essential elements of MWs, because only structures can be discovered. This is true for certain musical parameters, but is certainly not *generally* true. Non-structural features (duration, phrasing, rhythm, timbre, instrumentation, dynamics etc.), are the most important elements in certain musical

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[1] 'Perdurantism', a theory similar to 'Continuism', cannot be considered here, due to space reasons. Cf. Caplan and Matheson 2006.

practices (cf. Trivedi 2002: 78). For example, you could not ever think about jazz in purely structural terms, i.e. abstracting its structures from the particular tone colours of the instruments played by each singular musician, the dynamics, the *swing*, etc. Moreover, different kinds of music differ from each other also as to which kinds of structures are the most aesthetically and artistically relevant in every case. In a symphony the appreciation of the work requires understanding the 'big' structures of its movements as well as its global harmonic development. In a jazz standard the structure of the harmonic chord progression can be very simple and banal, yet this does not imply that the piece is simple and banal: in this case the melodic and rhythmic structures of the solos can be the relevant thing.

z) According to Platonism, if two different persons compose the same tonal structure, they compose the same MW (Davies 2009: 160). Yet:

z.1) There can be MWs that share the same sound sequences, but are nonetheless different MWs for the different properties are to be considered for their appreciation.[2]

z.2) The idea that the historical context of the musical practice in which the work is composed and performed as well the instruments that should be played for producing the sounds of a certain MW are not relevant to determine the musical object seems at odds with our ordinary understanding of music. As argued by Stefano Predelli, "even for a particular work, the decision about what kind of properties are demanded from its correct performances may depend not only on the sort of object the work is, but also 'on the context'" (Predelli 2011: 281). In other words, "it would be a mistake to suppose that constraints [for performance-correctness] are embedded within the work's very nature" (Predelli 2006: 160), because standards of correctness shift accordingly to aesthetic, cultural, and technical changes in musical practices (Predelli 1995: 346-7).[3]

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[2] I thank Jerrold Levinson for helpful comments on this point.

[3] If I accept this point of Predelli's criticism against musical Platonism, I think, against his position, that this move does not imply a strong separation between ontology and aesthetics; quite on the contrary, it shows that a better assessment of the link between aesthetics and ontology is required. I will briefly discuss this point in the last part of this paper. Cf. also Predelli 2001. Levinson (1990) proposed a correction of the Platonist view, in order to solve these problems. On the basis of the implicit view that the demands of art "trump the demands of metaphysics" (Kania 2008b: 429), he argued that MWs are initiated-types that are not there before the composer invents them. Moreover he argued that works are not only sound-structures, but indicated-sound-structures, that specify the instruments to be played. Dodd (2000) criticized this view, on the ground that types are eternal, and so indicated-types, if they are types, cannot be atemporal. Levinson (2012) now claims that, if Dodd is right, then one could think that initiated-types are not strictly types at all, but simply 'generic entities'

b) The main objection raised against Goodman's theory is quite famous. Goodman argued that "since complete compliance with the score is the only requirement for a genuine instance of a work, the most miserable performance without actual mistakes does count as such an instance, while the most brilliant performance with a single wrong note does not." (Goodman 1976: 186).

This is at odds with the intuition that the identification of a work by its performances requires us to take into considerations elements like speed, dynamics, tempo, etc. and that there are plenty of bad performances of works in which every right note and no wrong notes are played, as well as good or even excellent performances in which some notes in the score are not played, and still we have no doubt in identifying the performance as a performance of the work it is a performance of. Goodman explains that his aim is to codify a coherent ontology, not to adapt the ontology to our practice. Anyway, *this* is precisely the point at issue: we want a theory that explains our practice, not one that is so blatantly at odds with it.[4] Moreover, Goodman's reference to *classes* is at odds with his official nominalism.[5]

c) Regarding Continuism, I think that it accounts better than Nominalism and Platonism for the performative character of music and its notion of MW is better tied to musical practice. Still, aside from technical aspects like the ones criticised by hard-Platonists (see Dodd 2004), it conceives music in terms of objects, whereby, as I will argue later, music should be better primarily explained in terms of activities and processes.

I will argue in favour of this claim by discussing the link between music ontology and improvisation.

3. Musical Improvisation and the Type/Token Ontology[6]

A simple definition of musical improvisation is this: an improvisation is a process, in which creative and performing musical activities not only

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(as R. Wollheim called them). Following Kania's terminology (2008b), I prefer to consider them as 'fictions'.

[4] Descriptive, not revisionistic, metaphysics is needed (I take this terminology from Kania 2008b). Further objections against Goodman's theory are raised by Wolterstorff (1975) and Kivy (2002). An interesting emendation of Goodman's theory, which preserves Nominalism, but mitigates its paradoxical character, is given by Stefano Predelli (1999a and 1999b), by arguing that in order to play a MW it suffices that you have a serious *intention* to play MW, even if you make some mistake in realizing this intention.

[5] I thank Lee B. Brown for this precious suggestion.

[6] For a detailed account of the conceptual relationship between musical improvisation and the type/token ontological duality see Bertinetto 2012 (forthcoming).

occur at the same time, but are the one and same generative occurrence. Hence *an improvisation is a process that unfolds while being invented*: it is an ephemeral, temporally irreversible, and unrepeatable event. In musical improvisation the creativity is performative, and *vice versa*, the performance is creative (cf. Bertinetto 2011: 94-96). Improvisation is "une action spontanée où l'on agit de manière imprévue, en ne se bornant pas à une décision d'agir prise à l'avance" (Levinson 2010: 213).

Therefore formalist musical ontologies such as Nominalism and Platonism are unsuitable for explaining improvisation. Goodman's Nominalism is unsuitable for improvisation for the simple reason that improvised music cannot be conceived in terms of performances that are compliant with a score. For improvisations are, by definition, "making music without writing music" (Austin 1983: 33).[7] Platonism also hardly explains improvisation, for the ontology of improvised music cannot be worked out in terms of the application of the type/token duality. This ontological alternative may explain the relation between a MW and its performances, but in an improvisation the distinction between MW and performance collapses. An improvisation is neither a performed MW not a performance of a MW, although it can be a performance *on* or *inspired by* a MW (or a performance thereof) and even if MWs can be *invented* (or discovered) by means of improvising.

The type/token duality does not apply for improvisation, because, if we claim that a musical improvisation is a type, we should admit the possibility of multiple occurrences of the type; but this conflicts with the singularity of improvisation that, as created by being performed, is an unrepeatable process and its spatiotemporal conditions are part of its identity. Analogously, if we consider the problem the other way round, and conceive a bit of improvised music as a token, it is not clear what type improvised music should be the token of. In other words, one could consider a certain musical improvisational event, that took place at the A-Trane in Berlin on January, the 4th 2012 between 22:00 and 22:15 pm as a token of the type "musical improvisational event at A-Trane in Berlin", or of the type "improvisational event occurred on January, the 4th 2012", or of the type "musical improvisational event occurred on January, the 4th 2012 at A-Trane in Berlin", or of the type "music improvised by Peter Liedermacher, Georg Schlager und Hans Sax", or "music improvised by Peter Liedermacher, Georg Schlager und Hans Sax in Berlin", or

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[7] Obviously, I am not saying that making music without written music is always improvisation. Brown (1996) argues that Goodman's distinction between allographic and autographic art does not accommodate improvisation. Whether an emendation such as Predelli's could make Goodman's philosophy of art suitable for improvisation is a question I will not pursue here for space reasons.

"improvisational event" or…?? In other words, it is impossible to single out the relevant type concerning the ontology of improvisation, although we can choose different possible semantic descriptions of the single event occurred.

Yet Platonists are tough: therefore we have to discuss their views at some length. One might be tempted to explain the type/token nature of improvisation by considering that in musical improvisation, for example in jazz, musicians do not usually create *ex nihilo*: they use pre-composed and prepared elements (materials, formulas, riffs and so on). An improvisation v, one might argue, is the combination of those elements. Hence, a) v is the combination of patterns that are types, and as such, v is a type too; or b) v is the occurrence of a combination of those types, i.e. a token thereof. Unfortunately, for the Platonist, even if we grant, for the sake of the argument, that v is only the combination of prepared materials and formulas, this answer still does not work. In fact the manner, the order, and the time in which the prepared elements are selected and played is decided on the spot.[8] Moreover the changing musical and performing context contributes to reshaping the 'same old' riff into something new. In this respect the processual character of v has to be considered as crucial: v must be primarily regarded not as *result* of a performing activity, but as performance *in actu*. Hence one should not abstract from v's spatiotemporal conditions in order to explain its ontology, for those conditions are part of its ontological *identity* (an identity that, as activity *in actu*, is an on-going transformation).

This argument also does not work with transcriptions of v.[9] If you transcribe v, or extract a structural (melodic, rhythmic, harmonic) pattern from v, you change ontologically v into something else, exactly because, in so doing, you are abstracting from the dynamic character of v as activity-in-action. Those operations are often important to make v accessible and an object of experience aside from its situational frame, to document v, to make v analysable. They are very important for various reasons – didactic, aesthetic, artistic, commercial, etc. Still they do not serve the cause of Platonist ontology. Platonist ontology based on the type/token dichotomy as well as the Nominalist ontology based on the idea of compliance class are not valid for the ontology of improvisation *stricto sensu*.

However, in the philosophical literature, the ontology of improvisation is subordinated to formalistic ontologies of MWs. Here I will discuss two of those theories. The first one was suggested by Philip

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[8] Not to mention that often v is an interactive interplay and process between several musicians.

[9] I put off the implications of sound recording for another paper.

Alperson. In order to accommodate the singularity of improvisation with the type/token ontology, Alperson claims that an improvisation can be conceived as the *unique* token of a type, i.e. as a type having a single token (what scholars now call a 'singleton'). In this sense, he writes: "(...) musical improvisation seems ontologically closer to the creation of a wood sculpture – the unique token instance of the type – rather than to a conventional musical performance" (Alperson 1984: 26), which must be conceived, by contrast, as one of the multiple tokens of a unique type.

Yet, this move conflicts with the most widespread ontological theory about types and, in order to adjust to the singularity of improvisations, achieves an unwanted result for formalistic and objectivist ontologies. If we argue that improvisations are singular tokens of singular types, aside from the fact that this is at odds with general metaphysics, in this way we are forced to accept that every musical performance – not only improvised performances, but even performances of musical compositions – is a token with its own type 'attached', as it were, to it: the type "Musical Work performed at time *t* in space *s* with players *pp*... etc." (MWTS), an only-once-tokened-type (a singleton) that is 'discovered' or 'created' (to decide this is not crucial here), while the music is being performed. This would change musical Platonism into a strange kind of "nominalistic Platonism" or "platonistic Nominalism". The Platonist part of the theory is that the type "composed musical work" MWT is instantiated in the tokens that are its performances (MWts). The Nominalist part results from the idea of improvisation as a single token of an only-once-tokened-type: if we grant this view, I do not see any reason to reject the implication that each singular MWt would actually be the occurrence of *its* singular type (a singleton: MWTS) and MWT would be better understood as the class of all the MWTSs.

This is rather at odds with our ordinary intuitions about works and performances and it conflicts resoundingly with Occam's Razor ("no entity without necessity"). On my view, if only for the sake of elegance, it would be better to avoid an ontology that includes entities like MWTSs. Yet Alperson's ontological view of improvisation obtains only iff such an ontology holds true. Because this is not the case, then Alperson's ontology of improvisation, in this specific regard, fails.[10]

The second formalistic explanation of musical improvisation I take into consideration was given 1983 by Peter Kivy (2004: 99-101). If right, this theory could avoid the problems of understanding improvisation as a

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[10] It would be unfair, however, unfair not to mention that Alperson's 1984 seminal paper gave a big impulse to philosophical investigations on improvisation and that Alperson's research on the topic has since then provided an important benchmark for the topic.

token of a single type. However, Kivy's account of improvisation is wrong. Unlike Wolterstorff (1975) Kivy thinks that the improvisational action is, as such, a kind of composition. It is not necessary that a musical work is scored in order to be composed. The improvised performance is the act that discovers the MW: it is the first token of the type the MW consists in. According to Kivy's Platonism, the composition is an act of discovery, rather than of creation. Hence, improvisation is composition because it discovers a MW, while tokening its structure for the first time. Therefore, improvisation accomplishes two things at once, according to Kivy. The improviser not only composes, but also interprets, the MW. In an improvisation such accomplishments – composition and interpretation – occur at the same time. Yet they still are different accomplishments. While improvising, the musician may, for example, add a bit of *rubato*, that, according to his musical tradition is usually heard as part not of the composed work, but of the performance. Hence, in writing a score that matches the work composed by improvisation, the transcriber *can* skip the indication of *rubato*, because this is not part of the conditions for a right performance of the work. Yet, is it a correct way, and the only possible way, to understand the connection of improvisation and MW? I do not think so, and I will now explain why.

Kivy's understanding of improvisation as composition and as performance of the composition seems to be an effort to solve the problem resulting from the odd consequences of the application of the type/token distinction, drawn from the ontology of music in general, to the ontology of musical improvisation in particular: the transformation of Platonism in a kind of 'nominalistic Platonism' or 'platonistic Nominalism'. The only way to avoid the awkward multiplication of entities generated by conceiving the spatiotemporally individuated singular performance p of MW as the token of a MWTS could be reached by distinguishing an essential and an accidental part in what is accomplished while improvising and by improvising. Essential and eternal is the work discovered by the improvisational action. Ephemeral and accidental is the interpretational contribution of the improvisational action. Unfortunately, this misconceives completely the ontology of improvisation, by making it a kind of tool for getting through to the MW, a tool that can be, as it were, thrown away after being used.

According to Kivy, MWs are eternal and unchangeable. Composition is a discovery and improvisation is a kind of composition. In this sense MWs can be the outcomes of improvisations and under this aspect improvisations are valuable undertakings. Improvisers reveal MWs, while adding to them elements that are expression of a certain style, a certain historical and cultural context, a certain mood, and so on. These elements are non-structural and from a 'purist', formalist and Platonist perspective, *incidental*, features of music: duration, phrasing, rhythm,

instrumentation, dynamics, expression, articulation, and timbre. Yet, through these incidents we can get to the MW. Hence, the Platonist can tolerate them as kinds of necessarily evils.

Unfortunately, this view depends entirely on Kivy's Platonist musical ontology, which does not overcome the objections stated above in §2.1. The way the Platonist explains improvisation, by distinguishing in it an essential and a contingent part –the part through which we can get to the eternal MW, and the ephemeral part that depends on the performance conditions and means– reveals a preference for the result of the improvisational process: for the product. Yet, even if we grant that the act of composition is valuable only in virtue of the composed MW, this is not true of improvisation, because in improvisation we have not first the process and then the product, but the process *is* the product. They simply cannot be distinguished.

This has negative consequences on Platonism as a general ontology of music.

As we saw in §2.1.c, Platonism does not account for the fact that the criteria of correctness for performances are not part of the nature of MWs, but shift according to musical practices. Following this line of thoughts, one may argue that the criteria for distinguishing an essential and an ephemeral part of improvisation are not embedded in the work's identity that an improvisation, according to Kivy, discovers. Hence, it is not clear how to pick out the elements that belong to the MW from the elements that belong to interpretations or renditions of the MW. Surprisingly this is precisely what even Kivy thinks. For he thinks that, whether the *rubato* played during an improvisation is or not an essential part of the work discovered while improvising depends upon musical conventions. Hence, he should consequently say, the identity of a MW is not of an atemporal metaphysical order. It is a cultural, historical identity, with changes through time. Not only that. The very idea that one can distinguish between an essential and an ephemeral part of improvisation as well as between a MW and its interpretations and renditions is due to a particular cultural and historical notion of MW. This notion of MW arises within historical musical practices along with conventions about performances. Those notions, practices and conventions are hardly unchangeable. Yet, if the identity of MW is subject to transformations, because musical conventions as well the very notion of MW change, then Platonism, which defends that MW are eternal unchangeable type, is wrong.

Musical Platonism does not accommodate the ontology of musical improvisation as a real, irreversible, and singular process. Moreover, the failure to explain improvisation according to the Platonist type/token duality, by saying that improvisations have essential as well as ephemeral

parts, show that a general failure of Platonism is to ignore the cultural and historical character of MWs.

4. Werktreue, Fictionalism and Real Music

The general flaw of formalist ontology, both of the Platonist and Nominalist sort, derives from the unwarranted assumption that it is metaphysically obvious what it means for the relation between a MW and its performances to be explained as a matching between performances and MW.[11] What is claimed is that the performance must be *faithful* to the MW: it must match it, in order to be performance of MW. According to Platonists, this is so because MW is a type: its identity is essential and unchangeably transmitted through its occurrences. According to Goodman's Nominalism work identity is preserved by rigidly tying the legitimacy of a given performance of MW to the notational elements of some score (and, as we saw, this entails odd consequences). Anyway, the standards of performance-correctedness are not exclusively established by the MW as type (Platonism) or by the score (Nominalism). Goehr (1992: 99) wrote in this regard that "most if not all identity conditions for works and performances are (...) mis-translations of ideals that exist within classical music practice." In other words, the allegedly unchangeable identity of MWs depends on the practices in which the notion of MW has been developed. We are able to refer to MWs as entities that are instantiable in their tokens without loss of identity or as compliance classes of equal performances only in virtue of the cultural *fictional* discourse arising out of the aesthetic practices established in the context of Western classical music.

I term this position *Fictionalism*, but contrary to Kania (2008a), who introduced this terminology in the ontological debate on music, I do not think that it is a *metaphysical* stance. Rather it is a kind of *deconstruction* of the metaphysical demands on music (it could be called also *(De)constructivism*). Accordingly, it would see as ideological dogma the idea that MWs are metaphysical entities with unchangeable identities or classes of equal performances. The perfect matching between performance and MW is not a normative criterion for preserving the identity of MWs (as types or classes) through correct performances. It is rather an aesthetic and evaluative ideal in the frame of Western classical music and its aesthetic theory: the *Werktreue* ideal. The (conscious or unconscious) acceptance of this ideal underlies the belief that MWs have an ontological identity, which is separated from their instantiations in

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[11] See Ridley's criticism toward Davies' account of the relation between work and performance (Ridley 2003: 210-11; Davies 2001: 5).

performances that should faithfully manifest the intrinsically unchangeable MW.

Ridley (2003) elaborates on this point. According to him, the ideal of matching is at most a cultural prescription, which is valid only in certain musical practices and should not be universalized. Moreover, *Werktreue* cannot be the criterion for evaluating performances, because, in order to do this, we need to determine the identity of MWs independently from their performances. Yet this is impossible. The attempt to determine the ontological identity conditions for MWs makes necessary the distinction between a good and a legitimate performance. This distinction is made possible thanks to the already considered distinction between essential and accidental elements of MWs. Unfortunately, the distinction between essential and accidental elements of MWs depends on evaluations, that are made and are understandable only in certain musical practices, not in others (cf. Cadenbach 1978: 86). The alleged identity conditions of MWs cannot even determine which performances are legitimate, for the MW's properties are specified only by the performances and the ways they are evaluated in a musical practice. In this sense musical ontology depends on musical and aesthetic practices. But how can one justify the claim that ontology depends upon those practices? Here I can only sketch a strategy of answer, before returning to improvisation.

The issue is to explain how ontological intuitions about MWs, their identity and their connection with performances depend upon the musical practices they are rooted in –that is, according to my *Fictionalist* stance, how they are constructed in and through those practices. A partial answer may be provided by considering scores. Writing scores is a technical practice that is not merely a way to get access to a pre-existent work and a condition for its diffusion. It is also part, in certain historical situations, of the production process of the MW, because it "enables a work to have a kind of autonomous existence (…)" (Benson 2003: 80). To put it in a simply way: the practice of writing music in scores makes possible the representation of an unchangeable MW existing independently from its performances. We represent MWs as individuated unchangeable entities because the scores, in which they are "embedded", are – despite the fact that the can also be modified – "solid" objects that can be easily re-identified.

Some scores specify in a highly detailed way the pitches that must be played, the way they should sound and the instruments that must be used: the works they notate are, according to Davies (2001), "thicker" than other works, which, in comparison, are "thinner", because they are not specified in a detailed way by the instructions embedded in scores. In this case the notation is generic or even absent. However, the point is that even in case of MWs specified in a highly detailed way by scores, it is wrong to say that performances of the MW w are, generally speaking, but

mere instantiations of w mirrored in a score, that thus do not affect w's identity. It is wrong to infer w's ontological consistency and identity as well as its independence of any cultural construction from the possibility, given by scores, of associating a single MW with several performances (cf. Cometti 2008: 174).

The identity of MWs is not metaphysical: it is the product of the cultural discourse of the *Werktreue* ideal. Yet, even in the practices regulated by this discourse the autonomous existence of MWs is only a manner of speaking, a *fiction*, because, even in the case of "thick" MWs – say a Brahms' symphony – "what we hear in performance is always *much more* than can be indicated in the score" (Benson 2003: 80) and this "much more" is not the same "much more" in every performance of the MW. As Davies (2003: 56) acknowledges, the score of a work undermines the sound of its performances, i.e. it does not rigidly determine how it must be translated, as it were, in sounds. The score does not explain exactly how performers can even recognize – and distinguish between – *determinative* and *recommendatory* intentions as to how the work should be *faithfully* performed. The correctness criteria for performances are not rigidly established by scores and vary due to the musical practice one is considering. Also the allowed variation level of those criteria depends on the practice. Hence, standards of evaluation for performances change as the practice changes as well as if one considers a practices, like jazz, rock or pop for instance, that are not based on the *Werktreue* ideal. This means that scores, that shape the representation of the identity of MWs, cannot guarantee that this identity is respected in the practice.

Moreover, to be faithful to the work is hardly intrinsically good and valuable. Even if we grant that all author's intentions can be recognized in the score, it does not follow from this that performers *must* obey to them. If they think that it is better to play differently or even different material, they can *change* (what they think it is) the MW. The reason of this could be their desire to delight the listeners. This desire can supersede the *Werktreue* ideal, and become another ideal that shapes a different musical practice.

Analogously, only in the *Werktreue* regime transcriptions of MWs must be faithful to the author. The problem is, however, that it is not clear what this amounts to. Even in this regime the content of the MW (whatever could this mean) is not closed in the score or in a type or in a compliance class, waiting to be recognized, performed and transcribed. If musical transcriptions are comments on something else they refer to as the original by the very fact of presenting themselves as transcriptions of it, than transcriptions add new content to a MW and, in so doing, they change the MW to different degrees. In this sense every transcription is, to different degree, creative. Whether the result of the elaboration on a

score is a transcription, an arrangement or a new MW is a matter of stipulation, of cultural convention, of aesthetic ideals. [12]

Obviously, one could attack this way of reasoning, by saying that, if something can change, than this something is an entity that can be identified and, if it can be identified in different situations, it is the same thing through its modifications. Unfortunately, this view rests – at least in this case – on a mistake. The possibility to identify a MW through a cultural discourse, by appealing to scores, authorial intentions, cultural ideals, perceptual similarities, and, ultimately, ways of speaking, does not grant that, aside from scores, performances and recordings, there really is something like an unchangeable MW (cf. Young 2011).

MWs are ontologically *flexible*, because they are shaped and continuously re-shaped in changing cultural practices. Since the cultural practices are continuously changing, the cultural products are changing too. What is ontologically an arrangement of the Aria n. 14 from the Queen of the Night ("Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen") from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* performed by a brass section of the *Berliner Philarmoniker*?[13] Is this performance a performance of (a part of) the MW? Is it a right token of the right type? Is it a member of the right class? Is it a forgery? An imitation? A parody? A faithful transcription? A creative transcription? Both a faithful and a creative transcription? And how faithful and/or creative is the transcription? Or…? The answer to this question depends on aesthetic ideals and tastes, rather than on metaphysical truths. Personally, I think that it is a transcription that offer an interpretation, and in this particular case a successful one, of a well known MW, performed by the champions of Western classical music, that change the *fiction* (and, to some degree change the practice of classical music as well), while inventing new possibilities to deal with it. In other words it is a part of the *fiction's life*. Its *raison d'etre* is aesthetic or artistic, not metaphysical.[14]

Hence, should one, as argued by Cometti (2008: 174), "(…) give up (…) the ontology of the object that govern our analyses and valuations"? Do we need to get over "the image of object [that] springs from our grammar and it is in tune with our familiar tendency to reify"? (Cometti 2008: 174). Yes and no. No, if speaking about musical objects or works (and pieces, tunes and the like) is recognized as a fictionalist discourse,

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[12] A very different view of this matter is offered in Davies (2003): 47-59.

[13] I listened to this performance in Berlin on Monday October 31st, 2011. It was exhilarating.

[14] The same can be said regarding the pop version sung by Michelle Veenemans (URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PcYKHmsuSoc). The very different reported listeners' comments offer aesthetic judgments, not ontological considerations, about the piece.

which is moderately acceptable and useful in some practices. Yes, if one claims that MWs, as metaphysical entites, are real, actual and unchangeable objects. Therefore I do not think that "we need an aesthetics without ontology", as argued by Ridley and Cometti (see Cometti 2008, p 174).[15] Although I agree with their criticism against formalistic and objectivistic musical ontologies, I draw a different conclusion. We should avoiding throwing out the baby with the bath water. We need not reject ontology in order to save the aesthetics. We need rather to work out an ontology that fits better to explain the aesthetics of music, especially where improvisation is involved.

Looking at improvisation, from an anti-formalist perspective, assists us in this task, because it lets us focus on the constitutive feature of music: music is real only as activity and, whatever the way it is performed, it exists only when is performed *here and now.*

5. Here and Now. Music as Improvisation

We can hardly play or listen to types or compliance classes. Music is something to be played and heard, it is real only in actual performances. For this reason, I suggest that we re-orient musical ontology by looking at the practice of improvisation. This strategy is not new. It is a strategy nowadays performed by philosophers as well by musicologists, arguing that "the binary schema of 'composing' and 'performing' (...) does not describe very well what musicians actually do" (Benson 2003: x) and what people actually experience. Composition and performance overlap in significant ways.

Benson (2003) thinks that the hegemony of the ideology of Western classical music has shaped the philosophy of music until now, leading it to reify the practical separation between composition and performance, by which one element (composition) is privileged over the other (performance) which is considered as "primarily reproductive and only secondarily creative" (Benson 2003: 10). Yet, Benson goes on arguing, this is reflective only of the way in which a limited part of musical activities were organized during a short historical period. Actually most performers and composers are in a constant dialogue, to the extent that performers contribute to the continuous transformation of musical works and pieces.

Here improvisation comes into play. Improvisation, is, generally speaking, music created while being performed. The product the listeners hear *is* the process: music created as it is being performed. Now, composing and performing as well as other activities involved in music

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[15] For a criticism against Ridley's position see Kania 2008a.

making –arranging, transcribing, interpreting, re-mixing etc.– are processes as well, but they are different kinds of processes. In these cases the product is (and is perceived as) different from the process. Nonetheless, although in them there is no real time coincidence between process and product, and despite their difference from *improvisation*, there is a sense in which they are *improvisational*: in these activities decisions are made about the process as the process is going on.

Consider composition. It can be conceived as the (provisionally) frozen outcome of improvisational processes and their emendations. In this sense, the process of creation of music is a kind of performance, even if there is no audience and even if the music does not actually sound and it is only imagined as sounding: the composer is the listener of the (real or imagined) music. Hence, if composing is a process of creating music by performing, composition can be conceived as improvisational, in this limited, yet important sense.

And now consider performance. In *every* musical practice, not only do performers have more or less free *room* for improvisation, but this is required of them (Benson 2003: 82). It is required that performers, before and while performing, make decisions as to what (for example, which notes) and how (slowly? And how slowly? Or impetuously? But how impetuously?) to play and choose what and how to play. The scope of those choices as well as the degree of their freedom and intentionality depend for sure on the performers' individual style, the musical genre, and the performance conventions, all of which are not unchangeable fixed parameters, but change through the activities that realize them in each performing situation.

Surely, music is not *per se* improvisation. A lot of musical practices do not make use of improvisation as creation of new musical material during the performance and do not consider improvisation a fundamental musical resource. Nonetheless, in this sense just explained, as Bruno Nettl argued (1998: 5), "improvisation is central to music as a whole", to the extent that "the understanding of music at large hinges on understanding something of improvisation". Without denying the differences between composing, performing, transcribing etc., and improvisation *strictu sensu*, it seems useful to adopt the concept of improvisation in order to grasp the processual character of different kinds of musical operations.

Improvisation can be considered as a key activity of music, due to its "mediation" between composition and performance: like composition it is a kind of "putting together" (Benson 2003: 136 and 143; cf. Gould and Keaton 2000); like performance it has interpretative character. Conversely, performances can be conceived as "improvisations on compositions" and compositions not only can be the result of a more or less improvisational activity: they also change through the performances (and the transcriptions) that enacted them, in ways that they cannot

completely determine and that cannot be rigidly planned. A kind of (true or presumed) spontaneity seems to be involved in all kind of music as activity – that is, as Small (1998) calls it, as *musicking*. Hence, although Benson's claim that "music making is *fundamentally* improvisational" (Benson 2003: xii) is highly overstated,[16] it makes sense to say that improvisation is a genuine musical activity that manifests a truth about music as such.[17]

This truth is that music is sound art that is real only when performed and heard *in the moment*. Musical ontology based on the concept of work, as type, compliance class, or concrete objects with different temporal parts, seems to underestimate this point.

Obviously, we can reasonably speak about different kinds of musical objects, which have different meanings and values in different contexts: harmonic intervals, rhythmical figure, melodic phrases; distorted chords played by the guitar, a "*do di petto*", a *glissando*, a *riff*, a *loop*, a *blue note*; sonatas, symphonies, stanzas, chorus, songs, tunes, MWs, etc. However, these objects, that are constituted, individuated and recognized by our cognition as targets of our intention and attention, are real elements of music only in the actual process of the performance. They have a social and historical, not a metaphysical, dimension. Objects of this kind are not at all incompatible with the practice of improvisation and with the notion of music as "*musicking*". As Arbo (2010: 245) writes:

> [...] tout objet musical – du plus générique (comme un motif, une harmonie ou une séquence d'accords, etc.) au plus éphémère (la performance d'une jam session), au plus spécialisé ou canonisé (les œuvres reconnues en relation avec un répertoire, un genre ou un style) – peut être expliqué avec pertinence (...) sous la forme (...) d'un acte qui s'accompagne de quelque forme de fixation (graphique, notationnelle, mais aussi gestuelle ou simplement mnémonique) qui en assure l'identité et la reprise dans un contexte donné. Ce principe s'applique à une grande varietè de réalités musicales : même des improvisations 'libres' (comme celles du guitariste Derek Bailey ou, dans un autre style, du oudiste Anouar Brahem), dans la mesure où elles souhaitent conserver l'esprit de créations instantanées, se réfèrent à l'inscription de gestes instrumentaux dans un répertoire de possibilités – des séquences, des modules harmoniques, des gammes, des rythmes, des sonorités, etc. – susceptibles d'être reconnues par un auditeur plus ou moins avisé, et qui peuvent faire en ce sens l'objet d'une analyse spécifique.

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[16] See also Benson's entry "Phenomenology of music" in Gracyk & Kania (2011): 589-590.

[17] To speak of improvisation, without qualifications, is inaccurate. There are different kinds of improvisation: strict intentional or unavoidable improvisation, improvisation as performance, improvisation as practice, the improvisational character of creative processes, etc. However, the differences between them are not of primary importance here.

However, we must not confound the notion of musical object with the notion of MW, which is only a kind of musical object in certain musical practices and not a metaphysical entity. Indeed, the notion of musical object is fully consistent with the idea that what primarily counts for the musical experience is not – at least, not always, and not usually – the (more or less abstract and unchangeable) MW, but the "material, present event" (Abbate 2004: 506), because, I quote Vladimir Jankélévitch (2003: 70), "a musical work does not exist in itself except in the time of its playing (…)".

Although music does not reduce itself to improvisation – otherwise the concept itself of improvisation would be dilated too much and deprived of any specific content –, we hear music here and now, composers listen or imagine to listen to the music they are composing as they compose, performers must decide on the spot how and what to play. Every musical performance, while using and manifesting different kinds of musical objects, is an event that is tied to the moment of its occurring.[18] In this sense, while music can be fixed in memories, recordings and scores, it is not as fixed, that it moves. It can move, only if actualized; and it is actualized only if played. Looking at improvisation can remind us of this fact as Platonist and formalist ontologies of music cannot do. Hence, improvisation is here taken as a key category for music ontology, because exemplifying the processual character of music, as performing activity as well as an on-going dialogue between composition and performance, in which different musical objects become actually real and actually recognizable and valuable as elements of the musical experience in the context of different cultural practices.

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[18] I agree with Dieter A. Nanz (2011: 23), improvisation makes us aware of the performative character of all kind of music: "Zwischen der Anstrengung der Vorbereitung, der technischen und hermeneutischen Aneignung des Werks, und der Bühne, zwischen Partitur und Klang, findet jedesmal ein Sprung statt. Was die Musik sein wird lässt sich nicht vollständig vorausbestimmen. Immer bleibt ein Teil von ihr der Ausführung vorbehalten, wird das Werk eigentlich erst auf der Bühne erfunden, nicht immer ist das Resultat mit dem Plan deckungsgleich. Der Interpret nimmt das ganze Risiko; wenn er danach strebte, bei jeder Aufführung dasselbe zu realisieren, würde er es aussperren und gleichzeitig potenzieren. Was gespielt wird, sei es eine Improvisation oder eine Komposition, wurde noch nie gespielt. Es ist ,Performance'".

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