

What Have They Done to My Song? Work, Performance, and Meaning

Introduction

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The three papers collected here originated as a panel at the 1993 meeting of the American Musicological Society. Although the “live” performance of video excerpts and the conversation among panelists and audience is inevitably lost when the occasion is reproduced in print, we hope that the papers will be read in dialogue with each other, as they raise richer questions in juxtaposition than alone. This introduction suggests a few of those questions.

The notion of the cover, a remake in the style of the current performer, is central to all three papers and was present in all our preparatory discussions of the session. It is a term comfortably at home in the world of pop reworkings that Katherine Bergeron explores. Perhaps more surprising is the notion that Mark Morris’s danced re-creation of Tate and Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* is a cover, or that Tate and Purcell’s work is a cover of the Carthaginian episode in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Indeed, one could argue that Purcell’s opera appropriates Virgil’s episode in ways more characteristic of the common or garden notion of

the cover than Mark Morris's self-conscious play with the original(s), despite the latter's closer historical proximity to the concept. Similarly, the motley collection of funny, heart-rending, and outrageous versions of Cole Porter songs on *Red Hot + Blue*, project and stimulate an awareness of the originals in ways that the default notion of the cover does not quite encompass, despite being "classic" examples of that phenomenon. And what of Peter Sellars's production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, which simultaneously claims the work as a document of the present moment and declares uncompromised respect for Mozart's authorial intentions? How does a cover balance appropriation by the performer against consciousness of an original? Can we think about "Peter Sellars's *Così*" (or "Mark Morris's *Dido*" or "Annie Lennox's 'Every Time We Say Good-bye'") in the same terms as "Aretha Franklin's 'Respect'"?¹ The notion of the cover is helpful in all three cases, but only to a point: some of the interesting differences between these performances are revealed precisely in where and how they *cease* to cover their originals.

The issue here is not so much the semantics of the "true" cover, which quickly degenerates into pointless nitpicking, but the ways in which different traditions (as well as different social/political aspects of single traditions) construe the relationship between performer and composer, or between performance and work. In the act of covering well-known originals, Morris's *Dido*, Sellars's *Così*, and *Red Hot + Blue*'s Cole Porter, in one way or another and with different ranges of intentions, "uncover" a gap between an actual or abstracted original and a particular instantiation of that original. All three exempla encourage (or force) the audience to engage with the space between the putative work and the actual performance; we suggest that it is a space in which history, politics, and aesthetics play with and against one another.

1. Aretha Franklin's song covers an Otis Redding original.

With the exception of *Red Hot + Blue*, in which the CD and video might be said to be the “originals,” the performances we discuss are videotapes: a made-for-television version of Sellars’s *Così*, and an informal record of a theatrical performance of Morris’s *Dido*. The examples used as illustrations in this journal are silent and unmoving shadows of those reproductions. Although medium is a rich and relevant area of inquiry in performance studies, we do not address it as a separate subject, but rather take our tapes for granted, treating our performances as fixed texts parallel to the “works themselves”; for our purposes the play lies between these parallel but obviously not equivalent texts. In addition to sidestepping the complex question of the effect of medium on meaning, our use of particular performances as texts separates our work from the philosophical discussion of the ontological status of the musical work, most of which treats “performance” as a generalized (and variously theorized) penumbra around the notion of “the work,” not coincidentally avoiding any discussion of actual performances. We hope that, in confining our remarks to individual performances, however artificially frozen, our essays suggest that the identities of musical works, both popular and classical, are not only more grounded in the details of actual performance, but more multivalent and more connected to complex and contingent webs of meaning than any single theory can explain.