

Originality or Familiarity?

A discussion on programming
a recital of new and existing
musical works

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Recommended Music to accompany this article:

7 Takes, composed by David Behrens

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Xkx4w5RSOI&list=PLrJ-fzeHqjXl4WRjCOo8bvlZHIiPdNsg4>

Rhapsody in Blue for Piano Solo and Orchestra,
composed by George Gershwin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cH2PH0auTUU>

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‘Since public concerts began centuries ago, engaging audiences has been a concern’.^[1] This statement succinctly establishes that there is no one method of constructing a successful recital programme. With that in mind, this essay will explore the dramaturgical strategies used to present my chosen repertoire, initially outlining what lead to the formation of the programme, before discussing elements of musical narrativity and how that can aid in conveying meaning on a deeper level. In addition, I will investigate the importance of utilising novelty in balance with familiarity to entice an audience, whilst keeping an awareness of the drawbacks that each can impose. Finally, the presence of a unifying theme will be discussed with regards to how it can potentially add originality, resulting in a programme that can be simultaneously engaging and informative.

Given my mixed jazz and classical training on both piano and alto saxophone, I decided to introduce a theme to my recital: *On the Boundaries of Jazz*. The concept of boundaries and

[1] John C. Tibbetts, Michael Saffle and William Everett, eds., *Performing Music History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 327.

musical fusion is rather appropriate in the context of jazz, as the style itself only emerged from the combination of cultures in the first place.^[2] The very nature of jazz is that it absorbs and makes the ‘richest use of new musical materials, systems and languages’.^[3] I consequently wish to present this programme with an equivalent attitude—that of experimentation and exploration whilst nevertheless taking into account established musical styles and their cultural contexts. Parallel to performing, another significant interest of mine is composition, so I took this opportunity to write two pieces for my programme—one for alto saxophone and piano, and one for solo piano. Given that my foremost aim is the audience’s enjoyment, the main reason to add original music into the programme was to make this recital unique and as enticing as possible. A considerable benefit of writing original work was that I could simultaneously tailor the compositions to fit the theme, whilst writing to my own performance strengths, both of which should facilitate the audience’s engagement. As a result, my programme, in order, is as follows: Zequinha de Abreu’s *Tico Tico no fubá* (a Brazilian song arranged for saxophone and piano), *Kind of Klezmer* (original composition for saxophone and piano), *7 Takes* (original composition for solo piano), George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* (arrangement for piano and string quartet).

After deciding on these pieces, the first aspect to establish was the order of performance. Given that the theme I have chosen for this recital incorporates elements from several musical disciplines, and that this is therefore a hybrid style, there are no set programming conventions. However, conventions and etiquette from the original styles are still relevant and contribute to the decision-making process concerning performance order. Regarding new, original compositions, the art of programming must be used especially carefully. Edward Cone comments that ‘all too often new compositions are quarantined, consigned to programmes consisting entirely of unfamiliar works’, noting that ‘intelligent programme construction is impossible’ under

[2] Sidney Finkelstein, *Jazz: A People’s Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1948), 78.

[3] *Ibid.*

such circumstances.^[4] Consequently, a sensible solution to this issue would be to combine new work with familiar repertoire to provide both comfort and novelty for an audience, hence my decision to begin and end with pieces that are each well known in their respective styles. Although *Tico Tico no fubá* was originally written for classical guitar and voice in the Brazilian choro style in 1917,^[5] it was Charlie Parker's rendition of the song that caught my attention, redefining it as a jazz standard. I will perform an arrangement inspired by this version. Due to the addition of an improvised solo between two incarnations of the main melody, this piece constitutes the closest resemblance to 'pure' jazz on the programme, with none of the subsequent pieces following such a trademark structure. It was a conscious decision to place this as the opening item—not only should its catchy, up-tempo melody draw people's attention, but despite its South American rhythms, it nonetheless provides an example of jazz in a relatively conventional sense before departing more consciously to fuse with other musical styles.

The first of my compositions, *Kind of Klezmer*, as the name suggests, takes inspiration from traditional Jewish and Eastern European music, casting the audience from the Americas over to Europe with its distinctive harmonic vocabulary. At this point, the concept of narratives becomes significant. The addition of a theme to this recital already introduces an aspect of narrativity to the programme, transporting the audience between continents by varying musical styles. This initially establishes a geographical element to the whole recital; however, within each piece lie several sub-narratives. The idea of narrative in music is rather convoluted, with a range of opinions surrounding their origin, function and even existence.^[6] One question raised, addresses the necessity for music to be able to refer to something outside itself.^[7] I would argue that this depends on the function and context of the music in question, but in a concert environment it could be argued that it may not be a *necessity*, yet nevertheless could

[4] Edward T. Cone, 'The pianist as critic', in *The Practice of Performance: Studies in Musical Interpretation*, ed. John Rink (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 243.

[5] Tamara Elena Livingston and Thomas George Cara Garcia, *Choro: A Social History of a Brazilian Popular Music* (Indiana University Press, 2005), 101.

[6] Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful: A Contribution Towards the Revision of the Aesthetics of Music* (Hackett Publishing, 1986), 28.

[7] Werner Wolf, 'Narrative and narrativity: A narratological reconceptualization and its applicability to the visual arts', *Word & Image* 19 (2003): 181, accessed 20 February 2020. doi.org/10.1080/02666286.2003.10406232.

add another layer of meaning to a performance. Despite the associations that ‘narrative’ has with semantics, Eduard Hanslick argued that music is unrelated to semantic content, and that ‘the content of music is tonally moving forms’.^[8] Juxtaposing this view, however, are several academic investigations which have shown that jazz musicians favour using language metaphors when talking about their practice.^[9] Furthermore, in an improvisation masterclass I attended, the late saxophonist Joe Temperley told me that ‘if you don’t have anything to say, don’t play’,^[10] clearly equating speaking with performing. Aside from performers’ choices regarding narratives, the audience too will form their own interpretations, and so the responsibility lies with the performer to convey how their performance should be perceived.^[11]

In an effort to engage younger generations in ‘classical’ music performances, performers are increasingly expected to speak directly to their audience with respect to the music they play, rather than playing it without such interaction.^[12] Although this departure from more traditional performance contexts could be seen as a rather defeatist actuality, I see it rather as an opportunity to connect with an audience on a level that could result in their heightened responsiveness. In terms of my recital, this kind of interaction could bridge the gap between the laid-back presentation in jazz performance, and the more formal introductions heard in purely ‘classical’ contexts, a gap in which my recital might be placed. I intend to use this method of communication as a strategy for engaging my audience to allow them to easily accompany me on this journey across the boundaries of jazz and appreciate the narratives I outline along the way. To justify this decision, Ludwig Wittgenstein observed that ‘listener’s narrativisation of music may be dependent of cultural competence’,^[13] implying that the socio-cultural context of each listener could potentially result in a wide variety of interpretations throughout the audience. Although this is a valid point, made by a highly acclaimed philosopher, I plan to

[8] Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, 28-29.

[9] Sven Bjerstedt, *Storytelling in Jazz Improvisation: Implications of a Rich Intermedial Metaphor* (Lund University, Malmö Academy of Music, 2014), 311.

[10] Joe Temperley, ‘A Masterclass with Joe Temperley’, Masterclass, Lochgelly Centre, October 23, 2014.

[11] William Rothstein, ‘Analysis and the act of performance’, in *The Practice of Performance: Studies in Musical Interpretation*, ed. John Rink (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 237.

[12] Tibbetts, Saffle and Everett, *Performing Music History*, 327.

[13] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 67.

use this means of introduction before each piece to unite the audience in their understanding of my programme, eliminating any potential confusion that may otherwise occur.

The function of each piece on the programme is also a pertinent aspect in relation to the narratives they present. While I use *Tico Tico no fubá* primarily to exploit its inherently high energy levels to initially entice my audience. Its narrative purpose is that of establishing a level of jazziness parallel to a recognition of its country of origin, setting the theme of the recital in motion. *Kind of Klezmer* then serves to introduce the aforementioned concept of cross-continental musical inspiration into the programme. *7 Takes* utilises the structure of theme and variations to further accentuate this switching between styles, presenting seven main incarnations of the theme. My intention with *7 Takes* is to both emulate musical aspects of the programme that have already been heard, while foreshadowing those to come in *Rhapsody in Blue*, functioning in part as a microcosm of the whole programme. As such, the narrative being conveyed through this piece is as equally related to the other pieces' narratives as it is to its own. One of the most notable musical links is the presence of certain rhythms, namely the 3,3,2 grouping (a bar of eight split into two consecutive groups of three, followed by a group of two). This is a rhythm that Gershwin frequently employs across his works and *Rhapsody in Blue* is no exception, so I decided to incorporate this into *7 Takes*.^[14] Although both pieces feature this rhythm multiple times, one of the most obvious comparisons is shown below—example 1 from *7 Takes*, example 2 from *Rhapsody in Blue*.

[14] George Gershwin,
3 Preludes For Piano
(Alfred Music, 2010)

“the narrative being conveyed through this piece is as equally related to the other pieces’ narratives as it is to its own.”



Example 1. David Behrens, *7 Takes*, bars 247-250



Example 2. George Gershwin, *Rhapsody in Blue*, bars 367-370

Another noteworthy connection is that this rhythm has its roots in South American music,^[15] linking back to *Tico Tico no fubá*, and providing a sense of completion in drawing together the first and last items on the programme. The idea of theme and variations is also not exclusive to *7 Takes*; Gershwin's musical development of certain themes result in considerable evolution over short spaces of time. The most extreme example of this is with the iconic 'love' theme,^[16] first heard in the orchestra at the opening of the second movement, before being imitated on piano in a similarly slow, emotive manner. It is not until the finale that the same melodic material returns in the orchestra, accompanied by the piano in one of its most virtuosic passages—a repeated staccato ostinato (from which the example above is taken) into which the previously delicate 'love' theme is sent forth. This passage succinctly unites each end of the wide narrative spectrum of the piece, and the device used is variations on a theme.

A considerable means of engaging an audience surrounds the idea of novelty,^[17] and whilst including original compositions adheres to that means, a resulting challenge is having to overcome the audience's potential 'resistance to innovation'.^[18] Samuel Gilmore candidly states that 'if audiences do not like to listen to new music, performers are forced to play old music'.^[19] Given that I am in the fortunate position of performing a programme entirely of my own choice,

[15] John Charles Chasteen, *National Rhythms, African Roots: The Deep History of Latin American Popular Dance* (University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 91.

[16] David Schiff, *Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 9.

[17] J. Peter Burkholder, 'Museum Pieces: The Historicist Mainstream in Music of the Last Hundred Years', *The Journal of Musicology* 2 (1983): 128, accessed 21 February 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/763802>.

[18] Deena Rosenberg, *The Music Makers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 93.

[19] Samuel Gilmore, 'Tradition and Novelty in Concert Programming: Bringing the Artist Back into Cultural Analysis', *Sociological Forum* 8 (1993): 222, accessed 20 February 2020. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2FBF01115491.pdf>.

this is less of a concern, but I do nonetheless need to justify and convince my audience of these pieces to avoid over-exploiting this freedom. As already touched upon, the programming of such items is of sizeable importance. Regarding recitals of entirely new music, Edward Cone comments that an audience can be ‘numbed by excessive novelty’^[20] and as a result ‘cannot hear the interrelationships between the compositions’,^[21] insinuating that it is in nobody’s interest for such programmes to exist. Thus, I came to my decision to keep the key concepts surrounding my own pieces easily understandable—the first involving Klezmer traditions to introduce more diversity, and the second using variations on a theme to demonstrate the multiple genres that can be absorbed into jazz.

Whilst programming original works into a recital has its challenges, performing a piece as famous as *Rhapsody in Blue* conversely brings its own complications. At this point in my recital, the notion of bringing novelty to the programme suddenly switches from being potentially overabundant to non-existent. Although there is a great deal of novelty to me as a performer, *Rhapsody in Blue* has nevertheless existed for almost a century now, entering the realm of the ‘familiar masterpiece’.^[22] Cone points out that the decision to perform such a work ‘implies that the piece has not been exhausted by all its previous performances, and [the performer] promises an interpretation which is somehow novel’.^[23] Having been performed by the likes of Leonard Bernstein, André Previn and Lang Lang to name just a few, the idea of bringing something new is somewhat daunting; however, one considerable aspect of novelty in my performance is the presence of a string quartet to play the orchestra part. Although this does not significantly alter how the piano part is performed, it should suffice to add an element of refreshing unfamiliarity to the piece as a whole. Regarding my personal interpretation, the question of the score’s role is raised. In jazz idioms, the score is mentioned far less due to the copious amount of improvising and flexible

[20] Cone, ‘The pianist as critic’, 243.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid., 242.

[23] Ibid.

approach to melodies; as Scottish jazz pianist Richard Michael once said, ‘jazz musicians never play the same thing once’.^[24] Cone states that ‘the performer’s responsibilities [...] begin with what I call his obligations to the score—but they do not end there’,^[25] continuing that whilst an understanding of the score ‘is necessary, it is never sufficient’. Nicholas Cook supports the same argument, stating that ‘the experience of live or recorded performance is a primary form of music’s existence, not just the reflection of a notated text. And performers make an indispensable contribution to the culture of creative practice that is music’.^[26] These are both opinions with which I would agree, as I believe listening to other performers’ renditions can significantly influence one’s own interpretation, consciously drawing awareness to sections that might be played in vastly different manners between performances. This also supports William Rothstein’s point that ‘one performer’s narrative may differ radically from another’s for the same work’,^[27] a reality which provides a beneficial range of choices from which I can build my own interpretation.

Due to its comparative length and sheer scale, *Rhapsody in Blue* contains the most internal narratives of all pieces on the programme, absorbing almost half the length of the recital. This piece alone contains six different musical themes, each with its own distinctive characters and so the performer’s responsibility lies in justly presenting these characters in an appropriate manner. Gershwin conceived each of these themes on a single train journey, describing the piece as a ‘musical kaleidoscope of America—of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our metropolitan madness’ referencing also the train’s ‘steely rhythms’.^[28] One of these themes indeed became known as the ‘train’,^[29] creating a very direct association through use of specific rhythms. Raymond Williams described ‘rhythm [as] a way of transmitting a description of experience’,^[30] a statement which could hardly fit better with the literal narratives that Gershwin outlines in this piece. The importance of each of

[24] Richard Michael, ‘Jazz and Improvisation Workshop’, Workshop, University of St Andrews, March 31, 2015.

[25] Cone, ‘The pianist as critic’, 244.

[26] Nicholas Cook, *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance* (OUP USA, 2014), 1.

[27] Rothstein, ‘Analysis and the act of performance’, 237.

[28] Ron Cowen, ‘George Gershwin: He Got Rhythm’, *Washington Post*, 11 November 1998, accessed 21 February 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/horizon/nov98/gershwin.htm>.

[29] Schiff, *Gershwin*, 9.

[30] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Parthian Books, 2011), 40.

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these themes could be summarised by Leonard Bernstein's point that 'the identity of the piece [...] lies in the melodies, not their sequence'.^[31] David Schiff comments that 'any one of these six melodic elements stands for the whole',^[32] and so any successful interpretation should convey this significance in the incarnation of each theme. A study in music and language proposed that music has three elements of narrativity: suggestion, symbolism and imitation,^[33] all of which could be relevant to both *Rhapsody in Blue* and the rest of my recital. *7 Takes* employs a very literal use of imitation to reflect on other parts of the programme, while the idea of suggestion can relate to *Tico Tico no fubá* and *Kind of Klezmer* with their respective links to South America and Eastern Europe. The concept of symbolism again relates most to Gershwin's explicit narratives as he explores such a variety of moods and styles using the same six musical themes.

Arguably the most revolutionary aspect of *Rhapsody in Blue* was its introduction of jazz, the popular music of the time, into the 'classical' concert hall. Being premiered in a concert entitled 'An Experiment in Modern Music',^[34] Gershwin stated that he had heard so much about the 'limitations of jazz', that he 'resolved to kill that misconception with one sturdy blow'.^[35] This level of innovation is harder to appreciate today, as jazz forms a unique case in having evolved through the twentieth century to become 'treated as serious concert music, listened to attentively, quietly, and motionlessly, it has adopted some aspects of the tradition of 'classical' concert music'.^[36] Despite the cultural connotations of jazz having changed since the piece's conception, I still hope to inject the same anarchic energy into my performance as that which was present at its premier, emulating the cosmopolitan chaos that Gershwin so desired. As Roddy Murray, gallery director of An Lanntair arts centre in Stornoway, once commented, 'history will tell you what happened, art will tell you what it felt like'.^[37] This is the sentiment I hope to convey when performing *Rhapsody in Blue*.

[31] Schiff, *Gershwin*, 2.

[32] *Ibid.*, 9.

[33] Calvin Smith Brown, *Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts* (University Press of New England, 1948), 258.

[34] Schiff, *Gershwin*, 2.

[35] Walter Rimler, *A Gershwin Companion: A Critical Inventory and Discography, 1916-1984* (Popular Culture Inc., 1991), 81.

[36] Henry Pleasants, *The Agony of Modern Music* (Simon and Schuster, 1955), 171.

[37] Susan Mansfield, 'Iain Morrison on marking the centenary of the Iolaire tragedy', *The Scotsman*, 24 October 2018, accessed 22 February 2020, <https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/music/iain-morrison-on-marking-the-centenary-of-the-iolaire-tragedy-1-4819224>.

Although the idea of having a theme for a programme is relatively common, it is still a topic of some dispute. Composer Christopher Fox remarks that:

For the listener, it must tend to stifle the lively, individual response to each work beneath the weight of preconceptions imposed by the single construct on a whole series of works. For the composer, it is a diminution of the integrity of his or her own work for it to be placed in a contrived context in which emphasis is being thrown on just one of its (real or imagined) characteristics. For the performer, it is a further step in a process of alienation which has continued throughout the Modern period.^[38]

The argument against such a claim, in my case, would be that my chosen theme is still broad enough to avoid limitations to this degree and rather provides a context in which the chosen repertoire is justified. Ironically, had I decided against any theme, I would potentially have had to narrow the variety of styles currently present to avoid performing a combination of pieces that may, to a certain degree, have seemed incongruous. Indeed it has been found that the inclusion of a theme can ‘create a new layer for the active listener by heightening intellectual and emotional awareness’.^[39] Music Performance Director and Vice Chairman at Faber Music, Sally Cavender, notes, however, that ‘the motivation for including an item in a programme is so often an extra-musical point’,^[40] implying that performers and programmers might prioritise programmatic links over the fundamental musical quality of a recital. Whether true or not, this serves as a reminder that the music itself must be of a sufficient standard to justify inclusion in a programme, regardless of how elaborate the interrelations might be. If a programme is particularly dependent on such a theme, then that theme must equally strike a balance between sophistication and accessibility, as Mark Gotham points out,

[38] Mark Gotham, ‘Coherence in Concert Programming: A View from the U.K.’, *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 45 (2014): 304, accessed 20 February 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43198649>.

[39] Diane Lewis, ‘Programming Our Convictions’, *Choral Journal; Lawton, Okla.* 45 (2004): 18, accessed on 21 February 2020.

[40] Gotham, ‘Coherence in Concert Programming’, 303.

‘there is of course an upper-limit to the technical content which can realistically be included in advertised themes or expected to be apparent to an audience’.^[41] However, despite the theme’s role in explaining the chosen repertoire, the enjoyment of the programme should equally not depend on the audience understanding all the narratives and concepts behind it, just as the music alone should not rely on such concepts. They should rather support each other symbiotically and this understanding should only enhance, rather than enable, the listening experience, drawing attention to specific aspects of the music to enable a potentially higher, more intellectual appreciation. The incorporation of a unifying theme in conjunction with several novel aspects, should allow me to engage my audience in a programme that I will genuinely relish performing and be proud to present.

[41] Ibid.

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