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**The Making, Unmaking, and Remaking of Music**

By [Joseph Marcello](https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/author/JosephMarcello/)  
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“To morph or not to morph – that’s the question.  
Whether ’tis nobler for the Muses to suffer  
The stings and ouches of outrageous artistic alteration,   
Or to litigate against a sea of liberties,   
And by opposing, end them”

(with apologies to Will Shakespeare)

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| |  | | --- | | name How far can you bend a piece of music before it breaks? Photo by Trevor Hunter | |

How far can you bend a piece of music—whether through subtle interpretation or outright improvisation—before it, or its composer, breaks?

This is a brief overview of the liabilities inherent in such undertakings, as well the author’s best shot at sharing what may be a genuinely viable solution for reconciling the seemingly irreconcilable contradictions that have riddled this controversial territory for, well, centuries, if truth be known.

On November 14, 1929 the legendary Toscanini premiered Ravel’s *Bolero* with the New York Philharmonic. The critic of *The Morning Telegraph* shared, “When Bolero had completed perhaps ten minutes of sinuous way, I gasped and prest my heart, which pounded. When another five minutes had passed, one thought possest me:

‘Marvelous, miraculous music; fundamental, simple, primitive, low-down, earthy, but the essence, the pure residue, the actual metal.’ . . . I do not recall any premiere to have been received with such a reception as was given it by the emotion-loosed audience. The yells and hand-clapping came down like an earthquake. It did not subside. And even after Toscanini had tapped for the next opening, the applause broke out afresh. No music anywhere in the city has been acclaimed in this season in such manner.”

It’s clear that the gentleman was harpooned by the performance, and, from all reports, that the irrepressible audience was taken as well. On top of that, another critic went on to say that Toscanini had made Ravel into “almost an American national hero”. And, of course, Bolero has occupied perennial hit-list status ever since.

A pretty strong case for the power of Ravel’s art, no?

But, what’s this, can it be? The Maestro turns and beckons to the hall to give its author acknowledgment when none other than the composer himself, the very object of their adulation, registers his disenchantment with the performance by refusing to take up Toscanini’s invitation, remaining seated throughout.

After the concert Ravel informs Toscanini, “It’s too fast,” to which Toscanini responds “It’s the only way to save the work.” According to another report, Ravel said, “That’s not my tempo.” Toscanini replied, “When I play it at your tempo, it is not effective,” to which Ravel retorted, “Then do not play it!”

So, however many enthralled listeners it had left in its wake, *Bolero*‘s premiere was emphatically not a success from where its creator listened.

Fast forward to April of 1962, when the arcanely gifted pianist Glenn Gould’s take on the Brahms First Piano Concerto was so counter-traditional that the then conductor of the New York Philharmonic, Leonard Bernstein, felt it necessary to offer a public disclaimer of sorts to his audience before the performance:

Don’t be frightened. Mr. Gould is here. He will appear in a moment. I’m not, um, as you know, in the habit of speaking on any concert except the Thursday night previews, but a curious situation has arisen, which merits, I think, a word or two. You are about to hear a rather, shall we say, unorthodox performance of the Brahms D Minor Concerto, a performance distinctly different from any I’ve ever heard, or even dreamt of for that matter, in its remarkably broad tempi and its frequent departures from Brahms’ dynamic indications. I cannot say I am in total agreement with Mr. Gould’s conception and this raises the interesting question: “What am I doing conducting it?” I’m conducting it because Mr. Gould is so valid and serious an artist that I must take seriously anything he conceives in good faith and his conception is interesting enough so that I feel you should hear it, too.   
  
But the age old question still remains: “In a concerto, who is the boss; the soloist or the conductor?” The answer is, of course, sometimes one, sometimes the other, depending on the people involved. But almost always, the two manage to get together by persuasion or charm or even threats to achieve a unified performance. I have only once before in my life had to submit to a soloist’s wholly new and incompatible concept and that was the last time I accompanied Mr. Gould. But, but this time the discrepancies between our views are so great that I feel I must make this small disclaimer. Then why, to repeat the question, am I conducting it? Why do I not make a minor scandal — get a substitute soloist, or let an assistant conduct? Because I am fascinated, glad to have the chance for a new look at this much-played work; Because, what’s more, there are moments in Mr. Gould’s performance that emerge with astonishing freshness and conviction. Thirdly, because we can all learn something from this extraordinary artist, who is a thinking performer, and finally because there is in music what Dimitri Mitropoulos used to call “the sportive element”, that factor of curiosity, adventure, experiment, and I can assure you that it has been an adventure this week collaborating with Mr. Gould on this Brahms concerto and it’s in this spirit of adventure that we now present it to you.

([transcribed](http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~mwatts/glenn/lennie.html) by Mary Jo Watts)

Whereupon, these two agreeing-to-disagree musicians went on to deliver a Brahms concerto nearly twice its usual duration.

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| |  | | --- | | name Leonard Bernstein, Glenn Gould and Igor Stravinsky; Photograph: Picasa 3.0/Public Domain | |

In the new millenium, and with centuries of scholarship under its belt, the issue of what, in the old days, was termed “musical fidelity”—faithfulness to or violation of a composer’s original intent and a work’s innate spirit—still remains as seismographically sensitive as ever; perhaps more so now, in light of technology’s unimagined proliferation of the permutational potentials in musical performance.

While most composers, performers, and listeners would probably agree that there is a wide and flexible field of possibility available in bringing a piece of music home creatively and with its dignity still intact, they would also be quick to add that there are distinct limits—parameters, if you will—beyond which the native sense and spirit of a musical creation undergoes rapid self-destruction and loses its core identity.

True, it may, even successfully, become a new and altogether different entity, a “horse of a different color,” so to speak, and have an unsuspected impact upon its listeners in its new incarnation, however many have kept the faith and remained in their seats. But we are no longer speaking of the piece tradition and the culture-at-large have bequeathed us.

For example, would even a note-perfect rendition of Brahms’ lullaby reeled off, say, at a metronome marking of 188 to the quarter be anywhere near the composer’s emotional intention? Or a lugubriously slow “Happy Birthday to You”? How about the bassoon solo opening *The Rite of Spring* at double-speed? Or the once-scintillating prelude to *Le Tombeau de Couperin* at a leisurely lento? Or perhaps Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* in a hurry?

Unless one is a musical Martian, or has somehow completely lost it artistically, there will be clear and no-nonsense outcries to each of these insolent suggestions. And why? For the same reason we might snatch a child away from the path of a speeding car, or prevent a vandal from spray-painting a Vermeer: to preserve the life and integrity of a living being, a thing of beauty, a joy—one hopes—forever.

But creative and radical experiments are seldom satisfied by fingers pointing to the past, or to such mantras as “tradition,” “practice,” and “scholarship.” They want fireworks, lightning bolts. And, who knows, maybe they can just manage to find some undiscovered angle, a certain spin that might bring the whole thing off brilliantly. But if disfiguring departures from the artistic essence of a work are its death knell, how can any of us presume to know how far—and in what direction—our ingenuity can be permitted to go? Must all scripted music be declared off-limits and untouchable? Or only those pieces which are allowed by composer-consent?

And what of very differing performances and alternate versions of the same work composers themselves have made? And all the wonderful jazz takes on classic ballads and even some classical pieces, none of which are note-perfect, because no self-respecting jazz-person would ever dream of being so? Mustn’t there be some way around the logjam here?

After having pre-meditated, meditated and post-meditated on this dicey issue both from the point of view of a composer (perhaps my most abiding role), as well as that of performer and of pure listener and lover, I’ve come to some curious and unexpected conclusions that may spark some further possibilities in similarly eccentric minds.

When we speak of the “artistic essence”—”the native spirit” of a work—we’re not always referring to its technical topography. Surprisingly, perhaps, or at least counter-intuitively, it appears that the musical soul of a piece, a popular song, for example, can not only survive, but even thrive, when extracted from its specific notational grid, provided certain other less tangible dynamics are observed and respected.

Or take many of Ravel’s most beloved orchestral works—not a few of which entered life as works for solo piano. While far from their original haunts, few even musically literate listeners ever complain that their transliterations into orchestral format belittle or betray their radiance; in fact, opinion often runs in quite the opposite direction. *Ma Mere L’Oye*, *Rhapsodie Espagnol*, and *Le Tombeau de Couperin* are most often remembered and regarded as exclusively orchestral experiences, the predating keyboard versions considered almost as afterthoughts.

Why might this be the case? Why, as Ned Rorem asked, do so few complain about Ravel’s art, in any form?

The answer is not very difficult to find: Ravel seldom if ever set his hand to something without endowing a great enhancement upon it; his output is a precious, finely distilled archive of masterworks, almost all of which have remained consistently in the repertory since their inception, works over which their creator labored with mind-boggling exactitude. He made every note, every moment, count and also had the uncanny ability of zeroing in upon and magnifying the quintessential character of whatever music by others happened to inspire his creative attention at the moment. Only through such self-abnegating, wizardly co-identification with his source-piece could such an original genius have, with confidence, shared his—to some, audacious—intention to someday re-orchestrate so revered a masterpiece as Debussy’s *La Mer*; the man was actually convinced that he could relieve his colleague’s version of some needless awkwardnesses and miscalls, and to illuminate its aesthetic intent even more fully than its creator had.

“Arrogant!” some might understandably decry. Perhaps, but only someone fully conversant with the genie-like brilliance of the soul that lived inside the façade of the inscrutable Maurice Ravel—through deep study of his work and his remarkable musical prescience—would be in a position to appreciate the immense possibilities it harbored.

Unlike Schoenberg, Stravinsky and similar others who could not seem to repress their innate musical proclivities when making arrangements of the music of others, Ravel achieved the virtually impossible—and managed somehow not to “Ravelize” the music which fell into his hands, rare as those instances may have been. He came to that task with the self-denial of a scholastic monk, and the inspiration of a true *amateur*—that is to say, “a lover of.”

His *Pictures at an Exhibition* is a case in point, a re-creation which has long since become the accepted version of Mussorgsky’s masterpiece. And, once having heard the Ravel, it is not so easy to remain content with the earnest strivings of the original version piano solo, which is, to be sure, deeply original, unique in flavor, arresting and fascinating in its exploitation of the keyboard, but both in its climaxes and in its subtleties simply asking more of the poor piano than it is able to deliver, even under virtuosic hands. Indeed, it feels to be something of a Sleeping Beauty awaiting resurrection by some future Musical Prince Charming, or an Ugly Duckling not yet become a swan.

Nor is this merely a matter of “bigger is better.” Nothing reveals the inherent impoverishment of a mediocre piece of musical more than an unwarranted inundation into orchestral format – such as, perhaps, various Liszt Hungarian rhapsodies; and nothing violates the virginity of pieces already perfect-fits for their genre such as the Satie *Gymnopedies* or the Chopin preludes than abuse-by-orchestra.

The point here is not to explore the pros and cons of original versus transliterated or reworked, but to demonstrate that when revisiting a work results in an enhancement and a deepening of its essential spirit, there is no outcry and no complaint; we sense, almost instinctively, that both the composer and his musical child are being cared for and respected. Those occasions which cause head-on artistic collisions, fireworks, and lawsuits are the ones in which the mutation, the upstart, has been offered as a viable replacement for the original. This is when the fur flies. And this is why few gripe about far-out jazzifications of classical works; they’re so far afield from the original that the issue of challenging the authorized version is virtually out of the question.

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| |  | | --- | | name Miles Davis’s *Sketches of Spain* which features a Gil Evans arrangement of Rodrigo’s *Concierto de Aranjuez* | |

Joaquin Rodrigo was more than happy to see the spontaneous combustion of the exquisite slow movement of his *Concierto de Aranjuez* for guitar and orchestra into every imaginable form—a popular song and a Gil Evans arrangement for Miles Davis classic *Sketches of Spain*—without so much as a murmur of protest because he knew that the original stood untouched and untouchable, at the heart of the repertory, as the archetype from which all its spinoffs emerged, and to which they all paid homage. But in the case of the Gould-Bernstein-Brahms concerto, it was a situation of pawning off the performance as Brahms’s very own love-child—indeed a possible impostor usurping the rightful throne and a slap in the face to a century of scholarship and performance wisdom.

When countless jazz players intone their own takes, spins, and bluesifcations—and Boston Pops arrangers their high-browsinizations—of Gershwin’s lullaby, “Summertime”—the peerless soprano solo leading us into the musical drama of *Porgy and Bess*—we feel no sense of moral outrage because none of them ever dreamt of purporting to replace or improve upon Gershwin’s original aria.

Indeed, long familiarity with *Porgy* has indelibly imprinted its uniquely lovely and artful chord-voicings into the spirit, converging lines which are virtually never reproduced by any of its improvisers or arrangers, and which, to my ears, contain the secret of the original’s magical potency to move us, beyond any virtuosic elaboration spun off by hot fingers.

Again, the original stands safely out of harm’s way.

But, as a composer of both many concert works and many theater and neo-folk songs, I have no problem with any number of barely-skilled amateurs playing their self-styled versions of my neo-folk songs, even with a substantial percentage of its critical (and, it must be said, ingenious!) harmonic infrastructure lacking, as long as the tune and the lyrics ring true of Marcello; but I find far less room for such latitude in renditions of my musical theater works, which fall—when push comes to shove—not too far short of art song in their delineation of line and voicing; and alas, no wiggle-room whatever in my musical soul for the slightest transgressions of note-choice, tempo, and phrasing for my solo, chamber, orchestral, and other concert works.

The reason? Simple: the “folk” or “pop” song venue is largely the creature of unspoken mutual agreement, a common practice or cipher—as it were—whereby it is tacitly understood that, provided critical harmonic flavors are respected, these musical ice cream cones may be served up in any number of ingenious ways—from No Frills to Extra Fancy—without treading on any sacred toes of content and musical meaning.

But in more highly choreographed, please-don’t-touch creations, we’re trying to keep the contours (after all, “morphe” means “shape” in Ancient Greek) and, perhaps above all, *content* of who and what it is we truly feel ourselves to be artistically and spiritually. Do we really want anyone to mess with that?

Probably not. But then again, if done, well, *brill*iantly, the answer could very well be an unreserved “Yes!”

A true story comes to mind about a well-known American composer who happened to encounter the elderly Stravinsky at a social gathering in the former’s home; in the course of their composerly shop-talk, the old master made it clear that he had the uncanny skill of being able to identify the stylistic hallmarks that were responsible for producing the identifiable “voice” or “sound” of a given composer, and to amplify and enhance that unique voice. Expressing astonishment, the composer asked Stravinsky if he could do that with anyone’s work, to which the latter replied in the affirmative, inviting him to bring the Grand Old Man a piece of his choosing for instant Stravinskyization. This was done. Stravinsky studied the score for a few minutes, making occasional marginal notations on the manuscript, and then played the result for his host. The man was amazed and dumbstruck. “I had to admit,” he said, “that the piece sounded more like me than *I* did!”

Far from being mere grandstanding—and a good anecdote for after-dinner raconteurs—this vignette demonstrates a little-perceived artistic truth that many of us might well choose to avoid: we all—almost to a man or woman—like to believe that we possess both the self-knowledge and the artistic prowess to express who we really are and how we truly feel in our chosen medium, whether that be music or any other venue; but in fact we may have far to go in both departments, like each of the seven blind men thinking the part of the elephant he touched was the definitive one.

If and when an unexpectedly probing and profound executant comes along who, somehow, has spontaneous access to the inner sanctum of musical resources and skills, who can see, sense, and feel the intent beyond the crude roadmaps of printed score, dry scholarship and accepted performance practice, perhaps miracles *can* happen, miracles by which an only partially manifested artistic intent can at last be fulfilled, perhaps even re-invented. Certainly the thrill that this composer experienced as a result of Stravinsky’s seemingly magical intercession was no disappointment, no merely intriguing dalliance with his music, but an essential and qualitative enhancement, a giving of himself to himself, in short, a gift of spirit, albeit a humbling one. Unlikely as it may seem, there may actually be someone out there who can express the song of our inner Muse—gasp—better than *we* can.

The past has bequeathed us many stories testifying to the transmogrifying interpretive genius of such as Mozart, Beethoven, and Liszt (pianists seem the rule here, exercising, as they do, the capacity to control linear and horizontal dimensions of music simultaneously. And perhaps guitarists run a close second.) Such performers have walked the earth, and do even now exist. Among those who come to mind of my immediate acquaintance are two magnificent Polish-born classical-to-jazz pianists, Leszek Mozdzer, a still-young prodigy of Lisztian prowess, and Adam Makovicz, who could easily give the legendary Art Tatum a run for his money; then there is the “trans-classical,” beyond-category phenomenon of Gabriela Montero, who can morph any piece on-the-spot into and out of any period style with a skill consummate enough to convince you that you were only dreaming.

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To be honest, possibly even heretical, sometimes these and other gifted performers turn in takes on hallowed originals that result in an unimagined expansion of their inherent glories. While die-hards may insist that this is simply not possible without violating sense and symmetry of that original, again, there is no conflict if one does not enter into the dichotomy of an either/or scenario; i.e., one proclaimed authoritative and the other sentenced to annihilation.

It is as if, in the infinitude of compositional possibilities which so daunted even as great a composer as Stravinsky when he faced the pregnant void of unmarked score paper, there are many possible—and equally successful—ways in which the same piece, containing the same core thematic, harmonic, or motivic material, could be realized. Ravel said as much to Roland-Manuel when the latter sought to penetrate the secret of achieving the perfect orchestrational solution to a given passage, telling him that there were many successful ways in which the passage in question might have been orchestrated effectively. This, in the face of Ravel’s seemingly unimprovable musical choices, stunned and bewildered the young Roland-Manuel.

It is almost unthinkable for most of us who have bonded with various works and performances through the decades to, in hindsight, hypothesize how even more prescient and penetrating evocations versions of such old and dear friends could ever exist, yet it does not lie beyond the range of possibility. A hearing of selections from Leszek Mozdzer or Gabriela Montero’s classically-based evocations, reveals a deepening exploration of Bachian, Chopinesque, and other musical dialectics in moving creations which completely respect their namesakes, yet which break exciting new ground.

Well, it’s clear we can’t turn back; as long as musicians draw breath there will be experimenters upon experimenters, versions upon versions of just about every musical genre; which leaves only one viable solution: we must allow for the simultaneous existence of *multiple* creative dimensions, coexistent musical universes, none of which replaces or interferes in the least with its other-dimensional counterparts, so that contemporary creativity can flourish without restriction, and without the illusion that it can ever, in the least, threaten the dearly-forged infrastructure of centuries of Western musical invention and loving labor.

So then, here’s to a profusion of glories, a grand-tiered hierarchy of parallel kingdoms in which all art forms may freely consort, for ever and ever, without remorse or endangerment:

a) The Kingdom of Engraved-in-Stone, Never-in-the-Slightest-to-be-Altered-Upon-Pain-of-Excommunication inspirations of Palestrina, Bach, Ravel and the other apostles of Eternal and Unchanging Beauty. (We worship them and will happily endure Eternity with them Just the Way They Are, thank you.)   
  
b) The Kingdom of Passionate Metamorphosis, in which beloved works are evoked, brought to life, and engage in artistic intercourse, producing often attractive, sometimes stunning love-children unmistakably resonant of both parents—yet clearly in no danger of being mistaken for purebreds. (We too worship them, but, well, we just get a kick out being miraculously surprised and delighted now and again, even against our own best expectations, beyond our pet attachments and at the risk of a dud now and again.)   
  
and   
  
c) The Kingdom of Incredibly, Infinitely Free Creation, where no exploration, no experiment is off-limits, and where, if anything you hear sounds remotely like something illegally procured from the other two kingdoms, you may count it, like the whole of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a pure fantasy, nothing more than a musical free-fall in which—who knows?—we may find ourselves in an as-yet unimaginable realm of beauty that steals the souls from out our very breasts. And if, in the journey, your beloved old friends seem to have been mishandled, take heart—no true harm has been done; they still exist, stainless and perfect, in Musical Eternity. (We love it all, good, bad, and all that lies betwixt. And if, perchance, eternal musical damnation is the price we free-thinkers and full-feelers must pay for such illicit experiment, then we say “A*men*!” Life is short, and the magic is more than worth the risk!)

A toast then, to our shared musical credo: “Let us—*all* of us—to the marriage of True Muses, not admit impediment.”

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