

Geoffrey Dean

The Orphic I

A Philosophical Approach to Musical Collaboration

STUDIES IN HISTORICAL PHILOSOPHY

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Preface

Presaged by the aesthetics of Heidegger, Dewey, and Gadamer, a mainstream philosophical approach to music of recent decades refutes the primacy of the musical work as an object and recasts music as a type of human experience. Reflecting the intersubjective refocusing of philosophical inquiry in the twentieth century, this approach centers on music as “something lived through...a musical field [that] holds participants together,” and suggests that the work in and of itself has no meaning, existing only to give musicians something to perform.¹ My main focus in this study is on the interactions of the participants as they engage in the social practices of music creation, performance, and listening.

Recalling Heidegger’s restoration of the Greek *aletheia* (truth as unconcealedness) over truth as certainty and drawing on the commonality of pragmatic and hermeneutic principles, I pursue an intersubjective approach to understanding music as a collaborative activity. By incorporating insights gained from my own professional experiences as a performing musician, I have chosen to embrace my own position within music-making traditions. Because these experiences have taken place within a unique intercultural context—that of an American musician working in Bulgaria—my perspective is perhaps as unique as it is potentially flawed or limited. Through an examination of different aspects of my musical activities in Bulgaria, I attempt to bridge the gap between abstract philosophical theory and actual musical practice.

My collaboration with the distinguished Bulgarian composer Lazar Nikolov on his solo composition, *From the Music of Orpheus*, suggested to me a reinterpretation of the Orpheus myth. By transposing the Heideggerian “seeing as”—as applied by Paul Ricoeur in his theory of semantic innovation—to “hearing as,” I apply Ricoeur’s hermeneutic interpretation of Husserl’s concept of imaginative transfer to the composer’s collaborative relationship with those who perform his or her music. Through what I call *creative Orphic intersubjectivity*, the composer finds creative inspiration by identifying with a real or imagined performer as a kind of completion of the composer’s Orphic self. A central component of Nikolov’s creative process, this identification allows the composer to

1 Philip Alperson, “Introduction: The Philosophy of Music,” in *What is Music? An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music*, ed. P. Alperson (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987), 14.

achieve self-consciousness as the product of consciousness of another, as Orpheus is transformed by being revealed to himself when he looks back at Eurydice.

The performative collaborative approaches I experienced while working with composers Dimiter Christoff and Petros Ovsepyan led me to look at imaginative transfer and the associated concept of empathy in a different light—through the prism of the multimodality of musical performance. With the support of Dewey’s statement on manipulation as art in incipency, I suggest that audience members willingly perceive the performer’s dishonest signals as sincere through what I term *consensual empathic manipulation*. Related to it is *interpretative Orphic intersubjectivity*, whereby a performative composer identifies with a performer later in the creative process, while they work together to shape a musical interpretation that is both aurally and visually compelling for the seeing listener.

My years of international concert activity as the cellist of two leading Bulgarian string quartets led me to explore the cultural values embedded in the social interactions of those who perform music together. Examining communitarian aspects of Gadamer’s aesthetics and MacIntyre’s ideas on tradition, I suggest that the participatory act of music-making is both a model for and exemplar of specific intercultural relationships. A division along liberal and communitarian lines can be observed in the distinction between what I call the *conversation and control models of string quartet playing*. My own intercultural chamber music experiences have shown that the core values of individual ensemble members cannot be upheld unless they are grounded in what I refer to as a set of unifying communitarian ideals that govern the ensemble’s collective work.

My performance projects involving informal and improvised group music-making among people from divergent cultural backgrounds, and having little or no previous musical interaction, support my conception of *entrainment ethics*. I propose that music performance situations based on entrainment—the innate perception of repeating patterns within a time frame—provide a universally valid ground for practices undertaken to obtain group consensus. Interactive music-making can therefore precede and model the public discourse at the heart of Habermas’ Discourse Ethics.

Habermasian thought brings together several interconnected strands of my inquiry into the nature of musical collaboration. Habermas has been outspoken about his decisive turn toward intersubjectivity as a response to what he sees as the exhaustion of the philosophy of the subject. He stands

out among the present-day philosophers who draw on a broad variety of scholarly sources, uniting the continental and analytical traditions. His intentionally de-limited conception of empathy as the social cognition of mutual perspective-taking offers a firm philosophical foundation for a fruitful final variation on the workings of empathy in music.

I gratefully acknowledge Prof. Alexander Gungov of Sofia University, without whose expert guidance and constant encouragement I never would have considered writing a study of this nature, let alone carried the project through to completion; Prof. Dimiter Christoff, who magnanimously entrusted to me the (co-)interpretation of his cello music and inspired so many of my earlier writings on music; Prof. Lazar Nikolov, who provided my earliest exposures to contemporary Bulgarian music and my earliest opportunities to perform it; Prof. Artin Potourlian, Roumen Balyozov, and Mihail Goleminov, and the many other Bulgarian composers with whom I have had the honor of collaborating over the years; Mario Angelov, Georgita Boyadzhieva, Rossen Idealov, Ganka Nedelcheva, Biliiana Vutchkova, Helen Bledsoe and the inimitable Anssi Karttunen, who showed me what long-term dedication to new music, and authentic artistry in its performance, could look like; my colleagues in the Dimov and Sofia Quartets, the Stankov-Radionov Duo, and at the Ardenza Foundation of Sofia, especially Daniela Dikova and Galina Koycheva, for a sustained immersion in chamber music performance that took us on so many far-flung musical adventures; Ekaterina Docheva, Elena Dragostinova, Natalia Ilieva, and Anda Palieva, for their unflagging support for my festival of American and Bulgarian music, and Julia M. Watkins, whose encouragement while president of the American University in Bulgaria helped get the festival off the ground in the first place; Perry Townsend and Petros Ovsepyan, two of my earliest composer-collaborators, who introduced me to new, unsuspected worlds of sound; Sophia Högstadius, Laura Geier, and Myriam De Bonte, who opened my eyes to the diverse multicultural intersections of music and community through our ethnomusic collaborations; Dragomir Yossifov and Goritsa Naidenova, for setting a consistently high bar for encyclopedic erudition; everyone else in my musical family in Europe and the U. S.; my wife Christa and daughter Vera, for giving me daily strength and confidence through their unbounded love, matched by their equally unbounded patience; and my parents, for everything, from the start.