

Manifestations of Musicality

by Jörg Heiser

How could we move beyond the overuse of the word “performance”, its application for anything to do with artistic activity, or even any kind of social activity? How could we also move beyond the equally tiring rhetoric of transdisciplinary fluidity, and its evocation anytime a musician or visual artist or choreographer does something not strictly within the traditional bounds of their discipline? How could we not least move beyond the validation of all these activities as being “conceptual”, as if having a concept was something exclusive to those who expressly say so? Augustin Maurs’ answer to all three of these questions, I suspect, would be one word, and what it stands for: *musicality*.

Maurs may be described – in these aforementioned and slightly tired parameters of transdisciplinarity – as a composer and musician who has increasingly become active in the realm of contemporary visual art, not least with a series of projects commissioned by and realized for artgenève over the last few years. The focus of this essay is that very series, and Maurs’ notion of musicality is key to understanding it. But before I try to convey and expand on how he himself defines the term by taking his artgenève projects as a cue, let me briefly digress by bringing up two associations I had when he first brought up that notion of musicality in conversation.

First, I had to think of a phone app my eleven year old daughter keeps using. I first noticed it when she was moving in abbreviated R&B-HipHop moves for the camera of her phone, with head wiggles and hand gestures and silently moving mouth. The app is called musical.ly and is a sort of Instagram-cum-silent karaoke. In short, 15 second selfie clips, kids and teenagers sing or lip-sync, and move or dance, to well known bubblegum pop or R&B. Some of them become stars in the very medium, musical.ly heroes and heroines that in turn have millions of followers and mainstream sponsors, just like the pop stars they initially imitated. The Shanghai-based start-up behind musical.ly already has attracted more than 130 million users (the majority of which are tween and teen girls), and venture capital also in the hundreds of millions has been unleashed, while big companies invest in musical.ly-based “influencer” product placement. But what I find striking about the app is not so much its quantitative reach as a social media tool, but how it literally affects how my daughter carries herself, how she talks and sings and moves also outside of the direct interaction with her phone, as she peppers her conversation with movements and tonal evocations that are essentially elements of US African-American Hip-Hop culture filtered through Asian K-pop culture, distilled into micro-choreographies of an eleven-year-old Berlin girl’s everyday. One way to look at it is to describe my daughter’s gesturing and intonation as being transformed and infiltrated by corporatized (and ultimately monetized) stereotypes; another – which I maybe naively tend to prefer – is to read it as her way to accommodate and make livable these technological environments, adopting but also parodying their logic.

The second association I had upon hearing that deceptively simple term “musicality” was another deceptively opaque-sounding term, that of *prosody*. Part of the terminology of linguistics, it designates the phonological aspects of speech such as rhythm, stress and intonation.¹ These sound patterns are partly responsible for the formation of meaning (sincerity, irony, parody, etc.) and emotional subtext (indignation, enthusiasm, confusion, fear, etc.). But they are also subject to certain conventionalized patterns that serve proper understanding (for example if the stress in “he gave her cat food” versus “he gave her *cat* food” substantially changes the meaning²). Hence prosody

is a technical term, defining how we convey meaning to one another, willingly or unwillingly, and how understanding would in fact be nearly impossible without it. But if we take it as an allegory also beyond the realm of speech, it becomes a way to describe how every event – “event” as a catch-all term for sounds emitted, or objects presented, or gestures done – has different levels of rhythm, stress and intonation that are not only tangential, but actually essential to the effect the event may have on its “witnesses”, and how the latter may interpret it. This makes it sound more complicated than it actually is, since every time we laugh at a piece of slapstick we probably laugh not least because we are presented with an “unfitting” prosody attached to some event: say, the chair that crashes under someone during the pianissimo part of an elegiac chamber concert. Or, to give another example: Spike Jones, the famous composer of comical, zany music soundtracks, recalled how he first came up with the idea of “planned mistakes” in his compositions after witnessing Stravinsky conducting a performance of his own composition *The Firebird*: “Stravinsky was wearing new patent leather shoes and I was sitting close enough to notice [that] every time he went up on his toes in preparation for a downbeat, his shoes would squeak. So here go the violins, and here goes his shoes – perfect harmony!”³ Cheekily, Jones describes how an unintended prosodic shift in rhythm, stress and intonation by way of the squeaking soles inspired him to do the same thing intentionally.

But to come back to Maurs’ musicality, he has stated that it “is about inserting non-musical things into music.” In other words, for him the term designates a particular quality of other factors – machines, bodies, spaces, semiotic (dis-)agreements, other art forms and their respective conceptualizations – entering the transitory cloud of music, and how, paradoxically, these factors that seem, strictly speaking, *alien* to that cloud actually define it, even call it into being. The interaction between these musical and non-musical factors *is* musicality. The projects in the series realized with artgenève are cases in point.

Even before that series actually set in, however, a project that Maurs realized in collaboration with Thomas Hug in 2010 can be seen as a perfect exemplification of the described concept of musicality. Even though one could at first think it was rather about virtuosity, for the musical element of *Bach Suites in the Dark* is an enshrined classic for cello players, Johann Sebastian Bach’s six cello solo suites of 1717–23. The concept of the project entails Maurs playing the suites, which are also increasingly challenging technically, in absolute darkness, while the audience is left to trust solely its sense of hearing, with the traditional framing of the concert radically removed. In a lucid text written in response to the project, Christian Baier describes how famous cellists perform the Bach suites and how, in the case of Yo-Yo Ma for example, “His face contracts in concentration before, just as the bow approaches the strings, it opens up like a fist unclenching.” We all know these expressive routines, and we can imagine how they may at least have a lateral influence on the way we hear the music, whether we are aware of that or not. With no performer personality or concert hall ritual to influence, or distract from, our listening experience, however, we’re just sitting there in the dark, left with little but the feeling of the presence of our own body, and the presence of Bach’s music in the moment it is performed. The crystalline structures contoured by the solo instrument, implying contrapuntal voicing in a single musical line amount to a psychedelic experience, as they seem to cascade, circle and dance around you in the dark. In other words, what would first seem to be about virtuosity – the capability, sophistication and grace of playing – shifts towards musicality, away from the musician towards the listener, or rather, into the space they share.

That very shift was what largely motivated Minimal Art from the 1960s on. Visual artists such as Tony Smith or Robert Morris posited that what they presented were neither monuments nor objects, but something in-between, stripped down to a singular and/or serial shape placed in such a way that the viewer's own navigation amongst the work(s) within the space in which they were placed became the most important part of the experience.⁴ Within the orthodoxy of (Post-)Minimal Art, that ultimately meant to emphasize the autonomy of the artwork as it is placed within a white cube scenario, because it is truly the artwork and its placement that triggers that effect rather than some aura provided by the artistic "style" as manifested in figurative motif, compositional detail, virtuosity of gesture etc. The same holds true for Conceptual Art of the 60s: with the demotion of "style" came the enhancement of the relation between viewer, work, space, and placement.

But the shift from being "absorbed" by the artwork and its style towards a heightened feeling of oneself as a viewer in relation to the work and its surroundings also opened up the possibility that this very act of placement – where, when, and how does the artwork appear, to whom? – would venture outside of the conventional exhibition framework. And so it did: contemporary artworks and performances popped up in all sorts of fringes of the art context, and well beyond. There is no space here to recount all the steps in that development, but it has almost become common knowledge that a contemporary artwork can today be a meal, a cinema movie, a novel, a protest march, a song – something that appears in another context but holds significance precisely because it does so, as a kind of camouflage or simulacrum or uncanny sibling of ordinary, real life, including its cultural conventions.

In music, we have singular examples of such developments, namely in the work of composers such as John Cage or Alvin Lucier, or artists such as Laurie Anderson who have worked in-between contemporary art and music right from the beginning. However, talking about contemporary music as a field in general – similarly to auteur film and to a lesser extent contemporary theater – it has been surprisingly stubborn in adhering to its mid-19th to mid-20th century paradigm of the concert hall performance, the record release, the formats and units of the classic orchestra or chamber ensemble etc. The concert hall performance, just like your regular theater or cinema visit, also comes with the usual conventions of ticket pricing, seating, stage, starting time and duration of performance including pauses, and even the typical coughing cascading through the audience during a concert etc. In other words, we are couched in a whole set of traditions, rituals and conscious or unconscious habits, as if to ease the shock, surprise and frustration of the as yet unknown, muffle it amongst reassuring conditions.

It could be argued that these conventions are necessary to assure the best possible hearing experience – concentration, space acoustics etc. In music, it could also be said that the mobility of the recording – often, not always, the document of a performance – allows for unexpected uses and conditions, depending on when and where and how we listen. It could also be argued that there are works that nevertheless shoot through the muffling effect of convention; or even that some works are so innovative precisely because they occur within a deceptively conventional setting. What's more, in contemporary art, these kinds of conceptual, performative approaches have become pervasive to the extent that they are now a convention in themselves; there is no shock or even just confusion anymore in many of the tried and tested ways of letting performance happen.

Nevertheless, and at the risk of generalizing, it seems that musicians and composers today could play much more with social situation and placement beyond the conventions of staging. In order to do so, it would become necessary that they embrace a

conceptual attitude towards placement and situation that first came about in the 1960s at the interstices of disciplines: say, the transdisciplinary Black Mountain College activities of John Cage, or the background serving as a poet of first generation conceptualist Lawrence Weiner, or the political activism of Argentinian art group Tucuman Ardé, all of which dealt in one way or other with an unraveling of the very framework of what an art experience could actually be. And in fact musicians and composers increasingly follow in these footsteps, while contemporary artists, vice versa, seek to collaborate with the experimentally inclined protagonists of the music world. In the process – again at the risk of generalizing – contemporary artists tend to feel confident about their conceptuality, while sometimes underestimating the importance of musicality; musicians tend to be slightly insecure or untrained about conceptuality, while sometimes underestimating the conceptual significance of musicality itself. Augustin Maurs’ series of collaborations with artgenève over the years could be seen as a kind of continuing effort to break down these subtle but significant barriers.

The evening titled *Virtuosity* that took place at the Chamber Music Hall of Berlin’s Philharmonie in April 2013 is a case in point. Amongst the numerous contributions,⁵ let me just give two examples: Olaf Nicolai and Tino Sehgal. For his project “Escalier Du Chant”, first realized at Munich’s Pinakothek der Moderne, Nicolai had approached Elliott Sharp, along with a number of other musicians and composers, to make a new vocal piece in response to current political events, to be performed by an a cappella ensemble or solo singers in a situation that was transitory (in this instance, on a staircase) and unannounced (in the sense that the exact timing was kept as a surprise). At the Philharmonie, mezzo soprano vocalist Truike van der Poel performed Sharp’s *The Ballad of Bradley Manning* in a regular stage situation; it’s a song written from the perspective of the infamous US soldier who leaked US army data from Iraq and Syria, including documentation of war crimes, to Wikileaks (and who, by now as Chelsea Manning, has been pardoned by Barack Obama shortly before the end of his term as president). Held on the cusp between searing, traumatic emotionality and an almost coldly conceptual, almost Dadaist unraveling of language into its basic components, with stuttered consonants and prolonged vocals, further shaped by basic musical devices such as pitch, loudness, emphasis, vibrato etc., the performance of the song is precisely based on the score, with passages such as: “ttt t t t t t t t th ththththth ththththethewuwuwuwrrwrword... word... is it free or is there price to pay?”. What emerges is an imaginative, post-traumatic monologue of a person who became a whistleblower, and whose personal traumas became amplified and transmogrified in mass and social media, while draconic state persecution was put in place.

Another piece that entails a score written by Nicolai himself brought Truike van der Poel to the ticket office area, outside the concert hall itself. Here, she sang solo, as people stood in line, based on a score that looks like a set of four star constellation maps, in which dots of yellow, red, green, and blue work like indications of duration and intensity (*diaphanic backpackers*, 2013). This notation is visually alluring, but also aleatoric, leaving a lot to the performer. Standing near the line in front of the ticket office, van der Poel’s voice enters the sphere outside the actual concert hall, and as soon as the singing ventures offstage so to speak, the tension between emotionality and conceptuality becomes all the more poignant. Just as the singer’s trained voice unexpectedly cuts through the hustle and bustle like a knife through butter.

In his work, Tino Sehgal has given the creation of social situations and their placement the central role, with no objects or even written statements to accompany. At Philharmonie he realized the first instantiation of what would become his contribution to the Venice Biennale 2013. Again, in the lobby or staircase area of the Philharmonie, a

number of his protagonists were engaged in what seemed at first a slightly mysterious choreography of movements, often done while slouching on the floor, solo or in unison. There is no discerning beginning, middle, or end to the piece, it just seems to unfold like a living being, yet following a certain plan or pattern, present but largely non-intrusive, continuing to draw you in but without using any tactics of shock and awe. What keeps the whole thing going is, unmistakably, music: the people make rhythms and tones with nothing but their voices, sometimes sounding like a human beatbox, at others like cranes or peacocks calling in unison. Either way, everything is very rhythmical and often in synchronicity with the others. Beholding this work unfold is like watching a flock of starlings move in close coordination, emitting a strange kind of magic in which individuals seem to become part of a bigger organism that moves gracefully. In other words, it's anything *but* a regular musical performance, even though music is clearly at its center. It not only doesn't need a regular stage, and a start (when everyone falls silent to listen) and an end (where everyone applauds and the performers bow), but it actually wouldn't even remotely be what it is and do what it does as an artwork with these things.

So to come back to Maurs' notion of musicality, what Sehgal's piece exemplifies is that musicality here resides in a pitch-perfect instruction and coaching, leaving a lot to the individual protagonists of the piece but still making sure what they do, and how precisely they do it, adds up. In other words, the first non-musical element that awards these "interpreters"⁶ and their renderings grace and elegance ultimately results from the eloquence and subtlety of the instructions they were given – in the conceptual yet embodied framework. The second non-musical factor is, equally conceptually driven, their placement in the transitory area and the open-endedness yet clearly planned aspect of what they do.

Of course, the history of modern and contemporary music has seen many examples of composers stretching and at times breaking the logic of the classical notational system in their scores; not least, they have often played with aleatoric, at times radically contingent elements, leaving a lot, if not sometimes almost everything, to the musical performers. In that sense, what Maurs did for his 2014 project for Villa Sarrasin, a 19th century residential building near artgenève, was nothing new, per se. *Found Melodies and Stains* does what the title says: musicians are confronted with sheet music bearing stains and spots. But instead of having to ignore them like fly droppings or spilled ink, these stains become their actual focus, the task being that they translate them into sound and music. Importantly, they don't do so amidst the heightened attention awarded by the classical stage performance, but in a more casual walk-in scenario, scattered across rooms like guests waiting, as if playing to kill time. This purposeful intensification of the inadvertent and random, paired with the equally purposeful de-intensification of the act of performance, produces something that actually feels more like a "regular" installation of art than a concert, only that instead of sculpture, real musicians perform, and instead of paintings, the scores become visual elements.

One year later, in 2015, at the same spot, Anri Sala created a sort of sonic hall of mirrors. The starting point was a previous work by Sala, the video *Long Sorrow* of 2005. The camera very slowly, over minutes, zooms from a room with nothing in it but a radiator onto a half open window; there we see the back of someone's dreadlocked head – we know it must be the saxophone player we have listened to during that zoom. It's the eminent free jazz alto saxophonist Jemeel Moondoc. Eventually the camera shows us there is no balcony at the spot where he plays at the top of a high rise residential building (the scene was shot in a council estate in northern Berlin), and even though we

never get to see his feet, it's as if the player were levitating, just like his music. And that music is an eloquent monologue, with an elegiac melodic tone as the underlying continuum from which occasional voiced or sung squeaks and words ("end!", "see!") emanate like puffs from a steam locomotive. It's like prosody without all the rest – intense emanations of rhythm, stress, and intonation. In 2011, Sala asked another improvisational saxophonist, André Vida, to marathon-perform live on film over the course of 51 days during his exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in London. In Geneva, Sala used the recordings from these Serpentine sessions called *3-2-1* alongside *Long Sorrow*, and Vida this time faced not only the task to improvise to Moondoc, but to his own playing as well. What's more, Sala also asked him to slip in yet another work that he had previously worked on with Vida, together with the trombone player Hilary Jeffrey: the score of *Where the Moon Notes Equal the Beach Bridges* (2012) is a compilation of more than a hundred pop song bridges – those parts of the song, usually placed after the second chorus, that digress from the verse-chorus pattern in order to keep the listener's attention and create a moment of redemption before the song returns to its previous formula. In this roundelay of playing along, with and against, musicality is pitted against musicality, as recording and live, pop song quote and free jazz freakout, artistic conceptualization and musical improvisation interlock, cacophonically and majestically.

In 2016, the project *Seven Ideas of Stolen Time* took as its starting point a 19th century device of musical notation and way of playing, often associated with the work of Frédéric Chopin: *tempo rubato*, Italian for "stolen time". In sheet music, that instruction means that at the given point in the piece, the player can speed up and/or slow down the tempo at their own discretion. Thus, expressive freedom lends the interpretation a sense of expressive, intuitive naturalness – musicality of the here-and-now. From the seven contributions,⁷ let me just give two examples. Jonathan Monk's *A Piece For Piano (My Mother Cleaning My Father's Piano 2001)* (2015) is accompanied by the instruction that the action – deriving from the title – is to be performed in-between other pieces. Obviously, Monk here builds on the kind of deadpan humor mixed with Zen stoicism that arguably originates with David Tudor's 1952 interpretation of John Cage's *4'33"* – which instructs the player(s) to stay silent for the duration of the composition – by alternately opening and closing the piano lid for the piece's three movements. But Monk also takes that attitude two decisive steps further by bringing not only his own parents and class-specific gender roles into play, but also by defining the work as an intermission or interlude between other pieces, further stripping it down to its slapstick core, which is to say to the physical comedy of the in-between slippage, in the spirit of Spike Jones's musings about Stravinsky's squeaking shoes.

From one giant of modernity (Cage) to another (Marcel Proust), and from stolen to lost time, Louis Scoufaras's *Temps Perdu* (2013) builds on a simple application of an important rule of classic minimalism: take things literal, but wittily so. In this case, the artist read out Proust's novel encompassing four volumes in its French Pleiades edition in its entirety, resulting in 128 recorded hours; these were then, with the help of sound software, compressed (i.e. sped up but with the original pitch preserved) to 16 minutes for each volume with 16 minutes of silence in-between respectively. The epic timespan of the famously lengthy novel is literally lost. The resulting sound piece has the unsettling, brooding quality of a swarming bee colony, or rather robot bee colony – hissing, scrambled, captivating yet menacing, like a long horror film curse. That effect was heightened as Scoufaras installed speakers around the outer walls of Villa Sarrasin, as if the house were haunted by the spirit of Proust.

It would go well beyond the scope of this little essay to discuss all of the works that have been part of these years of collaboration between artgenève and Maurs,

notwithstanding all relevant aspects of each of these many projects. But what can be said is that they all are chosen, commissioned or conceived in the spirit of a search for musicality. Often, the “non-musical” aspect that Maurs describes as the one that actually brings musicality into being, like the grain of sand that makes the pearl, is conceptuality coming from a contemporary art trajectory. However, one shouldn’t assume that this relationship is a one-way street, in the sense of a kind of injection of some supposedly superior knowledge or technique nurtured in the art realm; in turn, it cannot be assumed that there is any reason for an aloofness of musical virtuosity and knowledge vis-à-vis the supposed dilettantism of visual artists dabbling in music. What needs to be understood, rather, is that both realms can only profit if they seek to consult the other as a kind of remedy for their inevitable blind spots and inhibitions so to speak, caused by the inevitable *deformations professionnelles* produced by the respective institutional and infrastructural frameworks. In other words, to hypostasize – turn into a fetish – the quality of musicality is precisely to enfeather it; equally, contemporary artists shouldn’t feel too sure about conceptuality per se giving them license, as if somehow having authored a clever-sounding plan would exonerate them from responsibility if the result somehow lacks, well, musicality. One could also put it this way: both musicians/composers and visual artists are in charge of letting their work literally come to life, and not allowing it to be suffocated by the faux authority awarded by convention.

¹ Cf. Marina Nesor, “Prosody: an interview with Marina Nesor”, *ReVEL*, vol. 8, no. 15, 2010, p. 381. http://www.revel.inf.br/files/entrevistas/revel_15_interview_marina_nesor.pdf

² Nesor, *ibid.*, p. 382

³ quoted from Scott Stanton, *The Tombstone Tourist: Musicians*, New York: Gallery Books, 2003, p. 136

⁴ Cf. Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture”, *Artforum* February 1966 (part I) and *Artforum* October 1966 (part II), reprinted in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press 1995 (1968), p. 222-235.

⁵ by Saâdane Afif, Bethan Huws, Christoph Keller, Annika Larsson, Klara Lidén, Olaf Nicolai (feat. Elliott Sharp), Tracey Rose, Tino Sehgal, and with performers including the Kammerensemble für Neue Musik Berlin, Truike van der Poel, and Chor der Kulturen der Welt.

⁶ Sehgal prefers to call the people in his works “interpreters” to avoid the term “performers”; thus he wants to mark the difference of his almost living-sculpture-like pieces to stage- and time-defined performances.

⁷ by Saâdane Afif, John Armleder & Christian Marclay, Jean-Pascal Flavien, Karl Holmqvist, Jonathan Monk, Tisha Mukarji, and Louis-Philippe Scoufaras.