Rethinking Music Critique

At the age of 76, Florence Foster Jenkins finally yielded to public demand and performed at Carnegie Hall on October 25, 1944. So anticipated was the performance that tickets for the event sold out weeks in advance.

Jenkins died a month later, seemingly also because of the destroying critique.

27.1 Boiling Down Infinity

We have learned in previous chapters that performance conveys a doubly infinite message: the infinity of interpretative perspectives as they are realized in music analysis, gesturality, and emotive expressivity, and the variety of performative shaping expressed in the infinitesimal vocabulary of performance fields.

Critics are very probably not aware of such a variety of backgrounds that may produce concrete performances. In particular with respect to (analytical) interpretation, they preferredly stick to the traditional canon of how the structure of a composition should be viewed and interpreted or analyzed. Of course, it is not clear whether music critics should be cognizant of possibly new interpretations, but once they have gone into their business, a creative dealing with analytical problems should be mandatory.

One may understand that this is not necessary ante rem, but after the event, a re-reading of the text should be considered, be it only for comparative handling of the present performance: Could it be that the artist discovered a new interpretation of the given text? In practice, the selection of an analytical interpretation (in the best case, auto-incompetent critics excluded...) is just a matter of limitations of time, energy, and interest, besides ignorance of the infinite variety of interpretations.

As to the infinity of performance nuances, this is beyond the vocabulary of music critics and it is also beyond the present measurement technology for such data: In a common concert, no performance field reconstruction is feasible. So critics are *nolens volens* limited to describing performance by use of common language expressions (“elegant diminuendo blended by a mysterious pedaling cloud...”), which beyond their imprecision cannot relate rhetorical expression to semiotic expression.

So is feuilletonism inevitable? Or rather: Is such a bad feuilletonism inevitable? Is it necessary to play the game of a unique “best” performance whose expression has to move along unreflected paths of prejudices? The alternative would be to embed one’s judgment in the potential infinity of analytical interpretation and expressive performance. And to keep this embedding omnipresent in the critical discourse. We argue that the most precious role of a music critic would be that of putting the infinity of perspectives of a musical work into evidence in every concert or CD review. These would be the crucial points:

- Infinity of analytical interpretations,
- infinity of expressive performances,
- infinity of correlations between expressive rationales and expressive rhetorics (shaping of the performance field and other stemmatic details).

Our discourse is not about bad or good quality in these specifications, in essence, the only quality is to teach us something about the work in question and about the relativity of each perspective. Suggesting a boiled-down finitistic or even unicorned view of art is a destructive reduction and hinders every understanding or progress in the arts.

### 27.2 Glenn Gould’s Politically Incorrect Performance

Glenn Gould’s performance of classical works from Bach to Webern is a testbed for a valid music critique. His also technically spectacular performances have evoked strong reactions that unveil a number of deficiencies in common critique styles.

Whereas Gould’s Bach performances may be non-conformist but still acceptable and adequate for Bach’s compositions, his performances of Beethoven’s sonatas are beyond the supportable deviation from common taste. The famous critic Joachim Kaiser has described in [58] the most famous “mis-performance” of a Beethoven sonata on the example of Gould’s presentation of op.57 *Appassionata*, hear example 🎶 1:

> Bei Goulds Wiedergabe des allegro assai dürfte es sich um die verrückteste, eigensinnigste Darstellung handeln, die jemals ein Pianist einem Bethoven-Satz hat angedehien lassen; und das will etwas heißen. Gould hält es für richtig, demonstrativ langweilig und gelangweit den