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Topics in Advanced Theory  
10 March 2014

Composition, Constructions Burn Down

Performance of music in both live and recorded instances requires a certain reliance on pre-composed songs/setlists. Even in the case of improvisational performances, musicians perform spontaneous combinations of notes in different tempos to form new tunes; all of these notes have already been defined and have their place on a music scale. Without written documentation of new music, artists are unable to claim copyright infringement in the case that their music is stolen. The requirement of composition for copyright amongst other factors described by Aram Sinnreich in his discussion of a composition/performance binary in a chapter on the topic in “Mashed Up” leads him to the claim that culture not only favors the former, but believes that an objective distinction can actually be made between the two. Sinnreich fittingly does not attempt to provide a concrete definition of the concept, but provides interesting perceptions from various artists of configurable music that subsequently provide an enriched view of meanings packed into a 1984 rock documentary “Stop Making Sense” with the band The Talking Heads. According to Sinnreich, modern configurable culture, which gives rise to mash-ups and sampling, blurs a historically determined definition of “composition” and questions an existing bias by posing the questions: does composition enhance or degrade “meaning” of a musical performance, and does it necessarily precede expression? The Talking Head’s documentary occupies a borderline position between performance/composition in a way that similarly complicates the dichotomy. Ultimately within the modern framework, “composition” does not inherently give more meaning to music nor does it hold a concrete position in the musical process anymore.

As with all binary oppositions, it would be impossible to understand the concept of composition without trying to understand performance as its opposite. The chapter “Live from a Hard Drive” cynically introduces the distinction between the two concepts as “a convenient fiction” and “an uneasy one” but directly after acknowledges the “inherent bias” that gives advantage to composition. Something fictional cannot at the same time be recognized as inherent, so this juxtaposition properly addresses the difficulty in assigning meaning to either. Musicians “perform” in live settings, while composition occurs with the “Romantic ideal of the sole composer, laboring in solitude at his or her sheaf of staff paper”. Live performance only becomes translated into composition when documented, given the example: “Charlie Parker’s saxophone improvisations are painstakingly notated” and then performed by another band. Despite the effects that the improvisational performance may have on the audience, until the notes are documented, and can thus be repeated, the song cannot be produced and commodified—giving it meaning in a capitalist economy. Composed music historically reigns supreme over improvised performances in this instance because it can be legally protected and shared with other artists in a manner dictated by the law. This changes with advancements in technology allowing for DJ’s to completely alter the tradition composition process and still somehow manage to create new music and therefore expression.

By interviewing a few contemporary configurable artists on the dichotomy, Sinnreich yields a conclusion that most DJ’s consider the following criteria for making the distinction: “time and location of sample manipulation, granularity of sample manipulation, presence or absence of an audience and performativity”. DJ Earworm, for example, makes this temporal distinction, “if you do it in real time, it’s called musicianship. And if you do it ahead of time, it’s called composition”, which reflects sentiments of other DJ’s in the chapter as well, with regards

to time. In this instance, composition occurs prior to performance, and might even take a lesser preferential status because live performance is referred to a “musicianship”, which seems to take on a more idealized tone of what music should be. The amount of work put into a sample also seems to give it place on the spectrum between composition and performance for DJ Earworm as well as the “number and size of sonic elements being appropriated for the new work”. A new sample that strays furthest from the original materials used would constitute a higher degree of composition. While some interviewees indicated that the presence of a live audience was necessary for their work to be considered a performance, others argued that performance is not important for configurable musicians or that the presence of a live audience is necessary for the process of composition as well. DJ Axel tells Sinnreich that “having an audience is integral to the composition process” and compares himself to a stand-up comedian, relying on the presence of the audience for the process of creating jokes in “real time”. What seems consistent for each DJ is the cyclic nature of the process of composition, rather than a tradition notion of composition-performance-express. The configurable musician vaguely composes, then simultaneously performs and expresses while also still composing at the same time.

Sinnreich focuses on the problems posed by configurable culture, a modern environment of music created by innovations in technology that allow for sampling, mash-ups and DJ’s to give live performances using multiple pre-recorded performances. The “Modern Discursive Framework” which is introduced in the second chapter of text, began over two centuries ago with Hector Berlioz’s memoirs which defended originality, and includes a number of binaries that manage to “elevate art above other fields of human endeavor”, one of which being the discussed “performance as opposed to composition” binary. The framework relies on the idea that “music exists prior to and independently of its expression”, and recognizes that “expression” can also

“refer to recordings and printed scores as well”. This framework, which originated with Berlioz’s triumphant efforts to keep Beethoven’s original compositions from being edited and tampered with, holds the composed to a godly standard. Written music encompasses the creative minds of musical geniuses, and shall not be tampered with. Yet with the modern usage of recording and copyrights, it has become easy to claim ownership over written music, and thus the plasticity of composition does not pose a threat to history. Mashing-up Beethoven would not fundamentally change its composition, so now it can be expressed and performed in different ways.

Before the rise of configurability, music was first composed, then performed at which time it was expressed and received by an audience. With configurability, it becomes hard to draw the line of when exactly music expresses meaning. Sinnreich poses the question, “Can composition precede expression when a DJ is juggling beats between two vinyl platters, or dropping samples and effects into Ableton Live or another software program?” The traditional order of composition-performance-expression becomes complicated when this process becomes recorded then re-performed and manipulated to express totally new meaning. Similar effects are had when live performances, which happen to be composed and not improvised, are recorded and distributed. Michael Byrnes, lead singer of The Talking Heads, in his performance during the documentary acknowledges the existence of music “prior to and independently of its expression” like Berlioz, but seems to draw attention to the construction of the show as a performance in order to impress the importance of the expression and performance aspect.

Though The Talking Heads do not belong to the most modern innovations of configurable culture nor do they make use of any sampling or DJ’ing techniques, they present an interesting representation of the dichotomy between performance and composition. In 1983, while on tour promoting their album *Speaking in Tongues*, The Talking Heads were filmed

giving 3 separate live performances to a large audience at Hollywood's Pantages Theater. The band performed a number of songs that were written and rehearsed, accompanied by choreographed dances. The entire performance was at first composed and practiced, and then performed and finally recorded, edited and mass-produced. The whole process of production creates a Russian-nesting-doll like affect where composition is so buried beneath layers of recording and performance that it would be impossible to distinguish one from the other. The multiplicity of each of these components is carried even further given the content of the songs that attack established social order by suggesting we "burn down the house" and by mocking symbols of power with particular use of costumes. Perhaps the documentary suggests we also burn down constructions of performance and composition as well.

Michael Byrnes, the band's lead singer, begins the show by coming onto an empty stage alone with only his acoustic guitar and a cassette player/boom box. He sets the boom box on the stage, says he wants to play a cassette tape, and begins playing his single instrument. A ticking beat accompanies his guitar but this comes from a machine backstage, and nothing comes from the boom box. This action, though at first satirical, unknowingly foreshadows modern DJ performances where they do in fact play pre-recorded tapes for an audience that sometimes comes to simply watch them hit play. Byrnes plays off of the audience's expectations: that the stage might be set ahead of time, that the band would play the show rather than just the lead singer, and that they will in fact be witnessing and experiencing a live performance where music and emotion are expressed. The performance complicates this because the entire show has been already composed and practiced, which Byrnes acknowledges by saying he is going to play a cassette tape. The whole show hopes to acknowledge the construction of all performances and show that composition may come before expression, but this does not necessarily hamper the

effect of the performance. In the case that the composition precedes performance with no deviation from the script, there is no real expression, just a mechanical show that mimics the simple press of a play button. The notion of the cassette player as a metaphor of composition tips the scale of preferential status away from the idealized Romantic musician composing works in solitude, and towards the musician able to give an affective live performance.

Rise of configurable culture introduces ambiguities to countless constructions in the modern discursive framework, in this case primarily by complicating the temporality of composition and disregarding traditional criteria for what constitutes a performance. The Talking Heads perfectly complicates the timeline of expression as initially proposed by Berlioz in his defense of Beethoven's compositions. Like configurable musicians including the DJ's interviewed in Sinnreich's chapter on this binary, "Stop Making Sense", perhaps unintentionally, addresses the ambiguity of composition by acknowledging a level of composition that occurred prior to the show (with the boom box as a symbol of this), but at the same time offering a live performance that is being recorded to create yet another layer of documentation to be copyrighted and distributed. In this sense, the modern discursive framework only supplies another construction of normative musicianship to be burned down by modern configurable musicians.