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Should performers strive to realize scores beautifully or become intellectuals on a quest to unearth the musical meaning of the works they perform? In either case, what should be the ultimate goal of a performer and the limits of performance practice? Edward W. Said’s *Music at the Limits* is a posthumous compilation of Said’s music journalism originally published in his column for *The Nation*. The book consists of 44 chapters organized chronologically and divided into three parts: “The 80s,” “the 90s,” and “2000 and Beyond.” There are reoccurring themes throughout, such as critiques of piano concerts at Carnegie Hall; opera reviews from the Metropolitan; book reviews such as Maynard Solomon’s *Mozart: A Life*; Glenn Gould’s concerts and performance practice; and the contextualization of musical practice in a social, economic, and political reality. In each and every one of his writings, Said goes beyond the mere critique of the effectiveness of a performance, or the superficial discussion of the subject matter in question. He presents the challenges of musical practice in modern society altogether with his philosophical, political, and aesthetic insights.

This book contains a mix of articles that fall into four categories: concert reviews, opera reviews, book reviews, and performance practice and its challenges. Pianists can benefit from the concert reviews because most of them examine concerts by prominent pianists such as Alfred Brendel, Andras Shiff, Maurizio Pollini and particularly Glenn Gould. Said’s knowledge of works by Ludwig van Beethoven, Richard Strauss, Richard Wagner, and Johann Sebastian Bach among others are informed and informative. Musicians in general can benefit from the opera reviews, as the book comments on
Mozart’s Don Giovanni and Wagner’s Ring Cycle among other works. The book reviews included concern works by Maynard Solomon, Peter Ostwald and Alfred Brendel. Themes such as music and feminism and middle age performers could also be valuable for musicians in general and for musicologists in particular.

Edward W. Said was one of the most profound thinkers of the twentieth century. He was the author of more than twenty books and a regular contributor to different newspapers in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Said was also the head of the graduate program in Comparative Literature at Columbia University. His contribution to contemporary social studies with his book Orientalism was significant, and he was also an accomplished amateur pianist who collaborated with two of the most recognized figures in western music, including Daniel Barenboim—as part of his West-Eastern Divan project—and Yo-Yo Ma.¹

Said’s main concern is implicit in his collection: the activities of performers should not be reduced to sounding out scores, but they should also be oriented to the construction of the meaning of the musical work. In other words, performance practice should stretch the intellectual limits of performers. A common theme in Said’s critiques is that it is not enough to possess a brilliant technique, a beautiful voice, or be one of the most recognized orchestras in the world. What really matters is the concept of the work that the performer constructs and transmits through the musical act.

In Music At the Limits Said proposes that performance practices should stretch a performer’s intellectual limits to decipher the meaning of the musical work, in other words, to unveil what Schoenberg called “the idea” in the musical work.² Schoenberg criticized modern composers for caring more about style than the idea behind the work of art, which he felt was the most important component. The goal of understanding the idea of a musical work would not exist without the strong work concept that Dahlhaus defines in Nineteenth Century Music, writing: “Beethoven’s symphonies represent inviolable musical ‘texts’ whose meaning is to be deciphered with ‘exegetical’ interpretations.”³ The logical consequence of this concept is the differentiation of the activities of composers and performers. Said’s main contribution is that whereas Dahlhaus’ and Schoenberg’s perspective privilege the composer’s point of view and her/his ideas about the work of art itself, Said addresses the performer’s responsibility in deciphering the meaning of the musical work, thereby expecting the performer to become an intellectual.

² Arnold Schoenberg, Style and Idea (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), 49.
It is not surprising that Glenn Gould had an enormous influence on Said. Gould was a world-recognized pianist who abandoned the stage at the highest peak of his career as a concert performer and turned to the recording studio. This eccentric pianist has been both widely criticized and praised. His first recording was Bach’s Goldberg Variations by Columbia records, marking the beginning of provocative and unique interpretations of musical works. Gould became the epitome of the performer-intellectual who sometimes went beyond the limits of performance to recompose a work. Said argues that “unlike many performing musicians, [Gould] seemed to have not only ideas and a mind but the ability to apply them to music both as performer and as a critic.”

Said’s admiration for Gould could have been based on Gould’s intellectual approach to music. In “Glenn Gould, the Virtuoso as Intellectual,” we can see why Gould was so important to Said’s writings when Said comments on Gould’s approach to Bach’s works, writing:

This is exactly the kind of Bach that Gould chose to play: a composer whose thinking compositions provided an opportunity for the thinking, intellectual virtuoso to try to interpret and invent or revise and rethink in his own way, each performance becoming an occasion for decisions in terms of tempo, timbre, rhythm, color, tone, phrasing, voice leading, and inflection that never mindlessly or automatically repeat earlier such decisions but instead go to great lengths to communicate a sense of reinvention, of reworking Bach’s own contrapuntal works.

Said argues that Gould’s decision to rediscover Bach’s repertoire provided the pianist with the opportunity to stretch the intellectual limits of the performer to the point that he could reinvent, re-create, and re-compose the work.

Said also indirectly criticizes the overspecialization of the whole educational system, not just that which trains musicians, and argues that few performers have produced intellectual works similar to those of the pianists Charles Rosen, Glenn Gould, and Alfred Brendel. In Said’s review of Alfred Brendel’s Music Sounded Out: Essays, Lectures, Interviews, Afterthoughts he comments: “Brendel’s new collection is very satisfying, especially as it helps us actually to hear and better appreciate what he does in his recitals.”

Said argues that the intellectual production of a performer provides the

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6 Ibid, 130.
analytical and theoretical reasons for his or her performance decisions. It also contributes to understanding the performer’s concept of the work.

Said’s work has informed other scholars who are concerned with performance practice. Lydia Goehr in “The Perfect Performance of Music and The Perfect Musical Performance” quotes Said while also taking his work on Glenn Gould in a different direction. Goehr argues that Gould’s effort to strive for the perfect performance of music at the recording studio dehumanized his musical practice. Goehr’s critique of Gould is based on the idea that the perfect musical performance is a unique experience, Goehr writes: “concert occasions are always located in a uniquely endowed site, and what occurs then and there is part of the cultural life of modern society.” Goehr points to Gould’s decision to retire from live concerts, but argues that Gould’s reasons were not so that he would be able to produce a perfect performance through technology but were so that he could present new interpretations of the works through recordings — some of them provocative.

For scholars interested in opera and piano repertoire, Music at the Limits would be as valuable as it is well-informed, as Said comments on what other scholars have said about the works that he analyzes. It is this aspect of the book that establishes it as a potential point of departure for additional research. Conversely, Said’s vocabulary as an intellectual and an artist results in very interesting reading, but can also make the text hard to follow. On the one hand, the articles present Said’s own concept of musical works in various guises. For instance, Said’s expertise in literature enriches his articles about opera and provides the reader with a broader perspective of the operatic works upon which he comments, such as in Chapter 10, “The Barber of Seville and Don Giovanni,” where he writes: “Mozart characters in Don Giovanni and Cosi can be interpreted not as individuals with definable characteristics but as figures driven by forces outside themselves that they don’t comprehend and make no effort to examine.” Said presents his analysis of the characters from two operas and establishes their similitudes. Yet, on the other hand Music at the Limits is difficult to read because its tone and content are intended for the informed reader. Said’s articles were published in newspapers; and so we would assume that they would address the general audience. In reality, they were written for the informed reader with a background in the liberal arts as we can see in the following example:

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9 Edward W. Said, Limits, 64.

Critical Voices: The University of Guelph Book Review Project is part of the curriculum at the School of Fine Art and Music, University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada.
Any seriously considered theatrical and musical conception of the Ring today must therefore emphasize the staginess or artificiality of Wagner’s attempt to use the opera house as the site where the analogy between the aesthetic and the political could be staged. In addition, an audience should be able to perceive the revolutionary quality of Wagner’s musical reach as he brings the two spheres together, employing an alliterative text set to declamatory and melodic utterances of incredibly plasticity, inventiveness and personality.  

As we can see, to understand this passage the reader should have previous knowledge of the Ring, Wagner’s biography and composition style, and additional literature. Here, Said assumes that the reader understands what exactly the revolutionary quality of Wagner’s musical reach means—what it means that Wagner attempted to stage the analogy between the aesthetic and the political.

Said is well known in the fields of cultural studies and literature but not as much in the musical community. His book would be easier to read if introductory material, some sort of contextualizing preface that might inform the reader of who Edward Said was, his contributions in other academic fields, and his philosophic frame, were added. Music at the Limits was a posthumous collection, and I wonder if the author would have agreed with the selection of the articles and if he himself would have organized the material chronologically or by themes. From my point of view, the book could have been more effective if the articles were chronologically organized according to the following four categories: concert reviews, opera reviews, book reviews, and performance practice and its challenges. Organized this way, the reader would have access to the topics that he or she was most interested in.

One of the most important contributions of Music at the Limits is that we can follow three decades of Said’s insights about music and the general context in which it was performed. Music at the Limits allows us to identify the standards under which our work as performers continues to be evaluated and most importantly it invites us to reflect on what our role as music performers is. Music at the Limits is a valuable read as it is well informed in its topics. An important asset of Music at the Limits is that it presents the author’s concept of the musical work in various guises and provides new perspectives about the act of performance. The high intellectual profile of its author results in interesting reading that exposes the challenges of interpretation and analyzes the social, economic, and politic context of music as a profession. It is stimulating reading and motivates performers to stretch their intellectual limits.

10 Ibid, 111.
For Further Reading


