

Two Kinds of “Bad” Musical Performance: Musical and Moral Mistakes

Justin London

ABSTRACT

There are many ways in which a musical performance can be “bad,” but here the focus is on two: those performances that make you laugh, and those that make you angry. These forms of musical badness, however, are not primarily compositional deficits, but either (a) that the performer simply cannot competently deliver the music to their audience, inducing laughter, or (b) that the performer exhibits some form of disrespect, provoking anger. Such laughter or anger stems from failure of the expected relationship between a performer and their audience, that is, a social failure. After surveying a range of musical faults, the article examines the causes of laughter in general and in relation to some of examples of risible “bad” music. Similarly, the causes of social and moral anger in general are examined, and several cases of anger-inducing musical performances are presented. The article concludes with a consideration of the broader implications of these responses to “bad” music for theories of emotional expression in music, the relationship between aesthetic and moral judgments, and the centrality of musical performances as opposed to works in discussions of musical expression and value.

I. INTRODUCTION: TWO CASES OF OUT-OF-TUNE SINGING

Florence Foster Jenkins (1868–1944) has been described as “the world’s worst opera singer” (Pile 2011, 115). Her musical story has recently been retold in an eponymous 2016 biopic starring Meryl Streep, and promotional materials for the movie describe Jenkins as having a “hilariously awful voice.” A recording of Jenkins’s singing was released in 1954 on a 10-inch LP mockingly titled *The Glory (???) of the Human Voice* (1962 re-issue RCA LM-2597). Her performance of Mozart’s “Queen of the Night” aria (“Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen”) from *Die Zauberflöte* is representative of her many vocal faults: incomprehensible lyrics, melodic and rhythmic reinvention, and above all, extremely poor intonation. Jenkins can at times hit the notes, including the high ones, but mostly she does not. And for a singer, the ability to sing in tune is *the* bedrock skill; indeed, a consistent inability to sing in tune is a marker for amusia (“tone deafness”; see Vuvan et al. 2018). Yet many listeners are drawn to Jenkins and her performances; the YouTube recording of her “The Queen of the Night” performance had 1,376,238 views as of July 2020. Florence Foster Jenkins’s performances can be viewed as paradigmatic instances of “bad music” that we nonetheless appreciate (if that is the right word) for its comic value.¹

Now imagine a different performance by Florence Foster Jenkins, a version of “Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen” in which, thanks to Auto-Tune’s pitch correction algorithm, she now seems to hit all the notes (even the high F above high C). Presume that we would initially accept that version as a credible performance of a notoriously difficult coloratura aria. If we then were to hear the track with the Auto-Tune removed—that is, the original track—how would we then react to it? Here I believe the response would not be amusement and laughter, though there could still be a comic aspect to the revealed performance. Rather, we are likely to regard the performance negatively, and we are also

likely to have an emotional response, one best described as a kind of anger, as we would have found the auto-tuned version to be misleading. In presenting Jenkins with Auto-Tune we are led to believe she is something she is not, a competent coloratura soprano.

As Simon Frith has observed “‘bad music’ describes ... an *emotional* [emphasis added] not an ideological response” (2004, 30). Throughout our musical lives we encounter many pieces and performances whose flaws are apparent—songs with over repetitive melodies, banal lyrics, performances that are rhythmically sloppy or out of tune, and so forth. These are all examples of musical deficits, but we often do not respond with anger, contempt, or in any other emotional way. There is a distinction, then, between flawed music and flawed performances, versus music and performances that are “bad.” Discerning the difference between “flawed” versus “bad” performances involves grasping the difference between the causes of our response versus objects of our response, a distinction noted by Kendall Walton (1993) in his discussion of musical humor. While the causes of our response may be cracked notes in the performance, the object of our response is the performer herself or himself, and not the individual notes nor the aria she or she is attempting to sing.²

Consider again some performances of out-of-tune singing, perhaps by a conservatory student first learning to perform the “Queen of the Night Aria.” Initially the student fails to sing some of the notes in tune as their upper register is still developing and the piece is still not fully learned; those cracked notes would be heard as flawed and are not likely to give rise to either laughter or anger. Such defects are to be expected in a student’s initial attempts at singing this difficult aria. Now, if the student never is able to develop their upper register, and if they nonetheless present themselves as a coloratura soprano, subsequent public performances of the aria are likely to be regarded as “bad” rather than simply flawed. For now the cracked notes may occasion laughter (al à Florence Foster Jenkins) or perhaps annoyance or anger (if we regard the performance as self-indulgent, for example). The difference between “flawed” versus “bad” is revealed by the absence or presence of an emotional response to the musical shortcomings one hears, as well as the social underpinnings of that response.

Florence Foster Jenkin’s versions of the “Queen of the Night” aria described above are representative of two kinds of “bad” musical performances, each with its telltale affective response: those that make you laugh, and those that make you angry. In this article, I investigate these two categories of musical fault, as they provide a window into our affective responses to and aesthetic judgments of music more generally. Rather than starting with a consideration of musical properties, and then hypothesizing or observing the kinds of responses they engender (both affective and evaluative), I will start with the laughter and anger, and attempted to work backwards to their musical and (especially) social causes. I start with an overview of the varieties of “bad” musical performances that may induce laughter or anger, following a discussion by Frith. It is shown that risible performances are tied to various kinds of musical incompetence, and our response is socially grounded involving the status of the laugher (audience) to the laughee (performer); it is an example of the superiority theory of humor and social hierarchy regulation. Performances that provoke anger, by contrast, are tied to a range of socially grounded moral offenses, all of which are varieties of disrespect. This includes misrepresentation (the Auto-Tune problem), inauthenticity, self-indulgence, and discourteousness. I conclude with some thoughts on the broader implications of our laughter and anger responses to “bad” music for theories of emotional expression in music, the relation between aesthetic judgments and moral judgments, and central importance of musical performances, rather than musical works, in discussions of musical expression and value.

II. VARIETIES OF MUSICAL BADNESS

In his essay “What is Bad Music?” Simon Frith surveys the many ways in which music can be said to be bad, but in the end notes that “there is no such *thing* as bad music”: there is only music which is negatively assessed relative to some context (2004, 19). In part this is because *de gustibus non est disputandum*, but also because, as Frith notes, even for a single listener the same music may be good in one context and bad in another. Over the course of his chapter Frith surveys the various contexts

in which various listeners make their musical appraisals—the various opportunities for music to “go bad.” Frith (2004) lists the following classes of musical badness:

1. *The Ridiculously Bad*: music that is incompetent, stupid, banal, over-the-top sentimental, or generically confused. These are all species of incompetence, which may be in the composition or the performance of the work.
2. *The Technically Bad*: Music that has defects in its composition or production (or both), which includes incompetent handling of basic musical materials, such as poor rhythm, wandering chord progressions, incoherent lyrics, and so forth. This also includes music which is unoriginal or overly formulaic (including outright plagiarism).
3. *The Motivationally Bad*: music which (putatively) makes you do bad things, as in the examples of Marilyn Manson, Judas Priest, AC/DC, and the Beatles (i.e., Charles Manson and the song “Helter Skelter”), all of whom were criticized for promoting violent antisocial or criminal activity.
4. *The Offensively Bad*: music which overtly traffics in overtly racist, sexist, misogynistic, and other material. Examples range from the antisemitism in Bach’s “St. John Passion” (see Taruskin 1995, Marissen 1998) to the misogyny in Eminem’s *The Marshall Mathers LP*.
5. *Guild Violations*: music which offends musicians for failing to meet community standards. This category also includes musicians who are lazy as composers or performers (“phoning it in”), or who are self-indulgent.
6. *Broader Community Violations*: music which offends nonmusician listeners in a manner similar to the guild violations noted above. This includes cases of “selling out” (e.g., Bob Dylan, infamously using an electric guitar at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965), a performer who is deemed inauthentic relative to a given genre, a musician who gives only a cursory performance at a concert, or a musician misrepresents their abilities as a performer to the audience (e.g., Auto-Tune).
7. *Music One Just Does Not Like*: here “bad” is simply a placeholder for preference, rather than a true appraisal.

Doubtless one could carve up the landscape of musical badness in other ways, but Frith’s surveyance gives us a good view of the terrain of musical badness. The present article will focus on categories (1), (4), and (6), that is, the ridiculous and the offensive. Of course, these two (and other) types are not mutually exclusive, but my interest in these particular kinds of musical badness is twofold. First, I would posit that these two types comprise most nonmusician listeners’ ascriptions of musical badness. Second, these two types tend to provoke specific affective responses—laughter and anger, respectively—in both musicians and nonmusicians alike, and those responses, I will argue, are important aspects of our evaluative judgments. The other categories tend not to give rise to the same sorts of emotional reactions, which is both significant in terms of what it may tell us about the varieties of musical badness, but also as to which kinds of musical badness matter most to most listeners.

III. LAUGHTER, AND MUSIC THAT MAKES YOU LAUGH

Most approaches to laughter focus upon jokes and humor, with the presumption that we laugh because we find something to be funny (e.g., Morreall 2020). Robert Provine (2000) has written extensively about the social aspects of laughter, including the influence of sex and gender, social status, and conversational setting on laughter, as well as the many things that trigger laughter, including tickling, social contagion, and conversational interjections. In fact, most of our laughter is *not* in response to jokes (see Provine 2000). Provine also found that laughter is a highly social response; his initial forays into studying laughter in a laboratory setting simply did not work, for while one can laugh alone, we mostly laugh in the presence of others (see also Weems 2014 and remarks below on live vs. mediated performances).

Like many other emotional displays, laughter plays an important role in the regulation of interactions between members of a social species. Adrienne Wood and Paula Niedenthal (2018) claim that laughter’s overarching function, evolutionarily rooted in laughter as a signal of play among primate

conspicuous, is to convey harmless intentions and diffuse social tensions. They note three distinct social functions accomplished by human laughter:

- To acknowledge and reward the behavior of others and reinforce ongoing interactions;
- To ease social tensions and signal affiliation (i.e., a lack of threat);
- To negotiate status and correct undesirable behavior.

Wood and Niedenthal note that social laughter “uses laughter’s basic tension-easing effect to cushion a message of superiority or punishment” (2018, 4; see also Szameitat et al. 2013). While it is true that laughter is an alternative to physical confrontation and can work in the positive ways noted above, the social costs of being laughed at, especially by a group in a public setting, may be considerable, and thus far from harmless.

While some occasions for musical laughter are due to the comedic skill of a composer (Peter Schickele as “P.D.Q. Bach”) or performer (Victor Borge)—skills we appreciate, admire, and applaud—in the case of laughably “bad” music, it is the absence of musical skill and taste that causes our laughter. Florence Foster Jenkins’s off-key renditions of opera arias are a paradigmatic example, along with The Shaggs’s *Philosophy of the World*, Rebecca Black’s “Friday,” and many other staples of the “Worst Song of All Time” lists that are rife on the internet.³ These pieces are also the subject of books and of radio and internet broadcasts, such as Jim Nayder’s *The Annoying Music Show*, which ran on Chicago Public Radio from 1996–2013, and Irwin Chusid’s shows, *The Atrocious Music Hour* and *The Incorrect Music Hour*, which have been broadcast on WFMU, New York since 1975. Chusid claims to be a champion of outsider music, analogous to outsider art (Cardinal 1972), including his project “Songs in the Key of Z” (book published in 2000, Chicago Review Press; with two companion CDs published in 2002). However, as the titles of Chusid’s radio shows make clear, as well as the packaging and marketing of his book and CDs, for many listeners the humorousness of the music was the intended draw, rather than the originality or non-conformity for which outsider art has been valued. These forms of “bad music” would thus seem to be textbook examples of the superiority theory of humor (Morreall 2020), as well as laughter as a form of social regulation as described by Wood and Niedenthal (2018). We are, alas, laughing at rather than laughing *with* the performer in these instances, and our laughter is a form of derision. It is thus not as innocent as Wood and Niedenthal make it out to be, given the harrowing effect it is likely to have on the poor performer.

IV. MUSIC THAT MAKES YOU ANGRY

IV.A. Anger in a Social/Moral Context

Just as many things can make us laugh, many things can make us angry. Mostly broadly, there are two distinct forms of anger: anger I feel because I myself have been injured or wronged in some way, and anger I feel because some other person or group (including groups to which I myself belong) has been wronged in some way. This second form of anger has been regarded as one of the “moral” emotions:

Those emotions that are linked to the interests or welfare of either society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent . . . [as] Homo sapiens, far more than any other animal, appears to devote a considerable portion of its emotional life to reacting to social events that do not directly affect the self. (Haidt 2003, 853)

The moral emotions include disgust, shame, anger, contempt, embarrassment, and guilt, as well as empathy and sympathy, compassion, gratitude, and esteem. Jesse J. Prinz (2010) has noted that the moral emotions may not be a special class of emotions per se, but rather forms of other emotions (e.g., anger and disgust) occurring in a moral context that typically involves the welfare of others as well as oneself. Prinz also notes that emotional and affective responses “[motivate] moral behavior,” (520) and that “when we come to regard something as morally good or bad, we have characteristic emotional reactions” (522). The kinds of behaviors moral emotions motivate are above all social be-

haviors, and so like laughter, moral anger (which might also be called social anger) occurs in social contexts involving at least two people.

Moral anger is perhaps the most under-rated moral emotion (see [Haidt 2003](#), 856), as anger, one of the “basic emotions,” is typically studied in its simplest forms and contexts, rather than in the richer and messier social contexts in which it often arises.⁴ While simple anger is often characterized as an individual response to goal blockage or other frustration, anger in social settings is more diffuse, as it involves empathy for others as well as an indirect sense of harm. Social or moral anger is useful in a social species that can both take note of who maintains or violates of social norms and communicate that information to conspecifics:

Language and highly developed social-cognitive abilities allow human beings to keep track of the reputations of hundreds of other individuals . . . people work together to catch cheaters, liars, hypocrites, and others who are trying to fake the appearance of being reliable interaction partners. Human beings, then, live in a rich moral world of reputations and third-party concerns. We care what people do to each other, and we readily develop negative feelings toward individuals with whom we have never interacted. ([Haidt 2003](#), 855–6)

Social anger is closely related to contempt. Prinz regards contempt as an amalgam of anger and disgust, and “contempt also exhibits a kind of directionality. We look down on those for whom we have contempt. This suggests that contempt may also be related to emotions that regulate social status hierarchies” ([Prinz 2010](#), 526).

IV.B Auto-Tune and Other Forms of Musical Misrepresentation

The German “singing” duo Milli Vanilli (Fab Morvan and Rob Pilatus) won the Grammy award for Best New Artist in 1990, and they were a very popular music act of the late 1980s and early 1990s. But there was one problem: they did not actually sing any of their songs. Rather, they were a lip-syncing act, and their vocal tracks were performed by other musicians. When this became known the Grammy Foundation rescinded their award, and their career fizzled. Yet many other artists are known to lip-sync (also known as “tracking,” that is, using a backing vocal track in a live performance) when they perform, especially if their performance involves elaborate dancing and stage routines. Brittany Spears, Mariah Carey, Justin Bieber, and Whitney Houston all have come under scrutiny for this practice.

The use of Auto-Tune, however, is a different issue. It is one thing to be a competent singers who, for practical reasons play a recordings of themselves singing while they are occupied with an athletic dance routine (e.g., Brittany Spears, Janet Jackson); it is something else to use technical assistance to produce a performance that one cannot do otherwise. A quick internet search for “Who Uses Auto-Tune” or “Auto-Tune Fails” reveals a set of often discussed singers (e.g., Taylor Swift, Selena Gomez, Rhianna, Katy Perry, Lana Del Rey, Jennifer Lopez, Ke\$ha)⁵, as well as impassioned debate over their musical abilities. Clearly, the use of Auto-Tune is regarded as a form of musical misrepresentation by some listeners.

Jeanette [Bicknell \(2015\)](#) brings a nuanced perspective to this debate. She notes that nobody sings perfectly in tune all the time—even the best singers have off days—and yet everyone wants to hear a singer at their best in concert. So, the question is not a simple judgment on the acceptability of Auto-Tune, but rather “what rate of being off-pitch is acceptable?” ([Bicknell 2015](#), 76), which can be extended to “what amount of technological assistance is acceptable?” Before the advent of auto-tune singers already made use of many aids in live performance, above all amplification, as well as reverb, compression, and equalization—all of which alter the “true” sound of the singer’s voice. These technologies are accepted as fair and appropriate by concert goers, who appreciate the challenges of projecting a singer’s voice into a gargantuan hall, stadium, or other venue. At some point, however, excessive use of these assistive audio technologies—and most especially Auto-Tune—is no longer acceptable, as they lead to a misrepresentation of the singer’s vocal abilities and indeed, their very identity ([Bicknell 2015](#), 71–9).

Denis Dutton also addresses misrepresentation in his article on “Artistic Crimes” (1979), which focused mainly on the problem of forgeries in painting. Dutton includes a hypothetical example of a

recording of Liszt’s virtuosic *Transcendental Etudes*, recorded at a slow tempo and then subsequently sped up through studio trickery. Dutton notes that any admiration we might have for the pianist’s virtuosic performance would evaporate once we learned how such a recording was made. David Davies (2019) notes we would have similar misgivings were we to find out that Keith Jarrett’s famous 1975 *Köln Concert*, rather than being improvised (as advertised), was in fact carefully composed and rehearsed beforehand by Jarrett. Thus, the use of Auto-Tune in live performance, gimmickry in the recording studio, and faux improvisation, are problematic because they enable the misrepresentation of essential musical skills—intonation for a singer, facile technique for an instrumentalist, improvisatory imagination for a jazz musician. In attending to a performance, we are not only invested in the appreciation of the works performed, but also in the appreciation of performers, whose talent and skills bring those works to life. In many cases, the appreciation of the latter far exceeds the former, as when a talented and empathetic performer gives a nuanced and moving performance of a modest musical work.

IV.C. Inauthenticity, Undeserved Praise, and Self-Indulgence: The Case of Kenny G.

Kenneth Gorlick, better known as by his stage name Kenny G, is both the most popular and the most derided “jazz” musician of our time. He has sold over seventy-five million records, while at the same time has been extensively criticized by many jazz musicians and critics, most notably by guitarist Pat Metheny. In a widely circulated blog post, Metheny begins by criticizing Gorlick’s musical ability:

He had major rhythmic problems and his harmonic and melodic vocabulary was extremely limited, mostly to pentatonic based and blues-lick derived patterns, and he basically exhibited only a rudimentary understanding of how to function as a professional soloist in an ensemble. . . . But he did show a knack for connecting to the basest impulses of the large crowd by deploying his two or three most effective licks (holding long notes and playing fast runs - never mind that there were lots of harmonic clams in them) at the key moments to elicit a powerful crowd reaction (over and over again). The other main thing I noticed was that he also, as he does to this day, played horribly out of tune - consistently sharp. (Metheny 2000)

Metheny then notes that while the kind of “smooth jazz” Gorlick plays is not really jazz at all, he can live with that—though he also notes that Gorlick would not fare well in comparison with better players in the genre like Grover Washington Jr. or David Sanborn. Metheny’s most pointed criticism, however, is about Gorlick over dubbing himself into Louis Armstrong’s “What a Wonderful World”:

But when Kenny G decided that it was appropriate for him to defile the music of the man who is probably the greatest jazz musician that has ever lived by spewing his lame-ass, jive, pseudo bluesy, out-of-tune, noodling, wimped out, fucked up playing all over one of the great Louis’s tracks (even one of his lesser ones), he did something that I would not have imagined possible. He, in one move, through his unbelievably pretentious and calloused musical decision to embark on this most cynical of musical paths, shit all over the graves of all the musicians past and present who have risked their lives by going out there on the road for years and years developing their own music. (Metheny 2000)

Gorlick’s sins, according to Metheny, are threefold: his music is *inauthentic* (i.e., it is not really jazz), he has received *undeserved praise and rewards* (i.e., he is a hack but his huge audience mistakenly thinks he is talented), and he is *self-indulgent*. While distinct, these three sins are not mutually exclusive.

Gorlick is *inauthentic* because he does not stand in the right relation to the musical tradition in which he works. He is not a serious student of jazz practice (e.g., his limited capacity for improvisation) nor history, as when Gorlick erroneously claimed that Charlie Parker was nicknamed “Bird” because he often “chirped” notes (see Washburne 2004, 126–7).⁶ Most of all, his subgenre of “smooth jazz,” is not authentic jazz at all, as it lacks essential qualities of jazz, most notably an engagement with the canon of jazz standards and an approach to improvisation that possesses imagination and taste. Washburne notes that “smooth” jazz is often ignored in standard jazz histories, and that when jazz writers and magazines do deign to discuss Gorlick and smooth jazz, “editors feel compelled to write apologetic disclaimers, something that is not typically done for other subjects” (2004, 125).

Intimately related to the problem of inauthenticity is the *undeserved esteem* and praise given to Gorlick. Implicit in Metheny's critique is the presumption that smooth jazz is a more limited genre, one that does not require the technique, knowledge, and taste that mainstream jazz requires. Gorlick is nonetheless able to use these limited resources ("limited harmonic vocabulary" and overuse of "two or three licks") to "connect to the basest impulses of the large crowd"—and thus mislead his audience as to his musical abilities. Metheny also presumes that Gorlick should be aware of his musical limitations, but instead promotes himself as a saxophone virtuoso on the same level as Charlie Parker, Lester Young, John Coltrane, or Paul Desmond. Clearly for Metheny and others, Gorlick is not in this club.

While Gorlick's inauthenticity and unwarranted admiration are irksome to Metheny, it is Gorlick's insertion of himself into a recording of Louis Armstrong that provokes the most opprobrium. The last thing Armstrong's performance and recording needs is Kenny G's saxophone *obbligato*. Gorlick has produced a recording that seems to be more for his own ego gratification (and perhaps a crass commercial move by his record company) than for any musical reward. It is both *self-indulgent*, the third of Gorlick's sins, and it shows a lack of respect for both Armstrong and the broader community of jazz musicians and listeners.

Gorlick's performances more generally show this self-indulgence through his pandering to his audience and other forms of "showboating" (see Metheny's description above). According to Christopher Lasch (1991), narcissism is characterized by deficient empathic skills, self-indulgence and self-absorbed behavior. As Frith has noted, self-indulgent musicians,

forget or deny that good music is a collective practice; they use a performance to show off their own virtuosity or character, to dominate the microphone or sound mix, to play too long or loudly. Such musicians don't listen to their performing colleagues. (2004, 27)

To be sure, Gorlick is not the only musician who has been accused of being musically self-indulgent; this charge has been leveled against Cecil Taylor and other proponents of "free jazz" (e.g., Branford Marsalis's remarks in Ken Burn's 2001 documentary *Jazz*), as well as against some of the solos and improvisations of John Coltrane and Keith Jarrett. Yet there is a striking difference between allowing a performer extra license to produce an exemplary musical experience (e.g., Jarrett's "Köln Concert" improvisations), versus retroactively adding oneself to an already finished musical work. The difference lies between indulgence for the sake of the musical "work" (here, for the moment, regarding improvisations as a kind of musical work) versus indulgence simply for the ego gratification of the performer—and presumably one can discern between these two.

IV.D. Offensive Music: Hendrix and the Star-Spangled Banner, One More Time

One last category of bad-music-that-makes-you-angry involves music that trespasses on social conventions of politeness, or otherwise is viewed as mocking or insulting the audience or persons/institutions the audience values. In other words, music that is overtly or directly offensive, as opposed to the indirect forms of offensiveness noted immediately above.

These trespasses are often due to the lyrics of offending songs, but a piece's performance history may carry associations or connotations that are offensive. For example, the song "Dixie," in addition to its lyric content, has strong connections to minstrelsy and slavery and hence is offensive to many listeners (see Zimmer 2020). Another famous example is Jimi Hendrix's performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner" at Woodstock in August, 1969. Hendrix's now iconic performance is broadly viewed as one that combines a stirring protest against the Vietnam war, a strong assertion of patriotism, and a virtuoso rock guitar performance. It was not the first or last time Hendrix performed the national anthem in this fashion (see Clague 2014, 2019). While some might regard parts of Hendrix's Woodstock performance as instances of musical text painting (e.g., "bombs bursting in air"), with its loud, distorted guitar, imitations of explosions and machine guns, shrieks and cries, these were (and in many ways still are) violations of *manner vis-à-vis* Gricean conversational maxims for the performance of a national anthem (Grice 1975). This led many listeners at the time to interpret Hendrix's performance as disrespectful and unpatriotic.

V. LAUGHTER, ANGER, AND MUSICAL AESTHETICS

This article has looked at two kinds of “bad” musical performances: those that make you laugh, and those that make you angry. A consideration of these two affective responses reveals their social and moral underpinnings, and thus leads to a consideration of the social contexts in which those laughter- and anger-inducing performances occur. While these particular affective responses tell us some things about these species of “bad” music, they also can shed light on our evaluations of and responses to music and musical performances more generally. To conclude I will examine some of the broader issues regarding the relation between musical experiences and their social contexts that have particular aesthetic import.

V.A. Musical Performances are Inherently Social Experiences.

The social context in which works of art in general and music in particular are encountered is often overlooked in discussions of aesthetic experience and aesthetic value. For example, Gary Iseminger outlines a functionalist approach to the definition of works of art and to aesthetic value:

Something is a work of art if and only if its function is to afford aesthetic experience,
And
A work of art is a good work of art if and only if it has the capacity to afford aesthetic experience.
(2004, 118)

Iseminger grounds the ontology of artworks in terms of the particular kind(s) of experience that artworks are designed to afford, yet his discussion (like most others) remains work centered. For the performing arts, the design of the artwork implicitly (if not explicitly) includes a consideration of the social context in which those experiences will take place. Musical performances are social occasions, and performances take place in the context of particular institutions, rituals, and conventions. It thus follows that many of the broadly normative conditions for and constraints upon social exchanges are operative in the context of musical performances and can have a strong effect on our aesthetic experiences.

Listening to music is a special, but in many ways not an extraordinary social context, one in which displays of skill (which we can also see at an athletic event), shared expressions of empathy (which we may also feel at a funeral), or our joint attention and action (which we can also experience at a political rally) are all part of our experience of the musical performance, upon which our understanding of and emotional response to the music depend. Taking the social context of performance into account allows us to shift our focus from the musical work to its performance, or, preferably, to “the-performance-of-the-work,” in which the work affords the performer the means to provide an aesthetic experience to the listener.

While the prototypical social context for a musical performance is that of a live concert, as Philip Auslander (2008) points out, most of our access to the performing arts (music, dance, drama, opera, etc.) is through recordings or other mediatized transmission such as simulcasts, live streams, and old-fashioned radio and television broadcasts; for most listeners, listening to music in a live concert is the exception and not the rule. This, of course, is just as true for many other forms of social interaction (COVID-19 related zoom meetings aside): sporting events, state funerals, and political rallies and conventions can be attended virtually and asynchronously, and even if our experience is not the same as if we were actually present at the event, we still have a keen sense of experiencing these events as part of a group (of fans, mourners, or political party members), rather than as wholly isolated individuals. Similarly, Provine noted that when we laugh alone, our solitary laughter often occurs as a response to media which are a “source of vicarious social stimulation” (2000, 44) as we enter a “virtual” social world in which we read about, watch, or listen to others.

In the particular case of a musical performance, when listening to a recording or other mediatized conveyance we need to determine: (a) are we listening to a performance by a human agent? and (b) is what we hear an honest representation of that performer’s musical achievement? Regarding (b), as the quotations from Bicknell given above have noted, live performances already make use of a wide

range of technical enhancements to the performer's natural sound (amplification, echo and reverb, equalization, etc.). These enhancements are also available in the recording studio, and of course, in a studio, one can start over if one makes a mistake, or if the musician or producer simply does not like a particular take. Recordings in every musical genre can convey a performance that never actually occurred in real time. Listeners know this, yet we still regard these recordings as conveyances of performances-of-a-sort, at least if they are reasonably honest and transparent versions that do not make use of the jiggery-pokery noted by Dutton and David Davies above. It is for this reason that it is appropriate to regard these kinds of pieces and recordings as "works for studio performance" (e.g., S. Davies 2001, 35–6; Kania 2006, 402). They are at least examples of "possible performances," and so if (b) is satisfied, then regarding these recordings as performances—condition (a) is warranted. Note also that condition (b) can be violated in either a recording or a live concert (e.g., excessive Auto-Tune, Tracking, etc.).

V.B. Musical Disrespect

In the entry on "Respect" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Robin Dillon (2018) notes that respect can be manifest both as a form of behavior and as an attitude or feeling. These are related, of course, as attitudes have cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions. Respect can be grounded on fear (e.g., a sailor respects the sea), awe of the sublime (for God, nature, the law), and, most relevant for "bad" music, considerations of what we owe each other, including politeness, honesty, and kindness.

The cause of the anger that some fans feel for Taylor Swift's (mis)use of Auto-Tune, that Metheny feels for Kenny G, or that some listeners initially felt for Hendrix's performance of the "Star-Spangled Banner" is not inherent in the musical sound. Rather, it is Swift's dishonest presentation of herself as a competent singer, Gorlick's inauthentic claim to be part of a particular jazz tradition, along with his self-indulgence, and Hendrix's musical impropriety that leads to these angry responses. Misrepresentation, inauthenticity (a kind of misrepresentation), self-indulgence, and impropriety are all violations of the social covenant: to deal with others honestly, to respect the rights and claims of others, and to be mindful of others' interests and feelings. As such, the listener's anger at these violations is not just directed at the music—the means by which disrespect is conveyed—but at the person who performs it, as the listener feels that the performer has failed to give them respect they are due as a critically engaged audience member.

These social violations will affect the felicity conditions for aesthetic communication, especially in terms of their sincerity (Bach and Harnish 1979, 55–7). If we are not pure sonicists (pace Dodd 2007), it is our awareness of the human agency behind the musical performance that allows us to hear the musical details for what they are. Thus, knowing that Hendrix was sincere in his musical and patriotic expression allows listeners (many then and many more now) to understand and appreciate his version of the "Star-Spangled Banner," and to grasp the details of his performance in light of that understanding. By contrast, the inauthentic or dishonest performances of Swift and Gorlick forestall our ability to aesthetically frame the sounds we hear. Is Swift's intonation lacking nuance because she wants us to hear a certain coldness in her performance of a song, or is it just a byproduct of the software? Is Gorlick's choice of creating tension via a long, sustained note a considered aesthetic choice, aptly placed, or simply a self-indulgent "look at me" moment. As Bicknell notes, we "care about what a singer really sounds like and what he or she is genuinely capable of" (2015, 76). We have these cares not only because we want to evaluate and appreciate their musical talents and abilities. We also care because our sense of the performer's identity informs our sense of the music they perform, down to the details of its expressive and structural qualities. That in turn requires that what we hear is an honest representation of the performer's actions and intentions. To paraphrase Dutton:

When we learn that the kind of achievement a musical performance involves has been radically misrepresented to us, it is not as though we have learned a new fact about some familiar object of aesthetic attention. To the contrary, insofar as the performer's artistic status is concerned, they are no longer the same performer, and the music is no longer the same work. (1979, 314)

V.C. Affective Responses in a Social-Musical Context

The social dimension of musical experience and the kinds of affective responses social contexts afford may have some bearing on arousalist versus cognitivist accounts of musical expression (for a useful recent summary see [Trivedi 2017](#)). First, the laughter and anger responses to “bad” music detailed above *are* bona-fine arousals of the requisite social emotions. They are similar to affective responses that arise in nonmusical social settings, precisely because the trespasses that give rise to them are fundamentally nonmusical in nature: laughter at incompetence; anger at dishonesty and disrespect. That we have these kinds of social-emotional reactions underscores the fact that our musical experiences occur in socially grounded contexts. Likewise, the fact that we can have these responses even when listening to recordings or live-stream presentations of music shows that these modes of musical experience retain their social dimension to a significant degree.

This has relevance for other aspects of our affective experience of music, for our grasp of and response to musical expressions of sadness, melancholy, exuberance, and joy (to mention just a few) occur in this same social context. In a musical performance, the musicians we hear are the agents of that experience, and as such, we respond to them and to their “enactment” of the music ([Kozak 2019](#), 139). When we hear expressive properties in the musical performance, we are able to do so through their musical behaviors, and we respond to their behaviors as we do to the behaviors of other agents in other social situations. Indeed, if we focus on our affective responses to the performance-of-the-work, rather than the “work itself,” we need not avail ourselves of imaginary musical personae or other agents, as real performers are present, and are responsible for the enactment of music, including its expressive properties.

As an illustration, imagine the late Peter Kivy studying the score of second movement adagio of Albinoni’s Concerto for Oboe in D-minor, Op. 9, no. 2. Kivy, a talented oboist, would note that striding arpeggios in the strings and the plaintive, sustained, notes in the oboe together are expressive of a kind of resigned sadness. Kivy (1989) also famously claimed that this is grasped cognitively, and not because the music actually makes him feel sad. Like most skilled musicians, Kivy could discern the expressive properties of Albinoni’s concerto from reading the score, apart from any performance of the work. When I listen to Heinz Holliger’s performance of this same piece, I too hear that the music is expressive of resigned sadness, but moreover, I feel it as well. I do so because the attributes of the music that Kivy would have claimed are “expressive of” resigned sadness afford Holliger’s enactment of that expression in his performance. As part of our social exchange, I listen to (and physically move) in sympathy with his performance, and as a result, a feeling of sad resignation is aroused in me. Thus, why what makes sense regarding the musical work from a cognitivist point of view (Albinoni’s concerto is “expressive of” resigned sadness) is not at odds with the arousalist point of view with regard to my experience of the performance of that work. Holliger is an expressive agent in the social context of a musical performance, and my empathetic participation in that context engenders my emotional arousal.

V.D. Bad Music Admits of Degrees

The degree of musical laughter and musical anger can vary, and it seems that some thresholds are involved. A few wrong notes or having slightly inexact intonation is unlikely to produce laughter; if such faults arise in the context of an amateur musical performance, a karaoke session, or music making among friends, they might not be noticed at all. At a professional concert performance, they are more noticeable, and may give rise to disappointment as the performer is not as good as one hoped. However, if the performance is spectacularly inept, then laughter may well ensue.

Similarly, and as already noted, we already accept some degree of sonic enhancement to musicians on their recordings and in their live performances. Indeed, music that is overtly false may not be problematic at all, as when a musician multi-tracks themselves singing or playing several parts “at the same time” (e.g., Les Paul and Mary Ford’s famous rendition of “How High the Moon”). An example of this with Auto-Tune would be Dua Lipa’s song “New Rules” which uses Auto-Tune (and other studio processing) to minimize the vocal differences between herself and her back-up singers, as well as for various effects in her upper vocal register. [Dutton \(1979\)](#) noted that as the use of particular studio techniques becomes normative, then we re-calibrate our assessment of the piece/performance accordingly—such that we could appreciate the skill of both the performer and recording engineer. This is precisely what we do in some cases of works-for-playback where we appreciate the production

details and aesthetic choices made by the engineers and producers in finishing a recording—and why certain producers are in high demand by recording musicians (e.g., Quincy Jones, Brian Eno, George Martin, Don Was, T. Bone Burnett). At the same time, the increased use of these enhancing and corrective technologies makes the identification of misrepresentation somewhat more difficult, as the “true sound” of the musician becomes more opaque. At some point, however, the enhancement becomes too much, which we may not be able to discern until the technology unexpectedly fails.

Inauthenticity also admits degrees. While one may have qualms regarding the putatively authenticity of blues performances by Eric Clapton, given Clapton’s obvious devotion to and mastery of the genre (and thus his exhibiting of suitable “moral deference” toward the tradition in which he works—see [Bicknell 2015](#), 83–90), we may have far less of a problem with his inauthenticity than, say, Pat Boone’s covers of R&B songs by Fats Domino and Little Richard. Likewise, what is authentic enough for one group may not be authentic enough for another; today all of Bob Dylan’s music is accepted as part of a “folk” musical tradition, or at least its commercial variant; such was not the case when he first went electric at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival.

V.E. Music’s Social Entanglements

[Vincent Bergeron and Dominic McIver Lopes \(2009\)](#), drawing upon the work of music psychologists, point out that many aspects of musical expression involve our visual as well auditory modalities. Other studies have shown that basic musical properties, such as the duration of a note or tempo of a passage, similarly rely on cross-modal cues ([London et al. 2016](#); [Schutz and Kubovy 2009](#)). This article argues that not only does music involve our senses beyond our ears, but that an even thicker context is required for the aesthetic evaluation of music (and the performing arts more generally). That thickness includes the social context(s) in which our artistic experiences occur, and the performances which constitute those social contexts. This in turn should lead us to focus our aesthetic attention on “performances-of-works,” rather than works divorced from performances. This is especially true when considering the expressive properties of a work. Rather than appreciating the artwork-as-performance by focusing on the medium by which the work is conveyed to its perceiver, and the achievement of the composer, author, or painter through their use of that medium, for the performing arts one may appeal more directly to the social exchange that occurs between performer and audience.

Performances are occasions for social exchange, and this context needs to be taken into account in our understanding of artistic performances and our affective responses to them. Musical performances, like all social exchanges, are constrained by many expectations regarding the social responsibilities of the performer and audience alike, and many of these responsibilities have moral force (e.g., truthfulness, sincerity, moral deference as is required, reciprocity, and so forth). When those social responsibilities are breached, we respond emotionally, and often strongly so. Our reactions to “bad” music are illustrative of this social-moral dimension to our musical experience, reminding us of the central importance of musical performances in discussions of musical expression and value. Recalling Provine’s difficulties in studying laughter in the laboratory, one cannot talk of a listener’s experiences of a work or performance apart from the normative contexts in which those experiences occur.⁷ It is thus questionable the extent to which other aspects of musical structure and performance, in their sensible, sounding forms, can be considered apart from the social contexts in which they are embedded.⁸

JUSTIN LONDON, Music, Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota, 55057, USA. Email: jlondon@carleton.edu

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END NOTES

- 1 When I have presented Jenkins’s recordings in classes and public lectures the response is always the same: amusement and laughter. This response is tempered when I tell a bit more of Foster’s biography. She began her career as a pianist and piano teacher, which ended due to an arm injury. She had life-long aspirations to be an opera singer. Upon inheriting a sizable fortune from her father, she became dedicated patron of music. While she did perform, she did so only in private concerts, save for one last recital at Carnegie Hall in 1944 when she was seventy-six years old, and that concert is the basis of her 1954 record. She died a month later.

- 2 When we do respond with anger or contempt for a musical work rather than a performance (perhaps due to its banality, or cloying sentimentality), our anger is again directed at a person, namely, the composer of such a work, perhaps in virtue of the anger or contempt-inducing performances that such works will engender.
- 3 The Shaggs were a quartet of four sisters, Dorothy (“Dot”), Betty, Helen, and Rachel Wiggin. The band was formed by their father, Austin Wiggin, who bought the girls instruments and after six months of practice, brought them into a recording studio to record their first and only album in 1969. Frank Zappa claimed they were “better than the Beatles” and one of his favorite bands. Rebecca Black’s “Friday” is a vanity music video that was released in 2011 when Black was 13 years old; it soon thereafter went viral and has been considered by many to be the worst music video of all time.
- 4 The theory of universal basic emotions—anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise—was posited by Paul Ekman (1999), based upon his cross-cultural study of facial responses to affective stimuli. Basic emotions are hardwired, automatic, fast, and trigger behavior important for survival. The individuation of basic emotions has been the subject of much debate, questioned by Ekman himself; for a summary see Prinz (2012).
- 5 Most of the singers accused of mis- or over-use of autotune are women. Bicknell (2015) notes that there is a wide range of ways in which one can be a successful singer, and she lists several men who have “interesting” voices (e.g., Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, Tom Waits), but no women (p. 73). Thus, vocal attractiveness vis-à-vis intonation is gendered: men have normal vs. interesting voices, while women have good vs. bad voices.
- 6 Charlie Parker’s nickname “Bird” comes from “Yardbird” (i.e., chicken) or playing like a bird. While various accounts regarding his nickname circulate, it was clearly *not* from squeaking notes; see <https://web.archive.org/web/20131219234852/http://www.birdlives.co.uk/content/yardbird>.
- 7 Empirical research in musical emotions has also recognized music’s social embeddedness, hence the development of the “LiveLab” at McMaster University (<https://livelab.mcmaster.ca/>) and the “ArtLab” at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, Frankfurt (<https://www.aesthetics.mpg.de/index.php?id=625&L=1>), where the behavior of entire audiences can be studied in the context of actual live performances.
- 8 The author would like to thank David Davies for his comments on an earlier version of the manuscript, along with the journal editors and two anonymous reviewers for the helpful criticisms and suggestions.