

Representing Performance: Musical Recordings in Culture

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Charles Wiffen: 'Capturing life and selling the mix: the simulation of live performance in the music video'

Abstract:

This paper examines how the 'live' element of diegetic performance in a music video may be simulated, and explores the narrative origins and implications of the performance context. The first case study is a sequence extracted from a film by Kevin McMahon, based on a performance by the cellist Yo-Yo Ma of Bach's G major Cello Suite; the second study is taken from 'Big Beach Boutique 2', a 2002 Brighton performance of DJ Norman Cook. Both examples present performance as an apparently spontaneous act in an outdoor environment with contingent technological challenges; both use music diegetically and non-diegetically; both exploit mime, structural coordination and gesture; both present a conflict between high and low budget visual and musical effects; each focuses on the artistry and charisma of a single artist; each seeks to represent the artist as promoting participation, inclusivity and egalitarianism; each places performance within a narrative framework.

Tony Langlois has suggested that electronic dance music constructed from samples is 'blatantly artificial', and that 'there is no pretence that the record represents a live

performance'. This paper demonstrates not only the manufactured 'liveness' of such performance, but that this characteristic is integral to the identity and commercial success of the recording venture. Both Ma and Cook seek to represent a free, 'not-for-profit' experience, but this is instantly commodified in the various formats in which the performances are commercially available (CD, video and DVD) and in their publicity: despite the narrative, the live experience is for sale.

Introduction:

My paper addresses the question of how 'live' performance may be portrayed in music video. I choose two diverse examples: the first is a performance by the Paris-born American cellist Yo-Yo Ma of an unaccompanied suite by Bach (taken from a series of films titled *Inspired by Bach*); the second is an example of dance music 'performed' (and I will return to the use of this term) by the British DJ Norman Cook, alias Fat Boy Slim (*Big Beach Boutique II*). I examine aspects of the process involved in the creation of these videos and look for some common ground between them. Finally, I attempt to draw some general conclusions about the nature of their production and reception.

Ma commissioned six films in 1996 from different directors to respond to Bach's unaccompanied suites for cello. The set is collectively titled *Inspired by Bach* and includes films on garden design, virtual realisations of Piranesi drawings, dance, drama, kabuki theatre and ice-skating. Each film includes an entire performance by Ma of its respective suite. The cultural range of these films reflects the breadth of Ma's personal interests, but also points to specific target audiences and issues in the mid-1990s: ethnic minorities, socially deprived communities and virtual reality are somewhat self-consciously represented in the films. Gesture emerges as a significant factor, both in

physical terms (as in the dance and skating contributions) and in a metaphorical sense (as in the first film, in which a garden is created in a deprived urban setting). Ma initially made audio recordings of the suites before embarking on the film project. I make no attempt to aesthetically evaluate Ma's project or to analyse details of its cinematography or choreography: my focus is purely on the portrayal of performance.

Norman Cook initiated a major open air concert called the 'Big Beach Boutique' in his home town of Brighton in 2001. This first event drew a crowd of 60,000 people and was repeated in 2002, when 250,000 attended. The video to be discussed today is a recording of the live performance – essentially a souvenir of the event. Ma's video on the other hand is an art object in itself which happens to use a filmed performance to reflect upon a musical work within a multi-disciplinary framework.

Performance

In *Six Gestures*, Ma is seen performing Bach's D major Suite, BWV 1012 in three locations: a church, a high-rise rooftop and a busy junction in New York City; we see a live audience only at the end of the video. These scenes are inter-cut with video-clips of Torvill and Dean skating against backdrops of the sky and superimposed urban buildings; at times they are reflected in the glass of these buildings. A third presence in the film (which I ignore for the purposes of this paper) is the character of Bach and is played by the actor Tom McCamus. The official press release for the film described it as follows:

In *Six Gestures* (Suite No.6), ice dancers and Olympic champions Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean join Yo-Yo Ma in the last of the Suites, in which the cellist believes Bach most dramatically 'stretched the envelope' of musical possibilities. *Six Gestures* takes its inspiration directly from Bach's life and experience, as filtered through Ma's performance. Torvill, Dean and the film's director Patricia Rozema chose a distinct gesture for each of the Suite's movements—'looking

upward' in the Prelude, 'looking inward' in the Allemande, 'hands and feet working' in the Courante, 'hand stroking the face' in the Sarabande, 'mannered and courtly gestures' in the Gavotte, and 'flight' or rebirth in the Gigue.¹

Both Ma and Cook are seen to approach their performing locations in crowd scenes: both interact with anonymous members of the public on this journey. Ma responds thoughtfully to a clearly planted question from a member of the public about his reasons for choosing Torville and Dean for the video; Cook, on the other hand, greets fans with handshaking and 'high fives'. Thus, though there is an added triumphalism in Cook's entry, both performers are portrayed as communicative, approachable and genial human beings.

The principal narrative thread that links the diverse clips in *Six Gestures* is the continuity imposed by the diegetically used Suite. The recording ambience suggests a fair degree of resonance and does not alter according to changing visual elements on screen. In other words, the on-screen Ma mimes over a pre-recorded audio track as is common in much pop performance. Occasionally, ambient noise is mixed in with the studio performance, most notably in street scenes and when a flock of geese flies across the sky. This use of mime is an important similarity between both videos: Cook mimes the vocals of the tracks which he plays, sometimes for comic effect, as in Mint Royale's *Sexiest Man in Jamaica*. Cook's reason for miming differs from that of Ma: his miming serves not to enhance continuity but rather to appropriate the original material. He becomes an ironic embodiment of the original artist.

Both videos employ a combination of high and low technology: in the case of Ma, the use of geometrically shaped buildings as a backdrop, the superimposition of the

¹ Patricia Rozema, 'Six Gestures', quoted on <http://www.patriciarozema.com/main.html> (accessed 21/11/2007)

skaters on these buildings and the video editing combine to create a sense of visual sophistication. For Cook, the use of a large video screen behind the mixing desks, complex lighting rigs and a powerful sound system creates a similarly high tech environment, enhanced by the use of special effects in the video. However, both performers humanise their environment through low tech forms of communication, most notably through handwritten signs asking for different forms of validation. Ma places a sign in his cello case acknowledging donations and Cook uses handwritten LP sleeves to communicate with his audience. To use the terminology Nick Cook developed in *Analysing Musical Multimedia*, these are examples of ‘contest’ between components of the video.

Nevertheless, there are also examples of ‘conformance’ in these performances: musical structure, for example, is emphasised in Ma’s performance through video editing. In his recording of the Gigue, the repeat of each section is marginally more urgent in Ma’s reading than its first statement and this is underlined by the increased rate of change of camera shots and edits in each repeat. There are two edits in the first performance of the first section as opposed to five in its repeat. Similarly in the second section, there are eight edits in the first performance and twelve in the repeat. Synchrony is also employed to mark particular musical events: for example, when a member of the public throws a coin into the cello case, the clink of the coin coincides with the bass note of a root position secondary dominant.

Both videos employ dislocation as a means of articulating their material. In Cook’s performance, the dance music is extracted from its original club context and released into the open air. This may represent a metaphorical mainstream acceptance of

dance music; ironically, this acceptance appears to have subsequently jeopardised the future of the genre by reducing its 'street cred'. Music which originated as urban black music in underground clubs on North America's east coast has evolved to become daytime entertainment on the beach of a regency resort on England's south coast, presided over by a middle-aged white DJ and attended by a predominantly white and apparently affluent audience. In Ma's performance, on the other hand, the dislocation results primarily from witnessing music which had originated (as we are reminded) in the court of 18th century Cöthen performed outdoors in late 20th century Manhattan. Both Cook's material and the Bach suite are transformed, re-constituted and re-contextualised within these performances. According to Tony Langlois,

The visual projections and videos used in raves constitute something of a postmodern idiom, consisting as they do of collage, 'cut-up' and distortion of time and colours. Like the music, the visuals reject a 'hierarchy of connotation' and neat 'good continuation'. Instead, composers and 'scratch video' artists alike seek decentred plurality, ironic use of meanings, and disorientation. There can be little 'narrative' where the image is presented just long enough to be apprehended before being replaced by another with no logical connection. The object, rather, is to revel in the experience of being disorientated – of trying (and failing) to fill the semantic gaps between images, sounds and their meanings.²

Thus, dislocation is crucial to the performance itself in the club context. Although such dislocation is by no means as radical in Ma's performance, there is nevertheless a similar sense of rejecting traditional continuity in the video. Both processes might be graphically represented using a Brunswik lens model: from this it is clear that there are at least five transformations between the original musical object and its domestic consumption.

² Tony Langlois, 'Can you feel it? DJs and House Music culture in the UK', *Popular Music* (1992) 11:2, 237

Meaning

Both Ma and Cook are relentlessly post-modern in the diversity of their references and in their accessibility: Ma is portrayed as performing in the street as a busker – anyone can stop and enjoy the performance. We are shown his on-screen audience only at the very end of the *Gigue*, and it is an ethnically diverse group, clearly chosen to promote the inclusiveness to which he aspires. Cook's *Big Beach Boutique* was advertised as a free event and therefore would appear to represent a similarly democratic aspiration. Yet for all this, both embrace the commercial reality of the 'music business' in a typically post-modern way. Both are marketed by commercial record labels (in Ma's case this is Sony, in Cook's it is Eagle Rock Entertainment). Thus, the inclusive and 'not-for-profit' images of both performances are misleading. In both cases, the performers themselves are the product, in terms of marketing, regardless of the intended artistic or cultural claims of their actual material.

Conclusion

Both performances focus attention on the role of a recognizable individual. Cook's success has been closely linked to a growth in visibility of the DJ which has been remarked upon by numerous commentators. As Tony Langlois has noted,

House records are not recordings 'of' performances, they are actively performed by the DJ himself, allowing spontaneity, surprise and creativity. It is this direct and reciprocal relationship between the DJ and his audience that makes a rave a qualitatively 'special' event and allows the participants to become emotionally involved with the music.³

³ Langlois, *op. cit.*, 236

According to Langlois, ‘recorded music is regarded as a tool *for* performance rather than a facsimile *of* one.’⁴

The relationship between Ma and his onscreen audience is portrayed as being equally direct and reciprocal. The act of performance for both Cook and Ma is portrayed as personal and authentic communication even when this is clearly recognised by the audience to be simulated. This notion reflects the call of Georgina Born for ‘co-presence’. Just as new technologies make new modes of expression possible in performance, so these technologies are subverted by a simulated return to direct communication. All of which bodes well for live performance.

Sources:

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- Patricia Rozema, ‘Six Gestures’, quoted on <http://www.patriciarozema.com/main.html> (accessed 21/11/2007)
- Fat Boy Slim, *Big Beach Boutique* (Eagle Vision, EREDV279)
- Yo-Yo Ma, *Six Gestures*, directed by Patricia Rozema, with Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean (Sony, SVD 89322)

⁴ Langlois, *op. cit.*, 235