



Weblogmusic: A Performance Platform for Ensembles of Individually Time-Shifted Improvisers

Jeffrey M. Morris

Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas, USA
morris@tamu.edu

Abstract

Weblogmusic is a web-based venue for time-shifted improvising ensembles. By embracing the asynchronously created, glitch-prone nature of internet fora, the project allows each performance to be unique in the viewer's browser, with unpredictable network latency disrupting cause and effect in ensemble interactions. The project brings focus to extramusical elements including presence, authenticity, and causality as well as the non-transparent effects of mediatization, allowing the audience to reflect on the unique properties of live performance and the unique properties that emerge from mediated performance.

Keywords

Aesthetics, glitch, improvisation, interdisciplinary, mediation, music, telepresence, web

Introduction

While modern citizens are busy keeping up with communications technology, they are missing out on many human elements in communication like presence and authenticity. While some say we will get used to life mediated by screens and some prefer to wait for technology to get fast enough so we can recreate some of those human elements, there is value for artists in exploring the expressive potential of liveness as a unique dimension in a performance. Aesthetic concepts are established to show what is lost when a performance is mediated, what it gains from the of mediatization, and how mediated, once-live events can establish a new kind of authenticity within a performance, even if their authenticity is lost. A number of web-based mediated performances are analyzed to demonstrate the nature of creating performances for mediated environments.

Substance in Live and Mediated Performance

Reflecting on some innovative compositions of the mid-twentieth century, author and theorist Umberto Eco revealed a useful tool for finding the value of such works. Speaking of "open" works (whether they are chance-based or simply subject to many interpretations), Eco says, "the form of the work of art gains its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood." (Eco 1989, p. 3)

Similarly, philosopher Stephen Davies differentiates between compositions that are *ontologically thin* such as lead sheets (only specifying a melody and chord changes) and compositions that are *ontologically thick*, ones that are fully scored in detail (Davies 2001, p. 180). I have found it useful to evaluate works on a continuum of *substance* between the ontologically thin and thick (Morris 2009) and to extend this model farther to accept that part of the substance of a performance may lie outside its purely content, even in the case of performances we consider to be purely musical (Morris 2013).

This approach can be used to discuss works like John Cage's *4'33"* (1960), in which the score merely instructs the performer to be silent, and many of Anton Webern's compositions, known for their brevity. Neither can be fairly evaluated by the number of notes it contains, whereas one might use duration as one measure of substance in music by Mahler or Wagner. For Cage, one might find substance in the clever approach of turning a mirror on the audience for all its sonic content or in the specialness of witnessing one live performance, knowing there will never be another exactly like it. For Webern, one might appreciate its reserved, deliberate textures and articulations. Great substance can be found in Webern's pitch structures if one inspects them. *Summary:* There is more to a musical performance than the notes we hear.

Stage Presence. Traditional musical instruments require the performer to *move* in order to play them, and the ways in which they move communicate much to the audience, demonstrating the difficulty of a passage or modeling how the audience should feel during a passage. The cello creates a lively intermedial counterpoint between the actions seen and the notes heard. When the bow moves horizontally, we hear notes. When the left hand moves toward the bridge, the notes we hear are higher overall. However, these relationships are not linear as they are on a keyboard instrument. The speed of the bow controls loudness, and the portion of the bow used at any time affects tone, but the most visually obvious parameter, the direction of the bow's movement, is not as significant. While the left hand's position shifts most pitches in a general way, it is still common for pitches to go down as the hand stays still or moves closer to the bridge, as the player is switching to a lower string or an open string. This visual portion of the substance of any traditional performance comes

naturally and often does most of the work to evoke a satisfying stage presence.

In computer-based performances, however, this portion of the substance is absent unless it is purposely built into a performance. When one keystroke can trigger any number of sounds and that keystroke can be so subtle a movement that it goes unnoticed, or if it is hidden behind a computer display, a live electronic performance can be as awkward as a composer sitting on stage during his own acousmatic composition. Technology-based performance begins with a deficiency of substance manifest in stage presence.

An increasing number of technology-based performances are making efforts to reconstruct this obviousness of causality (Energy). While making one-to-one relationships between actions and results clear may seem to be an obvious solution, it still lacks the subtle and complex counterpoint of the cello performance, for example. *Summary:* The nature of the instrument and the performance situation are (once-given) standard dimensions to build substance in a performance.

Mediated Presence. Philip Auslander argues that the direct and mediated (e.g., Jumbotron) versions of a live performance are of equal value to modern audiences (Auslander 1999). Further, Julio d'Escrivàn argues that audiences will become accustomed to live performances by unmoving laptop performers, counting them as equal to fixed media acousmatic music without missing any of the traditional elements of stage presence (d'Escrivàn 2006), suggesting that we will eventually value and regard live and recorded performance as the same in nature.

However, Peggy Phelan has suggested,

To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's becoming... becomes itself through disappearance. (Phelan 1993, p. 146)

Elements like stage presence are lost when they are mediated by technology. Some music survives mediation better than others, which is probably one reason why telephone ring tones quoting Mozart are more common than ones quoting Varèse. Pitch and rhythm carry a larger portion of substance in Mozart's music, and those parameters survive mediation through small monophonic speakers tucked away in pockets better than the timbre and other cues of vastness. However, both suffer a loss, and the more faithfully an element *can* be reproduced, the less substance it probably carries.

Further, mediation is not transparent. Besides sacrificing some content, it imposes artifacts that we can see and hear. Jean Baudrillard has argued that when live events are mediated by close-up screens, they become *hyperreal* (Baudrillard 1981): they can be experienced, enhanced, and manipulated beyond the limits of real experience, and this added value simultaneously makes the mediated version the preferred version of reality and erodes our sense of authenticity in the events, because we know the mediated version is disconnected from reality. For example, visual elements superimposed on the field during a sports broadcast provide rich information about the event, but they may make it feel like a

video game without real human players. When an event has lost certain elements and gained others through the mediation process, Baudrillard says the event has been *mediatized*. *Summary:* Some elements are lost through mediation; others are gained. Some forms of music suffer more than others, depending on where the substance lies.

YouTube Symphonies A number of artistic projects have used non-real-time video streams in a variety of ways. While one of them actually bears the name YouTube Symphony Orchestra, the existence of other unique works based on non-real-time video streams suggests that the term *YouTube symphony* might be used to indicate their genre. The original YouTube Symphony Orchestra project culminated in a traditional orchestral performance in Carnegie Hall directed by Michael Tilson Thomas; the unique factor was that auditions were submitted via YouTube and evaluated by YouTube users.

For other projects, the final performance is "born digital" (that is, the genesis of the fully realized performance is ultimately made possible within a digital realm), and it remains there. *In Bb* (Solomon), a play on Terry Riley's *In C* (1964), invited performers to submit videos through YouTube, playing freely in the key of B-flat major, avoiding metric patterns and dense textures, and optionally playing along with a provided audio track for inspiration. In performance, the viewer clicks to play any videos at will, starting at any time, with any number of them playing at once. In contrast, *Thru-You* is an album of songs created from videos that were already on YouTube, not created for this project (Kutiman). The artist cleverly edited and mixed the solo videos into tightly-produced ensembles. The result is not malleable or influenced by the viewer like *In B-Flat*. Even in the case of the YouTube Symphony Orchestra, because of YouTube's role in the process and because it sponsored the whole project, the process generated great amounts of video material, allowing the full performance to be recreated in a fixed-media "mashup" using several original audition videos.

These works highlight the limitations of this form of mediation (non-real-time solo videos) and some sacrifices that can be made to overcome them. The YouTube Symphony project only used the media to substitute for live auditions, and then the resulting videos became material for future fixed-media projects. The composer, conductor, and later the video editor retained full control. *In Bb* uses the video content directly in the final product, but the musical must avoid meter or density, in order to avoid cacophony. Pads and drones add up nicely especially if they share a tonal center, but rhythmic coordination, form, expressive changes in intensity, and harmonic shifts are all given up: most of the things that make for memorable moments in a performance. The composer allowed freedom to performers but only within a narrow, safe range. While *Thru-You* delivers a satisfying "born digital" result, this editor has also taken full control. The result, while entertaining, is the same every time. It is now fixed media void of liveness. Other approaches that allow for user interaction and rhythmic coordination resort to looping step sequencers, so users may specify what happens during the *next* cycle, sac-

rificing expression, interaction, and variety as a result. *Summary:* There is rich potential for mediated performance as a genre, without merely being a substitute for unmediated performance. However, it involves embracing the effects of mediatization and strategic sacrifices.

Weblogmusic

Weblogmusic (<http://weblogmusic.org>) is a web-based platform for born-digital performances by improvising ensembles, using the asynchronous and episodic but still conversational structure of a weblog (“blog”) to shape the performance process. The project contains a number of *mixes*, each of which is a unique performance realized in a web browser window. Each mix contains several *tracks*, each containing one performer’s contribution. In performance, four tracks are randomly selected from within the given mix and are played in tandem, forming a quartet ensemble. Each performance functions both as a live performance and as a pedagogical tool for improvisation, as the viewer is welcome to play along with the improvising ensemble.

Instead of attempting to overcome the limitations of this heavily mediatized form, trying to sweep its artifacts out of view, Weblogmusic embraces the rigid and sometimes faltering properties of the mediation as a compositional element. Unpredictability in loading times for each video and glitches in playback due to fluctuating data bandwidth contribute to make each performance unique, even if the same four tracks happen to be selected for two different performances. The rigidness of asynchronous collaboration, the reshuffling caused by network glitches, and the fact that no one can tell which video came first all work together to playfully challenge our sense of causality and authenticity.

It embodies a value of promoting awareness of mediatization in our human encounters instead of pretending that communication only consists of notes/words on a page. It also promotes a value of letting human behaviors find their own ways to “grow” within these synthetic structures, for we may discover new aspects of ourselves and our communications.

Structure and Process Weblogmusic uses Wordpress for its basic episodic structure and YouTube as a streaming server. This removes significant bandwidth and storage demands from Weblogmusic’s own server and eliminates the need for custom-coded in-browser video recording and transcoding software. It does require that contributors manually upload their videos to YouTube, but YouTube’s interface for this is well polished and need not be reproduced just for this application.

Six musicians were originally invited to initiate signature mixes (by contributing the first track for the mix) and to contribute additional tracks to each others’ signature mixes. Although the first track may not always be heard in a performance of a mix, its influence is manifest in all future tracks, because they are either direct responses to the first track or responses to those responses to the first track. In this way it is the foundation or perhaps the DNA of that mix, making it unique.

When recording each additional track, the performer sees and hears what any viewer would see and hear: a random selection of previously recorded tracks from that mix (sharing the same root inspiration), and the performer records himself or herself playing new material as the other tracks play (in headphones, for the sake of isolating each track as it is recorded). While recording a track, the performance is subject to the same unpredictable loading order, delays, and other glitches as any viewer would see, and those unpredictable phenomena may take a role in shaping the track being recorded, which may in turn influence future tracks. For example, if one track is briefly paused (due to faltering network speed) during a rhythmic motive, that rhythm has been transformed in an unexpected way, and the performer who is recording at the time may choose to echo that motive as he or she heard it, causing the temporary glitch to take an active role in transforming musical material.

Aesthetics Weblogmusic captures the intermediality of performance (i.e., the visual stage presence elements in addition to musical sounds) by juxtaposing camera angles of each performer in his or her own “natural habitat” or at least in a setting depicting their personal style or mood. Each is on his or her own “stage” and those stages are brought together into this new venue.

The performances play on the viewer’s sense of causality and authenticity. Not only is it impossible to determine which elements occurred first and evoked other tracks to respond, but there is no official, authoritative version of the performance. Each track a performer records is a “fork” in the evolution of the mix, and it will later be recombined with tracks that were responding to tracks in different forks. It is meaningless to attempt to see a performance that is free of network quirks, because they are a welcome part of the composed environment, and similar quirks have likely interfered with the creation of the tracks that are played. Further, there is no “master copy:” one could play all tracks of one mix simultaneously, but this is a reality that has never existed. It is the sum of all intertwined forks, parallel pedigrees of causality. The only authoritative performance is the one in the viewer’s web browser in the moment it is being watched, even though the viewer knows that it is only a subset of all tracks recorded, causality can only be guessed, and network glitches are interfering with its creation and delivery. This conundrum of authenticity is native to the world of mediated performance. Whereas we see elements of authentic human presence lost through mediation, in the right environments, these mediated materials can gain a new kind of authenticity, as the mediated content plays a dynamic role in the performance as if they were original content created for that purpose.

Conclusions Weblogmusic juxtaposes the loss of the traditional trappings of concert-going with the creation of new texts, different with each viewing. While the “aura” of authenticity accompanying a live performance is lost through its mediation (recording and playback), new value emerges as we notice—or sometimes are fooled by—coincidences that appear like planning or live interaction among the perform-

ers. This interchange of “liveness” value allows audiences to reflect both on the value of live performance and the usually-transparent effects of mediated communications.

This interchange brings attention to the medium itself as audiences realize that the performers are not live; only the medium is “performing” in the moment. Glitches, stalls, and unpredictable unsynchronization thwart our ability to tell cause from effect, and when we are sometimes fooled to perceive interaction or causality, they allow us to reflect on what properties actually evoke those assumptions in our minds. As the site continues to populate, performers in all time-based disciplines will be invited to join the collaboration. Instead of attempting to create technology that makes musical synchronization feasible among performers, Weblogmusic embraces and brings focus to the dis/reconnection of web-mediated communications and the glitches and unpredictability of media channels.

Through performances like the ones discussed here, I am hopeful that humans will cultivate a sensitivity to the human elements that are lost in mediation, lest we forget how to be human by the time technology solves all our problems. Human values of presence and authenticity can allow us to find ways to be human *despite* the mediation of so many screens between us. In environments like Weblogmusic, performers are finding ways to be expressive and human by embracing these quirks, remembering our values of human connection, and discovering new ways to build creative works that are native to these synthetic worlds, instead of accepting them complacently as substitutes for real human connection.

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Author Biography

Jeff Morris is a composer, performer, and director of the PerfTech program at Texas A&M University (USA). He creates instruments and performance situations that allow audiences to consider the impact of techno-mediation on the human experience: presence, authenticity, and the passing of time. Often, this involves novel sounds, ways of moving on stage to play an instrument, and ways of building a musical performances. He uses performance to ask, “What does it mean to be human in the twenty-first century?” Morris has presented works in the Milano Triennale museum, Onassis Cultural Center (Athens), Austin Museum of Art (Texas), Flea Theater (New York City), and the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library and Museum (Texas). He also curates the Fresh Minds Festival of audiovisual art.

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