Contours

Kate Romano

When is a performance considered a success or failure? At the turn of the 21st century it is easy (and a little simplistic) to embrace a neat set of conventions pertaining to what we consider "good" performance to be. We tend to seek safety in rules, hence the extraordinary popularity of "authentic" period performance which, in many cases, aims for reproduction (and an authoritative "how to..." guide) rather than innovation and originality.

Perhaps the desire for dry academic guidelines and the fear of impulsion and novelty derives from confusion; where are we now? how are we playing? what is our relationship with composers of the present and the past? The perplexity is understandable; throughout history performers have never before been required to play so many different styles and periods of music. Furthermore, the music of our own time is marked only by its complete lack of stylistic continuity or common syntax. When faced with such a multitude of tasks, it is surely only human nature to attempt to simplify and compartmentalise. It is a fascinating, intriguing and frustrating time to be a performer.

Maybe we look for rules because we feel, in our technologically-biased century, that we need some justification for the decisions we make? Doubtless the advent of the recording process has had the greatest impact on current performance practice. It is interesting to compare the attitudes of Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Debussy amongst others, who embraced the opportunity to create authoritative performances of their own works in the early part of the twentieth century. They were fantastically disloyal to their own scores and the resultant recordings provided more problems for future conscientious performers than they solved. In stark contrast, recordings made today are striking because of their utter fidelity to the score. Many performers admit to doubts and a fear of "getting it wrong" when putting something down as a permanent record. There is trepidation lest a future study might cause a moment of gut-felt intuition to become an academic embarrassment. The permanence of recordings has ensured a wary carefulness, a tendency to hide behind the printed notes and above all, the ultimate aim of a definitive performance which has inevitably spread from recording studio to concert hall. (If not in practice, at least in aspiration. Unfairly, performers are expected and - strangely - expect themselves to reproduce what may have taken several hours and sessions to get right in a recording studio.) Performance practice today - as Taruskin, Leech-Wilkinson, Kenyon and others have shown in their study of Early Music - is largely defined by note-

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Richard Taruskin, *Text & Act* (Oxford 1995)
Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, *Early Music*, 12 (1984)
Nicholas Kenyon, *Authenticity and Early Music* (Oxford 1988)

perfection, uniformity of tempo and complete faithfulness to the score. Little, however, has been written about the performance practice of playing music of our own time. Are we playing new music in the same way as we play music from the past? Do we share the same criteria for "success" or "failure" in performance? Is it possible for players of contemporary music to similarly seek solace in rules?

I suspect that many players of new music are less aware of exactly "how" they are playing and more concerned with the individual challenges of the work itself. Perhaps it is less relevant to be strongly aware of taste and trends when preparing a new piece (another language, another method of notation...) which may or may not become a trend in itself? Perhaps the detail and intricacy of the score may be seen to take away many of the decisions of colour, timbre, balance that were previously the domain of the performer? New music poses questions - technical and interpretive - and the first performance at least is often primarily a personal response to these challenges. How then is this to be judged as a success or failure? There is of course the added complication of what precisely is being judged when an audience experiences a first performance. A previously unheard work requires a listener to differentiate between success of the work versus failure of the performance and vice versa. In the current climate of limited funding and a general surplus of composers to concert opportunities, new works are often hastily premiered and forgotten. The habitual single performance of contemporary repertoire places unfair demands on the listener; a solitary rendition is rarely enough to formulate a valid judgment of either the performance or the work.

A solitary performance does not allow a worthy piece of music to evolve and grow into an established part of the repertoire. This is largely because the experience for the performer when giving a première is very different to that of giving a second or third performance or playing a renowned piece of music. Despite the obvious challenges (technical and interpretative) there are also considerable advantages and less obvious disadvantages. One might presume that the lack of a legacy of performances diminishes the pressure. This may be the case when the composer is relatively unknown or young, but giving premières for reputable and celebrated composers is a rather different matter; rightly or wrongly, there are expectations to satisfy. That aside, it is a most satisfying and rewarding experience for a performer to reach an understanding of a work for the first time and to know that every interpretative detail will be novel and new. But subsequent performances share striking similarities with the much-debated issues surrounding per-

formance practice of earlier music. I have always felt that it is considerably harder to be the second performer of a new work, especially when a composer has worked in close collaboration with the original performer. Often a work is written with the sound, talents and specialist interests of a certain player very much in mind. It is the subsequent performers unenviable task to decide what to do with the information they have available; does one consider, reject or emulate the original (presuming that is what the composer intended) henceforth reiterating the "reconstructionalist" arguments so familiar to the early music debate? It is actually more problematic in one sense, since the composer is most likely to be living (and not necessarily enlightening) and commonly the first performance will be readily available as an informal or commercial recording and difficult to ignore - should one wish to do so. Where the collaborative personalities are extraordinarily strong (for instance, the music of Maxwell Davies for Alan Hacker) attempts to re-read the work appear futile; the personality and mannerisms of the original performer are so wholly assimilated into the language of the composer that to mentally separate the two is impossible. It is interesting that in cases such as this, it is often the performer rather than composer who becomes the spoken authority on the piece and defensively possessive of the work.

A CD recording at least provides the opportunity for repeated listening and a more informed judgment of a work and performance. The nine works on this disc are diverse in their approach to solo instrument writing, share no common musical languages and are therefore typical of our time. I can find no "contemporary" rules which can be applied from one piece to the next which might guarantee some sort of level of success in performance. There are books supplying fingering charts and suggestions for technical skills but these are fast made redundant as composers generally move quicker than authors. Indeed, many "new" techniques of the past decade are now a perfectly acceptable and stable part of the clarinet repertoire. But as composers continue to push the boundaries of instrument and player the range grows progressively higher, tonguing becomes faster, dynamics are more extreme, multiphonics more demanding and technique is layered upon technique so that the overall challenges facing the performer become a much more personal issue than any book can provide answers to. Composers are not always the best oracle to consult; often an "effect" is heard in the head and notated with an extraordinary level of faith in the intuition of the performer. Much is said about the lack of trust between performer and composer today which, some theorise, has lead to overly complex scores. On the contrary, I feel that composers display an astonishing level of

confidence in performers today. "Complex" scores (such as James Erber's *Strange Moments*) place a huge burden of responsibility on the performer to make sense not only of the "blackness" on the page, but the relationships and connections beneath the notes (more often than not, the real meaning of "complex" in so-called music). At the opposite end of the spectrum, Chris Fox's blank boxes, proportional durations and pitch freedom (in *Generic Composition*) also suggests an innate trust of contemporary performers to do the right thing (although it must be said that there is something a little uncomfortably paradoxical about committing a work of freedom and flexibility to static permanence on a CD recording). Composers today are dependent on astute and dedicated performers to make sense of every new language, subtlety and system.

That said, a fiendishly difficult score will almost certainly alienate a good number of potential players; perhaps this acts as an in-built safety net for composers to ensure that only the most serious and dedicated will attempt their music? Works by composers such as Ferneyhough, Dillon, Redgate and Lachenmann place enormous demands on even the most experienced performer in the amount of time it takes to understand, appreciate, learn and practice the pieces to a performance standard. Even so, the result is often a compromise between score and performance. Not all things written are physically possible (or desirable) and good intuition of the performer becomes ever more important. If exactitude is not essential - or not possible - can any reasonable attempt at the score therefore be sufficient grounds for success? Far from being a sacrifice, I consider the compromise itself to be a very fundamental part of the interpretation. Music which tests the limits of both performer and instrument proposes a mode of communication in the level of difficulty itself and how it is perceived by the player. This manifests itself in various ways; the decision the performer makes may be illusory (finding a way to make the music sound as the composer wanted) or it may be one of concession (finding a simpler way of producing it). The performer may throw his or her self into the impossibility of the task or may shy away. The result might be a headstrong attempt or a liberty of pitch, rhythm, tempo or dynamic. From performance to performance the difficulty of the music itself forms an inevitable part of the interpretation.

This happens precisely because we care about remaining faithful to the score and aim for perfection. It would be naïve to assume that the traditions of Western performance practice and current trends play no part in the interpretation of new music. If we were less concerned with accuracy then this level of communication would be lost. Many of

the pieces on this recording contain such "compromises", some unavoidable, some intentional. A rapid colour-trill might replace flutter-tongue in the altissimo register because the effect is lighter and felt to be more in keeping with the delicate texture. A "breath tone" might be played using an alternative fingering so that the tone produced is closer in pitch to the note on the page. A pitch notated lower than the instrument is physically able to play is replaced with an alternative one believed to be not wholly unsuitable to the harmonic language of the composer. How can this be built into the criteria for a successful performance?

Although the level of fidelity bestowed upon the score might be unique to our time, musical decisions outside the score are certainly not a modern phenomena. Quite simply, the choices described above can arguably be seen as comparable to the "extra-musical" and intuitive decisions made by performers of the past; the aims and intentions are equal. The aural illusions of music (the "tricks of the trade" which make the printed score sound nearer to the musical ideal than the actual symbols dictate) are taught in conservatoires and applied until they become second nature. Undoubtedly the first performers of music from any period made more adjustments than subsequent performers and scores were amended or performance practice histories evolved. Perhaps we have to make more extreme adjustments now, but then, more is required of us.

There is something rather paradoxical about discussing the merits of successful or failed performances on a CD. Ultimately, CD recordings made today are not "performances" in the way that transient live performances in the concert hall occur. Recordings give us the advantage of cut and splice, of doing re-takes and some extraordinary technology (which most performers would draw the line at) that has the potential to make us sound far better than we are. In short, they give us an opportunity to create a definitive performance. Perhaps the true criteria for success or failure can only be found in the concert hall, in the level of communication achieved with an audience, in the way that the music is perceived to be understood? But even if this is so, we cannot disregard the CD recording which has become an integral part of modern performance practice and our most fruitful method of reaching a wider audience. At the most base level, communication is concerned with making sense of the music. How we communicate is a reflection of our current climate and its needs. I am yet to be persuaded that our modern performance practices of Early Music are anything more than a reflection of current musical taste. Despite some fairly significant differences, I believe that the way we approach contemporary music today is fuelled by the same desires, the same aims and

ambitions as those which determine our performance of earlier music since we cannot escape our heritage. "Success" or "failure' is less about how we play an embellishment, how our choice of tone fares or how precisely we stick to the printed notes. "Success" at any given time is surely determined by the level to which we are able to make sense of the music (all types of music) for ourselves and for our audiences in the time in which we live.

Kate Romano studied as a clarinetist at the Royal Northern College of Music and went on to pursue her interest in composition and contemporary performance practice at Cambridge University (MPhil) and Kings College London where she gained her PhD.

Kate gave her debut London solo recital at the age of 22 in the Purcell Room (Park Lane Group) and has since enjoyed a varied career focusing largely on contemporary music. As a soloist and chamber musician she has given over 100 premieres and performed at most UK festivals including Huddersfield, Cheltenham and BMIC's Cutting Edge. Her first solo CD on METIER in 1998 (MSV CD92013) of "20th-century works for clarinet and piano" was chamber music "Pick of the Month" in BBC Music Magazine.

Although Kate's compositional output is varied, she has an interest for writing for the clarinet and particularly in expanding the repertoire of the Eb clarinet. Works for clarinet include *Pied Piper* (featured on this disc), the clarinet quartet *Hamelin Pipes*, written for the Wigmore Hall debut of the Chinook Clarinet Quartet and a clarinet/soprano duo for Jane Manning. Kate currently combines performing with an academic career in her post as a lecturer at Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

Details on the featured composers can be found at the following web addresses:

Richard Causton (b.1971)
www.oup.co.uk

James Dillon (b.1950)
www.edition-peters.com

Franco Donatoni (1927-2000)
www.ricordi.com

James Erber (b.1951)
www.erber.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk

Christopher Fox (b.1955)
www.foxedition.co.uk

Salvatore Sciarrino (b.1947)
www.ricordi.com

William O. Smith (b.1926)
http://faculty.washington.edu/bills

Sohrab Uduman (b.1962)
www.bmic.co.uk

Also by Kate Romano, with Alan Hicks (piano)

Métier MSVCD 92013

Elizabeth Maconchy:
Fantasia
Anthony Powers:
Sea/Air
Piers Hellawell:
High Citadels
Harrison Birtwistle:
Verses
Richard Rodney Bennett:
Scena III
Hugh Wood:
Paraphrase on 'Bird of Paradise'
Gordon Crosse:
A Year and a Day
Martin Butler:
Capistrano Song
Michael Berkeley:
Flighting

"The performances are superlative in every way. Kate Romano's playing throughout is exemplary, displaying both stunning technical prowess and a real flair for the dramatic potential of these works. Performance ★★★★★ Sound ★★★★★" – BBC Music Magazine

"A well-devised retrospective of British music over three decades. Romano is an accomplished and sympathetic advocate, not least in her informative booklet notes." - Gramophone

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CONTOURS

new and recent music for clarinet

Kate Romano - clarinets

	FRANCO DONATONI Clair - two pieces for clarinet (1980)		
1.	i		4:06
2.	ii		3:36
	WILLIAM O SMITH Variants for solo clarinet (1963)		
3.	i	Singing	0:51
4.	ii	Aggressive	0:43
5.	iii	Nervous	1:17
6.	iv	Tranquil	1:02
7.	v	Brilliant	0:31
8.	vi	Dramatic	1:00
9.	**SOHRAB UDUMAN Contour** (2001)		5:19
	RICHARD CAUSTON Two Pieces for two clarinets (1995)		
10.	i	Grizzly Bear Jam	2:26
11.	ii	Song to End Mourning	5:06
	both parts played by Kate Romano		
12.	**JAMES DILLON Crossing Over** (1978)		7:27
13.	**KATE ROMANO Pied Piper** for solo clarinet (2000)		6:06
14.	**SALVATORE SCIARRINO Let Me Die Before I Wake** (1982)		5:01
15.	**JAMES ERBER Strange Moments of Intimacy** for clarinet in C (1999-2001)		16:25
	played on a clarinet in B flat by permission of the composer		
16.	**CHRISTOPHER FOX Generic Composition #7** (1999-2001)		4:40
			Total 66:45

Recorded in Holy Trinity Church, Weston on 23 & 28 September 2002.
Produced, engineered and edited by David Lefeber

Booklet design and layout by David Lefeber (cover after an idea by David Moffitt)
Photography: © David Moffitt, Future Earth Photography www.future-earth.co.uk

Metier Sound & Vision would like to acknowledge the generous funding support of Boosey & Hawkes and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London.

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