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Balancing Uniqueness and Transgression in Classical Piano Performance: Analyzing Interpretive Variations of the Goldberg Variations

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Abstract. This research examines the interrelation between uniqueness and transgression of norms in playing classical music at the piano and explores the interplay between these rival and frequently antagonistic forces through the playing of various pianists. In using a comparison between disparate performances of J.S. Bach's "Goldberg Variations" as the central methodological framework, the work examines the conceptual boundaries and practical applications of uniqueness (the articulation of singular artistic innovation) and transgression of norms (conscious violation of conventional practice) through the dissection of two disparate performances (Víkingur Ólafsson's and Glenn Gould's recording). The work explores the comparison's finding that the relationship between these two terms is rich and subtle. Rather than discovering an overriding equilibrium or announcing an ultimate practice as the ideal, the comparison discovers that uniqueness and transgression are simultaneous aspects within the artistic fabric of classical piano music. This work reveals that the sensed boundary between allowable uniqueness and allowable transgression is highly context-bound and subjective and that performers inevitably negotiate this scandal within the fabric of interpretation without discovering a determinate, objective ideal.

Keywords: Classical music, Piano performance, unique approaches, transgression of norms

1. Introduction

Nowadays, hundreds of thousands of pieces have been composed by great composers from decades and even centuries ago. A tremendous amount of work has been performed and recorded countless times by well-known pianists throughout the globe, and all of them have explored uniqueness within their respective performances and recordings. But the consequence of being unique often results in bending the composers' intentions, which is referred to as "transgression of norms." Therefore, a question emerges: How can one construct a two-dimensional balance model of "uniqueness — transgression of norms," achieving an interpretation that both respects the norms of the score and expresses artistic individuality?

The answers to this are two significant matters every future pianist seeks to find. And I am no exception. As I grow and my technical skills improve, I am no longer satisfied with merely executing notes from the score but to try to express my own emotions and understanding of the

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pieces. And the more wonderful recordings I listen, the more subtle differences I have noticed. Nowadays, there are pianists who focus on understanding information of the music from the notation from the scores written by composers, rendering the composers' intention with minimum differentiation, being loyal to the original composition. But there are other pianists who aim to be unique and play the pieces the way they believe is "right." Then I start to wonder, how am I going to differentiate myself from my peers or predecessors in terms of interpretation and piano music performance? Previously, I was taught that the primary job of pianists is to carry out the intentions of composers while being unique. That is a complicated question coated with the misconception of simplicity. I have been wondering upon this controversial issue, a problem that every musician proposes a different answer to. My readership provides critical thinking about finding uniqueness without over-interpretation when rendering classical music.

It is crucial to draw a line between uniqueness and transgression of norms in classical Piano performance, and respect towards composers' intentions in order to conduct this research. The term "uniqueness," in the field of classical Piano performance, means how one pianist can be differentiated from another from their performances and/or recordings. This can be the difference in their touch on the keyboard, their choices of rubato, length of crescendo, even minor changes without contradicting with the notation.

Transgression of norms, on the other hand, is defined as deliberate deviations from established conventions; often disregards the intentions of the composer, as well. In any cultural and social practices, transgression is usually believed as a challenge to "the absolute authority of existing norms, and questions their performative power with its own". According to study of scholars around the world, any performances that are done in an unconventional way are usually deemed as "erroneous" by music professionals who are strictly loyal to the "established norms." Therefore, some conservatory professors propose that being unique is not about "dismissing" the norms, but about "honoring" the respectable musicians while also seeking "creative instincts" and finding one's voice and delivering one's only musical ideas.

In relations to how pianists and piano students can learn the composers' intentions; there are a variety of paths to reach this goal. The study of composers' intentions is primarily a study of history. This can be achieved through reading books about a certain composer, listening to interviews, and most importantly, reading the notations written in the score.

However, music lovers raise the question whether classical musicians are expected to showcase creativity, as the musicians themselves nowadays have become more obsessed with the technique and "the execution of minutiae with the work, with technical elegance and a high level of fluidity" [1]. That is because for technically difficult pieces of music, such as La Campanella of Liszt, the delivery of the work itself has already required a very high level of playing the right notes in the right rhythms with the right dynamics, not to mention the articulation, tempo markings before one even dares to ask personal interpretation. This argument has received a lot of echoes among many classical music trainees.

In a debate about whether contemporary classical musicians are less creative, it is also argued that it is the rigorous training itself that has limited the intention of wanting to be creative, due to the fact that "technical skill, music theory, and adherence to established repertoire" are usually the focus. This is because such a training is designed to cultivate a deeper comprehension of musical structures and styles. Unlike solo musicians such as Jazz-musicians, classical musicians are allowed a very minimum level of improvisation and their performances are hence more theory-based with minor changes to the scores, with more freedom of personal innovation focusing on phrasing, dynamics, and emotional expression.

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2. Theoretical foundations

Two significant bodies of theories are drawn here for deeper analysis. Gadamer argues that interpretation is not merely a mechanical reproduction, but a creative dialogue. A dialogue involves the interaction of two parties, and in the modern-day reproduction of classical music, it means the past and the present. In Gadamer's theory, a "horizon" is considered one's perspective, which is shaped by one's historical context, culture, experiences, and expectations [2]. When we engage with something from the past, in this case classical music, the horizon of the past is brought into contact with the horizon of the present. When these two horizons meet, interact and merge, fusion is thus created. This is the part where pianists reinterpret the work instead of just reproducing the past exactly as how it was interpreted. It is in this process where the old meet the new and new meanings emerge. Therefore, in any analysis, two levels of contexts need to be fused. Firstly, the original intentions of the composers, the work modern-day contexts include current understanding, emotions and societal context. In addition, Joseph Kerman, in his work, explores how an opera singer would treat the narrative and emotional arc of a piece. Kerman argues that opera should not be considered just as beautiful music, but as musical drama where every note and phrase functions a dramatic purpose since music, text and action all, when being blended together, create real meanings [3]. To further elaborate based on Kerman's theory, we argue that same as opera singers, pianists do not just treat classical music merely as technical execution, but as dramatic performance where they deliver emotional truth in their storytelling. Hence, music is not just sound, but about narrative, emotion and character.

In the following case study section, Gadamer and Kerman's theories will be applied for a thorough analysis into J.S. Bach's famous piece "Goldberg Variations."

3. Case study (historical context of the recordings)

First and foremost, how the two pianists' identity themself plays a significant role in their performance. It should be pointed out here that Ólafsson, while being described as the Icelandic Glenn Gould, sees this title "a party game and mostly meaningless [4]", and believes that one should be oneself, instead of staying in the shadow of being someone else. As a result, he tries to approach the work in a way that is fundamentally different from the great Glenn Gould. That could be the reason.

Ólafsson seeks a broad emotional spectrum in his interpretation, emphasizing the "human" dimension, while Gould, in the famous 1981 recordings, focus on precision and control while avoiding being overly emotional. In terms of tempo and rhythm, Ólafsson, in order to highlight the "humanism" in the piece, prefers natural and breathing tempos where audience can feel a sense of dance in Bach's writing. In sharp contrast, Gould chooses extreme tempos, sometimes fast and other times unusually slow. As for their philosophy, Ólafsson never sees a performance as fixed monument, but a living dialogue with the past. So, he shows respect but not follows anything dogmatic in his interpretation. However, Gould, on the other hand, treated interpretation almost as a form of authorship, famously disdaining performance traditions and often rewriting conventions entirely. For him, any work, including the Goldberg Variations, can be reshaped according to his vision.

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4. Background and significance

The "Goldberg Variation" was Composed in 1741–1742 for harpsichord, Bach's "Goldberg Variations" was commissioned by Count Hermann Karl von Keyserlingk to alleviate his insomnia, performed nightly by Bach's pupil Johann Gottlieb Goldberg. The work consists of a theme, 30 variations, and a "Da Capo aria". This piece is structured around intricate canons and dance forms, highlighting Baroque contrapuntal mastery. Pianists famously described it as "a universe of logic and emotion," a synthesis of mathematical precision and spiritual depth.

Reason this piece is selected is because the Goldberg is the longest solo piece for keyboard instruments which it includes most features from the Baroque era (ornaments, tonal counterpoint, technical difficulties etc.). Most importantly, Bach does not include any notations in his manuscript other than notes and ties, meaning that pianists have a vast area to render the piece in the way they like; there is not a "correct answer" created by the composer.

5. Analysis of the recordings

Glenn Gould's 1981 recording of the "Goldberg Variations" Aria epitomizes his radical departure from performance conventions. His recording takes features detached, almost staccato articulation (ignoring Bach's legato slurs), tempi being deliberately slow (approx ♩=37), minimal pedal, highlighting the polyphonic structure of the piece; elimination of most repeats—a direct transgression of Baroque practice. As critic Tim Page noted (The Glenn Gould Reader), this created a "kaleidoscopic, hyper-clarity [5]" that prioritized architectural logic over expressive warmth. The theme (Aria) lasts for 3:04, and this speed is roughly 20% slower that Ólafsson's recording. This deliberately slow tempo magnifies every note and renders the harmonic skeleton unnervingly transparent.

Gould's theory was to play the piece in such deliberate tempo, sometimes fast and sometimes slow, so that the piece is contrapuntal, making it interesting. He also stated that music that could touch him should be played in a deliberate tempo [6]. In this case, Gould is not treating treating the music as a mere pleasant melody but explores a hidden story within Bach's counterpoint. The tempo was used as a thread to guide audience though Bach's contrapuntal maze.

In stark contrast, Víkingur Ólafsson's 2023 recording (Deutsche Grammophon) embraces legato phrasing in the aria, adhering to Bach's slurs while adding subtle pedal gradients to enhance resonance. His retention of repeats honors Baroque formal symmetry, yet his dynamic shading—such as a whispered pianissimo in the Aria's reprise—introduces a contemporary lyricism. Unlike Glenn, Ólafsson's speed in the aria is not fixed but ranges from ♩=55-60. His performance is clear like water, providing the variations as a crystalline lattice of sound [7]. Audience describe Ólafsson's recording as a dramatic variation of speed [8]. Ólafsson defends this approach in his thoughts on playing the Goldberg Variations-"For Music lovers, to refresh their spirits": "Bach turns limited material into boundless variety like no one before or since… astonishingly brilliant uses of counterpoint in the repertoire and countless instances of exalted poetry. all within immaculately shaped structures of formal perfection [9]." Víkingur himself claims that he was inspired by Glenn to record the Goldberg Variations, while he wants to be himself in his world of music [9].

Ólafsson recorded his version of his Goldberg after the COVID-19 pandemic, where the globe was suffering from economic and live losses from the tragic pandemic. We can assume that in order to lift people's sprits, Ólafsson chooses a lively tempo and articulation with connected staccatos, creating a casual nature throughout his Goldberg Variations. His phrasings indicate a wish to derive pleasure and strength from music, presenting the Goldberg Variations as a source of solace and

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renewal rather than a mere technical or philosophical entity. Associated staccatos confer a sense of continuity and movement, rendering an otherwise companionable piece rather than remote or stern. In this respect, Ólafsson's recording can itself be regarded as a reaction against a universal need to heal—whereby, as one of musical dispatches in difficult times, it serves as an agent of emotional retrieval, an anchor of beauty, familiarity, and optimism.

Connecting to Gadamer's theory, Ólafsson is creating a "Time Machine" throughout his music where he communicates with abstract soul of the past, presenting Bach's music not as a historical artifact but as a living, breathing conversation between eras. His interpretive choices—fluid tempo, dynamic nuance, and resonant pedal—constructs his unique pianism. Where Glenn's recording stresses structural clarity and detached precision—coinciding with mid-20th-century historically informed practice—Ólafsson's realization leans into Romantic expressivity, illustrating Gadamer's "fusion of horizons." Subtle rallentandos on his part during cadential passages and his glowing pedal effects establish an emotional presentness that touches the hearts of modern audiences, yet his respect for repeats and articulation enshrines the work's architectural coherence. In simple words, below is a table to show comparisons and contrasts between the two pianists:

Table 1. Comparison and contrasts between the two pianists

Element	Gould	Ólafsson
Tempo	♩=37	♩=55-60
Articulation	Staccato, shatters Bach's slurs	Liquid legato, blends voices using the pedal
Repeats	Most repeats are eliminated	All repeats played expect for Aria Da Capo

6. Reflections and suggestions

As piano students, it is not "wrong" nor "correct" to have personal thoughts upon a piece of music. The world of music exists because of different ideologies and feelings. However, students should restrict themselves from going too far like pianists above. Students should follow the notations and have a relatively limited space for uniqueness because the primary job of students is to study music of different eras, hone their techniques, and understand their features. For example, if Chopin wrote a "forte" sign (f) at the start of a measure, the student should play the notes with a relatively strong force; create contrast from "mezzo-forte" (mf) and "piano" (p). Where they can add their uniqueness in is how the whole phrase and the measure will go if there are not further indications; how strong the "mezzo-forte" and "piano" are played. Additionally, piano students need to pass a grading criteria in before they can become famous, and those criteria are set for everyone to be fair. Thus, students should be limited in their uniqueness while rendering classical music. It is usually those who strictly follow the rules that become the most confident and most polished in standardized contests. These rules make a clear difference to the way they carry themselves and to the audience's perception of them as a pianist in the future.

In terms of performances, when a student gradually grows to become a pianist and becomes well known, they no longer need standardized contests to prove themselves. It is up to them to construct their personal world of music (whoever holds their own recital or concert can be considered a pianist, regardless of their virtuosity or pianism). There is no one to judge and give marks to their art. Therefore, it is up to the students to construct their own, unique perspective on music. Whilst the audience still possesses the right to express their own feelings and criticize performances, this is a form of communication between pianists and the audience.

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7. Conclusion

In regards of the case study above, both versions are considered legitimate yet antithetical manifestations of authenticity—not despite their differences, but because of them. Their approaches stand for two parallel paths to truth in Bach interpretation, each revealing distinct dimensions of the "Goldberg Variations" universe of logic and emotion. Gould's 1981 re-recording served as a metaphysical farewell, a deliberate inversion of his frenetic 1955 debut; while Ólafsson's interpretation emerged as a post-pandemic balm, weaving historical awareness with therapeutic resonance. Yet both also transgress: Gould dismantled repeats, slurs, and tempo norms to expose "vertical" harmonic truths; Ólafsson subverts textual literalism through rubato and atmospheric production, declaring emotion itself a form of fidelity.

However, both are unique. Through deconstruction, Gould treated Bach's score as a skeleton instead of a prison. His transgression was epistemological, a belief that truth lays beneath tradition. Olafsson bridges historical practice with modern subjectivity. His uniqueness is phenomenological, an insistence that truth appears through embodied experience.

Authenticity should not be merely recreating the past, as recordings can do the job. It is about justifying the present [10]. Gould's 1981 recording justifies an era of technological asceticism, framing Bach as a geometrician of the soul. Ólafsson's 2023 recording justifies our age of fractured attention, restoring music as communal soul. Both are authentic since both respond with rigor to their cultural moments. Gould presented the work through corrosive honesty, while Ólafsson delivers the music through consoling beauty.

As long as uniqueness is explored, transgression exists. Both aspects coexist in the field of classical music. Further research has to be done in order to measure the extent of uniqueness and transgression within classical music, not merely piano performance, but composition, conducting, performance of other instruments, etc. Comprehending such balance amongst forces might shed light on why classical music continues to evolve while maintaining its integrity, and whether originality indeed exists within an art form deeply entrenched in heritage.

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