

# MUSICIANSHIP AND NARRATIVITY: MUSICAL PERFORMANCE AS FOCALIZATION

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## ABSTRACT

**Background.** Although musical narrativity is a relatively new research area in musicology, much has been written about the narrative aspects of music. But, just as in literary theory, there is no general consensus on how to define musical narrativity and on what its constitutive narrative elements exactly are. Furthermore, the main object of investigation into musical narrativity nearly always is the written musical score.

**Aims.** In this paper, I will investigate the role the performer plays in the process of musical narration by analyzing *Anthèmes 2*, composed by Pierre Boulez. In this analysis, I will devote special attention to the differences between performances by live musicians and performances by machines, and the implications of these differences for a musical narrativity.

**Main Contribution.** By using the narrative theory of Mieke Bal, I will argue that the performer fulfils the function of focalizer in a musical narrative, since we perceive the music through the “eyes” of the performer. I will focus especially on the similarities and differences of the focalizer in music and in literature. After all, music and literature are two different media, so one cannot simply apply theories about literature on music, without taking into account the differences between literature and music.

**Implications.** The investigation into the role of the performer in a musical narrative will give us greater insight in the way musical narrativity is established. Since performance is an important, even a necessary, element in music, one cannot ignore this element when talking about musical narrativity.

## 1. BAL’S NARRATOLOGY

In literary theory, there exists a plurality of narratological theories: structuralist, poststructuralist, psychoanalytic, contextualist, etc. While many of these theories cover important aspects of narrativity, and lead to new insights into the mechanics underlying the process of reading and interpreting narratives, they do not give a comprehensive and systematic account of narrativity. What is missing in these theories is an approach with which we can literally decompose a narrative into its individual “building blocks,” and explain in what manner these individual elements constitute a narrative.

Mieke Bal, in her 1997 study into literary narrativity, takes up this challenge. In this study, she aims at presenting a systematic account of a theory of narrative for use in the study of literary and other narrative texts. She conceives her theory “[...] as a set of tools, as a means to express and specify one’s interpretative reactions to a text” (Bal 1997: x). Bal emphasizes, however, that her theory holds no claim to certainty. Since the interpretation of

text, although not absolutely arbitrary, is in principle free, there is all the more a need for a discourse that makes those interpretations “expressible, accessible, communicable” (x).

### 1.1. A Narrative Trichotomy: Text

A narrative text, according to Bal, is a text in which an agent relates a story in a particular medium. She distinguishes three layers in such a narrative text: text, story and fabula. A text is a finite, structured whole composed of language signs. A story is a fabula that is presented in a certain manner, and a fabula is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors. An event is defined as a transition from one state to another state, whereas an actor is an agent that performs actions. To act, lastly, means to cause or to experience an event (1997: 5).

The strict division of a narrative text into three layers is something that is typical for Bal’s theory. She proposes a top-down approach to these layers. Since Bal regards her theory as “[...] a readerly device, a heuristic tool that provides focus to the expectations with which readers process narrative” (xv), she wants her narrative theory to reflect the way we, as readers, deal with narrative texts. This means that her theory follows the order in which the reader gets access to and interprets a narrative text, for “[i]t is by way of the text that the reader has access to the story, of which the fabula is, so to speak, a memorial trace that remains with the reader after completion of the reading” (xv).

As I remarked above, Bal regards a narrative text as a text in which an agent relates a story in a particular medium. According to her, an agent that “relates a story in a particular medium” is the narrator. To be more precise, a narrator is “[...] that agent which utters the linguistic signs which constitute the text or the equivalent of that agent in other media” (18). It is in other words the narrator that communicates the story to the reader. One must be careful not to assume that a narrator is a person of some sort: a narrator is a function, “[...] and not a person, which expresses itself in the language that constitutes the text” (16). So one should not confuse the narrator with the writer of the narrative.

### 1.2. Story and Fabula

Bal defines a story as a fabula that is presented in a certain manner, a fabula being a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors. According to her, aspects are those features that distinguish the structured story from the fabula, so those elements of a story that can be different from the fabula (78). She mentions six kinds of aspects: sequential ordering, rhythm, frequency, character, space and focalization.

By presenting a certain sequential ordering of events in a story, anachrony, a deviation from the chronological order as presented in the fabula, can be created (83). The same can be done by changing the rhythm of events in a story. With frequency, the numerical relationship between the events in the fabula and those in the story can be manipulated (111-113). With the aspect of character, the actors that act in a fabula become “personalized” (115-132), while with space the events of the fabula can be placed in a semantics-generating context (135-136).

By focalization, Bal understands the relations between the elements presented and the vision through which they are presented, so the relation between the vision and that which is “seen,” or perceived. There has to be a distinction between those who see and those who speak, i.e. the vision through which the elements are presented and the identity of the voice that is verbalizing that vision (142-143). In other words, we have to make a clear distinction between the function of narrator and of focalizer, which is the subject of focalization, the point from which the elements are viewed. This function can lie with a character, or can be external (146). When analyzing narratives, several relevant questions concerning focalization can be asked, such as: What does the focalizer focalize? What is it aimed at? How does it do this? With what attitude does it view things? Who focalizes it? Whose focalized object is it? Focalization is regarded as one of the most important aspect of a story, since it is this aspect that defines the way the story is communicated to us. The narrator may be function that in fact utters the linguistic signs that constitute the text, but it is through focalization that the completeness of the image that the reader receives, is determined.

## 2. NARRATIVITY IN MUSIC

According to Mieke Bal, “[n]arratology can be used on other objects than just narrative texts, just as narrative texts can sometimes be better approached with other methods than narratological” (1990: 730). With the aid of narratology, the narrative aspect of objects can be studied, regardless of them being linguistic or otherwise, and this narratological aspect being the representation of a temporal development. At first sight, many musical compositions seem to have such a narratological aspect, so there is no a priori objection to applying narratology to music.

Bal’s narrative theory seems very promising for an adaptation to music. This approach may account for the way the listener identifies in a musical text – the first layer – sequences of events and their interrelations – the second layer – and for the way the listener distills out of these events a lasting impression, a recollection of the music – the third layer, analogous to Bal’s top-down approach sketched above: via the text the reader has access to the story, of which the fabula is a memorial trace that remains with the reader after completion of the reading.

### 2.1. Musical Text, Story and Fabula

The trichotomy musical text – story – fabula can be defined as follows: a musical text is a finite, structured whole composed of acoustical signs, i.e. sounds that are regarded by the listener as constituting a musical work. A musical story is a musical fabula

that is presented in a certain manner, a musical fabula being a series of logically and chronologically related musical events that are caused or experienced by musical actors.

A musical event consists of a series of sounds, a series that is at a given moment interpreted by the listener as having reached a closure, which signifies an end or a final state, a sense of completion of an event. Such a closure can be a temporal interval that is larger than the immediately preceding ones, a sound that is significantly different from the immediately preceding sounds or a halt in a continuous change (Snyder 2000: 39-59). Since an actor is defined by Bal as that function that causes or experiences events, a musical actor can be defined as the musical parameter or parameters that cause closures, i.e. the musical parameter(s) that create(s) musical events. At the same time, a musical actor also can be the musical parameter(s) that change(s) during a musical event, since an actor not only can cause, but also can experience events.

A lot more can be said about musical narrativity, like how can we define a musical narrator, what is musical space, how can we distinguish a series of logical and chronologically related musical events from the presentation of those events in a musical story, etc. In this paper, I will not discuss these issues, but I will instead focus on one particular musical aspect of the story level: that of musical focalization.

### 2.2. Story and the Musical Focalizer

As I already remarked above, focalization is such an important aspect, because it determines the manner in which the succession of events is communicated to the reader. Focalization “colors,” to use Bal’s expression, the story with subjectivity. The jazz composer and musician Carla Bley also uses color as a metaphor when describing her compositions: “I write pieces that are like drawings in a crayon book and the musicians color them themselves” (quoted in Benson 2003: 135). Bruce Ellis Benson adds that this coloring never stays purely within the lines. “For the ‘coloring in’ that takes place in performance also consists of redefining those lines or, alternatively, redefining what it means to respect them” (135). The interpretation of a written score, which is the crayon book that is colored in during performance, is translated into sounds by that performance.

So, the composer is not the only person that is necessary for the creation of music. Music, the way it is regarded in this paper, is only music when the music is actually sounding, so when it is performed. As Benson observes, the way music is traditionally preserved is via a musical score, so via a verbal, notated prescription. With the aid of this prescription the performer or performers can give a rendition of the musical piece the composer has conceived. This rendition complies however only partially, at best, with the intentions of the composer. Since a written score leaves so many options open, they do “[...] make a work ideal – in the sense of being available to all – [but] they likewise allow a work to be detached from its composer and open to a wide variety of interpretations” (79). A score is a way to ensure the continuing existence of a musical work, while this manner of preservation is at the same time a guarantee for there being a wide variety of differently sounding performances of that work. As soon as the writing is done, the composer him- or herself can no longer

control the way the music will ultimately sound in performance, other than trying to be present during rehearsals and hoping the directions s/he gives will be acted upon during the performance of the piece. A musical text, then, which I earlier defined as a finite, structured whole composed of acoustical signs, does not receive its final appearance when the musical score is written by the composer, but only during performance; the moment in which, to use Benson's expression, the musical work is "embodied" (82).

Benson, in paraphrasing Wilhelm von Humboldt, argues that the work, the *ergon*, exists as an activity, as *energeia* (125), and thus emphasizes the necessity of there being one or more performers in order to let a musical text exist. According to Benson, the regarding of *ergon* as *energeia* has several implications: first, the creation of a musical work, in the sense of writing a score, is not an end in itself, but a means to the end of making music. Likewise, the performance cannot be seen apart from the work. All this, finally, makes the idea of authorship much more complex (126). Because the performer has such a decisive part in both the existence and the contents of a musical work, Benson argues that the composer cannot be the sole author of a sounding musical piece. S/he might have written the musical score, but s/he only did that in order to create sounding music, and for that s/he needs performers. These performers themselves are at the same time co-authors, since the score from which they are playing off leaves many options open, which they can fill in as they like. The filling in of these options is a very important activity, for, as Benson argues, "[...] it is precisely what is not to be found in the score that we often most value" (84-85). The reason why we favor one performance of a musical work over another cannot be found in the notes themselves. So the lines in the crayon book, the musical score, stay the same, but it is the coloring within and over these lines that shape our preferences. The performance thus determines how the music is communicated to the listener: performance acts as the musical focalizer, the point from which the musical events are viewed.

A literary focalizer can give an incomplete account of events, as I remarked above. Through focalization it is determined how complete the image is that the reader receives. When performing a musical work, the "image" of the musical events that is given to the listener is almost always incomplete: the performer or performers have to make choices about the interpretation of the piece, by deciding for instance whether or not the rendition will be historically "authentic," how to interpret dynamic and tempo marks, which are by definition only approximate, etc. In other words: the focalization in a musical work nearly always results in a partial account of the musical story. Perhaps only in the case of electronic music the image that is given is complete, but even then the means available for giving a true account of the musical events may prove to be insufficient.

Although musical focalization has the essential characteristics literary focalization has, i.e. the coloring of the succession of events with subjectivity and the determining of the way this succession is communicated, these versions of focalization are not identical. First of all, whereas in literature the focalization or focalizations are identical for every reading of the narrative, in music the focalization can, and almost always will, change in each performance. No one performance is the same, so, as I already remarked, different interpretations, and therefore different focalizations, of the same musical work may exist.

Furthermore, in literature, more than one focalizer, the subject through which "eyes" we "see" the events, can be found, while in music there is only one focalizer. Although many musical pieces have to be performed by more than one musician, each musician contributes to the performance as a whole, and it is this performance through which focalization takes place. A performance is the end result of the creation of an interpretation of a musical work, a creation in which each performer shapes his or her interpretation of his or her individual part in order to achieve the desired end result. So a rendition of a musical work by an ensemble of musicians is not the presentation of several focalizers, each giving his or her own view on the musical events at the same time, but the joint presentation of a single focalizer, i.e. the performance.

### 3. FOCALIZATION IN ANTHÈMES 2

*Anthèmes 2*, composed by Pierre Boulez, is in two ways an innovative work. Firstly, it is an innovation on an earlier piece by Boulez, *Anthèmes*, a work for solo violin. Secondly, in *Anthèmes 2* live electronics is used in an innovative way. In this piece, written for violin and "dispositif électronique," the sounds made by the violin are electronically altered and spatialized in real time, while other sounds are added that are electronically generated, but triggered by the violin's part.

In *Anthèmes 2*, it is the interplay between the violin and the electronic sounds that constitute focalization. Here we can really speak of a genuine interplay, since the electronic part is not fixed. This part is not just a playback of a tape or a sequencer, but on the contrary can vary from performance to performance, just like the live played violin part. This is not surprising, since the electronic sounds literally are a reaction to the violin part, so these sounds vary as much from performance to performance as the violin part does.

The introduction of *Anthèmes 2*, "Libre," starts with the violin playing a descending line that is reverberated electronically. Then the violin plays staccato bowed notes, to which echoes are added, that sound more pizzicato than arco. The violin concludes this first phrase with a short pizzicato note, and after that the introduction ends with a long, bowed, electronically altered note. In this introduction, the electronic sounds are embellishments rather than constituting a separate voice.

In the first movement, "Très lent, avec beaucoup de flexibilité – Libre," electronically harmonized melodic bowed phrases with electronically generated pizzicato-like embellishments are played. A long, electronically altered tone, similar to the one that can be heard at the end of the introduction, concludes the first movement. The second movement, "Rapide, dynamique, très rythmique, rigide – Libre," consists of a series of pizzicato notes, both played by the violin and generated electronically, as if engaged in some sort of dialogue. Often it is not clear which notes are played by the violin and which are electronically generated. Later in this movement, at approximately 00'53" (in the world-première recording that appeared on Deutsche Grammophon 463 475-2), a clearer distinction is audible. At 01'37", the same long electronically altered tone that also appeared in the other movements is played, only this time it is repeated and varied. In these two movements, the electronic sounds break loose from

the violin part, although they are still triggered by the violin part. Only in the “libre” passages the electronic sounds appear to be more embellishment than constituting a separate part.

The same impression do the next three movements give. Reminiscent of the pizzicato phrase in the second movement, the third movement, “Lent, régulier – Nerveux, irrégulier – Libre,” starts off with fast staccato, bowed notes, again in dialogue with pizzicato-like electronically generated sounds. At 00’49”, harmonized long notes, followed at 01’11” by a variation of the beginning of the movement are played. The movement ends just like the first movement, with a long, electronically altered tone. The fourth movement, “Agité, instable – Libre,” consists of bowed tremolo phrases in the violin, accompanied by reverberating sounds. Again, the movement ends with long note, this time again repeated and varied. The fifth movement, “Très lent, avec beaucoup de flexibilité – Subitement nerveux et extrêmement irrégulier – Libre,” also starts with a tremolo violin passage, this time electronically harmonized, followed by a similar phrase in the violin, but with pizzicato sound accompaniment. The ending again is similar to the previous movement.

The sixth and final movement deviates from the structure of the previous ones. In the first part of this movement, “Allant, assez serré dans le tempo,” a tremolo phrase played by the violin and electronic pizzicato-like sounds can be heard, interrupted by staccato echoes of arco tones. The second part, “Calme, régulier – Agité – Brusque,” consists entirely of an alternation of fast notes of the violin played pizzicato and electronic tones, fast notes played arco plus electronic sounds, and soft arpeggios played pizzicato by the violin along with electronic reverberations. In the third and final part of the last movement, “Calme, sans traîner, d’un mouvement très régulier – Libre,” a repeated bowed motif is played by the violin, which is slowly varied, accompanied by electronic reverberations and interrupted by other violin phrases. At the conclusion of the movement a long reverberation along with a very soft, sustained note in the violin can be heard. The piece ends with a short, soft tone, played pizzicato by the violin, without any electronic accompaniment.

Throughout the piece there is an alternation between electronic embellishments of the violin and the appearance of a genuine electronic voice alongside with the violin part. Both are however generated by the performance of the violin part, and therefore dependent on the way this part is executed. This is a reversal of the dependency relation in the performance of many electro-acoustic works, where the electronic part is fixed and the live performers have to adjust to this fixed part, for instance by playing along with a click track, since this part cannot be changed during performance. But in *Anthèmes 2*, it is the electronic part that has to adjust itself to the way the live part is executed.

This implies that the live performer determines, for the greater part, the focalization of *Anthèmes 2*. Here it is the human performer, and not the electronic device, that largely determines the manner in which the succession of musical events in this piece is communicated to the listener. S/he decides when a particular electronic sound or phrase will be audible, and even in part the way it will sound. This also implies that two performances of *Anthèmes 2* will differ in more ways than two performances of an electro-acoustic work with a fixed electronic part would. The focalization in these performances will therefore differ from each other considerably, too.

In other words: the musical events, that constitute *Anthèmes 2*, can be told in different ways, as opposed to electronic works with fixed parts. One could therefore argue that these electronic works resemble a literary story more than a piece like *Anthèmes 2* does, since the focalization in these works stays the same for each performance, just as for each reading the focalization in literary narrative is identical. Musical works in which the occurrence of electronic sounds is dependent on live performance thus contain more aspects that are characteristic of “traditional” music. Perhaps this is also the reason why *Anthèmes 2* is such a fascinating piece: it is a modern electro-acoustic composition that is communicated to us via a classical musical focalization.

#### 4. REFERENCES

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