‘Performance-Oriented’ and ‘Work-Oriented’ Compositional Processes: What is the Difference, and How is It Exemplified in Selected Recent Compositional Applications?

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My first substantial period of paid employment in the music profession was as Research Assistant to the late Professor Catherine Ellis, who was then a Research Fellow at the University of Adelaide in South Australia. The topic of her research was the music of the Aboriginal people of South Australia and the Northern Territory. One of the tasks she assigned to me was the making of machine-assisted transcriptions of a performance of the Native Cat Song by a group of singers from the Aranda tribe in the southern part of the Northern Territory. As a naive 23-year-old, only recently graduated from the Conservatorium in Melbourne, I appreciated the cultural context only vaguely at first, but over the years since, I have often had cause to reflect on the meaning of the experience of the two years I spent working for Catherine. It was the nearest I have come to close contact with what, calling on terms drawn from very different experiences in more recent times, I would designate as a ‘performance-oriented culture’.

By ‘performance-oriented culture’ I mean one in which the emphasis is on the practice of making music, rather than on musical objects which we agree to call works. It may be true that the Native Cat Song was a musical object in some sense or other: for example, the song was assigned an owner (the senior member of the group of singers). But it seems to me that the emphasis was on the event rather than on the object. This probably had something to do with the fact that the method of transmission of the music between individuals was an oral one; music which is written down might perhaps be more easily regarded as an object. Of course, the result of my labours as a Research Assistant was the production of a written text of the song, but it was produced a posteriori and perhaps might best be viewed as a transcription of a particular performance: an aide memoire, enabling the performance, or at least certain aspects of it, to be recalled after the event. Thus several performances of such a song, over a period of months or even years, might most profitably be regarded as several different events, more than as several performances of the same musical object.

Clearly, there was a time in the history of Western music when our musical culture shared some of these characteristics. For many centuries, music was regarded as too evanescent, mercurial and intangible to be written down at all, and in the case of the earliest manuscripts of Gregorian chant, at the end of the first millennium AD, the written text might indeed best be regarded as a prescription for certain aspects of a performance, rather than as the text of a musical object. Hence, aspects of the music which we in the twenty-first century are apt to regard as primary – pitch and rhythm – are often treated as secondary to performance nuances. The text is, like my Native Cat Song transcriptions, an aide memoire. The purpose of the aide memoire is – naturally – different. In the case of my Native Cat Song transcriptions, the aide memoire serves as a vehicle for the communication of information to interested onlookers, and, more particularly for the purpose of musicological discussion, whereas the earliest Gregorian manuscripts serve the purpose of reminding
Example 1: Graham Hair: *Paraphrase on Harold Arlen’s Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (Transcription, Arrangement or Paraphrase?)
performers of the details of a music which they already knew.

The world of Aboriginal tribal song and of Gregorian chant are by no means the only ones in which the sense of a ‘performance-oriented culture’ retains its importance. The tradition of Classical music in the Indian subcontinent has surely retained it, right up to current times, and perhaps some of our popular music traditions have revived it. Nevertheless, a number of authors in the twentieth century have suggested that, particularly since the time of Beethoven, Western ‘classical’ culture has developed into one in which the concept of the musical object has gained more and more hegemony. It is not my purpose here to go over this ground again. The writings of Benjamin, Ingarden, Goehr, Talbot and many others can be consulted (see, for example Benjamin 1968, Ingarden 1986, Goehr 1992, Talbot 2000), though the principal credit for articulating the concept in detail and analysing its implications is usually accorded to Theodor Adorno (see Adorno 1998). Linked closely to the growth in the hegemony of our ‘work-oriented culture’ is the concept of the authoritative canon of musical works, which perhaps reaches its apogee in the outlook which sees our musical culture as what Lydia Goehr has characterised as an ‘imaginary musical museum’ (see Goehr 1992).

Anyone who has read thus far will have gathered from the tone of the above remarks that I see this process of the progressive hegemony of ‘work-orientation’ as involving a degree of loss as well as of gain, and that I am drawn to compositional models which retain some degree of ‘performance-orientation’. The discussion which follows draws on particular works by Liszt and refers to the study of these works in a recent book by Jim Samson (2003). Reclaiming such a ‘performance-orientation’ in an era in which ‘work-orientation’ is the dominant paradigm implies that one of my compositional goals is the development of a ‘performance-oriented’ compositional process and in which follows I shall try to explain how that might be done. As the title of the research project in the course of which this article was generated implies, my composition for piano solo entitled Twelve Transcendental Concert Studies after the Australian Poets was inspired in particular by the series of Etudes d’execution transcendante by Liszt, one of the great monuments in the canon of piano literature, but also by numerous sets of Concert Studies by a great number of other composers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Cramer, Moscheles, Schumann, Chopin, Thalberg, Alkan, Debussy through to Stravinsky, Bartok and Ligeti, as well as more specifically British contributions from Racine Fricker to Michael Finnissy.

Two issues in particular were at the front of my mind when I embarked upon the writing of these works.

One was the rather contentious issue of the nature and status of those musical genres (if ‘genres’ is the right word) variously grouped together under the descriptions ‘arrangement’, ‘transcription’ and ‘paraphrase’. For a number of years prior to the composition of my Concert Studies, I had been composing ‘paraphrases’ of American popular songs of the period 1900–1950 for the several vocal ensembles of which I was director and which I often accompanied on the piano, notably Scottish Voices in Glasgow and Voiceworks in Sydney. I have also performed the piece elsewhere from time to time, particularly in the United States. These were paraphrases of songs by Jerome Kern, Harold Arlen, George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers, Irving Berlin and others. Example 1 provides a characteristic excerpt, from my Paraphrase on Harold Arlen’s Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea. The tune (which appears here in the middle voice) and the harmony are Arlen’s but the counterpoints in the first and third voices, the piano accompaniment and the general texture and character were added by me. Such paraphrases were inspired by, if not directly influenced by, the extensive canon of paraphrases by Liszt, though of course the medium – women’s voices and instrumental accompaniment – is hardly a Lisztian one, albeit one which I have cultivated intensively for many years, in ‘original’ works as well as in transcriptions, arrangements and paraphrases. The activities of musical composition and musicological
study are enacted in an environment heavy with ideological attitudes, one of which has sometimes suggested that such ‘paraphrases’ were ‘not really Gershwin’ (or whoever). My contention is that such attitudes derive not only from the particularly bad intellectual habit of essentialisation, but also from a misunderstanding of the culture and tradition of arrangement, transcription and paraphrase composition which was well understood in earlier centuries, but which has been obscured by developments in composition and musicology in the twentieth.

The other is a different, seemingly unrelated contentious issue, namely the nature and status of that branch of musicology called ‘analysis’, which has come under close scrutiny from musicologists in the recent past, and which, in the present context, I shall try to relate to issues raised by the tradition of ‘arrangement’, ‘transcription’ and ‘paraphrase’ composition, as articulated in the previous paragraph. Briefly speaking, one of the recent developments in musicology has been to draw out explicitly the implicitly ‘organicist’ ideology behind much musical analysis, and to contrast it, or at least balance it, with what we might call ‘contextual’ considerations. This recent view contends that an account of the meaning and significance of a musical work cannot be derived solely from a ‘close reading’ of its ‘text’, but must take into account the context in which it was composed, including cultural, social, historical, ideological and even political contexts (to name but a few). I have no particular axe to grind in relation to this controversy, at least to the extent of coming down decisively on one side or the other. My contention is merely that the relation between ‘organicist’ and ‘contextual’ readings of musical repertoire is a topic which has implications for our understanding of musical material and the strategies through which composition might be practised.

Consider the following very well known example from opemimh of the Piano Sonata in C major (Hob XVI/35, I) by Josef Haydn (Example 2):

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Example 2: Haydn: Piano Sonata in C major, Hob XVI/35, I (bars 1-8)
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Example 3 gives an analysis of the voice-leading structure of this passage, according to some basic ‘Schenkerian’ principles. It shows a principal top line descending from the fifth degree of the scale to the first, supported by a bass which proceeds from an initial tonic, through the dominant, then back to an arrival-point on the tonic. Various subsidiary events (melodic or harmonic ‘prolongations’ or amplifications of this basic structure) are also shown. In particular, the initial tonic is prolonged (auskomponiert) by a subsidiary dominant harmony in bars 3, 4 and the first half of 5, and the melodic prolongation of scale degree 5 extends that degree for 4 bars until the arrival of the F5 on first beat of bar 5:
Example 3: Analytical graph of Example 1

Compare this example with another, also from the opening of another well-known Piano Sonata, also by Haydn, and also in C major.

Example 4: Haydn: Piano Sonata in C major, Hob XVI/21, I (bars 1-6)

Indeed, Example 4 shares with Example 2 certain other features, in addition to the same composer, the same instrument and the same key. Example 5 gives an analysis, analogous to Example 3, of the voice-leading structure of this second Haydn passage, according to similar ‘Schenkerian’ principles. Again it shows a principal top line descending from the fifth degree of the scale to the first, supported by a bass which proceeds from an initial tonic, through the dominant, then back to an arrival-point on the tonic. Again, various subsidiary events, melodic and harmonic, are also shown. This time, the initial prolongation of the tonic is a slightly more elaborate (ii–V) harmonic progression (bars 2 and 3) and the melodic line descends from scale degree 5 to scale degree 4 after one bar, whereupon scale degree 4 is prolonged through bars 2, 3 and 4 until the arrival of the E5 on the second beat of bar 4:
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It’s obvious that these two passages share certain common structural principles, and that some of these are shown in the two graphs. The two passages exemplify a *dictum* which Heinrich Schenker articulated in the motto which prefaces his final book *Free Composition (Der Freie Satz)*: ‘semper idem sed non eodem modo’ (always the same, but not always in the same way). But even if we acknowledge the different ways in which the similar basic structure is prolonged in each passage, there are still certain quite striking aspects of both passages which are rather weakly projected by Schenker’s analysis.

Consider the motivic aspect, for example. The way I hear the Ex 2 is something like the following:

(i) a distinctive one-bar motif, consisting of the dominant G5 played three times in staccato crotchets (bar 1), approached from the tonic below via a dotted-rhythm upbeat
(ii) an answering one-bar motif: the same triple repetition of the dominant, preceded by an upbeat, this time from the tonic *above*;
(iii) a variation and extension (to two bars) of the motif: five staccato crotchets, incorporating *two double repetitions*, preceded by the dotted-rhythm upbeat.
(iv) to summarise: the ‘chunking’ profile of this passage thus projects a grouping of 1+1+2 bars
(v) an answering four-bar phrase, with certain similarities, but significant differences: for example, with a different ‘chunking’ profile: 1/2+1/2+1/2+1/2+2 bars.

Obviously, the two-bar motifs in bars 3-4 and 7-8, particularly the double repetitions, give a sense of ‘rhythming lines’ to the passage as a whole (two four-bar phrases concluding in a similar way), and thus a sense of one phrase answered by a complementary one. On the other hand, the one-bar and half-bar motifs in 1-2 and 5-6 respectively, are different from one another in important ways. Bars 1-2 stay put on or around the dominant, whereas bars 5-6 descend the scale to the tonic note. Bars 1-2 comprise perhaps an ‘opening strategy’, followed by a cadential phrase, bars 5-6 give a sense of ‘moving on’, followed by a ‘rhythming’ cadential phrase.

Ex 4 has a strikingly-different motivic profile:

(i) a two-bar motif, consisting of a jagged dotted-rhythm *broken-chord ascent* to a short resting-point on top C6, followed by a *scalar descent*, ending with a striking long appoggiatura resolving onto scale-degree 4
(ii) a double repetition of the second half of this two-bar motif (bars 2-3 and 3-4), likewise ending with long appoggiaturas, at transposition-levels which result in resolutions onto scale-degrees 7 and 3, respectively.
(iii) a concluding two-bar motif, based purely on the dotted-rhythm figure.
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No sense of complementation here: the passage moves directly from an opening strategy (broken-chord rise, scalar fall), to a sense of ‘moving on through the phrase’s middle part’ (the double-repetition), to an ‘ending strategy’, driving through to the cadence via energetic dotted rhythms.

In both cases, the double and triple repetitions, dotted rhythms, broken chords, scalar passages, appoggiaturas, and so on, particularly the way in which these things are set off against one another, or pile up in cumulative sequence, give a vivid sense of the character of the music. or to put it conversely, and in more general terms, in Jim Samson’s words: ‘An obvious effect of theory-based analysis has been to emphasise musical structures at the expense of musical materials (Samson 2003: 3). Another way of putting it might be to say that the account of Haydn’s motivic strategies adds a more vivid sense of the variety implicit in Schenker’s dictum, especially that sed non eodem modo. Or yet another way: ‘Here is a structural idea of which the two Haydn sonata themes are different versions. However, the latter formulation would be, in my estimation, to make too much of a good thing!

But to return to my Paraphrase on Harold Arlen’s Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea, with which we began: I composed it having in mind the creation of a particular kind of performance of Arlen’s song: it’s a clear case of a piece which is a version of a more general idea, and the process of composing it was a performance-oriented one. Transcription, arrangement and paraphrase interest me for just this reason: because they are concerned with creating specific versions of a more general idea. In that sense they are like performances.

The antithesis of such a performance-oriented compositional process would be a work-oriented one, and the two Haydn sonatas would seem to exemplify it, even though they too might just possibly be considered as versions of a more general idea in the sense that I have articulated. But to take such an attitude would be, I would claim, to overplay the analogy!

The terms ‘work-oriented’ and ‘performance-oriented’ derive, as mentioned earlier, from the volume on Liszt’s Etudes d’execution transcendante by Jim Samson, cited earlier, though Samson’s formulation may have earlier antecedents. The terms have a certain resonnance also in the controversy over ‘organicist’ and ‘contextual’ approaches to analysis, because ‘organicist’ approaches tend to stress the unique features of particular works, and to show how they can be considered to form self-contained, coherently-unified wholes, whereas ‘contextural’ approaches stress the wider cultural context in which every compositional act is located. ‘Organicist’ approaches tend to stress musical works, ‘contextual’ approaches to stress musical practices and activities.

I would argue that the middle ground between work-orientation and performance-orientation is provided by genre, for genre provides the means whereby specific works are located in the wider context of a network of what we might call ‘family resemblances’. And one of the most powerful concepts of genre is that provided by the étude. ‘It draws the performer right into the heart of he work, foregrounding presentational strategies that are hard to illuminate through the familiar, pedigreed methods of musical analysis. And it spotlights the instrument, elevating the idiomatic (the figure), a category much less amenable to analysis than theme, harmony and form’ (Samson 2003: 2).

I would therefore like to conclude with a few comments on the first of Liszt’s Twelve Transcendental Etudes. For ease of reference, the score is reproduced as Example 7 at the end of this article. It begins with a series of scalar passages elaborating tonic harmony and arriving on the note E3 (downbeat of bars 3 and 5), then
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climbing up an octave to E4 (bar 6, beat 4), E5 (bar 7) and E6 (bar 8, downbeat of bar 9). A series of pounding chromatic chords in bars 9–12 elaborates the space between this E6 (scale degree 3) over a C bass on the downbeat of 9, and the arrival of the structural line on D4 in bar 12 (harmonised with flat VII in bar 12, moving to the dominant in bar 13). The dominant resolves to tonic on the downbeat of bar 14 and the rest of the piece simply prolongs the tonic, settling melodically on scale degree 1 (C6) in bar 22, over which a cover-tone rises back up to E6 in the final bar (23).

Such a description I would suggest, might well give an overview of the structure, but it is also perhaps a little banal. Although this first etude is rather simple (it is, after all, a Preludio, an introduction to the series), there is some interesting use of figures, especially compared to the first number in Liszt’s two earlier collections of etudes, the Grandes Études and the Étude en douze exercises on which this one is based (in a sense the Étude en douze exercises, the Grandes Études and the Études d’execution transcendante are three different versions of a similar, broader general idea). Example 6 shows the (very simple) structural framework on which the first phrase is based, particular features being tonic harmony elaborated by a subdominant ‘prolongation’, and a scalar top line rising to complete the phrase on scale degree 3. I have divided the passage (stretching from the beginning to the downbeat of bar 3) into three parts (indicated by the brackets above the top stave) on the basis of the way Liszt uses pianistic figures in this passage:

This simple framework is elaborated by three contrasting ‘figures’ and the brackets indicate the portions of the framework to which these figures are applied:
(i) a single ‘percussive stroke’
(ii) a bravura descending arpeggio (a group of 19)
(iii) a rising scale in thirds, elaborated by chromatic colouring and a complementary counterpoint in the form of a series of descending four-note figures.

We might read these figures as constituting aspects of a performance; to borrow rhetorical terms for a moment, something like a sequence of exordium, narratio and propositio. This sequence is then repeated, but with significant extensions to its third component: an elaboratio, perhaps.

A third section begins at bar 9, with the series of brilliant staccato chords, passing through a sequence of fluctuating (aufgehobene, to use Schoenberg’s term) harmonies, in contrast to the arpeggio and scalar figures on which bars 1–8 have been largely built. Nevertheess, this staccato chord-sequence is built on a bass-line which articulates versions of the four-note figure which has been used so extensively in bars 1–8: here it reads G♯2, A♯2, G♯2, F♯2 and E♯2, D♯2, D♯2, C♯1. This chromatic sequence then turns out to be extensive dominant-
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preparation harmony, confirmed by the arrival on scale-degree 2 (D↓4) in bar 12, and the dominant harmony itself in bar 13. Bars 9–11 constitute perhaps a confutatio, balanced by a confirmatio with the arrival on scale-degree 2 and dominant harmony.

Finally comes a peroratio, concluding the etude with an elaboration of tonic harmony. New figures which bring together elements of what has preceded and raise the tenor of the rhetoric to a climactic point appear: the rising arpeggios in bars 14–15, then the wave-like (ascending and descending) bravura arpeggios in bars 16–21. A final concluding gesture is provided by the last rising arpeggio in the second half of bar 21: rising to the extreme upper register where the peroratio ends (bars 22–23). Over this harmony, the top line arpeggiates the tonic triad: G↓6 in bars 14–15, to E7 > C7 > E6 > C6 > E5 > C7 at the top of the wave-shapes in bars 16, 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21. This harmony in bars 21–23 forms a plagal cadence: that archetypal ‘post-terminal’ gesture, extending the sense of structural closure provided the authentic cadence which announced the arrival back on the tonic at the beginning of the peroratio in bar 14.

In my own set of Twelve Transcendental Concert Studies after the Australian Poets I have endeavoured to build analogous (but different) rhetorical features (performance-oriented compositional processes) which provide complementation for the work-oriented structural features (pitch-sets, time-series etc), inspired by Liszt’s fecund use of such ‘figural narratives’ in his Etudes d’execution transcendante.

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Example 7 (beginning): Liszt: *Etudes d’execution transcendante*, No 1 (bars 1–8)
Example 7 (conclusion): Liszt: *Etudes d’execution transcendante*, No 1 (bars 9–23)