

***Deux Aires* for flute solo: A musical reading of Fernando Lopes-Graça through Theodor W. Adorno's philosophy of music**

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Abstract: This paper presents a brief investigation that articulates the study and practice for the musical performance of *Deux Aires*, a piece for solo flute by the Portuguese composer Fernando Lopes-Graça, with the philosophical perspective on musical interpretation of the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno. The guiding line of this study was the question “How to better render the musical text in performance?”, a particularly relevant question when the issue is the performance of music from the 20th century onwards. Thinking about the performance of this “new” music, presented here in a case study of this 1976 composition by Fernando Lopes-Graça, is not only significant because of its existence in the shadow of the canonical pre-20th century repertoire, but also because its eclectic nature distances us, as performers and as listeners, from an immediate or intuitive understanding. Adorno's proposal of a *dialectical musical interpretation* assisted the musical practice of the score, promoting the discussion and surpassing of interpretation conundrums, obstacles or indecisions that arise within that practice. Confronting the study of Lopes-Graça's *Deux Aires* with Adorno's perspective had a significant impact on the sonorous realization of the piece, lending its performance a critical standpoint and escorting the search for musical sense in the score.

Keywords: Musical performance; Dialectical musical interpretation; Musical Text

In the cultural and aesthetic context of Western Art Music, the search for the musical sense, when preparing for the performative realization of a musical text, is the aim of any musician concerned with a truthful and clear presentation of the musical work to their public. The way to the musical work's “truth content” (*Wahrheitsgehalt*), accessible only through interpretation in the sonorous realization of the score, that is, in the work's actualization through performance, is perceived by Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969) as a dialectical process inextricably encompassing the musical text and the musician (Adorno, 2006). The relation between text and interpreter is, then, of crucial relevance when thinking about musical interpretation.

Such was the conviction of Adorno who worked intermittently on what would have been a Theory of Musical Interpretation. The Adornian notion of *dialectical musical interpretation* is presented in a very particular posthumous book, edited in 2001 by Henri Lonitz and titled *Zu einer Theorie der musikalischen Reproduktion* (Adorno, 2001). This book gathers notes, schematas and a draft collected and partially organized by Adorno between the 1920s and 1959 for a Theory of Musical Interpretation. This Theory never came to be finished but many of Adorno's thoughts on musical interpretation are explicit, as well as the relation between the score and the performer. An English translation appeared in 2006, by Wieland Hoban, titled *Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction* (Adorno, 2006).

A brief note might clarify, here, that the use of the term *Reproduktion* in the book's title is not to be understood in the strict sense of mechanical or technical reproduction, as in Walter Benjamin's critique of the work of art's reproducibility (Benjamin, 2012), but in a broader sense, which takes the musician's subjectivity into account. Musical reproduction is, in this way, understood by Adorno as the *hic et nunc* of music, the performance, the presentation, the playing or sonorous realization, specifically of the

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music that has the score as its starting point. Adorno was not only a prolific thinker on aesthetics and music, but also a profound connoisseur of the technical, theoretical, and practical specific elements of Western Art Music. He was a pianist and studied composition with Alban Berg, having composed some small pieces for piano, string quartet and orchestra. The philosopher was, thus, taking notes about musical interpretation in the light of the particularities of the context of Western Art Music.

In a sense, one can say that Adorno was anticipating the claims of performance studies and artistic research in the 21st century by questioning the “musical work” as static content. For the Frankfurt philosopher, whenever we perform any musical work, we are not *representing* it through performance but creating it anew. This ontological position is now being advocated by many musicians and researchers on musical performance, such as Paulo de Assis, who claims “the performative moment not as place for *representation* of already known sound structures, but of a critical *problematization* of the musical objects under consideration” (Assis, 2018b, p. 11). Although Adorno was firmly convinced of the necessary search for the musical work’s “truth content” (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) through interpretation, whereas artistic research is now devaluating the very notion of *truth* (Assis, 2018a, p. 35), his theory on musical interpretation bears some relation with, for instance, John Rink’s proposal for a reorientation of the relationship between score and performance towards what he calls the “score-sound continuum”, underlining the process-like character of musical works (Rink, 2018, p. 97).

Adorno was a dialectical philosopher. As such, he thought about musical interpretation presupposing a pre-contradiction between two sides from which a qualitative change would come as music. This philosophical method of argumentation, in which critical thought is stimulated by the introduction of an antithesis leading to an enlargement of the knowledge about the phenomenon under discussion, was distinctly expressed by Georg W. Friedrich Hegel in *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807). The well-known formula *thesis-antithesis-synthesis* presents itself as a movement from the abstract thesis, to the negative antithesis, to the concrete synthesis.

Nevertheless, Adorno was a critic of this positivistic, idealistic and a-historical dialectics. In *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1947), along with Max Horkheimer, and later in *Negative Dialektik* (Adorno, 1966), he maintains that one cannot grasp knowledge in a concrete, positive, synthesis. For Adorno, and for the Frankfurt School’s Critical Theory, we can only know something by revealing the limits of knowledge, and that only happens through critique. His negative dialectics present as a movement from the concrete, to the negative, to the critical.

In this sense, Adorno’s proposal of a *dialectical musical interpretation*, as a way of revealing what he called the “truth content” of the musical work, is a demand for a constant critical actualization of the performed musical work. Adorno elucidates the mechanism of articulation between the two elements present in the musician-score relationship from which a truthful and critical interpretation emerges.

Adorno's *dialectical musical interpretation*

The contradiction that Adorno diagnoses when searching for a critical performative interpretation of the musical score is the one between the text and the musician who interprets it. That text is described as the “mensural element” (*das mensurale*), as “der Inbegriff alles durch Zeichen eindeutig Gegebenen”² (Adorno, 2001, p. 88). Its characteristics are, on one hand, its mathematicity and its significant rigidity or objectivity, and, on the other hand, its imprecision, insufficiency and zones of indeterminacy. It is the “autonomous musical construction” (Adorno, 2006, p. 166).

The *negative* to this autonomous, *concrete*, construction is, then, given by the interpreter. The “idiomatic element” (*das idiomatische*), supplied by the performer, is described as “die aus der je vorgegebenen und das Werk *einschließenden* Musiksprache zu erschließende”³ (Adorno, 2001, p. 88). This brings out the immanent historicity of each musical work. For Adorno, the historical character, the idiom, of each work of art demands, in its objectivity, a change in representation. This is an ephemeral element, constantly changing, and thus, cannot be notated in the musical score. The idiom is present both in the historical character of the composition and in the historical circumstances of its performance by musicians. This is the legitimate place for the performer's subjectivity and aligns with Rink's arguments when he writes that “performers do influence music's very content, how it takes shape, and how those who hear it perceive and understand it” (Rink, 2018, p. 89).

It is from this conflict between the musical text's authoritative objectivity and the subjective interpreter – this is the *constitutive tension* between text and interpreter that Hans-Georg Gadamer identifies in hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1999, p. 461) – that a truthful interpretation might develop. The “neumatic element” (*das neumische*) is “das aus den Zeichen zu interpolierende strukturelle”⁴ (Adorno, 2001, p. 88), also termed as *mimic* or *gestural*. This is the mimetic or imitative expression of music. Music is, for Adorno, imitation, not representation. It is possible for the interpreter to draw this gestural element from the musical text because the notation is itself an imitation of the mimetic character of music.

The conflictual articulation between text and interpreter comprises different possibilities of interpretation and realization of the score, its task being to “render visible [audible] all the relations, transitions, contrasts, characters, fields of tension and resolution and whatever else the construction consists of [...]” (Adorno, 2006, p. 202). One of the fundamental motifs of Adorno's work on musical interpretation is the certainty that imitation of the text by the interpreter involves adding to that text. The debate around the ontological question on musical works and performances still leans today on what Stefano Predelli calls the “invariantist approach” (Predelli, 2006), that is, understanding the musical work simply as the common structure which is repeated in different performances. Contrary to these positivistic views of more or less sterilized execution of the score, and in line with performance and artistic research that focus on the event-

² “the epitome of all that is unambiguously given through symbols” (Adorno, 2006, p. 67).

³ “that which must be reached through the musical language given in each case, and which *encompasses* the work” (Adorno, 2006, p. 67).

⁴ “the structural element to be interpolated from the symbols” (Adorno, 2006, p. 67).

like character of the work of art (Assis, 2018a; Davies, 2018; Fischer-Lichte, 2008; Hindrichs, 2018; Rink, 2018), Adorno notes that “objectivity of insight [...] does not demand a *decrease* in subjectivity, and abandonment thereof, but rather an *increase* in subjectivity. Imitation means that the subject gains all the more understanding of the object by adding to it.” (Adorno, 2006, p. 65). The philosopher underlines that this adding is not to happen as something independent from the text. The increase in subjectivity must occur within the text’s objectivity.

Adorno identifies, then, three different conditions, or “layers”, in the interaction between the interpreter and the musical text. The first, related to the *mensural element*, is the layer of “analytical recognition of the sense” (Adorno, 2006, p. 130). For Adorno, interpreting a text “is by necessity a process of taking apart and reassembling” (Adorno, 2006, p. 91). The second layer is the one of “adequate imagination” (Adorno, 2006, p. 130), and relates to the *idiomatic element*. It is what aims at a convergence between the interpreter’s subjectivity and the text’s objectivity. The third layer is the “realization” (Adorno, 2006, p. 130), identified in the *neumatic element*; it is the critical resolution of interpretation in performance.

The study and training for the performance of a score must, then, promote an intimate relation between the musician and the musical text at hand; a relation that considers this dialectical movement between the composition’s objectivity and inevitable imprecision, and the interpreter’s, as well as the composition’s, idiomatic input. In the next section, we shall meet some practical examples of interpretative choices when preparing for the performance of the piece *Deux Airs* composed by Fernando Lopes-Graça (1906-1994), oriented by Adorno’s proposals for a *dialectical musical interpretation*.

Musical reading of *Deux Airs*

Deux Airs for solo flute was premiered by Marianne Clément in 1978 and composed two years earlier. Lopes-Graça’s work as a composer is perceived by Mário Vieira de Carvalho, one of the expert scholars studying this seminal figure of 20th century Portuguese music, as having a transgressive and counterhegemonic identity (Carvalho, 2017). This can be heard, for instance, in his provocation of the tonal norm, in his use of dissonance as anti-climatic, and in his irregular use of rhythm and meter (Carvalho, 2017, p. 86), constant features in his music.

Lopes-Graça composed mostly vocal music, involving great names of Portuguese poetry in his songs, such as those of Fernando Pessoa, Luís de Camões, Miguel Torga, Sophia de Mello Breyner and José Gomes Ferreira, but also invoking the popular and the rustic Portuguese cultural heritage in poetry as in music. His interest in Portuguese folklore was particularly salient after meeting with Béla Bartók in Paris in the 1930s, and later in his collaborations with Michel Giacometti. Lopes-Graça’s instrumental music is mainly for piano but he composed also for many chamber ensembles, as well as for orchestra and for solo instruments. Such is the case of the two-movement piece for solo flute I address in this study. The score of *Deux Airs* was revised and edited in 1997 by Carlos Franco and printed by Musicoteca (Lopes-Graça, 1997). The first aria, “Air tendre”, is a slow movement in triple meter, and greatly

contrasts with the second aria, “Air de bravoure”, which is generally faster and more energetic.

The study for the performance of this piece, begun with the first technical approach to the explicit *mensural* elements noted, was challenged by some zones of indeterminacy in the score, and augmented with the concern for a critical interpretation. The analytical analysis of the text, oriented by John Rink’s suggestion of a “performer’s analysis”⁵ (Rink, 2002), was a fundamental step in the study, as well as the recognition of Lopes-Graça’s work’s counterhegemonic and transgressive idiom – in music but also in other non-musical texts (Lopes-Graça, 1973). Some selected samples of this study follow, as well as an explanatory commentary on the solutions found to perform the work.

Air tendre

In the first aria, there is a motivic development in measures 9 to 12 (*Figure 1*) that appears as a transition between the first and the second sections. The final motif of the first section is arranged in a way that prefigures the first motif of the second section. Although it is quite clear to the eyes – especially after the analytical recognition of the sense in the primary relation as interpreter of the musical text – that a transformation is playing out with two notes (F# and G), it was important to stress it to the ears, particularly at the higher register (measures 11 and 12), so that the *mensural* element notated in the score could be recovered in performance. For this transformation to be clear sounding, and for the tension constructed in the ascendant motion not to be disrupted, I found it important not to breathe during measures 11 to 15. This was also relevant for a more explicit realization of the rhythmic irregularity of measure 12, amplified by a small *rubato*.



Figure 1. “Air tendre”, measures 9-12.
Source: (Lopes-Graça, 1997).

⁵ In “Analysis and (or?) performance”, John Rink addresses the notion of a *prescriptive analysis*, one that precedes performance. It is the “considered study of the score with particular attention to contextual functions and means of projecting them” (Rink, 2002, p. 36).
<https://proa.ua.pt/index.php/impar>



Video 1: Excerpt from "Air tendre". Measures 9 to 12.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7SHI1KP-DXU>

Another transition between sections is presented in measures 18 and 19 (*Figure 2*). In measure 20, another section starts with the ornamentation of the descending motif repeated in the two previous measures. No indications are given in the score regarding dynamics, or tempo changes in this transitional section. Once again, the text's objectivity, its *mesurable* character, is evident in the analysis but not so clear when played. A convergence between the text's objectivity and the interpreter's subjectivity was, then, needed so that, through adequate imagination, this motivic transformation was rendered audible. The way I found to make this transition, as well as the ornamented motif in measure 20, noticeable and revealed in performance, was to fade, in measure 19, producing a contrast in dynamics with the previous measure, and start measure 20 at a slower tempo adding an *accelerando* throughout until measure 21, where *tempo primo* is recovered.



Figure 2. "Air tendre", measures 17-20.
Source: (Lopes-Graça, 1997).



Video 2: Excerpt from "Air tendre". Measures 17 tp 20.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_PyeGr9hYw

In measure 57, the first note assumes the beginning of a disruption of the initial theme of the aria. This theme, with which the *Aria* begins, is re-exposed in measures 54 and 55 and repeated with a variation in measures 56 and 57. The C circled in *Figure 3* disturbs the thematic repetition and initiates the melodic development that will lead to the aria's finale. Its sonorous realization in performance is thus relevant in shaping the end of the movement. The idiomatic character of Lopes-Graça's compositions, as well as its transgressive and norm corrupting tendency, are explicit in this note. To make it sound clearly disruptive, I add a *rubato* that makes it slightly longer and hinders the possibility of letting it pass unnoticed.



Figure 3. "Air tendre", measures 54-57.
Source: (Lopes-Graça, 1997).



Video 3: Excerpt from "Air tendre". Measures 54 to 57.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJVEvB1mUnA>

Air de bravoure

The second aria starts with a fast (144 bpm), *con anima* and *forte*, introduction. The section that follows, after a double bar-line with a fermata, is presented in *Figure 4*. It is a contrasting section not only because it is much slower (69 bpm), but also because it is to be played *piano* and *pianissimo*. The expressive character of this section, proposed in the indication *flexibile*, is also at odds with the introduction's disposition. This contrast between a vivid and energetic section and a feeble and languid one is an important statement made by Lopes-Graça in this bravura aria. When preparing for the performance of this piece, I settled for an enhancement of this contrast explicit in the score. To the *flexibile* section on measures 13 to 16 I added, then, a timbric change when performing. This change offers a much windier tone, a frailer flute sound, produced by projecting more air out than in the flute, contrasting with the focused clear timbre of the introduction. One might say this is an informed subjectivity. It is my personal idiomatic input within the text's objectivity. This addition to the text in this section of the aria also informed two other slower sections, in measures 35 to 39 and 50 to 60, that similarly disrupt the *bravura* sections.



Figure 4. "Air de bravoure", measures 13-16.
Source: (Lopes-Graça, 1997).



Video 4: Excerpt from "Air de bravoure". Measures 13 to 16.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCfzgARiyyE>

Also disrupting the primary character of the aria is the finale of the third section. The third section of this aria is a great *bravura* exposition, that extends from measure 17 to measure 34. And yet, its last five measures, presented in *Figure 5*, express a dramatic change in character: from a *quasi tromba*, *ff*, *marcatissimo*, the monotonic rhythmic motif decreases in intensity and slows down (from triplet quavers, to binary quavers, to longer notes in the final two measures), culminating in the next *Tranquilo* and *piano* section. Measures 33 and 34 are also disrupting the tonal establishment of the C in measures 30 to 32, frustrating its stability with a C#, and corrupting it even further with the last D; as well as contrasting with the *on time* beat of the vertical previous measures, by means of a syncopated rhythm.



Figure 5. "Air de bravoure", measures 30-34.
Source: (Lopes-Graça, 1997).



Video 5: Excerpt from "Air de bravoure". Measures 30 to 35.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPgAW51A22c>

In order to produce this explicit change in character in the text, the indication *calando*, which suggests a decrease in loudness and fading of rigorous tempo (Baker, 1904; Stainer & Barret, 1876), or as Davis Fallows puts it, "an instruction to make the music die away in volume and sometimes also in tempo" (Fallows, 1980, p. 612), is plainly followed in performance, but not to a point of closure. Despite the double bar at the end of this section in measure 34, a connection might be established between the last two measures (33 and 34) and the first measure of the next section (measure 35). *Figures 6 and 7* show that link in the sequential, melodic and chromatic motif (C-C# C-D C-E b):



Figure 6. "Air de bravoure", measures 33 -34.
Source: (Lopes-Graça, 1997).



Figure 7. "Air de bravoure", measure 35.
Source: (Lopes-Graça, 1997).

Inviting such connection for the performance of the piece might enhance the disruptive appearance of a slower and quieter section on measure 35. In that sense, the *calando*
<https://proa.ua.pt/index.php/impar>

will be performed not as making the music “die away” (Fallows, 1980) as much as ‘making the music sleep away’, not totally evading, and welcoming the new section. The video example attached to *Figure 5* also presents this transition between *Figure 6* and *Figure 7*, one which was disclosed through an analytic recognition of the motivic development in the text.

Preliminary conclusions

The instances presented above illustrate how a performative reading of the musical text can address and interact with that text, discussing how to both audibly show the autonomous construction left by the composer, and imitating in performance the imitation of music in the score. This imitation of the text by the performer does not deny, as we saw, the possibility of adding to the text, heightening in that way the audibility of the connections and disconnections that constitute the piece. The dialectical movement between score and performance, a circular hermeneutic process that leads from ignorance of the work to its comprehension in the critical event of music, materializes in the interrogation of the text by the interpreter. This is the biggest Adornian contribution concerning the performance of written Western Art Music: the notion of music, this specific written music, as the imitation of musical composition, and the incorporation of the process of composition as reenactment in performance. Despite being accommodated, still, with conventional modes of presentation, not considering a critical performative practice that goes beyond the relation between text and musician, Adorno’s theory on musical interpretation complies with the same ontological commitments made by musicians and researchers who are currently questioning the “existence of identifiable and stabilized musical works, of uncorrupted subjects capable of immaculately apprehending them, and of a transparent link between a work’s written codification and its sonic manifestation in performance” (Assis, 2018a, p. 24).

Final impressions

Preparing for the performance of *Deux Aires*, aware of Adorno’s proposals about musical interpretation centered the study on establishing a more intimate relation with the score. The analytical recognition of the sense in the composition was a step of nuclear importance for its rendering. It is only in that recognition that an imitation of the text can happen through adequate imagination. The critical realization of the work in performance, however, is seen by Adorno as utopic, as never being absolutely finished. The philosopher expresses the impossibility of answering at once to all the riddles posed by the score; impossibility vindicated by the contradictory nature of the rational musical text and the free gesture of music:

Every interpretation is fundamentally confronted with *insoluble* problems. There is an absolutely correct interpretation, or at least a limited selection of correct interpretations, but it is an *idea*: it cannot even be recognized in its pure state, let alone realized. The measure of interpretation is the height of its failure (Adorno, 2006, p. 92).

The height of musical performance is, then, never being a finished, reified work of art. Even the study presented here for the performance of *Deux Airs* is necessarily partial and open to revision. Other, different interpretations, critical of the one proposed are not only possible but desirable. Such is the ontological venue of performable works. Their multiplicity and their variability impel us beyond the “classic paradigm” (Davies, 2018) where works of music are determined by fixed and unquestioned conditions of identity. The major contribution of Adorno’s unfinished theory is this sense that music is not a static, definitive version of itself. Every new performance of the same work renews it, bringing out different relations that are present in the score, while obscuring others. This dialectical process between the score and the performer is highlighted in such a way by Adorno, that we, as performers, are led to the notated music with an augmented vision that encompasses not only the superficial level of the explicit symbols, but also and foremost the historicity of those symbols and our own historicity as interpreters.

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