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## INTERPRETATIONS

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### FROM MEN TO MACHINES AND BACK: AUTOMATA AND THE RECEPTION OF VIRTUOSITY IN EUROPEAN INSTRUMENTAL ART MUSIC, C. 1815–C. 1850

**Abstract:** In most histories of Western music, the 1830s and 40s are typically described as “the age/era of virtuosity and/or virtuosi”. Indeed, major contemporary sources, including leading musical journals of the time, teem with reports on the latest exploits of Liszt and his rivals and in much of this body of criticism, piano and violin virtuosi were commonly celebrated for pushing the limits of humanly conceivable excellence in musical performance. However, a significant number of these critical responses were also negative, critiquing individual virtuosi for playing not like humans, but like *automata*. My claim in this article, documented with a detailed perusal of contemporary music criticism, is that this line of anti-virtuosic critique was part of the larger 19<sup>th</sup>-century suspicion of virtuosity as super- but also, perhaps, non-humanly accomplished, *automatic* technique, devoid of all emotion, expression, that is, of *human* presence and content. Also, I propose to interpret this line of criticism with reference to the even broader 19<sup>th</sup>-century anxiety over the issue of human subjectivity, that is, its freedom, evident not only in contemporary

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philosophy (Schelling, Schopenhauer, Novalis, etc.), but also in literature. Such narratives and, as I argue in this paper, much of contemporary criticism of virtuosity were shaped by the uncanny feeling that the human subject, too, like automata and “automatic” virtuosi, may not be free, contrary to the Enlightenment view of the human subject in Rousseau, Kant, and others, but actually under the power of mechanisms beyond itself, operating automatically and not of its own accord. In contemporary criticism of virtuosity, the elusive notions of *expression*, *expressivity*, *expressive* playing and the like, which were deliberately kept under-explained, were then marshalled to preserve the supposedly ineffable or at least ineffably human core of musical performance, in line with the contemporary Romantic view of music as the only means of expressing what is otherwise inexpressible, that is, ineffable.

**Key words:** virtuosity, automata, human subjectivity, music criticism

In music history textbooks, discussions of the period between the Congress of Vienna and the failed revolutions of 1848 usually include at least a subchapter on virtuosi and virtuosity; for instance, that is the case with such disparate sources as Carl Dahlhaus’s *Nineteenth-century Music* and Richard Taruskin’s *Oxford History of Western Music*, a couple of textbooks separated by over 20 years. That is because in European art music, those years were, among other things, indeed an age of virtuosi and virtuosity: benefitting from a rather fortunate constellation of social, political, historical, and economic factors,<sup>1</sup> virtuosi, typically violinists and pianists such as Paganini, Liszt, and a host of their today lesser known rivals, crisscrossed Europe and even the Americas, bedazzling their audiences from Lisbon to Moscow, Dublin to Istanbul, and Boston to Buenos Aires.

One of the socio-historical factors that enabled this was the rise of the musical press around 1800 – the first major music periodical, the Leipzig *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, which survived for decades and influenced the structure and organisation of all subsequent music periodicals, was founded by Friedrich Rochlitz in 1798 and was soon followed by equivalent publications in France (François-Joseph Fétis’s *Revue musicale*, 1827), Britain (*The Musical World*, 1836), and other countries.<sup>2</sup> The rise and growth of journals such as these, fu-

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<sup>1</sup> Including the return of political stability in Europe following Napoleon’s final defeat in 1815, which re-enabled crossborder travel; the development and spread of railways, which, for the first time, enabled safe and relatively fast transportation of people, goods, and information across vast distances; the rise of telegraphy, which, again for the first time in history, enabled instant communication across Europe and beyond; this socio-cultural background is discussed in detail in my study *The Virtuoso as Subject: The Reception of Instrumental Virtuosity, c. 1815–c. 1850*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016, 22–27.

<sup>2</sup> For more, see Cvejić, op. cit., 27–38.

elled by the upper and especially middle classes' newly found interest in music, provided unprecedented space for music criticism, which is another factor that made the 1830s and 1840s an age of virtuosity. A lot of the time, music critics celebrated virtuosi as (almost) superhuman figures who pushed the limits of human accomplishment in music performance. Thus, for instance, the Moscow correspondent of the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, described Liszt's concerts in Russia's old capital as no less than a "rightful triumph of art and humanity".<sup>3</sup> Typically, virtuosi were celebrated as heroes, gods, Caesars, Napoleons, and other such figures larger than life, whether from history or from mythology. According to Richard Leppert and Stephen Zank's interpretation, this was because they were "the literal embodiment of extreme individuality", the new bourgeois subject of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe – bold, enterprising, daring.<sup>4</sup>

But they were also criticised, sometimes even severely, with open hostility, in Leppert and Zank's interpretation, whenever they disregarded "the demands of bourgeois decorum, reserve, and respectability".<sup>5</sup> In fact, critics scolded them for a variety of perceived iniquities, including "charlatanry", a favourite criticism roughly referring to using non-musical means, such as fancy dress, bizarre behaviour, and the like, as well as musical effects perceived as cheap, such as "meowing" on the violin or adding octaves on the piano, to impress audiences; disrespecting the works they performed, especially when those works came from the then-emerging musical canon (e.g. works by Beethoven), by "embellishing" and violating them in other ways; and, last but not least, for playing "like (musical) automata". That last point of criticism forms the focus of this essay. On the surface of things, perhaps the appearance of automata in early and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century critical discourse on virtuosity is not all that surprising, given how fascinated the middle and upper classes of Europe had already been with automata since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century – mechanical contraptions designed to mimic, more or less successfully, human and other living beings; for evidence, one need only look at contemporary European literature, for instance, the tales of E. T. A. Hoffmann, one of which is further discussed below.

However, the thesis of this article runs somewhat deeper: that the dismissals of (some) virtuosi as (musical) automata reveal a more profound anxiety about the presence of the human element in virtuosic music performances that were perceived as simply too virtuosic to issue from a human being, limited

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<sup>3</sup> F. G., "Nachrichten. Moskau", *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, 28 June 1843, 478.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Leppert and Stephen Zank, "The Concert and the Virtuoso", in: James Parakilas (Ed.), *Piano Roles: Three Hundred Years with the Piano*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999, 259.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

and imperfect as we tend to be. Further, I will also argue that this anxiety was related to the more general anxiety regarding the very possibility of free human subjectivity, a freely acting human subject, and of the possibility of freedom in general, which permeated European culture, especially philosophy and the arts, in the wake of the failed bourgeois revolution in France – the culmination of liberal Enlightenment thought in practice – and the restoration of repressive monarchical regimes throughout Europe. To support my claim, I will resort to contemporary aesthetics and philosophy, namely the paradigm shift in aesthetics occurring around 1800, from mimesis, or edifying imitation of nature, to expression, more accurately, the expression of what otherwise could not be expressed, namely the highest truths about man and the world surrounding him, as the task of all art and especially music, which helped raise music from its lowly status in Enlightenment aesthetics, most notably Kant's, to its apotheosis as the supreme art in the succeeding generation of thinkers, most notably Schelling, Schopenhauer, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and other early German Romantics. This also obliged them to claim aesthetic autonomy for music and the other arts—submitting to their innate laws and purposes only, disregarding all other concerns, such as social and other non-artistic functions. According to the powerful interpretation of British scholar of classical German philosophy Andrew Bowie, this paradigm shift was at least in part driven by the suspicion regarding free human subjectivity described above. Namely, art and especially music were reconceptualised as aesthetically autonomous and uniquely expressive as a symbol or model, if only a utopian one, of a similarly free human subject, if such a subject could exist. In contemporary criticism of virtuosity, this aesthetic paradigm shift was reflected in constant demands for *expressive* play, without ever clearly defining what exactly such playing should express. But I will argue that that was precisely in line with the more general aesthetic paradigm shift from mimesis to expression described above. Presently, I will begin by providing several examples from early and mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century criticism illustrating the observations made above and then proceed to interpret them in light of the shifts in aesthetics and philosophy that I just described.

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As I suggested above, virtuosi, especially the major ones, were often celebrated, with much exaggeration, as (re)incarnations of gods, demigods, and heroes from Greek and Roman mythology, and emperors, kings, and great generals from ancient, medieval, and more recent history. For instance, writing in 1839 for Robert Schumann's *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, a major music periodical in the German-speaking world and the main competitor of Gottfried Wilhelm Fink's

*Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, an unsigned reviewer routinely described Sigismund Thalberg (1812–1871), a celebrated Austrian pianist based in Paris and Liszt’s main rival on the virtuoso circuit until the latter’s retirement in 1847, as no less than a “hero of pianism”.<sup>6</sup> As for his chief rival, according to an unsigned review published in the same journal two years later, harmonies spring from out of his hands “just like Minerva [sprang] out of Jupiter’s head”.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, reporting from Berlin on the pages of the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, the leading French music periodical of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the influential critic Ludwig Rellstab likened the young Henri Vieuxtemps, the famous Belgian violinist then still in his teens, to “Hercules in the cradle”.<sup>8</sup> The same journal repeatedly carried rhapsodic and somewhat even eroticised descriptions of Liszt as, in Heinrich Heine’s words, “transported, thunderous, volcanic, fiery like a Titan”.<sup>9</sup> In a somewhat later issue, the influential Parisian critic, violinist, and composer Henri Blanchard dubs Liszt “the Pompey, the [Mark] Anthony, the Moreau of the piano” and Thalberg “the Caesar, the Octavian, or the Napoleon”.<sup>10</sup>

But, as I also suggested above, not all critics were impressed all the time. For instance, for an anonymous contributor to the London *Musical World*, the leading British music periodical at the time, all virtuosos were monsters and their recitals little more than freak-shows. It was mere curiosity that attracted people to them: “does the innate love and admiration we feel for the beautiful in nature deter us from crowding to gaze upon some two-headed or three-legged monster which may be exhibited in our city? And is it to be inferred, that because we go to see it we find it more lovely and agreeable than the graceful and symmetrical being which we are accustomed to regard as beautiful? It is our thorough knowledge of the beautiful which makes us keen in our perceptions of the ugly and monstrous. We are led to monstrous productions of nature by curiosity, and the same feeling prompts us to listen to these monsters of art”.<sup>11</sup> The topic of this essay concerns a special variety of those monsters of art: the “automata” virtuosos. For instance, that is how Paris-based Austrian pianist Henri (Heinrich) Herz,

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<sup>6</sup> Unsigned, “Lieder und Gesänge”, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 1 February 1839, 69.

<sup>7</sup> Unsigned, “Vermischtes”, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 12 April 1841, 122.

<sup>8</sup> L. Rellstab, “Correspondance particulière. État de la musique à Berlin”, *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, 24 June 1838, 263–264.

<sup>9</sup> Henri Heine, “Lettres confidentielles. II”, *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, 4 February 1838, 43.

<sup>10</sup> Henri Blanchard, “Soirée de musique sacrée chez madame la princesse de Belgiojoso. Matinée musicale donnée par M. Liszt”, *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, 26 April 1840, 284. Jean Victor Marie Moreau (1763–1813) was a renowned French republican general.

<sup>11</sup> H. G., “Letters from Vienna”, *The Musical World*, 21 March 1846, 132–133.

only 17 at the time, fared in an 1820 report written for the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*. The author of the report, composer and violinist Louis (Ludwig) Spohr (1784–1859), begins by acknowledging Herz’s “extraordinary skill” as “astonishing”, but accuses him, as well as other Parisian virtuosi, of putting technical ahead of intellectual training. It is easy to see, he continues, that all those pursuing such a path will end up with their own spirit dead and grow into “nothing better than musical automata”.<sup>12</sup>

In a culture that increasingly had to contend, even in everyday life, with all sorts of machines, including trains, steamers, and, not least, pianos,<sup>13</sup> one could hardly expect contemporary music criticism to stay immune to the wholesale mechanisation of life beginning around 1800. It is therefore hardly surprising that we also find automata in many of these reviews. The important question here is how and why automata entered the critical discourse on *virtuosity* in the first place and how that reflects the larger issues, including philosophical, described above, that shaped that discourse. Automata were self-powered machines, which, when appropriately wound-up by a human operator, mimicked living beings, animal or human; and they were very popular in late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, from Jacques de Vaucanson’s “duck” and “flautist”<sup>14</sup> to Johann Nepomuk Maelzel’s “chess-player”, which, although really a piece of fraud, achieved global fame.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Louis Spohr, “Briefe aus Paris von Louis Spohr. Zweyter Brief, den 31sten December 1820”, *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, 7 March 1821, 156–162.

<sup>13</sup> Concerning the piano as the most machine-like of instruments, James Parakilas has written: “The piano is a machine. Already when it was invented at the beginning of the eighteenth century, it embodied a more complex mechanism than any earlier stringed instrument”; “A History of Lessons and Practicing”, in: James Parakilas (Ed.), *Piano Roles: Three Hundred Years of Life with the Piano*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001, 115.

<sup>14</sup> A facsimile of Vaucanson’s original treatise, with detailed descriptions and diagrams of his automata, is available in Jacques de Vaucanson, *An Account of the Mechanism of teh Automaton or Image Playing on the German Flute (1742) / Le mécanisme du fluteur automate (1738)*, Ed. David Lasocki, Buren, Fritsh Knuf, 1979. Vaucanson’s flute-player is also briefly discussed in Penelope Mathiesen, “Jacques de Vaucanson’s Mechanical Flute Player”, *Continuo: The Magazine for Old Music*, 1992, 16.6, 6–8.

<sup>15</sup> Tom Standage’s book *The Mechanical Turk: The True Story of the Chess-playing Machine that Fooled the World*, London, Allen Lane, 2002, is an amusing and informative history of the chess-player and other automata. Additional information on musical automata and their histories can be found in Adelheid Clara Voskuhl, “The Mechanics of Sentiment: Music-playing Women Automata and the Culture of Affect in Late Eighteenth-century Europe”, doctoral dissertation, Cornell University, 2007; David Toop, “Humans, Are They Really Necessary? Sound Art, Automata and Musical Sculpture”, in: Rob Young (Ed.), *Undercurrents: The Hidden Wiring of Modern Music*, London, Continuum, 2002, 117–129; and Roland Carera, “Androids”, *FMR* 1984, 6, 75–87.

However, as Catherine Liu explains in her study of pre- and early-Industrial Age automata and their contemporary reception, those machines also had a powerful destabilising effect, because the more convincing among them seemed to suggest that the difference between the human and the mechanical may not be as obvious as it seems, a difference of degree rather than essence: “Man can be *like* a machine and a machine can be *like* a man. In this kind of comparison, a relationship of analogical rather than absolute difference is established between what man (or human) is from what he is not”.<sup>16</sup> In other words, if an inanimate machine could be made to imitate real living beings so closely that it grew difficult to distinguish between an automaton and a living organism, how could one rest assured that what appears as living beings are not likewise mere mechanisms, without immaterial souls to animate them? That this was precisely the fear that tormented the citizens of the unnamed university town in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s famous story “The Sandman” suggests just how deeply present automata were in the culture of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, in a variety of fields, including mechanical engineering, fine literature, and music criticism.<sup>17</sup> If a mechanical

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<sup>16</sup> Catherine Liu, *Copying Machines: Taking Notes for the Automaton*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 78–79.

<sup>17</sup> E. T. A. Hoffmann, “The Sandman”, in: *Tales*, New York, Continuum, 1982, 305–306: “The story of the automaton had very deeply impressed them, and a horrible distrust of human figures in general arose. Indeed, many lovers insisted that their mistresses sing and dance unrhythmically and embroider, knit, or play with a lapdog or something while being read to, so that they could assure themselves that they were not in love with a wooden doll; above all else, they required their mistresses not only to listen, but to speak frequently in such a way that it would prove that they really were capable of thinking and feeling. Many lovers, as a result, grew closer than ever before; but others gradually drifted apart. “One really can’t be sure about this”, said one or another. At tea parties, people yawned with incredible frequency and never sneezed, in order to ward off all suspicion. Spalanzani, as has been noted, had to leave the place in order to escape criminal charges of having fraudulently introduced an automaton into human society”. For my purposes here, it is symptomatic that Nathanael, the main protagonist of the story, mistakes the wooden doll (automaton) “Olympia” for a real, living girl and falls in love with her at the moment when he hears “her” sing and play the piano, as any respectable bourgeois girl ought to do. One might perhaps understand Nathanael’s mistake given that voice has long been theorised as the most faithful sign of human (self-) presence, most notably by Jacques Derrida. As for “Olympia’s” other feminine accomplishment, it is worth noting that Hoffmann makes sure to tell us that her piano-playing was “too perfect”, like that of a virtuoso. For discussions of this and other stories by Hoffmann involving automata, see Wilhelm Seidel, “Olympia: Über die Magie der Herzlosigkeit”, in: Jörg Jochen Berns and Hanno Möbius (Eds.), *Die Mechanik in den Künsten: Studien zur ästhetischen Bedeutung von Naturwissenschaft und Technologie*, Marburg, Jonas, 1990, 201–12; Emily Dolan, “E. T. A. Hoffmann and the Ethereal Technologies of ‘Nature Music’”, *Eighteenth-century Music*, 2008, 5.1, 7–26; and Katherine Maree Hirt, “When Machines Play

simulacrum could approximate its organic original so much that they became indistinguishable, how could one rest assured that the original is organic and, moreover, that it is really the original? Then it may all come down to a soulless, self-animating mechanism; there might be no such thing as the immaterial soul, just a jumble of pulleys, cogs, and wheels.

As Spohr's review of Henri Herz shows, the danger for virtuosi was that in their quest for perfection in performance, they might come to be likened to, and dismissed as, automata, lifeless machines, rather than celebrated as extraordinary human individuals who push the limits, as virtuosi were supposed to do, of the humanly possible.<sup>18</sup> A virtuoso was obliged to pursue perfection, especially technical perfection, as a defining characteristic of virtuosity; but he also had to make sure that his accomplishment, however extraordinary, remain recognisable as that of a human being. A virtuoso had to be perfect, but *humanly* perfect, not *too* perfect, like a machine; he was required, perhaps, to display an almost superhuman level of virtuosity, but still to come across as a human being, not as a machine. That was the whole point: a seemingly superhuman level of accomplishment in a mere human being. Otherwise, the magic was lost and his apparently superhuman achievement might be explained away as that of a machine, an automaton. That is arguably what happened to Herz and many others in reviews such as the one quoted above: to put it simply, they played too virtuosically, too perfectly, for a human being; their tempi were too fast, their chords too dense, their leaps up and down the keyboard and the strings of the violin too wide and daring, and yet too perfect.

But if playing virtuosically or, perhaps, too virtuosically meant risking being dismissed as a human automaton, how could virtuosi remain in business *and* avoid such a fate? Was there a way for them to keep playing virtuosically but still be recognised as human, if not superhuman? The answer is yes and, according to

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Chopin: Musical Instruments and the Spirit of Musical Performance in Nineteenth-century German Literature”, doctoral dissertation, University of Washington, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> There is a related, though brief, discussion of this predicament of virtuosity in Marie-Louise Mallet, “La Virtuosit : Ou le jeu par excellence...”, in: Michelle Biget (Ed.), *Musique, sons et jeux, Les Cahiers du CIREM*, 1990, 16–17, 51–61. In “A History of Lessons and Practicing”, Parakilas provides an intriguing reading of 19th-century piano pedagogy, arguing that “it was not until the nineteenth century (which was called the Machine Age even at that time) that the ideal of the machine was extended to the way the piano was played – or more precisely, to the way people were taught to ‘play it’” (Parakilas, op. cit., 115–16). Klaus Giersch has argued that the didactic method of the famous Austrian piano pedagogue Carl Czerny was inspired by the industrial division of labour; see Klaus Giersch, “‘Der kranke Arm und die Toccata’: Robert Schumann und das Klavier”, *Das Orchester: Zeitschrift f r Orchesterkultur und Rundfunk-Chorwesen*, 1992, 40.5, 594–601.



many contemporary reviews, the correct way was to play *expressively*, whatever that actually meant, which was, as I show below, far from clear. Presumably, even a machine, one of Maelzel's or Vaucanson's automata, such as the latter's flute-player, could provide a "correct" rendering of a piece of music, correct in the limited sense of playing all the right notes at all the appropriate times. But only a human being could breathe life, as it were, into the piece, playing it correctly but differently every time, and expressing something beyond those notes as they appear in the score, something perhaps otherwise ineffable, something that only music might express. But more on that below; now we must again turn to some examples from contemporary criticism of virtuosity. For instance, in a review from 1843, an anonymous contributor to the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* asserts that only "genuine artists" among modern virtuosi "are allowed" to transcend the "merely sensuous", owing – crucially – to the power of "the driving force of expression".<sup>19</sup> But such genuine artists are rare, the reviewer tells us, because most virtuosi are entirely self-absorbed, with their little celebrity cults, only too ready to degrade musical performance into "finger-art" (*Fingerkunst*) and "handiwork" (*Handwerk*). Two years later, writing for the same journal, a reviewer signed only as "L. R." commends the Bohemian composer-pianist Ignaz Moscheles (1794–1870) for the "*humanity* of his execution" [emphasis mine], which comes straight out of his soul and "will always win him the hearts and appreciation" of every audience.<sup>20</sup> What is symptomatic here is the reviewer's choice of "humanity" as the most pertinent way to characterise Moscheles's "soulful" and "expressive" style, as though "expressive" (whatever that really meant) play was somehow proof that the virtuoso is indeed human.

Some reviewers were even willing to turn a blind eye to deficiencies in technique, if a virtuoso's performance was considered expressive enough. For example, an unsigned correspondent of the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* from St. Petersburg showed such benevolence in a review of Bohemian violinist Heinrich Ernst's (1812–1865) tour of Russia's imperial capital of 1847.<sup>21</sup> Comparing Ernst with the Belgian violinist Vieuxtemps, already mentioned above, the reviewer states that both of them are "great, extraordinary virtuosi", though differing in their accomplishment and aspirations. Vieuxtemps's technique is perfect; and yet, he lacks some of that "innate warmth", which, "coming from the heart,

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<sup>19</sup> [Unsigned], "Nachrichten. Wiener Musikleben", *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, 9 August 1843, 586–87.

<sup>20</sup> "...die Humanität seines Vortrages wird ihm stets die Herzen und grosse Anerkennung gewinnen"; L. R., "Nachrichten. Leipzig", *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, 8 January 1845, 28.

<sup>21</sup> [Unsigned], "Nachrichten. St. Petersburg", *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, 23 June 1847, 430.

captures the heart of the listener”; however, no one should reproach him about this, since it is “a free gift from God and cannot be learnt through any amount of study”. By contrast, Ernst, even if his tuning is occasionally less than perfect, has that “warmth of feeling, rapture, and originality that no study but only nature can give”. Although Ernst, too, must have devoted much time to diligent practice, the reviewer continues, “this was limited by a spiritual tendency, which saved his virtuosity from that one-sided, cold perfection, which causes amazement because it approximates an art-machine [*weil sie an eine künstliche Maschine erinnert*], but cannot capture the heart”. That is why “*Vieuxtemps* is a virtuoso and composer par excellence, but Ernst is an artist par la grace de Dieu”.

Several years before, on the pages of the *London Music World*, Ernst was similarly compared to Camillo Sivori (1815–1894), an Italian violin virtuoso and Paganini’s only pupil whom the Genoese master recognised as such. This time, too, Ernst came out on top, again on account of his expressive play: “Sivori possesses a command of his instrument almost unlimited; a fine, broad, free, and open style of playing; great brilliance and finish of execution, and a softness of manner that is not by any means without its powers of captivation. Ernst has, no less than he, the capability to *express* upon the violin the uttermost caprices of the wildest fancy; and he also has, far more than he, a fancy, quick, brilliant, and imaginative, to suggest the most delicate, refined, and passionate *expression*, which he pours out from his instrument with the enthusiasm of an author, rather than with the mechanical accuracy of a mere performer [emphasis mine]. ... Ernst, in his performance, seems to open the extremest depths of passion, and to expose the acute, strong, and impulsive workings of a musician’s heart, while Sivori evinces only the superficial gallantries of art, and captivates rather than commands our feelings, by the fascination of his graceful demeanour; in short, ... Sivori is a *fine player*, Ernst is a *great one!*”<sup>22</sup> On other occasions, too, *The Musical World* lavished praise on Ernst, almost always invoking his *expressive* playing: “Ernst is our violinist *de cœur* – he has that within him which surpasses show – he is a great artist, and his devotion to music is as unmistakably great as any of the qualities which we have so frequently found occasion to laud in him as a mere violinist. He plays the fiddle, certainly – and right ably he plays it, – but he *feels* something far beyond it – and *he expresses what he feels*”.<sup>23</sup>

So it seems that expression or expressive performance was that missing ingredient in “automata” virtuosity, required as evidence of the presence of a human element in virtuosic performance. But *what* exactly were virtuosos meant to express? On that matter, the critics were – without exception – surprisingly enigmatic. Simply put, in the huge body of early to mid 19<sup>th</sup>-century criticism of vir-

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<sup>22</sup> [Unsigned], “Sivori and Ernst”, *The Musical World*, 10 August 1843, 268.

<sup>23</sup> Q., “Ernst”, *The Musical World*, 11 July 1844, 227–28.

tuosity, including every issue of all the leading German, French, and English music periodicals published between 1800 and 1850, I could not find a clear definition of expression in musical performance or a clear explanation of what or how exactly an expressive performance should express or be expressive *of*. If pressed to come up with a definition or explanation of our own, most of us today would probably mention dynamics, phrasing, articulation, and the like, so defining or explaining expressive musical performance should not have been an impossible task. And yet, none of these critics, including some towering figures of music criticism and beyond, such as Schumann and Fétis, curiously remained silent on the matter. I suspect that there was a design to this, that they failed to define or explain expressive musical performance not out of ignorance or negligence, but deliberately, in order to preserve an ineffable human presence, an ineffable human core in musical performance, which could only be expressed *musically*, by means of music, in and through music, and not described, expressed, or communicated in language or by any other means. It just seems unlikely that such a glaring lacuna could appear in such a huge body of criticism by accident or neglect, and at that, by some of the leading authorities of 19<sup>th</sup> century music criticism.

Besides, the absence of a clear definition of expressive musical performance in early to mid 19<sup>th</sup> century music criticism would also fit in with the lack of a similar definition of expression in music in general, in other words, of an explanation of what exactly it is that music expresses. Indeed, when one arrives at a section marked *espressivo* in a sonata by Beethoven or a fugue by Bach, therefore, in a wordless piece of non-programmatic music, what exactly should one express at that moment? It is therefore with good reason that Andrew Bowie notes that “it is actually very hard to give the word ‘express’ a really productive sense”.<sup>24</sup> And even though it was precisely late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century aesthetics that inaugurated expression as the main task of all art and especially music, replacing mimesis or edifying imitation of nature, those very same thinkers likewise failed to provide a clear definition of expression in music or explanation regarding what exactly it is that music expresses. Their definitions and explanations, where they are offered at all, are at best rather general and often enigmatic, metaphysical. For example, according to E. T. A. Hoffmann, music “reveals to man an unknown realm, a world quite separate from the outer sensual world surrounding him, a world in which he leaves behind all feelings circumscribed by intellect in order to embrace the inexpressible”.<sup>25</sup> According to his contemporary and fellow-early Romantic Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder (1773–1798), music

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<sup>24</sup> Andrew Bowie, *op. cit.*, 27.

<sup>25</sup> E. T. A. Hoffmann, “Beethoven’s Instrumental Music”, in: David Charlton (Ed.), *E. T. A. Hoffmann’s Musical Writings: Kreisleriana, The Poet and the Composer, Music Criticism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 236.

“speaks a language which we do not know in our ordinary life, which we have learned, we do not know where and how, and which one would consider to be solely the language of angels”.<sup>26</sup> In the view of Friedrich Schelling, the leading philosopher of this generation, music is “nothing other than the primal rhythm of nature and of the universe itself, which by means of this art breaks through into the world of representation”.<sup>27</sup> In the aesthetic-philosophical system of his somewhat younger contemporary Arthur Schopenhauer, music “is as *immediate* an objectification and copy of the whole *will* as the world itself is”, the Will being the only real or noumenal existence in Schopenhauer’s metaphysics.<sup>28</sup>

Again, this failure to provide a clear definition of musical expression was hardly the result of ignorance or negligence on the part of these thinkers; rather, it was arguably the whole point: music expresses that which can only be expressed in music and in no other way, including language; therefore, it is impossible to *say* (in words) what music expresses, for it can only be put in music. This was in line with the wholesale loss of trust in language as a natural and faithful representation of reality, which permeated European philosophy from Kant’s somewhat younger and lesser known contemporary and fellow Königsberger Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788) and especially the famous early German Romantic Herder.<sup>29</sup> Music’s purported ability to express the inexpressible, that which no other art or language could express, that which could not be expressed by any other means, is precisely what enabled its meteoric rise in stature in contemporary aesthetics and philosophy, from a merely “agreeable art” in Kant<sup>30</sup> to Schelling’s “primal rhythm of nature”. In Wayne Bowman’s useful summary, expression is “both something music ‘has’ and ‘does’”, but only of itself and/or the otherwise inexpressible, which confirms its autonomy and is its chief virtue.<sup>31</sup>

That last line, concerning music’s autonomy, brings us to the final segment of this essay and will return us to its beginning, its initial and main topic – the issue of the human element in virtuosic music performance. According to An-

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<sup>26</sup> Wackenroder, *Phantasien über die Kunst für Freunde der Kunst*, in: Edward Lippman (Ed.), op. cit., 13.

<sup>27</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. I, New York, Dover Publications, 1969, 257.

<sup>29</sup> For more on the loss of trust in language in German philosophy around 1800, see Andrew Bowie, *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 53ff

<sup>30</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 206.

<sup>31</sup> Wayne Bowman, *Philosophical Perspectives on Music*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, 128.

drew Bowie's compelling reading of German philosophy around 1800, outlined above, music was revalorised in this body of thought as (aesthetically) autonomous and expressive of the inexpressible in order to compensate for the lack of freedom and autonomy in real political terms, in the wake of the defeat of the French bourgeois revolution as the culminating liberal political project of the Enlightenment and the restoration of repressive monarchical regimes across Europe. In other words, music, now reconceived as aesthetically autonomous and uniquely expressive, was meant to provide a sensuous, though, perhaps, utopian model of a similarly autonomous, politically free and unique human subject.<sup>32</sup> As a philosopher of the Enlightenment, still beholden to Christian dogma, including that of man's freedom of choice, Kant had still believed in the free and rational subject of the Enlightenment; "Freedom actually exists", reads the opening sentence of his second *Critique*.<sup>33</sup> After all, it was his spiritual father Rousseau who wrote in *Social Contract* that "Man is born free".<sup>34</sup>

But deeply shaken by the experiences of the French Revolution, which seemed like the realisation of the Enlightenment liberal project, but then degenerated first into Robespierre's totalitarian terror and then Napoleon's dictatorship, followed by a catastrophic defeat and restoration of the Bourbons, the very next generation of thinkers, while Kant was still alive, began to doubt whether man is really born free, in other words, whether the human subject is inherently or at least potentially free, or whether he may be in fact forever enslaved to forces, urges, and drives beyond his control, be they social, political, economic, religious, moral, metaphysical, etc. For instance, Schelling's subject is forever torn inside, between its intuiting and intuited self, and achieves self-completion only by returning to God, that is, in death; in life, only art and especially music, expressive and aesthetically autonomous, offers fleeting comfort by reminding him

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<sup>32</sup> I should add here that Stephen Rumph has offered a similar reading of E. T. A. Hoffmann's famous review of Beethoven's instrumental music, quoted above; see Stephen Rumph, "A Kingdom Not of This World: The Political Context of E. T. A. Hoffmann's Beethoven Criticism", *19th century Music* 1995, 19.1, 50–67.

<sup>33</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Amherst, NY, Prometheus Books, 1996, 14.

<sup>34</sup> In light of Bowie's thesis that music was revalorised in German philosophy around 1800 as a compensation for the lack of freedom in real political life, Kant's unshaken belief in the transcendental freedom of the human subject may be one of the reasons why there was no such revalorisation of music in Kant's aesthetics; I have treated the matter in detail in Cvejić, op. cit., 63–80 and "Andrew Bowie and Music in German Philosophy around 1800: The Case of Kant", in: Miško Šuvaković, Žarko Cvejić, and Andrija Filipović (Eds.), *European Theories in Former Yugoslavia: Trans-theory Relations between Global and Local Discourses*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, 5–11.

of his primordial but lost fullness, to be recovered only in death;<sup>35</sup> even worse, Schopenhauer's subject does not even truly exist, but is only a manifestation of the Will, the inanimate and irrational drive that lies at the core of Schopenhauer's metaphysical system.<sup>36</sup> Those are just two notable examples, but the list could go on through the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> and well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and cover such ideologically disparate figures as Marx, whose subject is enslaved to capitalist relations of production, that is, to economic forces beyond his control; Nietzsche, for whom the main cause of man's lack of freedom is Christianity; Freud, whose subject is governed by sexual urges beyond his control, and so on. In Robert Pippin's summary, "much of the tone of post-Hegelian European thought and culture" demonstrates a "profound suspicion about that basic philosophical claim of 'bourgeois' philosophy ... the notion central to the self-understanding and legitimation of the bourgeois form of life: the free, rational, independent, reflective, self-determining subject".<sup>37</sup> That is where, in Bowie's reading, art and especially music, with its unique expressivity and self-referential aesthetic autonomy, come in, as a source of consolation, providing a model, if only a utopian one, of freedom, if freedom could exist: "The aesthetic product thus becomes a utopian symbol of the realisation of freedom: in it we can see or hear an image of what the world could be like if freedom were realised in it".<sup>38</sup>

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Perhaps one could then say that in the view of early German Romantics and subsequent generations of thinkers, the human subject itself was reduced from the transcendently free subject of Rousseau, Kant, and other thinkers of the Enlightenment to a sort of automaton, bereft of its own free will and entirely driven by forces beyond itself, political, economic, sexual, or whatever. The virtuoso,

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<sup>35</sup> Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, op. cit., 23–24 and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism (1800)*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1978, 25 and 222–32. For a superb study of Schelling's philosophy see Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy: An Introduction*, London and New York, Routledge, 1993.

<sup>36</sup> In Schopenhauer's words: "During life, man's will is without freedom" (*The World as Will and Representation*, op. cit., Vol. II, 507); "[T]he individual, the person, is not will as thing-in-itself, but is *phenomenon* of the will, is as such determined" (*The World as Will and Representation*, op. cit., Vol. I, 113).

<sup>37</sup> Robert Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, 5. Bowie similarly notes that "Modernity has also revealed the fundamental fragility of the subject"; Bowie, *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity*, op. cit., 168

<sup>38</sup> Andrew Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy: From Kant to Habermas*, Cambridge, Polity, 2003, 57.

on the other hand, economically free, enterprising, daring, seemingly superhuman, appeared to defy that suspicion, but only when his performance included expression, that mysterious ingredient borrowed from contemporary aesthetics to guarantee the presence of a human element in musical performance, however virtuosic. In all other cases, even when it was technically perfect, as if performed by a machine, but deemed not *expressive* enough, it could be dismissed as that of an automaton and, along with it, the virtuoso himself as non-human or sub-human, rather than superhuman; in a word, an automaton. Thus what initially may appear as only a footnote in the history of 19<sup>th</sup> century music reception – the criticism of virtuosi as automata – turns out to be intimately linked with one of the central features of European 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and culture in general: the growing suspicion that the human subject is not inherently free, contrary to the claims of the Enlightenment of the preceding century and, indeed, to the much older claims of Christian dogma. It goes to show just how deeply ingrained the doubts regarding free human subjectivity were in European 19<sup>th</sup> century culture, permeating even such unlikely, peripheral quarters as contemporary criticism of virtuosity.

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