

On The Interpretation of "Falsa Lectio II"

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The notation of Dimitri Kourliandski's "Falsa Lectio II" is extremely problematic because there is no uniform or intuitive way to approach the material. Kourliandski has created a unique decoupled notational system which is literally unrealizable. The physical complexity (i.e. doing multiple complex and independent performance procedures simultaneously) creates so many problems that the interpreter is forced to make interpretive decisions simply to survive a performance. However, there are multiple paths the interpreter can take to perform this piece. This presentation will illuminate those methods and attempt to contextualize the piece as an argument against the interpretative hierarchies present in common practice music and scholarship.

Historical Considerations

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, interpretation was obsessed with intentionality, and performance was haunted by Platonic idealism: "Treatises on interpretation written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century conceive of an author-centric Platonic ideal of a work: a perfect "other" which performers are tasked with realizing in such a way as to elucidate its immanent structures without leaving a disturbing fingerprint." [1] This idyllic belief in a Platonic interpretation of a score or a compositional symbol creates hierarchical structures in the act of interpretation. The performer's subjectivity is subsumed by the composer's intentions and the structures inherent in the notation system. Furthermore, any idiosyncratic interpretive decisions must be hermeneutically and historically justifiable. This conception of performer agency dominated classical music scholarship until midway into the 20th century. However, during the late 20th century the issue of performer agency in the act of interpretation became a problem. In many respects, aesthetics caught up with compositional practice, with its indeterminacy, fractures, and dismantling of the notion of the authorial self. At the heart of critical theory, from semiology to deconstruction was an assault on the self and therefore intentionality. The act of interpretation now became creative, a play of signifiers that resisted any unitary meaning. This dismantling of the traditional notion of a text then fed the work of composers who felt the hierarchical structures present common practice music were no longer consonant with the creation of increasingly complex systems of notation. Compositional symbols (rhythm, harmony, extended techniques) were no longer standardized, and any illusory concept of stylistic unity collapsed. Some musical text went beyond inviting the free play of signifiers and began constructing music that was literally impossible to realize, forcing the performer to radically interpret the piece.

The Piece as an Argument

The title of the piece “Falsa Lectio II” (False Reading II) is rhetorically and ideologically driven. It hints at the performer’s inability to interpret a score as a denotative or Platonic object. This is due to either the physical complexity or the elusiveness of the compositional material and idiosyncratic notations. As one critic has argued, “Scores are more than just tabulatures for specific actions or else some sort of picture of the required sound: they are also artifacts with powerful auras of their own, as the history of notational innovation clearly shows us. As such, they are capable of playing an active but not authoritarian role, even in a period of pluralistic aesthetic standards: they carry their own history on their backs.” [1] Therefore the intention of the score is not to be fully transparent—its surface, its materiality, becomes foregrounded. It refuses to be “sublimated.” This is fully in agreement with the philosophy of deconstruction, which reasserts the materiality of writing over meaning, and also Abstract Expressionism, for that matter, with its dogmatic assertion of the materiality of paint and the surface of the canvas. In Kourlianski’s piece, the compositional materials are fluid, filled with multitudinous signification and possible interpretative choices to combat their inherent difficulties. The performer is presented with a devilish choice—to attempt to realize the impossible and fail, or to make interpretive choices that are by their nature compromised and inadequate. This strikes one as far from a joyful embrace of multiplicity. Instead it seems like tortuous dilemma worthy of Kierkegaard: “Choose or don’t choose. You’ll regret both.”

While the effectiveness of the notation system can be debated, its interpretational difficulties and paradoxes cannot be dismissed as perfunctory or sloppy. These elements are intentional and integral to the piece itself. Let’s focus for a moment on the paradoxes: the score itself in its unrealizability is in fact quite Platonic (beyond frail human flesh to realize its perfection). So if the piece is indeed an assault on Platonism, then it must be a type of argumentum ad absurdum, where one accepts the premise and then draws untenable conclusions systematically. The piece also forces the performer—through its imposition of creative obstacles, from the decoupled hands to the instability of the squeaker—to submit to her own freedom. The piece intentionally compels the performer to be free from intentionality and control. Yet the performer carefully chooses the squeaker to realize a particular sound and sees structural similarities in the score to determine performance strategies.

Methods of Interpretation

There are multiple ways to approach the notation in this score. One possibility is to interpret the piece as if it were a piece of New Complexity. This entails that the performer accepts that the notation will push the limits of human physical capabilities. From here they attempt to realize all of the contrapuntal details and inevitably fail. HOW WOULD YOU CHARACTERIZE THE OTHER APPROACH? E.g., recognize the absurdity of the score’s impossible demands and—like a practitioner of Zen—find the appropriate response when the one’s intentional self surrenders. Is the notation a koan?

To perform this segment, the performer has to find a toy squeaker to insert into the bass flute's embouchure hole. All physical and sonic processes usually associated with flute playing are completely abolished, and the instrument is turned into a resonating chamber. Furthermore, the timbre of this section is highly dependent on the squeaker. There is no specific requirements for a squeaker other than it having multiple multiphonic nodes and a complex sonority. Kourliandski's lax instructions should not be interpreted as carelessness. By leaving the language vague he allows the performer's individual sonic tastes to be showcased. This forces the performer to search for

I discussed choosing squeakers with the composer, and he said that some performers, to maximize the timbral complexity, chose to add alterations to the squeaker. One common change was to glue a small plastic cigarette tube to the bottom to try to produce more multiphonics.

The performer is given three staves to play from simultaneously. The three lines, reading from top to bottom, denote pressure (and subsequently resultant pitch), embouchure, and hand gestures. The pressure line is a vertical spectrum where the peak indicates to blow with as much force as possible. The embouchure is consistent through this page, though subtle differences can cause a tension between the extremely controlled notation and the resultant sounds.

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