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# Works, Recordings, Performances: Classical, Rock, Jazz

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## **Works, Recordings, Performances: Classical, Rock, Jazz**

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In this essay, I undertake a comparative study of the ontologies of three quite distinct Western musical traditions – classical, rock, and jazz – approached from the unusual angle of their recordings.<sup>1</sup> By the 'ontology' of a tradition I mean simply the kinds of things there are in that tradition and the relations that hold between them. A study of this scope is bound to leave many questions unanswered when restricted to this length. The ontology of classical music has been debated in the analytic tradition for close to half a century, and there has been a growing interest in the ontologies of rock and jazz in the last ten years.<sup>2</sup> The advantage gained by the wide scope, however, is a bird's eye view of the terrain. As I see it, that terrain is quite varied, and looking at it through the lens of recordings throws the differences into relief. I end with some reflections on the consequences of the ontological project for musicology.

One thing I take for granted is that there *are* three such traditions. Their precise individuation would doubtless be a complicated musico-socio-anthropological task, but that it would not be a wild goose chase is suggested by our shared abilities to sort music into these three categories, whether this be in a record store, when identifying the kinds

of music we are familiar with, or, significantly, discussing a case that is hard to pigeonhole. Despite what is sometimes suggested, the existence of borderline cases pretty quickly implies the existence of a borderline, however wide or fuzzy.

Another claim I rely on is that a great majority of art produced in a given tradition fits into a single ontological structure. (This is not to say that it is of a single ontological kind, but that relations between works, performances, and recordings, for instance, are invariant across most of the art produced in the tradition.) Though I do little explicit arguing for this claim, the idea is that once I have set out my theory of the ontology of a given tradition, reflection on the tradition by someone familiar with it will convince that the theory fits the data, that is, the tradition itself.

One might think, looking at my title, that the ontologies of the three traditions I discuss cannot be all that different. After all, it is not the case that in classical music we have only works, while in rock we have only recordings, and in jazz only performances. All three kinds of entities exist in *each* of the three traditions, it would seem. These appearances, however, are misleading, if not outright deceiving. There are different kinds of things that go under the name ‘recording’. Although all audio CDs seem *prima facie* to employ the same medium, the many different ways available to produce a sound recording belie this first impression. A recorded musical artwork that sounds like a landing jet will be more impressive if it is constructed entirely out of a recording of a bleating lamb than if it is simply a recording of a landing jet. But more than the direct causal provenance of a recording is relevant to its appreciation, for even two art objects made in exactly the same way will be appreciated differently if produced in different contexts. For example, it would be unremarkable to find an unedited studio recording of a

harpichord performance of one of Bach's two-part inventions on a CD of Bach's keyboard works by a leading performer, while such a recording issued by an avant-garde electronic-music composition studio would be considered a strangely archaic, rule-flouting work. Just as we might sensibly say that a CD containing an unedited, relatively transparent record of a sound event is a different kind of thing from one containing a highly edited and processed recording, we might also sensibly say that a recording produced in one artistic tradition is a different kind of thing from a recording produced in another tradition.<sup>3</sup> How we decide to label these different kinds of things is, naturally, a semantic issue (though it can also be an ideological one). I will suggest some neologisms below, simply in order to talk more easily about the different kinds of musical things I believe there are. Though I do not choose my terms capriciously, my focus is on metaphysics, rather than semantics – on the kinds of things there are, rather than what we call them.

The conclusions I argue for are as follows: Jazz recordings are like classical recordings in that we hear performances by means of them – they are in this sense *transparent*. The kind of performance to which they are transparent, however, differs. Typically, a classical performance is of a work, while there are *no* works in jazz, only performances that share various features with each other. There are works of art in the rock tradition, but these are the recordings themselves. They manifest songs which may be performed live, but since these are not at the center of the tradition, they are not the works of art in the rock tradition.

## *Musical Works*

Philosophy of music, like musicology, has historically been concerned primarily or exclusively with Western classical music. Most theorists agree that the ontological paradigm of this musical tradition is that there are musical works, such as Stravinsky's violin concerto, which receive multiple performances.<sup>4</sup> What kind of thing a musical work *is*, exactly, has been a matter of some controversy, at least among musical ontologists. Most, however, propose theories that can be seen as instances of more general approaches to the problem of universals – the problem of the nature of things that seem *prima facie* to be individuals in some sense, yet also seem to exist in multiple instances.<sup>5</sup>

I will not engage here in the debate over which fundamental ontological category classical musical works fall into. Before we look at recordings, however, it is necessary to see that the question of what a musical work is is not exhausted by the resolution of this debate. For whatever fundamental ontological category Stravinsky's violin concerto belongs to, it is easy to see that the *solo violin part* of the concerto falls into that same category. It, too, is unitary, in whatever metaphysical sense the concerto as a whole is unitary, and it, too, is multiple in the sense that it has many different instances – some with orchestral accompaniment, some with piano accompaniment, some with no accompaniment at all, and so on. Still, the solo violin part of Stravinsky's concerto is just that – a *part* of the work, not a work itself.

Using the term 'piece' to refer to any unit of music, we can put the current question as follows: What is it that makes some but not all pieces of music *musical works*? Reference to the literature on the definition of art will not help since, again, *parts*

of works are art, yet those parts are not in themselves works of art. I suggest that a work of art must be of a kind that is a primary focus of critical attention in a given artistic tradition. This suggestion is not without its problems. First among them may be the identification of the relevant artistic tradition. Nonetheless, the basic idea, which I believe is sound, is that the *Mona Lisa* is a work of art, in part because it is a *painting* produced in the artistic tradition known as ‘painting’, while none of the sketches for the *Mona Lisa* is a work, since sketches are not a primary focus of critical attention in the painting tradition.<sup>6</sup>

The case of classical music, however, shows that there must be more to the piece/work distinction than we have uncovered so far. For it seems plausible that *performances*, such as those of Stravinsky’s violin concerto, are a primary focus of critical attention in the classical tradition. Yet we make a clear distinction between the work and performances of it. The relevant difference here, one that is appealed to in similar distinctions in other multiply-instantiable temporal artforms, is between something that is an enduring entity and something else that is a fleeting event. Like works in theatre, dance, and cinema, musical works persist beyond the temporal boundaries of their instances, while musical performances, like dance and dramatic performances and showings of films, are passing. So a work of art must be, at least, (i) of a kind that is a primary focus of critical attention in a given artistic tradition, and (ii) an enduring entity.

It might be objected at this point that I have smuggled some ontological assumptions into the discussion. A certain kind of strict nominalist, for instance, will certainly not accept, at face value at least, the claim that Stravinsky’s violin concerto

persists beyond the boundaries of its performances. To assume so is to assume the existence of some sort of abstract entity. I do not, however, mean to make such substantive fundamental ontological assumptions. Thus far I have been ‘speaking with the vulgar’, and while the nominalist may be unable to resist ‘thinking with the learned’, he must nevertheless acknowledge the vulgar distinction between works and performances in *some* way. I intend to continue to speak in this vulgar fashion. The ontological views I defend below are not fundamental, meaning that they do not stand or fall along with any theory of the fundamental nature of reality. Even if we argue that tropes are all that ultimately exists, we still have to say something about why people go around talking as if there are concrete individuals. Similarly, classical musicians and audience members make a clear distinction between works and performances, and no fundamental ontological theory ought to rule out this distinction. In sum, the views expressed below, while ontological, are not fundamental. They are neutral with respect to various competing fundamental ontological theories.<sup>7</sup>

### *Classical recordings: Recorded work-performances*

If the paradigmatic ontological picture of classical music includes works and their performances, it is an open question where we should locate recordings in that picture. It seems to me that the intuitive answer is to locate classical recordings close to performances, and I will defend that intuition against two considerations that have led people to argue that, on reflection, classical recordings are more like works than performances.<sup>8</sup>

Before discussing those considerations, let me say something about what I refer to with the term ‘recording’. First, a recording is a type: there are particular tokens of a

recording, usually referred to as ‘copies’. We might each have a copy of Anne-Sophie Mutter’s recording of the Stravinsky violin concerto. Furthermore, there may be many playings of a single copy; I might listen to my copy every night for a week. What I will refer to as a recording is the type behind each of these tokens – the sound-event type that is encoded on each copy and instantiated with each playback.

The first consideration that moves people to see classical recordings as more like works than performances can easily be seen given our discussions of works and recordings, above. Recordings are enduring, reinstantiable things. If it is natural to think of a classical recording as a performance, it is equally natural to think of it as a *repeatable* performance. That itself should be enough to give us serious pause, for ‘ordinary’ performances are fleeting events, while works are the types they instantiate. If recordings are reinstantiable sound structures, then, it is not obvious they should not be called works.

The second consideration that leads people to think of classical recordings as more like works than performances is the fact that they are worked on over time. Even if a classical recording were a perfect live recording (in the sense that it gave an aural experience just like that afforded by the live event it records) it would still be a reinstantiable sound structure. But no actual classical recordings are like this. Apart from imperfections in the sound reproduction technology, the sound is mixed from a number of different microphones, parts of different takes are spliced together, notes are electronically corrected or overdubbed, and so on. The extent of these manipulations has led some to think of recordings as more like sculptures in sound than performances – as works of art in their own right.



I will deal with these two considerations in turn, offering arguments intended to lessen their force, leading classical recordings back to their rightful place, away from works and close to performances.

My main argument against the first consideration is that while classical recordings endure and are reinstantiable, they are also *transparent* in the sense made popular by Kendall Walton's discussions of photography:<sup>9</sup> 'to look at a photograph is actually to see, indirectly but genuinely, whatever it is a photograph of' (1997: 60). The basic argument for this thesis is that photographs are 'counterfactually dependent on the scenes they portray...[and that the] counterfactual dependence...is independent of the photographer's beliefs' (Walton, 1997: 68). Walton's original statement of this view (1984) has generated much discussion.<sup>10</sup> However, even Walton's best critics grant some version of the transparency claim – that we see the objects captured by a photograph unmediated by intentions in some important respect (Warburton, 2003). I will take for granted that photographs are transparent in Walton's sense. What I suggest further is that there are no relevant differences between mechanical image-reproduction and mechanical sound-reproduction, when it comes to considering their transparency. That is, recordings are as transparent as photographs; just as we see things in or through photographs, we hear things on or through recordings. The relevance of this point should be clear. Just as in looking at a photograph we see a single person, say, even though the photograph itself is a type with many tokens, so in listening to a recording we hear a single performance, even though we may listen to it several times. So, though the recording is a multiply instantiable enduring entity, our interest in it, what we hear through it, is a fleeting event

– a performance. For that reason, classical recordings are better viewed as more like performances than like works.

An objection to this argument brings us to the second consideration in favor of viewing classical recordings as musical works. The objection is that even if a classical recording is transparent, what you see through its window is not a single event – a performance – but a mish-mash of different bits of different performances tacked together with corrections pasted over certain spots, and so on. Thus, even if classical recordings are transparent, we do not, and ought not, approach them in this way. What we rightly appreciate in a classical recording is the finely honed sonic sculpture we hear on the surface, not the frantic chiseling that we know lies behind it.

This way of putting the objection draws out an important distinction between what I call ‘active’ and ‘phenomenal’ performance. These are not two different *kinds* of performance, but rather two distinct *aspects* of any performance. As Jerrold Levinson notes, there is ‘a well-entrenched *process/product* ambiguity in regard to the concept of a performance. On the one hand, there is the *activity* of producing sounds for an audience; on the other hand, there are the *sounds* that are produced’ (Levinson, 1987: 378, emphasis in the original). I call the activity or process the *active performance*, and the resulting product, the sounds we hear, the *phenomenal performance*. Levinson goes on to claim that

the thing primarily judged seems to be product rather than process, achieved result rather than activity of achieving it. This is not, however, to imply that one can judge the product in this case – a performance – in *ignorance* of or in *isolation* from the process that issues in it. (1987: 378-9)

The relevance of these points to classical recordings should also be clear. In what follows, I argue that the phenomenal performance we hear on a recording is connected to the active performance of the musicians in the studio in such a way that we are justified in claiming that we hear a performance *simpliciter* when we listen to a classical recording.

For clarification, it is helpful to contrast my view of the relationship between classical works and recordings with that of Stephen Davies, who argues that classical works are of the ontological kind *work-for-live-performance* (S. Davies, 2001: 20-36).<sup>11</sup> I argue instead that classical works are for performance *simpliciter*, and that there are two kinds of performance – live and recorded. This makes my view more attractive than Davies's, I believe. For if classical works are ontologically for-live-performance, then a recorded performance of a classical work cannot authentically instantiate it. Most classical audiences and musicians, however, seem to think that a studio recording of a classical work does give us access to a genuine instance of the work.<sup>12</sup> Davies seems to recognize this, and hedges a little, saying that 'such talk relies on our willingness to treat the representations of performances found on recordings as acceptable substitutes for live performances' (S. Davies, 2001: 319). Of course, our pre-reflective intuitions that classical recordings give us access to work instances may be wrong. But, other things being equal, this conformity with our intuitions is an advantage of my account.

The disadvantage, some might say, is that it makes no sense to talk of a 'recorded *performance*' in reference to classical recordings. One of the oft-cited features of classical recordings marshaled against the idea that they are performances is the much looser spatio-temporal constraints on the playings that go on in the production of a

recording, as opposed to a live performance.<sup>13</sup> Those who produce a live performance must all play together – in the same place and at the same time, without taking (non-musical) breaks. The argument is completed as follows: These constraints are not respected in the recording studio, therefore what happens in the recording studio is not a performance.

There are two ways of arranging this information into an argument, however. The above argument is *modus tollens*; what follows is a more positive spin. I take quite seriously the practice of treating classical recordings like performances. Most musicians, critics, and audience members think of them in this way. Of course, they also recognize the important *differences* between live and recorded performances – recorded performances are somewhat *idealized* performances – but given the initial intuition that recordings are like performances, this can be captured better by the theory that live performances and recordings are two types of performance, rather than two more radically different kinds of thing.<sup>14</sup> The distinction between active and phenomenal performance can help here. The looseness of the spatio-temporal constraints on episodes of musical playing in the recording studio is mirrored by a similar looseness in rehearsals for live performances. In both cases, the point of the disjointed active playings is the production of the best possible phenomenal performance. How the playings contribute to that performance is different in each case, but not in such a way as to justify withholding the name ‘performance’ from the recording.

Perhaps the most serious charge made against classical recordings, which might lead one to deny they are performances in any sense, is that the way the phenomenal performance on a recording is produced amounts to *cheating*. In availing themselves of

whatever technological means necessary to produce a phenomenal performance they have not, and perhaps could not, produce live, classical musicians are betraying the centuries-old skill-based tradition they purport to be a part of.

I reject both parts of this charge: Classical musicians do not avail themselves of any means necessary, nor do they produce a phenomenal performance they could not produce live. To put it a little more subtly and accurately, it is not *acceptable* in the classical world to produce recordings in this way. To do so *would* count as cheating, but is not common practice. As I have argued elsewhere, just as the spatio-temporal constraints appealed to by the opponent of classical recordings developed implicitly within the performance tradition, new conventions, also implicit, developed over the twentieth century, putting limits on what is acceptable in the production of a classical recording (Kania, 1998: 37-51). The occasional classical-recording scandal is evidence of the existence of, and general adherence to, these conventions. What these conventions try to do is precisely to find a practice that honors both the tradition's ancient valorization of live performance skill and the desire of performers and audiences (not of recent vintage itself!) to hear the best performance possible. Essentially, one should not release a recording under one's own performing name if one would not be capable of producing such a phenomenal performance live under ideal circumstances (Godlovitch, 1998: 26-7; Kania, 1998: 37-51; S. Davies, 2001: 192-4).

A common response to this argument, in my experience, is an appeal to the practices of Glenn Gould. His hands-on approach in the studio is legendary, and even if it is admitted both that some of the stories told are apocryphal and that he is at one extreme of the spectrum of use made of recording technology in the classical world, nevertheless

he is not considered a cheat by mainstream audiences. So, it might be argued, the conventions I have outlined above are not in fact in place.

My reply to this is two-fold. Firstly, it is not at all obvious that Gould flouts the conventions I have outlined. He established a fine reputation as a live performer before retreating to the studio, and no one could seriously charge that he was incapable of producing the kinds of performances live that are heard on his recordings. Secondly, Gould's actions belie a commitment to the classical performance tradition, whatever he might say to the contrary. He clearly believed that Bach should be played on a keyboard, whether on stage or in the studio. He was also clearly well aware of the resources available in the studio for producing recordings that cannot be happily be called performances at all, as his important output of electronic works shows. When producing recordings of classical works, Gould did not come close to doing what he did when producing non-performance recordings, or to what rock musicians contemporary with him were doing in the studio. In sum, Glenn Gould is no counterexample to the view of classical recordings as recorded performances that I am defending here.

I have argued that classical recordings, as they are typically made, are rightly thought of as giving access to performances of the works they purport to be of.<sup>15</sup> Although the unified phenomenal performance they give access to is usually not connected to a unified active performance, as in the case of live performance, the conventions for producing such recordings that have arisen in the classical music world – rooted in the long-standing tradition of live performance – are such that it is appropriate to think of what we hear on a recording as a performance – a different kind of performance from a live performance, but a performance nonetheless.<sup>16</sup>

### *Rock recordings: Tracks*

Turning to rock music after a lengthy discussion of classical, it is tempting to see the same ontology.<sup>17</sup> For in the rock world, as in the classical, there are songs that receive multiple live performances, and recordings of those songs. The easiest way to see that this temptation should be resisted is to cast one's mind back to our consideration of what makes a piece of music a *work*.<sup>18</sup> Theodore Gracyk has convincingly argued that the primary focus of critical attention in rock music is the replete soundscape of a recording, rather than the thin sound structure – the song – that is instanced in different performances and recordings (Gracyk, 1996: 1-98).<sup>19</sup>

Stephen Davies has argued that rock is more like classical music than Gracyk allows (S. Davies, 2001: 29-36). His view of what happens in the rock studio is somewhat like the picture I have just painted of the classical studio. Davies thinks that rock songs are written for precisely this kind of studio production, and thus calls them *works-for-studio-performance*. There is no space to go into Davies's arguments here.<sup>20</sup> Suffice it to say that I am sympathetic to Davies's reclamation of the importance of performance skill for rock, but I believe we can find a place for such values in rock without recourse to the notion of a work-for-studio-performance. Thus what follows can be seen as an extension of Gracyk's account of rock recordings – as the works of art in that practice – that responds to Davies's concerns about the importance of performance skills in rock practice.

The basic view is that rock musicians primarily make *tracks* – ontologically thick works that are instanced in playings of a copy of the recording.<sup>21</sup> These recordings are at the heart of the tradition. However, a rock track also typically manifests a song – a thin

structure of lyrics, melody, and harmonic structure – that may be manifested in tracks by other musicians or in live performances (Gracyk, 1996: 1-98; Kania, 2006).

There are two places in this account where there is room for valuing performance skills. The first is in the construction of tracks. It might initially seem that if the performance skills that we value in the production of rock tracks – typically skill in singing and playing the guitar, drums, and bass – are to be given their due, we must conceive of rock recordings as performances of some sort, and thus should be moved towards Davies's view of rock recordings as 'studio performances'. But in fact there is no need to do this. We often value skills that go into the production of a non-performance artwork; just think of a master's skill with the brush.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Davies is well aware of this possibility in the realm of recorded music, for he acknowledges that classical electronic works are for playback, rather than for studio performance, while they are often constructed from recordings of performance events of some sort (S. Davies, 2001: 26).

The second place where there is room for esteeming performance skills in rock is, of course, in live performances. Again, though I see this as an advantage of my account, it might equally be used to raise an objection against it. For aren't rock concerts a hugely important part of the tradition? Why, then, elevate recordings to pride of place, and grant live rock performances only a subsidiary role?

This is a difficult question, to be answered on the basis of an unwieldy body of musico-sociological data. I will offer three supports for my view. The first is simply Gracyk's work on this topic. He convincingly argues, as I mention above, that however



important live rock is, recorded rock is much *more* important to the tradition, as evidenced by musical, critical, and appreciative practice.

The second support is a consideration of live rock performances. It is clear that most rock performers, most of the time, perform their songs live in such a way that the sound produced is relatively similar to the sound of their recording of the song (more similar to it than to a recorded cover of the song by different artists, for instance).<sup>23</sup> What this amounts to is, firstly, the same song being performed as is manifested by the track, and, secondly, the same kinds of sounds used to fill out the skeleton of the song – something like what a classical musician would call ‘instrumentation’. On the other hand, it is also clear that most artists do not attempt to create on stage a sonic doppelgänger of a particular track.<sup>24</sup> For one thing, this can be done quite well by other musicians, as the performances of cover bands amply show, yet regular (non-cover) bands do not produce this kind of performance of songs they have recorded. For another, audiences *expect* live rock performances to differ from tracks in certain ways. Some of the more common changes are an extended introduction, often concealing which song is being performed, added verses, instrumental solos, invited audience participation, and so on. Thus we can see that live rock performances do not attempt to produce the closest sound possible to a studio recording of a song, but do nonetheless take the track as primary, in some sense. This is unsurprising, considering that the track represents the artists’ considered opinion about what sounds good enough to constitute an enduring addition to their oeuvre.

The third support for my view that recorded rock is primary, and live rock secondary, is a thought experiment. It invites you to imagine four different scenarios. Two concern the classical-music world, and two the rock-music world. For each

tradition, suppose, firstly, that all recording technology has been destroyed without hope of recovery. Then suppose an alternate scenario in which recording technology survives, but for some reason all live performances are eliminated from the world. In the case of classical music, the elimination of recordings would not greatly affect the music-making practices of the tradition; this would merely be a return to the old days. The elimination of live performances, on the other hand, might conceivably have an effect, over time, on the kinds of works and recordings produced. (I put this point somewhat hesitantly since, as I argue above, the long history of the live performance tradition in classical music has made its recording practices quite robust.) In the rock scenarios, I would argue, the situation is roughly reversed. With the end of live performances, musicians could continue to make albums as they have for the past several decades. Were the recording studios to be shut down, however, live rock performances could no longer draw on recordings as they do now. A different, more performance-based art would need to emerge were rock to survive. In short, classical recording practice is asymmetrically dependent upon classical live performance practice, while live performance practice in rock is asymmetrically dependent upon rock recording practice. While these thought experiments drastically oversimplify matters, I think they do thereby bring out clearly the basic differences between recordings in these two traditions.

To sum up: rock recordings *are* sonic sculptures – the works of art in their tradition – and not a type of performance, as classical recordings are. This, however, is consistent with the high value placed on performative skill in the rock world.

*Jazz recordings: recorded performances*

One of the many things that distinguishes jazz from rock and classical music is that it is historically coeval with recording technology.<sup>25</sup> Classical music was a firmly entrenched tradition with centuries of history when this technology made its appearance, while the emergence of rock music, if I am right about its ontology, depended on the existence of a somewhat developed recording technology. The claim that jazz came into existence at the same time as recording technology is somewhat contentious, since there is a tendency to focus exclusively on *recorded* history. Nonetheless, the impact of such technology on jazz, even in the technology's infancy, was such that it is hard to deny the major role it played in establishing jazz as a widespread and central tradition in twentieth century American, and arguably global, music.

This close connection between jazz history and recording technology might lead one to regard jazz as ontologically similar to rock music. After all, like rock musicians, jazz musicians exchange and discuss recordings, and learn to play by imitating their favorite recordings. The recording studio has had other wide-reaching effects on the history of jazz. For instance, one of the great early jazz groups – Louis Armstrong and his Hot Five – existed only in the recording studio, since contemporary live audiences preferred syncopated dance music to their hot New Orleans style.

Yet for all the similarities, there are important differences between rock and jazz approaches to recording; here jazz seems to be a lot closer to classical music than it is to rock. Just as notation enabled classical composers to create more and more complex enduring musical works, recordings enable the preservation of works with all the replete detail of a sound event. Rock, like classical electronic composition, embraced this aspect of recording technology to the extent that informed rock audiences do not expect rock

recordings to be transparent to live performance events. Both classical and jazz audiences, on the other hand, expect the phenomenal performance heard on a recording to be connected to the active performance of the musicians in the right way. Different takes may be spliced together, and extraneous noise removed, but nothing should be done to cause the recording to represent a sound event that the musicians would be incapable of producing live. As live performance traditions, both classical and jazz music have embraced recording technology's ability to represent artists' capabilities in the best light,<sup>26</sup> but both traditions maintain a distinction between 'authentic recording practice' and studio trickery. In both traditions, one is supposed to listen *through* the recording to the represented performance, rather than *to* the recording as a studio construction.<sup>27</sup>

A different reason that might be given to align jazz ontologically with rock rather than classical music is that jazz standards, like rock songs, are ontologically 'thin'; that is, relatively few aspects of an instance of a standard are determined by the standard itself, as opposed to late Romantic classical works, for instance, wherein quite specific instrumentation, tempi, dynamics, and even expression are determined by the work (S. Davies, 2001: 20). In fact, Stephen Davies has argued, convincingly in my view, that jazz performances are not rightly called performances *of* the standards they instantiate, since (i) the standards are so thin ontologically, and (ii) the performance is largely improvisatory (S. Davies 2001: 16-19). If this is so, then one might wonder what the work of art in the jazz tradition is. The standard is not a promising candidate for the reasons just given. But neither is the performance, if my arguments above are sound, since it is a fleeting event. A recording is the obvious next candidate, since recordings provide a way to turn a fleeting event into an enduring object. However, if my arguments

about classical recordings are convincing, not all recordings are rightly viewed as enduring objects in the sense relevant to making them works of art. Thus, in order to locate works in the jazz tradition, we might be tempted to see them as similar to rock recordings – tracks to be appreciated as replete soundscapes, rather than windows on to performances.

This theory does not jibe at all well with jazz practice. If anything, the recording conventions in the jazz world are even stricter than in classical music. This is due in large part to the centrality of improvisation in jazz. Quite apart from these considerations specific to jazz, though, the very project described in the preceding paragraph ought to strike one as odd. Given the aesthetic interest of improvisatory jazz performances, the subsidiary interest of the standards themselves, and the usefulness of recordings in delivering performances to large audiences, why exactly should we be concerned with discovering something that will count as ‘the work of art in jazz’? That jazz is an artform without works seems quite in keeping with its valorization of creativity in the moment – an attitude it shares with other traditions without works, notably performance art. If there can be artforms, like sculpture, wherein there are works but no performances, and traditions, like classical music, where there are both, why not accept jazz as a tradition, like performance art, in which there are performances but no works?

Though intended as merely rhetorical, a critic might respond to this question with the fact that ‘work of art’ is not merely a descriptive term, but a value-laden one. *Works* of art are the *telos* of each artform; an art tradition without works is an impoverished one. Thus my view of jazz as a tradition without works lends credence to the elitist view that jazz is ‘just’ popular art, not worth serious attention.

I think this line of thought is behind many attempts to uncover ‘the work of art in jazz’, but I also think it is misguided. Firstly, I do not think ‘work of art’ need be an evaluative term. Its descriptive and evaluative senses have been clearly distinguished since at least Morris Weitz’s seminal work on the definition of art (1956). Secondly, my account has something to say about why these senses get conflated. On my account, a work of art is of a kind that is a primary focus of critical attention in a given artform. If some kind of thing is the primary focus of attention in a human practice, then presumably it rewards that attention in some way. Thus one might hastily conclude that if an artistic tradition has no works, it has nothing worthy of attention. But this is a bad inference. For being of a kind that is a primary focus of critical attention is but one necessary condition of being a work of art according to my view. In addition, the candidate must also be an enduring object. Improvisatory performances are the primary focus of critical attention in jazz. That kind of thing is obviously worthy of attention, but it is not an enduring object, and thus cannot be a work of art.

To a critic of my view, this argument may look like a *reductio ad absurdum*. Why insist on this second condition if it costs jazz performances their rightful status as works of art? The reason is one of parity across the arts. If jazz performances are works of art because they are the primary focus of critical attention in jazz, then classical performances must be so too, since they are a primary focus of critical attention in the classical tradition. To agree with this, however, would be to radically revise the way we think about classical music (not to mention other arts involving the performance of works). The other alternative is to deny that the term ‘work of art’ is univocal across the arts. This would also be a radical revision of our art ontology. Since, if we are careful, we

ought not infer anything evaluative about jazz from the fact that it has no works, my account is preferable to either of the radically revisionary alternatives.

### *Consequences for musicology*

Musical ontology, as I have practiced it here, is *descriptive*, both in the sense that it aims to describe how we (really) think about things, rather than suggest new ways of doing so (Strawson 1974: xiii-xv), and in the sense that it describes extant musical practices, rather than prescribing how things ought to be done. Though I think musical ontology in this sense has intrinsic interest for those to whom both music and abstract thought appeal, it also has consequences for musicology.<sup>28</sup> For though musical ontology aims for the best fit with musical practice, the practice of musicians comes first, audiences second, and theorists, to the extent that they can be separated from the first two groups, a distant third. This is because musicology, like ontology, usually comes last, describing an existing practice. Thus, music theorists (like musical ontologists!) can get it wrong in ways that practicing musicians cannot. Because music theory, like philosophy of music, has focused primarily on Western classical music, when it does turn to other music, such as rock or jazz, it often assumes that all music is ontologically like classical music – a tradition of works for performance. When it does so with an ontologically different tradition in its sights, it can lead itself to error. Thus, an understanding of the ontology of a tradition can help the musicologist to focus on the relevant properties of the object of his attention.

The web of similarities and differences between classical, rock, and jazz is quite complicated. Classical and jazz are alike in being live-performance traditions. This results in the similar attitude each takes towards recording technology, using it to

produce, in a sense, durable performances. Yet the classical tradition is centered around enduring works, which are the creations of composers, while in jazz the primary focus of critical attention is ephemeral performances, so that the tradition cannot be said to contain works in the same sense as in the classical tradition. Rock music, on the other hand, while including an important practice of live performances, is centrally a recorded art, whose works are replete recordings that manifest songs which can be performed live, without the works themselves being performances of those songs, and without the songs being works in their own right.

In spite of the ontological dissimilarity between rock and jazz music, it seems that the criticism of those traditions might depart from conventional classical-music criticism in similar directions. For it is a consequence of both the improvisational environment in which jazz performances are produced and the studio environment in which rock tracks are constructed that small details of timing and timbre, for instance, can be of great import, and used to great effect. The reasons for this commonality are different, however. In rock, details can be very important because the rock musician has every imaginable timbre at her fingertips. In jazz, details can be very important because the improviser has very little to work with, compared to most of the works performed by classical musicians, and thus every nuance counts.

Two qualifications need to be added to these claims immediately. The first is that such criticism already exists, and is part of the data upon which I build my ontology.<sup>29</sup> One of the things I hope to have done here is make explicit the (correct!) ontological assumptions implied by such criticism, thereby encouraging more criticism in this vein. The second qualification is that the methods of analysis these critics apply to rock and



jazz, such as those focused on timing and timbre, can be (and occasionally have been) usefully applied to classical music.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, standard classical musicological tools can be of some use with respect to rock and jazz.<sup>31</sup> The development of these aesthetic implications is an important task, but one for another place.<sup>32</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I conduct a more extensive study of the same topic in Kania (2005), from which many of the ideas in this essay are drawn.

<sup>2</sup> A bibliography of the literature on the ontology of classical music would be out of place here. However, in addition to the work on rock and jazz cited elsewhere in the text, see Alperson 1984, Baugh 1993, 1995, Brown 1996, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2002, Carroll 1998, Fisher 1998, Hagberg 2002, Young 1995, and Young and Matheson 2000.

<sup>3</sup> For amplifications of these arguments see Walton (1970), and the recent debate over ‘aesthetic empiricism’ (for example Graham (2006) and D. Davies (2006)).

<sup>4</sup> I ignore classical electronic music for the sake of brevity. My view of that sub-tradition is in accord with Stephen Davies’s (2001: 25-9). I disagree with Davies in that I see rock music as ontologically akin to classical electronic music, as I argue below.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the different kinds of answers given to this question, see Kania (2007, §2.1). An important exception to this approach is Lydia Goehr’s work (1992). I hope that my approach, though analytic, is sensitive to her concerns about the need for an historical awareness of the musical practice one is discussing.

<sup>6</sup> If Leonardo produced something qualitatively identical to one of these sketches as a finished *drawing*, upon which he then based the painting, we would have instead two related works.

<sup>7</sup> This distinction between ontological levels raises issues in meta-ontology that are beyond the scope of this chapter. See Kania (forthcoming) and Thomasson (2005, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> I make no distinction between ‘live’ and ‘studio’ recordings in discussing classical recordings. This is partly because many of the things (such as editing) that move people

to reject the view I defend below are common to both types of recording, and partly because if I can make my case for studio recordings, then the case for live recordings will presumably follow automatically.

<sup>9</sup> Rather than in the sense used by Lee Brown (2005), according to which a recording is transparent if and only if it is sonically indistinguishable from the event it records.

<sup>10</sup> See Warburton (2003) for an overview.

<sup>11</sup> The hyphens are mine, to indicate the specific nature of Davies's view. It is not that there are classical works and rock works (discussed below), of some common ontological kind, and that the classical ones are intended for a certain sort of performance, while the rock ones are intended for a different kind of performance. The claim is that classical works are of the *ontological kind* work-for-live-performance, while rock works are of a different ontological kind: work-for-studio-performance.

<sup>12</sup> There is a parallel problem for Davies's view of the ontology of rock. On Davies's account, live performances of rock songs cannot be authentic instances of the songs they purport to be of, because in his view those songs are works for-studio-performance. I discuss these issues in the next section.

<sup>13</sup> I make a distinction throughout between playing and performing. I take the concept of playing for granted. That performing involves something more can be seen by considering other kinds of playing, such as practicing. See also Godlovitch (1998: 12-13). For ease of exposition, I include singing and conducting as species of 'playing'. For more on the precise nature of the spatio-temporal constraints on live performance, see Godlovitch 1998: 34-41 and S. Davies 2001: 186-90.

<sup>14</sup> There is an analogy between my argument here and Arthur Danto's argument about artistic predicates in 'The Artworld' (1964). While we always thought of live performances as the only kind of performance, with the introduction of recorded performances we see in hindsight that live performances are just one of (at least two) kinds.

<sup>15</sup> I am sometimes tempted by a stronger version of this thesis, namely that recordings are themselves performances, not merely modes of access to them. The temptation is the result of reflection on the fact that the performance the recording encodes can only be heard by playing the recording. Thus the recording is not a mere window on to something independently available, as a photograph of a painting or person is. However, I content myself with arguing for the weaker thesis here.

<sup>16</sup> One interesting topic I have not addressed here is the comparative advantages and disadvantages of gaining access to works through live or recorded performance. I address that question in Kania 1998: 78-100.

<sup>17</sup> With 'rock', I refer to a broad category, on a par with 'classical' and 'jazz', as opposed to a narrow stylistic category, on a par with 'heavy metal'.

<sup>18</sup> The following material is expanded upon in Kania 2006.

<sup>19</sup> I talk of rock 'songs' throughout, although there is some purely instrumental rock; what I say is intended to apply to both kinds. The distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' sound structures was first made by Stephen Davies (1991). The more properties of an instance of a sound structure are determined by that structure, the thicker it is.

<sup>20</sup> See Kania 2006.

<sup>21</sup> The sense in which one ‘plays’ a recording is, of course, different from that in which one ‘plays’ a violin. I trust which sense is operative will be clear from the context.

<sup>22</sup> *Pace* the revisionary ontologies of Gregory Currie (1989) and David Davies (2004), which see all works as performances in some sense.

<sup>23</sup> I ignore unrecorded bands for simplicity. Note that as the technology becomes more accessible, this kind of band is becoming less common.

<sup>24</sup> This seems to be Stephen Davies’s view of live rock, as evidenced in his comments on my ‘Ontology of Rock Music’, presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, San Francisco, October 2003. On Davies’s view, as noted above, rock songs cannot strictly be performed live, since they are of the ontological kind *work-for-studio-performance*.

<sup>25</sup> My focus in this section is on instrumental jazz. I ignore the jazz song tradition, which may be more like classical music ontologically. I note below the possible exception of jazz fusion to my general conclusions.

<sup>26</sup> Musicians from many different live-performance traditions seem to embrace this idealizing aspect of recording technology. See Frith (1996: 232-3).

<sup>27</sup> A case could be made that fusion is a significant counterexample to my thesis that jazz is a live performance tradition. For fusion artists arguably take an approach to recording technology similar to that taken by rock artists, embracing all its possibilities as part of the artistic medium. If this is in fact the case, I would attempt to give an account of jazz fusion similar to an account of classical electronic music. Though the latter is part of the classical tradition rather than the rock tradition for historical reasons, the radical ontological difference between electronic classical music and classical music for

performance has made electronic music a quite distinct and autonomous sub-tradition within classical music as a whole. Thus, perhaps the ‘war between fusion and other jazz practices’ (Brown, 1998: 6) could reach an armistice if both sides acknowledged that each employs a distinct artistic medium.

<sup>28</sup> In what follows, I use the terms ‘musicology’, ‘music theory’, and ‘music criticism’ loosely and interchangeably. I intend to refer to any theorizing about music that is not abstract enough to qualify as philosophy of music.

<sup>29</sup> For two academic examples, besides the journalistic literature, see Walser (1995) and Daley (1998).

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Cogan and Escot (1976). For a review of the current state of ‘performance studies’ – the discipline emerging within musicology that is most concerned with addressing these questions – see Rink (2004).

<sup>31</sup> For examples, see Covach and Boone (1997) and Schuller (1968) respectively.

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## **Keywords**

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