

# Performance/Media/Documentation... Thinking Beyond Dichotomies

## An Interview with Philip Auslander

Alessandro Cecchi

### *Introduction*

Philip Auslander (Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta) barely needs to be introduced to the audience of this journal, his name being linked to such relevant contributions as *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, winner of the Joe A. Callaway Prize for Best Book on Theatre and Drama. This book, with its two editions (1999 and 2008), has strongly influenced music, media, and performing arts scholars around the globe. One focal point of the book is the discussion of the relation between “live” and “mediatized” musical performance, which Auslander does not consider in oppositional terms, but rather as concepts involved in a process of mutual definition and possible re-definition. In his own words: “Far from being encroached upon, contaminated, or threatened by mediation, live performance is always already inscribed with traces of the possibility of technical mediation (i.e., mediatization) that defines it as live.”<sup>1</sup> Consequently, he warns his readers against “theorizations that privilege liveness as a pristine state uncontaminated by mediatization” and that in so doing “misconstrue the relation between the two terms.”<sup>2</sup> He has then extended his discussion to other forms of experience, including that of digital technologies as live, tackled by him in the more recent article “Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective.”<sup>3</sup> This critical approach to commonsensical concepts and cultural dichotomies characterizes most of his projects.

<sup>1</sup> Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. Second edition (London: Routledge, 2008), 56.

<sup>2</sup> Auslander, *Liveness*, 56.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Auslander, “Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 34, no. 3 (2012): 3–11.

Another relevant book, *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music*,<sup>4</sup> connects to a relatively different strand of research, that he has expanded further in *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona*, published in 2021.<sup>5</sup> The concept of “musical persona” was introduced for the first time in his seminal article “Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto” and became the title of the later article “Musical Personae,” which elaborates on Erving Goffman’s sociological perspective.<sup>6</sup> Along these lines, the book chapter explicitly entitled “‘Musical Personae’ Revisited”—included in the volume I recently co-edited with Gianmario Borio, Giovanni Giuriati, and Marco Lutz entitled *Investigating Musical Performance: Theoretical Models and Intersections*—clarifies and completes his thought almost fifteen years later. Here, Auslander goes on to deny any clear demarcation between the musician’s “self-presentation” and the actor’s representation of a “fictional character”, thus offering the model of a “continuum of behavior rather than a dichotomy.”<sup>7</sup> This kind of self-critical refinement of his own theorizations is not uncommon in his work.

As for the musicological discussion, Auslander has a particularly strong position, which challenges many apparently obvious assumptions. For example, he does not understand music to be an “object” of performance, because he situates the concept of “musical performance” in a wider perspective. In so doing, he firmly suggests going beyond the distinction between “musical” (or “purely musical”) and “non-musical” (or “extra-musical”) aspects related to that complex intertwining of actions and interactions which is performance. In this regard, I want to mention a significant book chapter in which he returns to the epistemological and ontological issues he had previously identified in “Performance Analysis and Popular Music.” The chapter I’m referring to has been published as “Music as Performance: The Disciplinary Dilemma Revisited” in the German collection *Sound und Performance: Positionen, Methoden, Analysen*, and is the expanded ver-

<sup>4</sup> Philip Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Philip Auslander, *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Philip Auslander, “Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 14, no. 1 (2004): 1–13; Philip Auslander, “Musical Personae,” *TDR/The Drama Review* 50, no. 1 (2006): 100–119.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Auslander, “‘Musical Personae’ Revisited,” in *Investigating Musical Performance: Theoretical Models and Intersections*, ed. Gianmario Borio, Giovanni Giuriati, Alessandro Cecchi, and Marco Lutz (London: Routledge, 2020), 45.

sion of his afterword to the edited collection *Taking it to the Bridge: Music as Performance*.<sup>8</sup> In his discussion, Auslander addresses the distinction between what music “is” (an essence) and what music “does” (an effect), which leads him to rethink the relationship between sound and gesture. In his view, “Music is not sound disengaged from the physical being of the person who makes it. . . . The sounds I hear result directly from all aspects of the person’s physical engagement with the act of music making—all of the sounds and gestures that constitute the performance.”<sup>9</sup> This is the result of a critical investigation aimed at questioning the still widespread idea that in a musical performance it is possible (and useful) to distinguish between “technical” (i.e., sound-producing) and “ancillary” (i.e., in some respects “unnecessary”) gestures. Auslander concludes the chapter by suggesting that “the solution to the disciplinary dilemma” he had identified in 2004 could be simply “to recognize that there is no dilemma, no ontological or epistemological gap between music and performance that needs bridging. Music ‘is’ what musicians ‘do’.”<sup>10</sup>

Auslander’s 2018 book *Reactivations* represents another arena of his inquiry. Here the author engages in a critical discussion of another strict demarcation, that opposing “performance” to “documentation.” To overcome this dichotomy, he reconsiders their relationship by focusing on the role of the audience—the one witnessing the original event, and the one beholding the document. As he puts it, “It may well be that our sense of the presence, power, and authenticity of these pieces derives not from treating the document as an indexical access point to a past event but from perceiving the document itself *as a performance* that directly reflects an artist’s aesthetic project or sensibility and for which we are the present audience.”<sup>11</sup> Although the book is mainly about performance art in relation to photographic and video documentation, music is brought into the discussion in the last chapter through the example of karaoke performance. The book therefore comes

<sup>8</sup> Philip Auslander, “Afterword. Music as Performance: The Disciplinary Dilemma Revisited,” in *Taking it to the Bridge: Music as Performance*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Richard Pettengill, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 349–357.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Auslander, “Music as Performance: The Disciplinary Dilemma Revisited,” in *Sound und Performance: Positionen, Methoden, Analysen*, ed. Wolf-Dieter Ernst, Nora Niethammer, Berenika Szymanski-Düll, and Anno Mungen (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2015), 541.

<sup>10</sup> Auslander, “Music as Performance,” 541.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Auslander, *Reactivations. Essays on Performance and its Documentation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 40.

to a much more general issue, that concerning the relationship between “original” and “copy,” which in the perspective of performance is anything but oppositional.

On the whole, the philosophical and general cultural contribution of Auslander’s work to music, media, and the arts considered as performance is the radical, critical, and self-critical questioning of cultural dichotomies that often trap our thoughts exactly when they seem to help us think more clearly. I suppose this suffices to justify the publication of this interview in the first issue of a scholarly journal entitled *Sound Stage Screen*—namely, to underline the exploration of the “continuum” between sound and vision, technique and technology, performance and media, music and the arts considered in their continuously and mutually changing relationships.

### *Interview*

*Sound Stage Screen. Three aspects or places of experience that encompass but are not limited to music (not directly mentioned in the title), and whose study is in no way limited to musicology, which, in turn, is redefined as an open, strongly interdisciplinary research field. What is the position of these three concepts in your perspective?*

Given my obsessive interest in performance and performers, I would also place “stage” at the center. To me, “stage” stands for performance, though not necessarily only live performance. As you suggest in the introduction, my approach to terms like this is to interrogate the ways their relationships are traditionally configured, including the idea you also mention that sound is a means to musical performance, not its end. In books like *Liveness* and *Reactivations*, I try to destabilize traditional assumptions about the relationship between performances and recordings or documentations of them.

*How would you define your research field? Do you place yourself at the intersection of different disciplines, for example, between performance studies and media studies or even musicology?*

I define my research field simply as “performance,” since my work always revolves around ways of thinking analytically about performance—how it is defined, its contexts, what performers do, and how audiences expe-

rience performance across a variety of social and cultural territories and media. I see myself described in all kinds of ways: as a theater or performance studies scholar, as a media scholar, sometimes as a musicologist, and sometimes even as an art historian. I have connections to all of these disciplines and practices, and I try to be a point of contact among fields that may not communicate with one another, but it's more about fostering dialogue across the boundaries than believing the boundaries can be breached or eliminated.

*In retrospect, how would you describe your own overall performance as a scholar today? Or, to put it in your own terms, what are the aspects of your "scholarly persona" that you would highlight at this stage?*

One thing I've noticed about myself is that I gravitate toward what seem to me to be unanswered questions or disciplinary lacunae. This was very much the case with *Liveness*. Reflecting on my experience as a young stage actor and the many times I had been told that the fact that theater is live is its essential characteristic, I went searching for writing in theater and performance studies that addressed this idea of the live directly and critically, and was shocked to find virtually none. I then discovered that liveness had been under discussion in television studies for some time, though there had been no dialogue between that field and theater studies. A similar thing happened with *Performing Glam Rock*. I became interested in Glam partly as a result of some historiographic work I had done where I discovered that there was a standard narrative in which rock reached a high point in the 1960s then fell into decadence in the 1970s until Punk ostensibly restored it to its original project. There was no place for Glam in this account, and I couldn't help but wonder why not. At the time, there were only two books on Glam (there are now many more), so I set about writing the one I'd wanted to find. Of course, I was also looking for a topic that would enable me to write about musicians in the way I wanted, since musical persona is so central to Glam. Another standard narrative I sought to challenge, this time in the work that led to *Reactivations*, was the idea that documentation necessarily betrays the live event; performance art is the context in which this idea has the most force, I think, though I have also addressed it in the context of jazz and improvised music. My insistence that musical performance is primarily about the performer, not the music, goes against much conventional wisdom in this area. My scholarly persona is impatient with received ideas and willing to interrogate them in those areas that interest me.

*And what about your academic performance specifically?*

I am very much aware of academic performance (conference presentations, lectures, and such) as precisely that: performance. When I was regularly attending theater conferences, I was always amazed at how poor the performance skills of many presenters were and how poorly prepared they were. I at least try to be entertaining when I present because I believe that intellectual value and entertainment value are not mutually exclusive. I also treat my presentations as performances. For example, whenever I give a presentation, even if I've given it many times before, I always rehearse it fully the night before. So, the public face of my scholarly persona is that of a performer talking about performance by performing.

*This seems to be linked to your experience as a professional actor... How has this influenced your thinking about performance, including musical performance?*

I'm sure that my performer-centricity derives from the fact that I've spent much of my life performing! For me, acting is and has always been the default model of performance (which I think is true for many people—when you say “performance,” most people probably think of acting first). As you mention in the introduction, a significant way for me to articulate the concept of musical persona has been by contrasting what musicians do in performance with what actors do. My knowledge and experience of acting gives me a way of framing questions about other kinds of performance and the contexts in which they occur.

The other thing I would like to say about this is that I believe the fact that I am a performer (albeit not a musician) has been beneficial on those occasions when I have talked with performers directly for my research. I don't do this often, but over time, I have drawn from exchanges with the rock singer-songwriter Suzi Quatro, two founding members of the doo-wop revival group Sha Na Na, the violinist Mari Kimura and, in another vein, the actor Willem Dafoe. Being a performer provides a common ground with other performers that can be a starting point for dialogue even if we don't engage in the same kind of performance. We can speak more as colleagues than as researcher and subject.

*You raise an interesting point: that of a mutual influence of research and performance. In the last few years musicology has recognized the role and value of musical performance and musical practice for research. It is no longer just*

*a matter of “research-led” musical performance; performance-led or practice-led research has also gained currency...*

Right. I’m aware of these developments in music, art, and theater. I don’t think of myself as engaged in practice-led research, more like research *informed* by practical experience. This reminds me of a piece of advice offered to me by my mentor when I was an undergraduate studying the history of art, the late historian of American art John McCoubrey. He asked if I had ever taken a course in the fine arts department. When I told him I hadn’t, he said, “Well, you’re studying this stuff, don’t you think you should have a sense of how it’s made?” So, I took a drawing course. I also studied music theory as an undergrad. I’m neither a visual artist nor a music theorist or composer, but having at least an idea of what goes into the making of the things I research, as well as familiarity with the technical vocabularies associated with making them, is valuable.

*In your many publications I find several intriguing discussions or interpretations of Walter Benjamin’s writings, especially his essay on “mechanical reproduction” or “technical reproducibility,” according to the German title of the unfinished, open project, existing in many different versions between 1935 and 1940, the year of his death. Is Benjamin’s thinking still relevant for contemporary scholars who work in such a different media environment than that experienced by him?*

I do return repeatedly to Benjamin. First, I think some of the specific points he made regarding the functioning of media and their social impact are as true for our media landscape as they were for his. For example, when he speaks of “the desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly,” or when he speaks of how the development of newspapers and cinema was leading to a cultural configuration in which anyone could become an author or an actor, he could have been talking about social media, which reflects these impulses and possibilities even more than the media of his time.<sup>12</sup> Second, Benjamin’s idea that new media bring into being new ways of perceiving is a valuable lens through which to examine the evolution of media and their impact in any historical epoch. John Berger’s classic *Ways of Seeing* is an elaboration of the same insight: that human perception is not neutral, or a given, but historically—and politically—conditioned.<sup>13</sup> I hope

<sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 219, 223.

<sup>13</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin, 1972).

that in a small way, my contention that liveness is not a stable ontological characteristic of events but a moving target, an ever-changing way of describing experience that morphs along with the evolution of technologies of representation and modes of perception, continues this tradition of inquiry.

*A second, explicit model for your reflection is Erving Goffman—you often refer to his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (first published in 1959) in your own writings.<sup>14</sup> Not only does the concept of “musical persona” draw on his approach, but you clearly present musical performance mainly as a form of social, symbolic and strategic interaction, and develop a dramaturgical approach which (in some respect) can be traced back to him. How would you define the influence of Goffman on your reflection?*

Goffman is a major influence on me. I came to Goffman indirectly through Derrida and poststructuralism, which I explored deeply in the 1980s. I internalized what might be called the deconstructive gesture to such a degree that it is pretty much reflexive, most evident in my constant questioning of cultural dichotomies, as you mention in the introduction. I leave no binary unturned! But I also found that Derridean deconstruction and other poststructuralist strategies were not paths forward for the ways in which I wanted to engage with performance. I was very happy to discover a strain of anti-foundationalism in certain mid-twentieth century thinkers, Goffman chief among them, who were also pragmatically oriented toward social and cultural analysis. For Goffman, reality (including identity) is anchored not in metaphysics or the psyche but in discourse, and he is interested in how we bring reality into being through performance, a perspective I have found to be incredibly productive, especially when trying to work out my ideas about musicians as performers.

*What about the potential usefulness of other models of analysis—for example, the one developed by Goffman’s pupil Harvey Sacks, who pioneered such methods as *Conversation Analysis* and *Membership Categorization Analysis*—for performance in general and particularly for musical performance, including the work of other scholars from Goffman’s circle?*

As you note in the introduction, my first foray into the line of research that culminates in my recent book *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona* (2021) was the essay “Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto” (2004). This was the first time I used the word “persona” in this con-

<sup>14</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).



nection (I had previously used it in talking about stand-up comedy and experimental theater) and I had not yet realized how useful Goffman would be in developing the concept. The analytical approach I was advocating was performance analysis as practiced in theater scholarship. Recently, I was looking at a discussion of performance analysis by the theater scholar Christopher Balme, who identifies some specific approaches. In his terms, my style of performance analysis is *product-oriented* in the sense that I look at finished performances from a spectatorial standpoint, and *structural* in that I “emphasize a set of procedures—the choice and ordering of sign systems—rather than an interpretation derived from the text.”<sup>15</sup> I remain committed to the idea of performance analysis—close reading and thick description of performances—and I like the fact that performance analysis is not a strictly defined procedure (it is defined only as being interpretive, as opposed to theater criticism, which is evaluative) or associated with any particular method. In terms of analyzing musical performances, I have found Goffman’s broad framework for self-presentation (i.e., the concept of social front and the categories of setting, appearance, and manner) to be sufficient for my purposes. I can see, however, that those whose approach is more process- or event-oriented (Balme’s terms again) might turn to other models derived from conversational analysis.

*Musical performance and musical persona are strongly connected in your reflection. Yet, the use of the concept of “persona” easily leads one to think of it as a pre-established identity that exists prior to and independently of its performances. How would you clarify this connection between musical persona and musical performance?*

This is a good question, but a complex one. There is one sense in which musical personae *do* exist prior to their performance. Musical personae are social roles and, as such, are defined collectively (socially) prior to any particular iteration. For example, if I take a job as a pit musician, I know this means that I have to assume a certain persona. I recently found a contractual document from the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra in Tulsa, Oklahoma that very explicitly defines the pit musician’s persona in terms of appearance: “black turtleneck or black mock turtleneck shirt, black pants, black socks and black shoes. T-shirts are not permitted.” This persona (including its front) is defined prior to my assumption of it, though

<sup>15</sup> Christopher B. Balme, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 144.

this does not necessarily determine how I choose to perform it. Individual performances of socially defined roles are always situated, to use Goffman's term. In some orchestra pits, wearing fluorescent socks might be an acceptable individualization of the persona, though clearly not in Tulsa! Some roles are defined more restrictively than others. Obviously, rock musicians have much greater latitude in constructing their personae than do symphony players. The point is that there are aspects of any musical persona as a social role that are in place before any individual assumes the role.

I also stress that not all performances of musical persona involve the performance of music. For example, the Beatles famously performed their individual and collective personae at their press conferences, in interviews, in their films, and so on.<sup>16</sup> These performances played key roles in defining the public's sense of who the Beatles were, especially in the United States. But it is obvious that this was all in the service of creating identities the audience would understand to be the sources of the music they were hearing. In this sense, these personae were not independent of the music, since they have no meaning apart from it.

When we factor in the role of the audience, it is clear that musical persona ultimately is neither independent of nor prior to its performance. For Goffman, self-presentation is a fragile effort to persuade an audience to accept at face value the impression one is trying to create. Whether or not this happens is up to the audience, not the performer. This is why Goffman refers to the process as "impression management"—an active, cybernetic process of evaluating the impression one is creating through the feedback one receives from the audience and modifying one's self-presentation as needed to maintain the impression. The musical persona, like all social identities, is not a static entity that the performer puts on display. It emerges through a negotiation with the audience and each iteration is specific to a particular interaction.

This relationship with the audience is particularly clear in instances where a group seeks to change its persona. The Beatles are again a good case in point, since they performed at least four different collective personae over the course of their career. If they still had been performing the same group persona and the music associated with it in 1967 as they had in 1964, it is doubtful they would have remained successful. At the same time, their

<sup>16</sup> Philip Auslander, "Live—In Person! The Beatles as Performers, 1963–1966," *Acting Archives Review* 10, no. 20 (2020), <https://actingarchives.it/en/essays/contents/229-live-in-person-the-beatles-as-performers-1963-1966.html>.

change in persona from a cheerful boy band to avatars of the counterculture had to be managed in such a way that they would retain the massive audience they had built.

*Indeed, the performance of change is strictly connected to the change of performance...*

Agreed, though this kind of change can take many forms. The Beatles undertook wholesale alterations of their group and individual personae in response to changing times and the rise of the counterculture. Responding to these same pressures, Chuck Berry changed the emphasis of his repertoire. Knowing that the rock audience of the late sixties was starting to understand the blues as the “roots” of rock, in his performances at the Fillmore West and similar venues Berry emphasized the bluesy portion of his song book (“Wee Wee Hours,” for example) while still playing his famous rock and roll songs to adjust his persona to that of a progenitor of rock with a relationship to the blues.

*With your publications, you have contributed to the dissemination of the notion of “mediatization” (“mediatized culture” is a part of the subtitle of Liveness). One problem with the concept is that the media are not all the same. Records, cinema, television, and YouTube are different, they perform differently (and also a live concert is in some way a medium—a form of mediation). The same is true for the general use of “mediatized music.” As any other kind of experience, music is “mediatized” differently according to the different media. Is the concept really useful and how?*

As I understand it, the term mediatization, which I took from Jean Baudrillard, is meant to describe a culture saturated by media, particularly mass media, and their representations, and I think it continues to be useful for that purpose, especially since the dominance of media in contemporary Western societies and cultures, at least, has increased exponentially since Baudrillard first wrote about it.<sup>17</sup> Since one starting point for *Liveness* was the live/recorded dichotomy, I was not that concerned with the different means of recording and the specific experiences they provide. However, there is a chart in *Liveness* that maps the changing meaning of the term in relation to

<sup>17</sup> “What is mediatized is not what comes off the daily press, out of the tube, or on the radio: it is what is reinterpreted by the sign form, articulated into models, and administered by the code.” Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), 175–176.

the evolving technological landscape.<sup>18</sup> Here, the particularities of specific media and the experiences they help shape are key. In *Reactivations*, I am concerned with the documentation of performances but not so much with the specific means of documentation, though the book does tend to emphasize photographic documentation, still the coin of the realm in performance art, as opposed to other kinds, and therefore does get into some ideas about that particular medium by way of Benjamin and others.

Other examples of my work in which medium-specificity is central include “The Liveness of Watching Online,” an essay I wrote for a Tate Modern publication, where I discuss the differences between watching a live performance on television versus one streamed on a computer.<sup>19</sup> Another instance is “Film Acting and Performance Capture: The Index in Crisis,” in which I get into distinctions between chemical and digital photography and between film and motion capture.<sup>20</sup> In these discussions, technical details such as the fact that whereas television is a broadcast, one-to-many medium, the internet is a one-to-one medium since each user has their own stream, or that motion capture “cameras” do not capture light as do film or digital cameras but actually bounce light off the subject in order to capture data points, are central to my arguments.

*On the other hand, the recent historical and technological developments, with the pervasiveness of the new digital media, make the idea of a generalized “mediatization” expressive of the cross-media environment—quite a few live concerts, particularly in the last decades, involve not only lighting design and videos on huge screens, but also 3D hologram projections, the resort to Virtual Reality and so on; and the unifying flow of the web leads to the same consequence...*

In the essay on performance capture I just mentioned, I propose that the entity undertaking the performance is the one we see on the screen, not the actor whose performance was captured, nor the creators and manipulators of the digital puppet, etc. This is in line with some work I did earlier considering whether or not machines, robots, and software could be considered to be live performers, which I believe they can under some circumstances. I

<sup>18</sup> Auslander, *Liveness*, 61.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Auslander, “The Liveness of Watching Online: Performance Room,” in *Perform, Experience, Re-Live: BMW Tate Live Program*, ed. Cecilia Wee (London: Tate Publishing, 2016), 112–125.

<sup>20</sup> Philip Auslander, “Film Acting and Performance Capture: The Index in Crisis,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 39, no. 3 (2017): 7–23.

have somewhat the same feeling about the so-called holograms giving concerts now. The Roy Orbison hologram is not so much a mediatized version of Roy Orbison as it is a performing entity unto itself. The medium ceases to be a channel or conduit for a performance but becomes the performer. Returning to your question about musical persona, I might argue that the hologram extracts the persona from the person: it is a representation of the persona but not as embodied by the person.

*Do you have any reference points in your personal approach to the media, I mean: media scholars who have particularly influenced you?*

In addition to Benjamin and Baudrillard, Raymond Williams has had a significant influence on me, especially his lecture “Drama in a Dramatised Society,”<sup>21</sup> his book *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*,<sup>22</sup> and his ideas of dominant culture and structures of feeling (both explicated in *Marxism and Literature*).<sup>23</sup> What I admire in Williams, and seek to emulate in my own way, is his effort to get to the heart of what it feels like to live a specific culture at a particular moment, while simultaneously recognizing that there will always be aspects of complex societies that will remain elusive. I realize that Williams may not be considered to be a media scholar exactly, but the materials I’ve just mentioned place media at the center of the cultural processes he describes and provide tools for understanding the role and dominance of media in contemporary society. In addition, he wrote beautifully in a way that is lucid, yet hints at conceptual depths that are not directly articulated.

Since I obtained the idea of liveness from television scholars, I have to give a shout out to Jane Feuer, who passed away this year, whose classic 1983 essay “The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology” was an essential starting point that influenced the terms of my discussions of these issues.<sup>24</sup> Another media scholar to whose work I find myself returning regularly is Lynn Spigel. *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* is still one of my favorite books.<sup>25</sup> Her examinations of

<sup>21</sup> Raymond Williams, *Drama in a Dramatised Society: An Inaugural Lecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

<sup>22</sup> Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974).

<sup>23</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>24</sup> Jane Feuer, “The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology,” in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches—An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Frederick: University Publications of America, 1983), 12–22.

<sup>25</sup> Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

how media are assimilated into everyday domestic life and interior design, and the later work she has done on the changing status of television in the age of the internet constitute a vital intervention on the evolving history of the medium in relation to other media and social discourses.

*On the side of historical musicology, I would like to touch on the vexata quaestio concerning the relationship between performance and “text,” which can take the form of a score but also of a libretto with stage directions, while in other artistic fields it can be a script or a screenplay. This question seems to be in some way “liquidated” by your approach to performance. For example, in “Musical Personae” you engage in a discussion with Nicholas Cook, who in his 2001 article “Between Process and Product: Music and/as Performance” proposed to consider the score as a “script” for performance, a concept that is still present in his more recent book *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance* (2013).<sup>26</sup> Yet, I think performance studies could help us rethink musical and non-musical texts as integral parts of what musicians “do”—as aspects of “musicking,” to borrow Christopher Small’s term. Performance studies, for example, provide the concept of “media performativity”—extremely relevant in media studies but in my view still undertheorized. The concept could be applied to musical texts as well—whether scores or scripts. In quite a few performances scores are directly visible on stage and exert their own “performativity” on the audience. In many cases texts are involved or used in some way: they are used in rehearsals, read, interpreted, discussed, and also questioned, overwritten, loved, hated, ruined, and so on. I would particularly stress the “material” and “pragmatic” aspects of texts used in performance. In your reflection, what is the place of “texts” as concrete written artifacts involved in music making as well as in other performance practices?*

Cook devotes a whole chapter of *Beyond the Score* to the idea of seeing musical scores as what he calls “social scripts.” Part of his argument is that if one is to think seriously of music as performance, the idea that the score is more akin to a theatrical script, which was written to be performed, is much more useful than the idea that a musical score is akin to a literary text, which was written to be read. I completely agree with this point. But I also think that Cook is committed to an idea of the musical “work” that has little presence in my thinking.

<sup>26</sup> Nicholas Cook, “Between Process and Product: Music and/as Performance,” *MTO/Music Theory Online* 7, no. 2 (2001), <https://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.01.7.2/mto.01.7.2.cook.html>; Cook, *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

I'm not sure I can give you as direct an answer to the rest of your question. The "liquidation" you mention probably results from the fact that I came of age intellectually in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a time when poststructuralist theory and cultural studies were proposing that everything could be considered a text, to put it crudely. The field of performance studies evolved amid this ferment; one of its premises was that performances could be "read" as cultural texts. Another part of my background is in the history of art, where we treated visual objects as texts to be analyzed. So, for quite a long time, I've been used to a way of looking at performance that does not particularly privilege its textual elements but treats performances as texts in themselves. This perspective is no doubt reflected in my claim that musical compositions are among the "expressive equipment" musicians use to perform their personae rather than privileged texts whose conveyance to an audience is the purpose of performance.<sup>27</sup> I don't in any way discount the idea that texts, understood broadly, are integral to performance. After all, performers always need something to perform, and that something is likely to be understandable as a text of some kind. The relationship of text as an element of performance to the performance in question is always worth investigating. But I guess it just goes against my grain to consider texts as privileged elements of performance.

I also like your point about the presence and performativity of musical scores onstage. I was watching Eric Clapton's tribute concert to the late Ginger Baker, and I noticed that Steve Winwood was consulting written notation, which certainly factored into my perception of his performance. I also recently watched two performances of John Cage's *4'33"* (1952), one by David Tudor and the other by William Marx. Whereas Tudor had the score spread out on the top of the piano, Marx had it in a music stand, and this difference contributed to the very different experiences of the two performances and the personae of the performers.

*Texts (scores, scripts, screenplays, even written archival materials) are also "documents." Do you consider them as in some way connected to "documentation"?*

I don't consider texts that in principle precede performance to be documents of the performance. I'm not saying that they can't help one to comprehend the performance. I once saw a production of *Othello* in Lithuanian, which I cannot understand at all. Since I know the play well enough, I was

<sup>27</sup> Auslander, "Musical Personae," 118.

able to follow the action, so textual knowledge helped me to understand the performance. But that doesn't make Shakespeare's play a documentation of that performance, at least not to my mind.

*But how would you consider scores and scripts when bearing the traces of specific performances? Don't you think they in some ways "document" the preparation of a performance or even the performance itself as specific event?*

This may be a somewhat indirect answer to your question. I do think it's analytically useful to retain a distinction between score or script and document along the lines of assuming that a score or script precedes the performance and the document comes after it and records it in some fashion. However, it is clear that such documents can become scores or scripts in turn. To take a conventional example, let's say I record a song. The song, the composition, is the score and the recording is the documentation of my performance of it. But if someone else learns the song and, perhaps, my way of performing it from my recording, the recording becomes a kind of script that engenders future performances. As we know, this is traditionally how rock musicians learn to play and learn the repertoire, and jazz musicians often seek to learn their idols' improvisations from recordings. In the realm of performance art, those who wish to recreate or re-perform historical pieces do so primarily from documents rather than scripts or scores. In other words, my understanding is that the categories of "script/score" and "document" are functional, not ontological—a particular text or artifact can serve as either one or both, depending on how it is used.

*Do you think your discussion of the performance/documentation relation in *Reactivations* can help us to reconsider in some way the text/performance relation beyond the dichotomic thinking that usually opposes them?*

The short answer to your question is yes. In *Reactivations*, I was trying to suggest that the document is itself a site on which the performance takes place via the beholder's reactivation of the performance from it. I think this complicates the conventionally assumed relationship between the terms "text" and "performance" in what I hope is a useful way.

*To what extent can the media be considered as offering a form of "textualization" of performance? Is the concept of text useful in this "active" meaning? To put it differently: can texts be considered as, say, provisional "de-activa-*



tions” of performances in view of future “re-activations”, to play with the title of your book?

Well, if a performance is already a text in some sense, as I said before, I’m not sure how much more “textualized” it can become! Perhaps it would be better to suggest, along the lines of what I say in *Reactivations*, that a live performance and a recording, say, are two different textualizations of the same thing, and that an experience of this thing can be had from either kind of text.

I do like the idea of a three-step process from performance (activation) to document (deactivation) to the performance reactivated from the document. The problem is that I don’t like the word *deactivate* in this context partly because it makes it sound as if the act of documenting a performance renders it inactive (or worse, kills it!), which is more or less the opposite of the point: the act of documentation enables future reactivations and reenactments and, thus, the continued life of the performance.

*In your recent writings, including “Digital Liveness” and Reactivations (but not in Liveness, if I am not wrong), you often refer to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutic approach, which started from the text/interpretation relationship... How is Gadamer or German hermeneutics, even including reception theory, connected to your work? Or how would you define the sense of your personal recovery and use of this tradition in your relatively recent writings?*

The honest answer is that I discovered Gadamer because I was looking for a solution to a specific problem. I wanted to argue in *Reactivations* that performance documents, including recordings, provide an experience of the performance in the partaker’s own time and place, a position I had already taken regarding recordings of music. They are not time machines that transport the partaker back to the circumstances of the original performance. Benjamin’s notion of reactivation addresses this. But it is also true, if I’m being faithful to my own experience, that one of the reasons we are interested in certain performances and in reactivating them is precisely because they occurred in the past. Gadamer addresses this in many ways. The simplest one is his point that since aspects of the past are always already embedded in the present, some artifacts of the past, including performances, are accessible to us through our present experience of them (in fact, this is the only way we can experience them). As he says in *Truth and Method*, “only the part of the past that is not past offers the possibility of

historical knowledge.<sup>28</sup> He also suggests that it is our ethical obligation as partakers to make the historical artifact immediate to ourselves (contemporaneous) without erasing its alterity. In this respect, Gadamer makes the apprehension of a work from the past—as something that can speak to us today—the result of an active and conscious effort on the part of the audience. To me, this can be seen as a description of how reactivation works, since Benjamin identifies it as a phenomenon without discussing its mechanism. I will also say that Gadamer represents for me something similar to Goffman: an anti-foundationalist thinker whose ideas lend themselves to practical analysis.

*The COVID-19 crisis (this journal is produced in the past Italian epicenter of the epidemic, Milan) prompts a deep reflection on the importance of the media in everyday life. While the health emergency imposes “social distancing,” the media enhance their paradoxical performance of immediacy and presence—or at least this aspect has become more and more important to us. How would you describe the role of “performance” and “media performativity” in the age of COVID-19?*

I am working on such questions right now as I prepare the third edition of *Liveness*, which will be in part the “pandemic edition,” since I’m writing it in quarantine and because I’m in the peculiar position of writing about the cultural status of live performance at a time when traditional live performance is impossible. Since I’m immersed in this situation, both intellectually and circumstantially, it’s difficult for me to get enough distance to be analytical about it.

One thing I have noticed is that the absence of live performance has created the conditions for a resurgence of the kind of rhetoric valorizing the live experience that was one of the things I was reacting to when I first undertook to write *Liveness*. This is accompanied at present in both theater and music by a fairly desperate-seeming search for online experiences that are equivalent to—or at least viable replacements for—live theater performances or concerts. This is entirely understandable from an economic perspective: performers and cultural institutions all over the world lost their livelihood overnight; some are only starting to recover, while others are threatened with extinction. It is perhaps ironic that the lack of in-person live experiences has created a glut of online ones: there is now more music,

<sup>28</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 2004), 290.

more theater, more everything available online than one could ever have time to watch. One of the dimensions of this situation that interests me the most is the way recorded performances, often recorded some time ago, are being repurposed as live events either by limiting access to a specific time period or by adding interactive features, such as real-time chat during the performance. I also take an interest in the new cultural performances that are emerging in the wake of the pandemic, such as people applauding first responders and hospital workers at shift change every night; people dressing up to take out their trash or coordinating times to be outside to sing or dance while maintaining social distance, and so on. The media and social media play a key role in promulgating these activities simply by reporting on them and giving people activities to emulate.

*Yes, like all historical traumas, the health emergency has contributed and still is contributing to question many easy conceptual dichotomies, forcing us to rethink concepts and their mutual relationship, especially in the field of performance and performing arts. This same interview was born under the influence of COVID-19, for example because it took shape at a distance and through subsequent online exchanges, which makes it a peculiar artifact, suspended between performance, media, documentation, and history. Isn't this a very clear and sufficiently complex case of "reactivation"?*

Yes. Strictly speaking, our readers are the ones who will reactivate and experience our dialogic performance from this document. Their experience is analogous to that of listening to a highly produced studio album that was performed and recorded in discontinuous segments that were pieced together through an editorial process, yet the beholder's perception of it is as a single, uninterrupted performance unfolding in real time. Perhaps we can use this circumstance to unpack one last dichotomy: that between activation and reactivation, two of the trio of terms you mentioned earlier. In cases such as a studio album or this dialogue, where the document records a performance that never took place in real time and space in the same form as it is made available to the beholder, the beholder simultaneously activates the performance, in the sense of bringing it into being, and reactivates it in the sense of constructing an experience of it from the document. The document, in turn, becomes both a primary and a secondary source. Primary in the sense that the document is the space in which the performance is initially activated, where it takes place, and secondary in the sense that it makes the performance available for reactivation.

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<sup>29</sup> In contrast to the standard way of alphabetically listing titles of works by the same author, the bibliography here presents them in chronological order to highlight the development of Philip Auslander’s work.

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#### Links

Philip Auslander’s institutional website at the Georgia Institute of Technology: <https://auslander.lmc.gatech.edu>.

**Philip Auslander** is a Professor of Performance Studies and Popular Musicology in the School of Literature, Media, and Communication of the Georgia Institute of Technology (Atlanta, Georgia, USA). He is the author of numerous scholarly articles and seven books, including *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance* (University of Michigan Press, 1992), *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism* (Routledge, 1997), *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (Routledge, 1999; 2nd ed. 2008), *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (University of Michigan Press, 2006), *Reactivations: Essays on Performance and Its Documentation* (University of Michigan Press, 2018), and *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona* (University of Michigan Press, 2021). In addition to his scholarly work on performance and music, Prof. Auslander has written art criticism for *ArtForum* and other publications and regularly contributes essays to exhibition catalogs for museums in Europe and North America, including Tate Modern, The Whitney Museum of American Art, the Migros Museum, and the Walker Art Center. He is also a screen actor and writer. “Dr. Blues,” a short film Auslander wrote, produced, and acted in, premiered at the Peachtree Village International Film Festival in Atlanta in October of 2019.

**Alessandro Cecchi** earned his PhD from Pavia University in Cremona and is currently Assistant Professor of Musicology at the University of Pisa, where he teaches Music History and Film Music. In addition to music theory and analysis, musical aesthetics, music in German literature and philosophy, and twentieth-century music in general, his research interests include film music, television music, musical performance and its circulation through media.

His main articles have been published in *Studi musicali* (2011), *Il Saggiatore musicale* (2012), *Rivista di Analisi e Teoria Musicale* (2015), *Music Sound and the Moving Image* (2014), *Musica/Tecnologia* (2014-2015), *Journal of Film Music* (2015), *Aisthesis* (2017), *Cultura Tedesca* (2018), *Biblioteca Teatrale* (2019), *Schermi* (2020), and *Gli spazi della musica* (2020). He was guest co-editor of “Film Music Histories and Ethnographies: New Perspectives on Italian Cinema in the Long 1960s”, special issue of the *Journal of Film Music* (2015), and co-editor of the volume *Investigating Musical Performance: Theoretical Models and Intersections* (Routledge, 2020). He is Series Editor of *musica.performance.media* interdisciplinary series with NeoClassica, and serves as Editorial Board member of the journals *Archival Notes* and *Sound Stage Screen*, Advisory Board member of the Gustav Mahler Research Centre, and Collaborator of the Centro Studi Luciano Berio.