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Stephen Davies, Philosophy, University of Auckland

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## Works of Music: Approaches to the Ontology of Music from Analytic Philosophy

Works of music: an overview

In this paper I outline the issues and philosophical theories about the nature of musical works that have been presented by analytic philosophers over the past forty years.

Ontology is concerned with the nature of things or the manner in which they exist. Our topic, then, is the ontological analysis of musical works; it is about what kinds of things they are. Such enquiries have their own, intrinsic interest, but they have important practical implications as well. Plainly we cannot characterize the relation between works and the performances that are of them if we have no understanding of what musical works are. And how we answer that question will have implications for what can be expected or even required from performers who attempt to play such works. For example, whether we think historically informed performance is an optional interpretative possibility or, instead, is something more strictly required in a performance that advertises itself as of a given work depends in part on what we judge to be constitutive of that or similar works. To anticipate one important conclusion that is to follow: musical works are not ontologically homogenous; they come in different grades and types.

Analytic philosophy is usually Anglophone and is committed to the clear (but sometimes technical) presentation and analysis of arguments and issues. Methodology in this area of philosophy is typically dialogical, with competing theories played off against each other by their critics and proponents.

By contrast, philosophy in the Continental style is sometimes more concerned with personal experiences and values than publicly shared ones, and with all-embracing, wide-ranging theories rather than isolated topics. Some Continental philosophers, such as Roman Ingarden, have addressed the ontology of music, but their writings lie beyond the deliberately restricted scope of this article.

[The work concept used here](#)

By *work of music* I mean a repeatable sonic entity the identity of which persists over its repetitions; it is the same work each time. Frequently, such works are named—*Fireworks*—or are otherwise specified—*Sonata for piano, opus 20*.

The soundings of such works in some cases involve performances, either live or in a studio where they are recorded. In others, they involve playbacks of electronic files (or of other encodings of the work, such as vinyl disks, music boxes, mechanical organs, pianola rolls). The creation of such files need not involve performance, that is, the sounding forth of music from the body or from musical instruments or other resonators. Some works, such as Beethoven's fifth symphony, are for performance. Others, such as Edgar Varèse's *Poème électronique* (1957-58) are for playback. And some works, such as Luigi Nono's *La Fabbrica Illuminata* (1964), which is for soprano and tape, combine both options.

Some people reserve the term *musical work* for sustained pieces with detailed, rigidly specified features, so that they are quite similar from performance to performance. This sometimes goes with the view that there were no musical works prior to the nineteenth century (Goehr 1992). Alongside this, a contrast might be drawn between music as activity, skill, and know-how and music as a collection of works of art. The latter perspective, which valorizes composers above performers, is seen as modern and as contrasting with earlier traditions that emphasized the idea of music as a practice rather than as a succession of works. "In our contemporary way of thinking, a piece of music is a specific kind of an object ... ultimately, an object made for its own sake, a form of being-in-itself. On this view, 'music', then, becomes the total collection of all its pieces, the imaginary museum of musical works" (Carpenter 1967, 68).

I see no reason to privilege extended, highly specified, Western works in this way and prefer more relaxed conditions for work identity (S. Davies 2001, 2003). For my purposes, *Happy Birthday* (the melody of which comes from *Good Morning to All*, attributed to Patty and Mildred Hill, c. 1893) is a musical work. It can have many renditions and, despite how these differ (for instance, in whose name is sung), each is identifiable as being of the same piece. Indeed, on my view, works are ancient and are present in almost all musical cultures. *Sumer is icumen in* is a mid-thirteenth-century work in my view. Other musical works are the Nepalese folk song *Chura ta Hoina Astura*, the Balinese piece *Teruna jaya* (which was composed by Gedé Manik and dates in its earliest version to about 1918), Robert Johnson's Mississippi delta blues known as *Cross Road Blues*, the traditional Shona (Zimbabwe) song *Mahororo* with mbira accompaniment, *Moon of my Hometown* composed by Byungki Hwang for voice and the Korean gayageum and janggu, and on and on. Finally, neither do I see an interest in works as thereby denigrating a process-oriented notion of music as practice. We can be interested in works, and in the process of realizing them, and in freer musical events that are not at all work-focused.

### Musical playings that are not of works

Let's emphasize this last point before proceeding. Not all musical playings are of works. Music can be freely improvised, a practice that is central to jazz and to many indigenous music-and-dance traditions. (In a few musical cultures, works might be entirely absent, though I believe

such cultures would be a small minority.) In jazz, sometimes such improvisings begin with an identifiable thematic kernel, the head, that inspires the musicians' ideas. What happens is not a performance of a piece identified with that tune, but a free work "after" or "inspired by" it. For this view, see S. [Davies 2001](#), [Kania 2011](#). In other cases, the improvisation is deliberately more constrained, for example by following the initial chord sequence, but again it is not obvious that should identify what is done as work-performance. This is not to deny that there might be some repeatable works in the jazz tradition (see [Young and Matheson 2000](#)) but it rejects the view (defended in [Dodd 2014](#)) that this is the paradigm. For attempts to find a middle ground, see [Brown, Goldblatt, and Gracyk 2018](#), [Fisher 2018](#).

Other examples of musical playings that are not of works would be the output of a device that generates tones according to a randomizing algorithm and some musical exercises, such as scales, arpeggios, and similar configurations.

### The historical plasticity of musical works

Though I have rejected the view that musical works emerged at a specific historical moment, it is important to acknowledge the flexibility of the work notion.

Where composers controlled the resources at their disposal (for instance, the musical instruments available to play their works) and the staging conditions of renditions of their works, they could invest those works with a fair amount of constitutive detail. What is more, even in oral traditions, it is possible to export works of some detail and complexity across the musical landscape. Where there is extended training and mnemonic notations or devices, as in the church chant traditions, work fidelity was preserved over geographical and temporal spreads. Alternatively, where the melodic or harmonic spine of the work is relatively simple and decorating instruments derive their parts from this in a systematic (if also creative) fashion, as is the case with central Javanese gamelan, extended works retain their identity over different renditions.

Nevertheless, over the course of Western music history, there has been a tendency for works to become specified in more detail over time. This went hand-in-hand with changes in the practices of music making and presentation — standardization of instruments, increased proficiency and professionalism within guilds of musicians, solidification of performance practices and conventions regarding presentations of works and concert behavior, gradual increase in the size of the instrumental ensemble with a corresponding increase in difficulty in co-ordinating the group, with this last leading to the development of more complex instrument-specific and generic notations, and so on. These made it increasingly possible for composers to be confident that the details and complexities of their works would be faithfully reproduced wherever the work was played, which of course led to the complexification and extension of those works.

I distinguish thin from thick musical works (S. [Davies 1991, 2001](#)). *Happy Birthday* is thin. In this case, the work consists only of the melody and implied harmonic structure (and words, in sung

versions). It could be played in any number of arrangements on all kinds of instruments. Many Tin Pan Alley songs are comparatively thin, as their sheet music implies by showing only words, sung melody, and chord tablatures. Thin works allow more latitude to the performer, often including with respect to structure, instrumentation, embellishment, tempo, dynamics, and phrasing. By comparison, a Mahler symphony is thick with work-constitutive properties, including its instrumentation, phrasing, dynamics, etc.. The thicker the work, the more constrained is the performer in playing it accurately and the more the features of an accurate performance are attributable to the work rather than to the performer's interpretation of it. (That said, even the most heavily specified work for live performance leaves a great deal to the interpretation of the performer; see [Godlovitch 1988](#), [Thom 2007](#).) So, we can characterize the long-term historical tendency noted above for Western art music by describing it as one in which works became progressively thicker.

As I use it, the thick/thin distinction makes no implicit judgment about work quality. By comparison with nineteenth-century Romantic music, most Medieval and Renaissance music is thin, but of course not inferior on that account. The thickening of musical works is not tantamount to a kind of progress in which they become better. The distinction is relevant only to allocating responsibility for assigning which aspects on a fully replete performance sounding belong to the work and which to the performer's rendition.

The thickening of musical works went hand-in-hand with the developments in notations and scores, with composers indicating with more and more specificity what the performer was supposed to bring off. In the twentieth-century there was something of a reaction to this kind of musical determinism. Composers adopted (or instructed) aleatoric methods or chance procedures for determining the work's content. The result was not a thinning of the work if the chance procedure generated a specific outcome, but responsibility for the outcome shifted from the composer to the non-deterministic procedure.

#### An aside on scores

Most work-specifying scores should be regarded as sets of instructions addressed to performers ([S. Davies 1987, 1991, 2001](#); [Thom 2003, 2007](#)): if you would perform my work, do thus and so! As we have already observed, complex, extended works can be preserved within oral traditions, but the adoption of notations increases the opportunities for creating large-scale orchestral and choral works.

Not all musical notations are scores of this kind, however. Some, for example, are transcriptions of performances or mnemonics for work renditions. Others notate what is produced by a mechanical sound generator, such as a music box, not by a performer. Others offer pictorial renditions of purely electronic works.

The case in which the composer instructs the performer not on the notes to be played but on some procedure — perhaps including random elements — for generating the work's content, as was just mentioned previously, raises another question. We might wonder whether we are

getting a score for a work that can have many very different performance realizations or, instead, a composition manual for generating many different works.

In some cases, the answer might be clear from what we get. Mozart's *Musikalische Würfelspiel* (S. Davies 2001, 109) provides a kit for composing minuets, not a work score. In other cases, the answer might not be obvious, or how we answer might not be important.

### The work in rock

A graphic illustration of the plasticity of the work notion is apparent in the complex relation between audio technologies and popular music. Writing in the 1990s, Theodore Gracyck (1996) made a strong case for regarding the primary work in rock as the recorded track and, in some cases, above that, the *album*. "Concept" albums were thematized and presented as wholes rather than as lists of tracks. (Opponents suggested instead that rock is primarily a performance tradition, see Baugh 1993; or, at least, that performance is no less important than recording, see Burkett 2015, Bartel 2017; or that the primary work is the song rather than the recording, see Bruno 2013.) Of course, the CD quickly overtook the vinyl record and some years later Andrew Kania thought the primary work was (again) the (now digital) *track* (Kania 2006, 2008b, see also Fisher 1998, Luzio 2019). But unified collections of tracks had become less common by that time. Nowadays, the primary work is a *song*, understood as an electronic file, probably streamed, though clearly related to the digital track that was formerly found on a CD. These are collected into playlists personal to the listener and the notion of the album has become much less prominent. Changes in how people access and listen to their music, which are a function of changes in audio technologies, may have altered how we think of the ontology of the primary items of musical appreciation in the popular music tradition.

### Skepticism about the enterprise

Some philosophers have questioned the value of doing musical metaphysics and quite a few musicologists regard the enterprise as so abstract and arcane that it is irrelevant to the real-world practice of playing music. Aaron Ridley, for instance, suggests that folk (that is, common-sense) intuitions about the identity of musical works and the performances that are of them suffice, so that arguments about ontology are irrelevant and unhelpful, while leading to the neglect of what really matters: the critical evaluation of work renditions (Ridley 2003). (For other reservations and discussion, see Bartel 2011, Kraut 2012, Young 2014-2015.) Furthermore, Ridley questions the obsession with authenticity or fidelity in performances that is a consequence of the interest in ontology, when what should concern us is the quality of performance more generally. When it comes to my trying ineptly to play Bach on an electric keyboard, questions of authenticity are quite irrelevant to what I'm trying to do and to what motivates me. And something similar might be thought to apply in the professional realm to those who mistake a literalist focus on historical practices for genuine interpretative insight. We'll take up this issue below.

A more modest doubt is expressed by Lee B. Brown about what he calls "higher-order musical ontologies," which ask of broad genres, like rock, jazz, and classical, what *primary* form the work takes (Brown 2011, 2012). (For examples of such theorizing, see Kania 2006, 2008a, 2011. The previous discussion of rock and jazz in this paper concerned higher-order ontology.) Within these categories, the variety of kinds of works is more striking than the dominance of any particular model, Brown thinks.

Andrew Kania has defended the philosophical enterprise of music ontology against these concerns (Kania 2008b, 2012a). Ontological arguments have their own value and, as well, can sometimes be relevant to the judgments of musical value that interest Ridley. And, provided they aim to be descriptive, they should respect and accommodate differences between kinds of musical works. I would add this: it's far from obvious that we all coincide in or should rely on our folk intuitions about musical works, or that we are always aware of their implications. Many of the issues and controversies surrounding the nature of performance and how performances stand in relation to the works they are of could be approached more perspicuously with the aid of ontologies sensitive to musical practices (and their historical contingencies). Not all ontological debates are interesting in this way, but some can be. In addition, ontology is always at risk of being converted into ideology (Sharpe 2000) – implicitly arguing that some types of works, compositional practices, or styles of music are superior to others – which should be avoided. But that seems more rife among musicologists, who mix sociological, political, and psychological concerns more readily with ontological questions than do analytic philosophers. Of course there are important questions about the artistic and moral comparisons that can be made between different musical works or musical kinds, and about who if anyone is entitled to make them, but the ontological enterprise can and should operate independently of these judgments of value.

### Revisionary versus descriptivist metaphysics

One reason why musicologists are irritated by musical ontologists is because some of the latter are revisionists (aka prescriptivists) rather than descriptivists. They think philosophical categories and arguments are more secure than folk intuitions and are thereby comfortable developing theories of the musical work that plainly contradict common-sense notions about such things (for instance, see Goodman 1968, Dodd 2007). Some revisionists (such as Rudner 1950) actually want to reform ordinary talk to conform to their theories but others (such as Goodman 1968) do not. By contrast, descriptivists expect the appropriate ontologies to track ordinary talk about musical works and judge them by how well they do so.

Here are some examples of revisionist views: Nelson Goodman argues that the smallest departure from a work-specifying notation disqualifies a playing from being a performance of the work so specified (Goodman 1968). A rendition with a single wrong note fails to instance the work, according to him. His worry is that denying this opens up a slippery slope that reduces different pieces to a single work. In practice, however, musical people tolerate and expect errors in performance and other departures from the score, while accepting performances with such blemishes as being of the work in question. At the same time,



Goodman rejects tempo indications, such as *Allegro*, as too vague to be work-specifying and thereby is committed to regarding a performance that takes years to execute as not deficient on that count. (For further criticisms of Goodman, see S. Davies 1991, 2001, Edlund 1996, Predelli 1999.) Meanwhile, Platonists (of whom more below) regard musical works as existing eternally and as discovered rather than created. They do so because they equate musical works with patterns of notes and regard patterns as abstract items that exist apart from their concrete instances. By contrast, musical folk think of musical works as coming into existence at more or less datable times and take works that once existed but of which all trace is now lost, such as Mozart's Trumpet Concerto K. 47c, as non-existent, not merely as still existing though inaccessible.

Other revisionist views maintain that musical works are ideas in the minds of composers (Cray and Matheson 2017) or, along with other works of art, that they are actions, either of discovering via a particular heuristic path the structure which is the work's outward face (Currie 1988) or of creation (D. Davies 2003). Another view that flirts with revisionism is fictionalism, which holds that there are no such things as musical works, but we talk as if there are for ease of reference in describing musical playings (Kania 2008c, 2012b, Killin 2017). Also revisionist is the position maintaining that the sentence "there are musical works" is true but there are no musical works (Cameron 2008; see also Letts 2018; for critical discussion, see Predelli 2009, Stecker 2009, D. Davies 2018).

Now, we could be mistaken about the fundamental nature of natural kinds, such as the elements of the periodic table. For instance, we might think that whales are fish. And we can be deeply wrong about natural events, taking the earthquake to be a punishment for human transgressions, for example. We can even be in error about the point of our social practices. Religion might be about establishing social cohesion and group identity and not at all about finding a route to an eternal Paradise, whatever the holy books say. But in the case of socially constructed kinds — money, the Stanley Cup, parking tickets, good germs, credit cards, and musical works — it seems implausible that we could all be wrong all of the time about what they are. (We might be ignorant about how the nature of the economy affects the political system, say, but we could not all be wrong at the same time about what is legal tender.)

Ontological accounts of such items should presume in favor of descriptivism, then. But on the other hand, we can be confused and inconsistent in our approach to the social world, and there can be cases in which several options seem equally plausible yet considerations based in theory — consistency, economy, and so on — should lead us to opt for one over the others. So, a worked-out ontology might reasonably reject some of our folk classifications and intuitions, even if it should not challenge them all. A degree of revisionism should be tolerated, even if most of the time our ontologies should be consistent where possible with folk theories about the nature of social items, including musical works.

For further discussion of revisionism versus descriptivism, see D. Davies 2003, 2017, Thomasson 2005, Dodd 2007, 2013, Kania 2008c, 2012b, Stecker 2009, Neufeld 2014, Killin 2017.



## Two Basic Kinds of Musical Works

I've already suggested that musical works come in two distinct varieties — those that are for playback, not performance, and those that are for live performance.

Let's begin with works for playback. These often take the form of encodings cloned from a master and they are sounded when the encoding is decoded by an appropriate audio-output apparatus. For instance, a digital file is played by an "industry standard" audio device under "normal" listening conditions, as when a recorded song is streamed through a computer or played on the radio. In the terminology introduced earlier, such musical works are thick in that almost all that is heard on playback is attributable to the work, there being no performance interpretation involved. Tape hiss might be present in the file or the vinyl grooves might be poorly printed and playback devices might be differently equalized, distort, or fail to sound some of the information in the file — consider the difference in sound quality between earbuds and expensive speakers! — but otherwise, what is heard is the work itself.

Prior to the invention of recording technology such works were rare, but there were mechanical sounding devices activated by such things as turning metal disks with holes, perforated moving paper sheets, turning metal barrels with prongs, and so on. Composers created musical works specifically for such devices. For instance, Mozart wrote an Adagio and Allegro in F minor, K. 594, for a mechanical organ and Stravinsky wrote an Étude for pianola in 1917 as a demonstration piece for the player piano then produced by the Aeolian Company. (Sometimes such pieces could be performed as well, though Stravinsky's Étude would have required three pianos. As it happened, it was later re-titled and orchestrated for live instrumental performance.)

Electronic musical works can be created on computers. Historically, studios in Cologne under the direction of Herbert Eimert played a leading role in the development of such music, called *Elektronische Musik*. At the time, this was strongly distinguished from *musique concrète*, associated with Pierre Schaeffer, which used samples of recorded sounds as its primary source, editing and manipulating them in the studio. These sounds could be from nature or from the human, mechanized environment (but they were not specifically of musicians playing music). These days, the distinction between such ways of composing might not strike us as significant and, anyway, both lead to works that are for playback, not live performance.

One option, that of recording music played in the studio, became the preferred method in popular music (Gracyk 1996, Fisher 1998, Kania 2006, 2008a). Already from the 1950s, the works produced relied on interventions made in the studio — filters, multi-tracking, editing, tapes played faster or slower than the recording speed, etc.. In other words, recordings in these cases deliberately created a "mastered" finish, rather than trying to emulate documentary-style recordings of live playings. Just as actors are involved in making movies, where the result is not a live performance but a work for playback (in this case, for screening), so musicians contribute to the work that is issued as a recording.

It should be noted that works for playback can sometimes be released in different but fairly similar *versions*. The original might be remixed or turned from mono to stereo, for instance, by a person with appropriate authority to release the result under the work's name. Continuing the comparison with movies, this would be similar to the director's cut. As long as versions are correctly dated and referenced, they needn't cause philosophical angst. The world of musical works can be an untidy place.

I have described works of the kind we are discussing as "works for studio performance" (S. Davies 2001). But this notion is perhaps already outdated, to the extent that some studio effects can be applied in real time to live performances. For example, autotune corrects intonation, drum machines and foot-pedal devices introduce electronic percussion, auto harmony adds vocals, and pre-sampled effects can be played at the touch of a key. Meanwhile, with increased computational power and appropriate playback technologies, electronically produced music can now be improvised in real time, as with the original rap DJs and groups such as The Chemical Brothers. For other criticisms of the distinction between live and studio performances, see Kania 2006, 2008a.

These alterations certainly undermine what were previously clearly marked distinctions, such as between recorded and live music and between electronically produced and improvised music. A similar blurring occurs when works that are presented as recorded live in fact involve heavy studio editing. (Led Zeppelin's *The Songs Remain The Same* is a case in point.) Meanwhile, in popular music, the live performance sometimes rivals the recording in importance.

Nevertheless, we can still make the familiar distinctions by appealing to the sonic ideals that are invoked and the products issued. Improvised electronic music falls in the category of music-making without works, unless it is recorded and issued as a piece (and also provided that this recording is appropriately authorized, so that it is not instead a "bootleg" recording of a live playing). Music that is released on disk and that bears obvious marks of electronic production represents works for playback, even if real-time manipulations of live performances are made also. Indeed, this latter practice, along with reliance on electronic amplification, electronic instruments allowing "special effects" such as wah-wah produced by a supplementary foot-operated pedal, and so on, suggests that the goal is that of emulating a recording as nearly as possible, which is quite different from live performance in the acoustic vein.

The case of "covers" — playings of previously recorded songs — has implications for musical ontology. Often, "tribute" bands produce covers (usually as live performances rather than recordings) that try to match the original recording as closely as possible. The work they target is the thick piece that is for playback. But other artists treat the songs they cover in ways that are very different from the original. Joe Cocker's live Woodstock version of the Beatles' *With a Little Help from my Friends* is famously divergent in style, instrumentation, and length from the original. Here, the work that is targeted is the thin song. The thin song is what is (roughly) represented on sheet music and it lends itself to wide interpretation, whether given live or recorded. This brings out the fact that the original recording simultaneously "manifests" two works. Usually, the primary object of appreciation is the thick recording, in all its detail, but

underneath that lies a barebones song that can be taken up and interpreted by others (Gracyk 1996, Fisher 1998). For more on covers, see Gracyk 2012-2013, Magnus, Magnus, and Mag Uidhir 2013, Rings 2013, 2014, Brown 2014.

This takes us to the second kind of musical work: those that are for live performance. Prior to the late-nineteenth century, hearing the vast majority of musical works involved being within earshot of a live playing event. Works for performance are better compared to plays that are for acting than to movies, both with respect to how they instance the work and to the interpretative freedom they display from rendition to rendition.

It is not necessary that all the parts or elements of a work for performance are for live playing. In some compositions, a tape or recording is included. Examples are Edgard Varèse's *Déserts*, with its recording of factory sounds, and Ottorino Respighi's *Pines of Rome*, with its recording of the song of a nightingale.

Just as there can be more than one version of a work for playback, there can be more than one version of a work for live performance (S. Davies 2007, Puy 2019). This occurs when a finished piece in the public domain is changed in ways that alter its identity and re-released by its composer. (On who can change a work, see Friedell 2018.) After he moved to the West, Stravinsky re-wrote *Petrushka* in order to be able to collect royalties from performances of the piece. Bruckner frequently revised his completed and published symphonies, often years after they had first been written. To avoid confusion, versions can be time-indexed — for example, "the 1887 version of Quartet No. 2."

How are works for live performance specified? In oral traditions, they come into the world via exemplars and direct instruction (in which, for instance, each musician is taught her specific part). Sometimes a sketchy notation serves as a mnemonic aid. Though they rely on memory, there can be large repertoires of works in oral traditions and, as was explained earlier, individual pieces can be both extended and complex.

David Davies has suggested that works introduced via exemplars, as are novels, allow no room for variability in their instances (D. Davies 2018). But this is plainly false in the case of musical works in an oral tradition (S. Davies 2001). For example, the Balinese piece *Teruna jaya* that was mentioned earlier exists in multiple variants. There can be difficulties in separating work-constitutive elements from performance-interpretative features within the exemplar, but shared conventions for the kind of music in question plus repeated presentations of the exemplar by custodians of its identity clarify this distinction. As a result, performers learn what is mandatory and what is variable in the exemplars on which they base their performances.

Many cultures have developed notations for the specification of works. The composers and musicians who employ them must be familiar with the conventions for reading them (S. Davies 2001; see also Nannicelli 2011) — they are not always literal and sometimes they include indications that are not work-mandatory. As well, some work-mandatory elements may be absent, being assumed rather than notated. This is often the case with expected

embellishments and decorations (S. Davies, 1987, 1988; see also Young 1988). The function of specifying works is usually primary, but music notations can have other purposes as was observed earlier — as mnemonics, as transcribing a piece or its performance, as retrospectively indicating the thin song at the heart of a recorded pop piece, for instance.

Notational work-specifications underdetermine the sound of a performance, no matter how detailed they are. This is where the space for the performer's interpretation lies. Even where something is instructed, many subtle aspects of its realization are left to the performer. She shapes the melodic phrase, using micro-deviations from strict temp, for instance. We value performances not solely for the works they display but also for their interpretative richness and for the light performance interpretations shed on the work. Many different performances, all equally and maximally faithful to the work, can differ in the interpretations they present of it. For further discussion of performance interpretation, see S. Davies 1987, 2001, 2002, Godlovitch 1988, Young 1988, Levinson 1993, Kivy 1995, Thom 2003, 2007, D. Davies 2011, Neufeld 2011.

As just implied, performances of works invite questions about their authenticity. Faithfulness to the work will be a performance virtue (S. Davies 1987, 2001), and the more so where works are sufficiently complex and detailed to be valuable in their own right. Here, faithfulness is understood as accurately following what the score, appropriately interpreted, instructs as work-determinative. (For different views, see Dipert, 1993, Kivy 1995, Dodd 2015.) More particularly, where the works are old, they should be played on the kinds of instruments for which they were written, in the style of the time, and interpreting the notation according to the conventions of the day. The idea is that, because composers knew what they were doing, showing the work in the best light is most likely achieved by doing what the composer wanted. Moreover, if the public performer represents her playing as of the given work, then she should accept a prima facie obligation to deliver that work as specified.

This said, qualifications are in order. Practical constraints might dictate departures from authenticity if a work is to be played at all. Perhaps the instruments cannot be obtained or no one knows how to play them. (For example, the ancient circular trumpets called for in Respighi's *Pines of Rome* are usually now replaced by flugelhorns.) As well, other kinds of virtues of performances — dynamism, excitement, novelty — can be in tension with authenticity, at least when it is pursued formulaically. And, as we know from performances shot through with wrong or out-of-tune notes, works can remain recognizable in very inaccurate performances, so a degree of deliberate inauthenticity can be consistent with the intention to play the work in question. In practice, however, intended departures from authenticity are usually on the modest end of the scale, at least in the rendition of Western classical music, or are advertised in advance, when professional musicians play to a paying public.

What are we to make of recordings of works intended for live performance? It is important to note that these stay close to the conventions for live performance, at least for the case of Western classical music. Multiple takes and editing are likely to be used to eliminate errors and infelicities that will stand out uncomfortably in a recording intended to be listened to often, but

long takes and the avoidance of studio manipulations are the norm (Godlovitch 1988, S. Davies 2001). Typically, it is assumed the musicians could play the relevant pieces in real time in live performance, and most ensembles that record also play the same music live.

Where the tradition is performance-based, rather than work-based, as in jazz, the norms for recordings can differ. For instance, the musicians might record many takes and stop only when each of them is satisfied with the result. But again, it is generally assumed that the musicians could play live a rendition like that found on the record.

Risky or deliberately strange interpretations are less common in recordings than live performances, presumably for commercial reasons. At the same time, the intimacy of recorded music mitigates the need to project to the far corners of an auditorium and encourages a more fastidious, subtle style of interpretation. A few performers, Glenn Gould being the obvious example, have preferred the distinctive circumstances of the recording studio for the display of their performances.

### Ontological theories of musical works

Musical works that are for playback, not performance, should be similar in their ontology to movies, photographic and other kinds of prints, cast statues, and the like. All these are based on a master or template, their instances are (potentially) multiple, and there is a high degree of resemblance between their various instances as a result of high transmissibility between the template and its decodings. In the musical case (and in movies and photography) there is an intermediate phase — the template gives rise to multiple, similar encodings — disks, copied files, pianola rolls — and the instances are generated from these, not directly from the original template.

The ontology of musical works for playback has not attracted much attention from analytic philosophers, apart from considering what is the primary object of appreciation in rock, as discussed earlier. I take it that this is because the familiar type-token model (Wollheim 1968) fits the case unproblematically. (The same might apply to works of sound art, which have not been discussed here — see Hamilton 2007, Pardo 2017.) The idea is that the tokens all resemble the type, what was referred to earlier as the template, in its crucial features. In the case of the Union Jack, the type is the pattern of forms and colors and the tokens are the individual flags that share the relevant design.

The main philosophical focus has been on works for live performance, and these have been analyzed in ontologically diverse terms.

The Platonist regards musical works as abstract, eternal patterns of sounds that are discovered by composers. (The name derives from Plato's theory, according to which actual things are imperfect copies of eternal forms they exemplify.) Platonists include Kivy 1983, 1987, Dodd 2000, 2002, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2012; see also Price 1982, Scruton 1997. To detach works further from their real-world performances, Peter Kivy regards them as timbreless (see also Webster

1974) — a Beethoven symphony could be authentically rendered by a choir of kazoos. Julian Dodd thinks timbre is work-constitutive but that the use of the specified instrument to produce that sound is irrelevant (see also [Scruton 1997](#)). He requires that the violin concerto have the sound *as of a violin*, but it need not be played by a violin ([Dodd 2007](#)). I have called this position "timbral sonicism" ([S. Davies 2001](#)).

Platonists are aware of how their views can appear to be counterintuitive and defend against this. For instance, though they think musical works are discovered, not created, they can argue that only a particular person at a particular place and time could have made the relevant discovery. Against this, critics have argued that musical works are created, not discovered, or that how we talk of works involve commitments to creation that are contrary to discovery. For discussions favoring "creationism," see [Levinson 1980, 1990a, Thom 1990, Fisher, 1991, Sharpe 1995, 2001, Predelli 2001, Trivedi 2002, Caplan and Matheson 2004, Cameron 2008](#). Indeed, it has been argued that some types or kinds, including musical works, can be created via acts of indication, selection, initiation, or stipulation ([Wolterstorff 1975, 1980, Levinson 1980, 1990a, Deutsch 1991, Howell 2002, Walters 2013](#)). Meanwhile, it has been suggested that the work's instrumentation (often) contributes to its identity and that, therefore, works must be played on the appropriate types of instruments if the performance is to be faithful to the work ([Levinson 1980, 1990a, 1990b, S. Davies 1987, 2001, 2008, Walton 1988, Bender 1993](#)). For further discussion and objections to Platonism, see [Khatchadourian 1973, 1978, Sharpe 1995, Predelli 2002, 2006, Nussbaum 2003, Alward 2004, Kania 2008d, 2012b, Trivedi 2008, D. Davies 2009, 2018, Ridley 2012, Letts 2015, 2018, Killin 2017](#).

An alternative to Platonism construes musical works (or at least, those for live performance) as classes or sets of performances ([Rudner 1950, Beardsley 1958, Goodman 1968, Bachrach 1971](#)). This was sometimes presented as an eliminativist position — there are no musical works as such; phrases such as "Beethoven's Fifth Symphony" are non-referring — and we would do better to renounce all talk of musical works.

Fictionalism is similar, though it regards talk of musical works as useful and worth preserving because it makes some ways of discussing performances easier. (Fictionalists about musical works include [Kania 2008c, 2012b, Killin 2017](#). For critical discussion of Kania's position, see [Letts 2015](#).) Our apparent references to musical works treat them as convenient fictions. This discourse is useful because it directs us to performance practices and ways of thinking of the underlying goals of performances that are of value. Fictionalism 'is a theory by which one can disclaim unwanted ontological commitments to suspicious or dubious entities, whilst reaping some of the benefits of those very commitments, not through paraphrase but by putting forward statements in a fictionalistic light. So as long as the fictionalist has a claim to the fiction's utility, fictionalism is having one's cake and eating it too' ([Killin 2017, 275](#)).

Problems faced by eliminativism and fictionalism include explaining how we group performances into the relevant classes or sets (especially if some performances are less than well-formed), showing that the attributes of classes or sets can match those we ascribe to



works, and accounting for the importance we attach to the role played by composers. For further criticism, see [D. Davies 2009](#), [Predelli 2009](#), [Letts 2015](#).

Another recently presented position construes works not as classes of performances but as *fusions* of performances ([Caplan and Matheson 2006](#), [Matheson and Caplan 2007](#), [Tillman 2011](#), [Tillman and Spencer 2012](#), [Aliyev 2017](#)). Some versions of the view count only fully faithful performances, while others include scores and recordings. This kind of theory takes musical works to be concrete existents (made up of performances, etc.). Musical works can be created, interacted with, and heard (while abstracta cannot be). Advocates have addressed many of the obvious issues – that performances are intermittent (whereas the work persists), can be simultaneous (i.e., the work can be spatially scattered), can contain wrong notes, and also that a work could have had more or fewer performances.

A similar position is that works are *continuants* that depend on performances and the like without being constituted by them ([Rohrbaugh 2003](#)). And another related position is that works are complex events consisting of networks of causally related performances ([Alward 2004](#)).

The idea that musical works are fusions of performances comes in two versions, according to the account of work-persistence that is adopted. If the work *endures* it is entirely present at all times that it exists, whereas if it *perdures* it has different temporal parts (corresponding to performances). An alternative theory of persistence yields a contrasting thesis in which musical works are spatio-temporal stages mapped by performances ([Moruzzi 2017](#), see also [Edidin 1997](#)). Here the musical work is a stage/performance connected by a privileged relationship (repeatability) to other stages/performances.

These last theories have in common that they are all transferred from the literature on the ontology of material objects and, more specifically, on personal identity and are then applied to musical works. With that in mind, we should perhaps focus on ways in which musical works and people are obviously different. People exist continuously (unless they are treated as purely mental, and then disappear when asleep...), whereas the existence of musical works is very gappy. As well, the same work can be performed at the same time in different places, whereas (short of time travel and fission fictions) people are not multiple in equivalent ways. And under some conditions, more than one musical work can be present in a single performance event ([Davies 2001, 175–81](#)), whereas the presence of one person at a time and place is thought usually to exclude the presence of others. Moreover, we should expect the score or exemplar to play a significant role in explaining the repeatability of musical works, yet with people there is no equivalent of a score-role or of stages that are special in being exemplary. Of course, ontologists might not see these differences as significant and there are ways of tackling some of them ([Caplan and Matheson 2006](#)), but in my view, it is far from intuitively obvious that notions of identity that might work for people are likely to transfer successfully to musical works. For further critical discussion, see [Dodd 2007](#), [Kania 2008d](#), [D. Davies 2018](#).



I turn now to Levinson's account, with which I am generally sympathetic. At first, he suggested that a musical work is a sound/performance means structure as indicated by a composer at a given time (Levinson 1980). Later he replaced "sound/performance means structure" with "performed sound structure" on the grounds that the former wrongly implies both that two antecedently specified things are brought into conjunction and that the performance means structure has the same reality and importance as the sound structure (Levinson 1990a). Following a suggestion from James C. Anderson (1985), Levinson changed the imprecise "indicates" to "makes normative" (Levinson 1990a).

The reference to *indication* (or *making normative*) was to explain how the sound sequence is pulled, so to speak, from the world of abstracta into the actual, temporal world, where it was then tethered to concreta such as the composer and performance means. But the vagueness of this notion has been criticized (Thom 1990, Bender 1993, Alward 2004, Evnine 2009). It seems to me that Levinson provides no way to distinguish work-specifying prescriptive acts of indication made in the role of composer from others that are not work-identifying made by the same person in the role of performer or conductor (S. Davies 2001). The story of work indication has to consider musical practices and conventions governing the finalization of the work's compositions that are absent from Levinson's account, rather than presenting this as a simple act of fiat. (For discussion of how these conventions sometimes go awry or are flouted, see S. Davies 2007.)

Levinson does not rely solely on indicating or making normative to connect the work's sound sequence to concrete, real features of the world. He follows an argument used against traditional aesthetic accounts of art. This argument tries to show that lookalike artworks — ones that are perceptually and hence aesthetically identical — can have different, artistically significant properties as a result of the context in and intentions with which they are made and presented (Danto 1964, Walton 1970). In this vein, Levinson argues that works could share the same sound structure and yet differ in their identities thanks to their context (Levinson 1980, see also Currie 1988). Levinson provides examples of aesthetically significant properties affected both by the general musico-historical setting and by the composer's individual situation. Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) would have been yet more anguished if it had been composed (at the same time) by Richard Strauss. Whereas Mendelssohn's style was original, someone writing in the same style in 1900 would not be. A work could be Liszt-influenced only if written after the relevant compositions of Liszt. Johann Stamitz's "Mannheim rockets" were exciting in the mid-18th Century but would be quaint and funny in works of more recent times. Bartók could not have been satirizing Dmitri Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7 (1941), known as the *Leningrad*, in his *Concerto for Orchestra* (1945) if it had been written in 1939. A composer's work is properly heard in relation to his other compositions and would differ in its artistic properties if his oeuvre did (even if the notes remained the same). Levinson (1990a, 1990b) defends these examples, which are supposed to establish that the composer's identity and performance means are crucial to the musical work's identity, against criticisms presented by Kivy (1988) and others.

I share Levinson's commitment to *ontological contextualism* (S. Davies 2001, 72–86, see also Gracyk 2009) — a work's musico-historical context can affect its properties, including (sometimes) ones relevant to its identity as the work it is (S. Davies 1994a, 1994b). Its relations to styles, genres, period, repertoire, tradition, and composer's oeuvre could all affect the identity of a given composition. That is, the musico-cultural setting at the time of the work's composition might contribute, along with its sound-structure, to its being the work it is. (I do not agree that the work's reception, after it has been created, can alter its identity, however. Compare with Matheson and Caplan 2007. Its significance and social can change, but not its identity.)

Despite holding this view, I do not follow Levinson in regarding its instrumentation as always among a musical work's identifying features, as should be apparent from the discussion of instrumentation earlier. The substitution of an oboe for the clarinet, where none is available, will surely alter some of the work's aesthetic or artistic features, but whether this amounts to a departure from the work's identity depends on the wider context. Even if Mozart preferred the clarinet, it is not plain that he could mandate its inclusion in his Symphony No. 39, K 543 of 1788 (S. Davies 2001, 67–8), though Brahms' adoption of the instrument in a later period makes it a requirement. It is the musical practice that decides, in the end, when a composer's work-identifying wishes become work-specifications. And as regards instrumentation, it was practical, contingent aspects of musical practice — the standardization of instrument types and uniformity in the make-up of the orchestra, alongside the reasonable expectation of high standards of professional musicianship — that, over time, turned the choice of instrumentation from a performance-interpretative option into a work-identifying requirement. Of course, this loss of performance flexibility was far outweighed by the expressive and textural nuance that then could be achieved.

Let me contrast my response to Levinson with one proposed by Henry Deutsch that I have only recently encountered. Deutsch's first objection to Levinson's different-works-with-same-sound-structure arguments is: 'First, it is both possible and natural to interpret the examples as showing at most only that the same work can have different aesthetic or artistic attributes in different contexts' (Deutsch 1991, 214). I agree, if not with respect to all of Levinson's examples but at least in relation to the issues about instrumentation just mentioned. But Deutsch adds further criticisms I do not agree with. 'Secondly, in drawing this conclusion, Levinson is endorsing an extreme and highly improbable version of the doctrine that to fully comprehend and appreciate a work of art one must be intimately acquainted with the personal, historical, and cultural facts surrounding its creation. It is Levinson's view that not only is such information relevant to appreciating the aesthetic qualities of work, it may also be *required* in order to know what work is being performed — even in the rudimentary sense of being able to recognize the work on hearing it for the second, third, or *n*th time' (Deutsch 1991, 214). In fact, I do think that the fullest appreciation of any work is likely to require information about the composer, his oeuvre, the wider musical context, and so on. But I do not see why identifying the work as such needs detailed awareness of every work-constituting feature. If we can recognize works in performances riddled with wrong notes then we can surely recognize them on the basis of their sound-structure alone, even if the work's identity takes in more than this.

Deutsch arrives at this point: 'If the *Leningrad* had not appeared before the time Bartok wrote the *Concerto for Orchestra*, the latter could not bear any but an adventitious relation to the former. It doesn't follow that the latter wouldn't be the *Concerto for Orchestra*' (Deutsch 1991, 215). I agree that this does not follow, but at this stage would turn to musical criticism. Is Bartok's mocking allusion to the banality of Shostakovich's melody a factor in his *Concerto*'s identity? So prominent is the passage and so stylistically anomalous is it in the piece's wider context that it would not make musical sense except as a reference, so there is good reason to doubt that we should consider the identical, hypothetical pre-*Leningrad* and actual post-*Leningrad* Bartok compositions as one and the same. If it is true that, without *The Odyssey*, James Joyce's *Ulysses* is impossible (as maintained in Rohrbaugh 2005, 216), then it looks as if we can equally say, without the *Leningrad*, Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra* is impossible.

Levinson's examples are also supposed to justify his tethering the work's identity to that of its composer. Again, I have disagreed. Two composers with very different styles or working in historically separated musical traditions and contexts would produce different works, even if those works shared the same sound-structure. That is because the two works would have very different artistic properties relative to their context of origin. But two composers sharing very similar styles and working in a shared musical culture might independently write the same, single work. In this regard I compared the young Mozart to one of J. S. Bach's sons, Johann Christian Bach (S. Davies 2001, 83). If experts could not decide which of them composed a given piece, then either of them could have and, despite the statistical improbability, both of them might have done so independently. In this latter case, it would be reasonable to conclude that only one work, not two, had been composed.

This conclusion was anticipated by Deutsch: 'The examples Levinson gives suggest at most that works with the same sound structure would nonetheless appear to have different properties when viewed as situated in widely different musico-historical contexts. This does not imply that two composers could not produce the same work within virtually the same musico-historical context' (Deutsch 1991, 214).

Here it helps to distinguish what Guy Rohrbaugh calls the individuation question — could the work have been written by someone else in this world? — from the modal question about the necessity of authorship — could the work have been written by someone else in a possible world? (Rohrbaugh 2005). Rohrbaugh defends the essentiality of authorship for most works of art, but regards Levinson's treatment, which takes the individuation question to be associated with the modal one, to be unsupported. 'An ontological theory that provided fine individuation of works but allowed authorship to vary counterfactually would be equally supported' (Rohrbaugh 2005, 214). Meanwhile, Robert Stecker thinks that modal intuitions about musical works are liable to vary, making arguments appealing to them indecisive. Musical works 'cannot change in the way physical objects ... do, and it is not clear that they ever undergo a change in intrinsic properties. So there are fewer opportunities for counterfactual thoughts about musical works to have a natural home (Stecker 2009, 375–6). By way of illustrating the clash of

intuitions, Stecker cites the dispute between Levinson (1980) and Gregory Currie (1988) over whether the composer's identity contributes to the musical work's identity.

### My view

In my view, composers do not "indicate" sound structures; instead, they *design* them. I'm not bothered whether this is described as creation or discovery, though I lean toward the former and stress that, if discovery is instead to be the preferred option, what is involved is a very active pursuit of the target that is discovered. This process of design involves discriminating between many similar sound structures and includes bringing possibilities for sound structures into conversation with musical practices and traditions — repertoire, oeuvre, genre, styles (personal and general), instruments and performance practices, and notational conventions. The relations in which the composer's specification stands to these matters that lie beyond the work's boundaries affect the work's contents and, in some cases, its identity-conferring features. To take just one obvious example, Musical works are often quote, allude to, pay homage to, are influenced by other musical works, styles, or genres and this can be relevant to their being the works that they are. The work is not some abstract thing but, rather, a complex generated out of real-world relations and instructions. Musical works (for performance) are communicated through instructions addressed to performers. The injunction is: If you would play my work, do thus and so. "Thus and so" presuppose and make sense only against the background of performance practice, instrumental options, notational conventions, etc..

A simple analogy might make matters clearer. Knitting patterns are instructions for the making of such items as sweaters. Sweaters, and the designs they instantiate, include patterns, but are not abstracta. A sweater design (such as Fair Isle) might be presented by appropriate instructions or via an exemplar. Typical knitting patterns include symbols such as:

: (blank) knit stitch (K) on right side; purl on wrong side

-: purl (P) on right side; knit on wrong side

o: yarn over (YO)

\: slip, slip, knit (ssk) on right side; slip, slip, purl (ssp) on wrong side

/: knit 2 together (k2tog) on right side; purl 2 together (p2tog) on wrong side

To execute such instructions, the knitter needs to know what knit and purl stitches are, which side is "right" and which "wrong," and so on. Such instructions make sense only against the background of a clothing world, practices of ornamentation, wool production and dyeing, technical notions such as "crimp" and "yarn," different gauges and types of needles, and so on. The pattern might leave color choice entirely to the knitter, or might offer non-mandatory recommendations about this, or might specify color details precisely and in the expectation that they will be followed. Typically, the pattern can be altered to accommodate such local factors as the size of the intended wearer. Because they are so heavily linked to the practices and practicalities that give point to their existence, it would be silly to think of specific sweater designs as abstract eternalities.<sup>1</sup>

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Stephen Davies,  
University of Auckland.

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