

THE SOUND OF PHILOSOPHY

Abstract: This article explores our natural reservations about the prospect of somebody singing, rather than speaking or writing about, philosophy. It argues that these reservations have less substance than might be thought, and goes on to explain some of the motivation for, and potential benefits of, the new Performance Philosophy movement.

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Imagine you are seated in a lecture theatre, patiently waiting to hear some philosophy. The philosopher you have come to see then takes the stage and starts to sing; a song about the very philosophical topic you were expecting them to *talk* about. What you were expecting from your next 60-90 minutes was the usual deal, namely a long build-up to situate you within the debate in question, the occasional (more or less) humorous aside to punctuate proceedings, lots of tentative reports of what the philosopher 'wants to say' (the nervous tic of the profession), and then some original claims, more often than not, saved up until near the end. Then comes the questions round; questions which some members of the audience will have been mentally rehearsing throughout the talk; questions designed as much to demonstrate the questioner's own philosophical prowess, perhaps by catching the speaker out, as to elicit an illuminating answer. This particular philosopher, however, has defied all these expectations: by *singing*. Would you be disappointed and immediately leave? I doubt it. You would certainly be surprised, and might well regard this spectacle as ludicrous beyond

belief; but a morbid sense of curiosity would keep you in your seat. But then, suppose the philosopher turned out to be a really good singer; with a really good song which had philosophically illuminating lyrics directly relevant to the issues. And suppose he or she was accompanied by a first-rate band. Then you might be rather pleased at this turn of events; delighted, in fact, such that you found yourself talking about it for years to come.

But entertaining as such an event might be, philosophy has nothing to do with entertainment, right? Philosophy lectures may often be boring (and they often are; professional philosophers have techniques to disguise when they are nodding off), but that is irrelevant. All that matters is the content, and surely there is no way you could convey through a song the richness of content contained within a lecture. (That said, you might have doubts about whether you can effectively convey the rich content of a written research paper through a lecture; you can go back and forth over a paper while studying it, but lectures happen in real time. You do get to ask questions at a lecture (if the chairperson chooses you), but then there are very few philosophers who will not respond to an email addressing issues arising from their work.)

Even if a carefully enough crafted song could convey such complex content, however – and Homer did used to sing the Iliad and Odyssey, after all – and even if my imaginary singing philosopher would do a good job of it, the idea of mixing philosophy with music still seems a bit silly; and real philosophers would surely *not* do a good job of it, even if they were that way inclined. This is perfectly illustrated by David Chalmers – of ‘Hard Problem of Consciousness’ fame – and his song: ‘Zombie Blues’. The song was named after the ‘philosophical zombies’ Chalmers conceived of; physically the same as ordinary humans, but lacking consciousness, and thus supposed to show that consciousness is not physical. But the song itself has no serious points to make, and is just intended as a bit of fun for the punters

after a hard day of consciousness-conferencing. Chalmers has an excellent stage presence but a truly rotten singing voice; which all adds to the fun, of course.

Nevertheless, there is some real musical talent to be found in philosophy. Schopenhauer was a good flute player, by all accounts. Nietzsche wrote piano compositions, and although musically, as opposed to philosophically, he was no visionary, they are perfectly credible pieces within the romantic idiom. Donald Davidson was an accomplished pianist, who collaborated with Leonard Bernstein in a college production of Aristophanes' *The Birds*. And on the current scene, Torin Alter (who like Chalmers, is a consciousness-man), fronts a rock band 'The Lying Angels', which is very much the real deal; while UK philosophy boasts a number of semi-professional jazz musicians, such as Andrew Bowie (saxophone), Andy Hamilton (piano) ... and me (saxophone). Rather unusually, I was a jazz musician before I discovered philosophy; not your typical career path.

Still, it is one thing to be both a musician and a philosopher, and another to try to combine them. On the face of it, they do not mix. To adapt an example of Quine's, rationality may be essential to being a mathematician, and being two-legged may be essential to being a cyclist, but neither is essential to individuals who are both mathematicians and cyclists. With no essential overlap, then, it seems there can be no good reason to combine music and philosophy. And we have already encountered two apparently good reasons not to try, namely that the combination seems silly, and that music is not an appropriate medium to convey the richness and complexity of philosophical content. I do not think the first is a good reason, however, and although the second embodies a good point, it overlooks a crucial aspect of philosophy. So let me address them in turn.

Firstly, we must ask why it seems silly to present philosophy in musical form. The reason, I think, is that philosophy is associated with profundity, but music with levity. Combine profundity with levity and the result is absurdity. If a political leader were to deliver a speech about foreign policy to a disco beat, then that would be a classically absurd juxtaposition. But then again, you could achieve the same effect by hosting a hotdog eating competition to the soundtrack of Beethoven's fifth. The reason this switch can maintain the absurd effect is that hotdog eating, unlike politics, is not serious; and more pertinently, that not all music is associated with levity. Some music, as has always been the case, is just for fun; and can be all the better for it. But to assume that all music is like this is to make a seriously philistine assumption; albeit one which it is easy to make, until you start to think about it. This explains our immediate reaction (mine too) to the idea of singing philosophy. But human beings have a long track-record of producing serious art music; and as a jazz musician, I can assure you that the first thing that springs to my mind is not the western classical tradition, even though that tradition does obviously provide many clear examples. So if you get the music right, I see absolutely no reason why a musical setting of philosophical ideas should be absurd; so long as there is good reason for it (and I cannot think of one for combining music with political speeches.) If you think philosophy is so utterly serious that no music could match its gravity, you probably should not be reading about it in a magazine.

The second reservation is that philosophy is too complex to effectively convey in musical form. I think this is basically, but not strictly, correct. It is not strictly correct, because there is no reason why every single word of a standard 50 minute research paper presentation should not be set to music. Very little if any audience interaction transpires during philosophy lectures, on the whole, but even that could be incorporated if the music had an element of improvisation, as jazz does. It might put some people off; Richard Rorty, who hated all

music, would certainly not have liked it. But others might find it focused their minds. Nevertheless the reservation is basically correct, because making it happen would require enormous, completely impractical amounts of effort, for minimal, if any, rewards. Scoring and rehearsing something like that would be a mammoth task; so such events could only be occasional one-offs, reserved for the odd star paper. And the only clear benefit, for those it did not put off, would be a more entertaining, enjoyable and memorable presentation. The ideas would be the same, however, and they are the point of the exercise.

But conveying content is not the only thing that philosophical talks and texts do; which brings us to the reasons why I am taking this idea seriously. For texts and talks also inspire us to think philosophically, not just by conveying ideas and arguments, but also by getting us to empathise with them; to connect them with our own lives and concerns, and thereby to lodge them under our skins, so to speak. And one way they have done this, throughout all the great philosophical traditions, is by cultivating what might be called non-argumentative, artistic effects. Here are two examples to show you what I mean.

There is a well-known passage in Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (Payne translation, vol. 2, p. 354), in which he illustrates his despair at the futility and cruelty of life in the kind of case which, he thinks, makes this most evident; in the lives of (non-human) animals. He gives the example of turtles in Java dying in agony as they are ripped apart by wild dogs, who are themselves sometimes ambushed by tigers; it is a scene of horror that is repeated year after year, and for Schopenhauer, with his thoroughly bleak outlook on reality, a microcosm of life in general. This is evidently not a disinterested exercise in academic reasoning, but rather a vivid illustration designed to induce the pathos in his reader that Schopenhauer himself felt. Schopenhauer was aiming for an artistic effect when he wrote

this passage. Of course, he was illustrating a position he had previously argued for; but here, in this passage, he was trying to produce an effect on his reader. It must have worked, given how often this short passage from a massive book is cited. I have no doubt that generations of readers have pitied those turtles, and drawn parallels between their own lives and the pointless, endlessly recurring horror that transpires on those Java beaches. And I also have no doubt that this non-argumentative, artistic effect has inspired many to take Schopenhauer's cosmic pessimism seriously; to look into the arguments to see whether it is well supported.

My second example is more recent: Derek Parfit's teletransportation example (*Reasons and Persons*, 1984), which he uses to test his account of personal survival through psychological continuity (continuity of memories, thoughts, experiences, personality traits, etc.). A teletransporter is sci-fi fantasy machine, well-known to Star Trek fans, which scans your body when you operate it, and then destroys it to create an exact physical replica at another place. Psychological continuity is all that is required for survival, according to Parfit, and since this is preserved in the replica, he regards teletransportation as a possible form of transport. Travelling this way would worry him, he admits, but he dismisses this as irrational; like the nerves we might feel in looking through the window at the top of a sky-scraper (p. 279). Similarly, any concern we might feel for our 'old' body is dismissed as no different in kind from the irrational sentiment we might feel for the actual wedding ring we actually wore at the ceremony, as opposed to a physically identical replica (p. 286).

People tend to react strongly to Parfit's thought experiment, and in diametrically opposed ways. One reaction is that *of course* teletransportation is perfectly safe, and that it is only the superstitious, anti-scientific belief in something like a soul that would lead you to think otherwise. The other reaction is that the teletransporter's destruction of your body would

bring down the final curtain just as effectively as a bullet through the head, and the fact that it would subsequently create a replica that would *think* it was you, is beside the point. But however you react, react you will, since thinking about teletransportation has a powerful artistic effect which draws you into the metaphysics of personal identity. Parfit has imagined a situation in which your metaphysical views would be a matter of life or death: if your views convinced you teletransportation was safe to use, but they were wrong, then you would die! (It is a strange quirk of metaphysics that in a world where everyone agreed with your views, no-one would even know.) Parfit did not need to use this thought experiment; his arguments stand on their own. But he clearly wanted to engage with our lives by bringing emotions like fear into the mix. 'Fear' is a word that frequently recurs in *Reasons and Persons*, because Parfit thinks his theory can help us conquer fear of death; given that psychological traits, which on his view is all we amount to, may be passed onto others, at least in their memories, this is supposed to make death seem less absolute and final. Only the illusion of a fixed self makes death seem terrible, Parfit thinks, and thus he embraces a Buddhism of 'no-self' (pp. 502-3). Others, however, regard the fear they imagine at the prospect of teletransportation as a spur to investigate where Parfit went wrong; on the grounds that fear of being zapped must surely be justified.

What these examples show is that philosophical ideas can affect us in the manner of art; they can arouse intuitions we did not know we had, while inducing passion, pathos, wonder, mystery, or fear. This is hardly surprising given what they typically concern, namely our lives and their place within reality. Neither is it surprising that philosophers would cultivate these effects to inspire their audiences and get them thinking. A lecture or text may produce them in a more or less inspiring way, depending on the philosopher. A musical or otherwise artistic presentation, on the other hand, has a natural advantage in this regard. The ultimate aim of

philosophy may be the determination of truth, once we get into the arguments; but it is very often an artistic effect which draws us into the arguments. These effects instigate and sustain philosophical thought, and hence do important work; not in guiding us to the truth, so much as in determining the kinds of truths we want to discover; and in motivating and sustaining our search for them. They are neglected in the quasi-scientific, technical work which predominates in much of today's academy, but they are a mainstay of the history of philosophy; and a highly suitable theme for artistic expression.

If our singing philosopher concentrates on producing these effects, then, and keeps the actual philosophy to the minimum required to produce them, then they might well be doing valuable philosophical work; the same work lectures and texts do when they aim to produce empathy and engagement which inspires further reflection. But a musical rendering has the advantage that it can aspire to art. Music moulds, reinforces and shapes our ideas and feelings, most typically love, sadness and passion; and it can do the same kinds of thing with the more sophisticated and varied conceptual palette of philosophy. Another advantage to a musical approach is that that given its patently artistic aspiration, our attention is immediately drawn to the non-argumentative nature of these effects; which is something that might pass us by in a textual treatment. Attention is drawn to the fact that although we may be moved and inspired, we should not be *persuaded*. As such, an artistic performance of philosophy has something in common with the aims of experimental philosophy, which among other things, provides a check on the use philosophers often make of intuitions: by empirically investigating a representative sample of a population's intuitions. The very fact that there is now such a thing as experimental philosophy makes us wary when we see philosophers appealing to the intuitive high-ground without evidence. And likewise, performance philosophy, by raising awareness of the use of non-argumentative effects in philosophy, may

remind us to keep a level head whenever these effects are employed, however much we may welcome them.

Performance philosophy has become a reality in recent years and is spreading fast (see www.performancephilosophy.org). It encompasses not only music, but also dance, theatre, film, and all manner of artistic endeavours which can be inspired by, and inspire, philosophy. I think we should welcome this, because even though some philosophers like to think of their discipline as a branch of science, philosophy has a strong affinity with the arts which should be celebrated, not hidden away. This can immediately be seen from the fact that the history of philosophy is a living part of the discipline, in a way in which the history of science could never be part of contemporary science. Philosophy, just like an art form (maybe it is one), has canonical figures whose thought has retained its relevance for hundreds or even thousands of years; Plato and Descartes will not fade from our horizons, any more than Shakespeare, Rembrandt or Beethoven will. Old science, by contrast, is typically obsolete science.

Another reason to welcome this development is that philosophy, to be frank, has an image problem. A 'toga / pipe and slippers / pointless waffle' image problem. Science is taught at primary schools and breeds celebrities like Brian Cox; it pervades our culture and is showered with adoration. Philosophy, on the other hand, is viewed with suspicion in many quarters, and remains a niche interest outside the stubbornly insular profession itself. This is despite the fact that philosophy is, in fact, thoroughly ubiquitous; it creeps into blockbuster movies, bestselling novels and ground-breaking artworks with surprising frequency; but with very few apart from us philosophy-nerds seeming to notice. If a novel is acclaimed for its intellectual depth, this usually means that it flirted with a little philosophy. So rather than remaining a publicly invisible source for art to draw upon, maybe it is time for philosophy to

start drawing upon art. Then it could hardly be missed and it might start to be appreciated a bit more.

In any case, philosophy certainly needs to raise its profile, because we are currently on the verge of technological breakthroughs, most notably in the fields of genetic enhancement and artificial intelligence, which, in the words of Edward O. Wilson, ‘will bring us to the greatest moral dilemma since God stayed the hand of Abraham’ (*The Meaning of Human Existence*, p. 14). If philosophy continues on its current, unassuming track, then we will soon find ourselves with the anomaly of all the seats on the ethics panels being taken up by scientists. Philosophy desperately needs more cultural influence and respect, for which public awareness is a good start. Performance philosophy can help; and if you think this will lead it to be taken less seriously, then you are falling back on the unthinking assumption about levity which I dealt with above. And in any case, when it comes to the big philosophical issues currently facing us, I am not sure it could have much less influence than it currently does. Anything is worth a try.

To return to my singing philosopher, then, I myself would willingly sing that song. Unfortunately, to echo the unforgettable words of jazz pianist Erroll Garner, my voice is ‘worse than Louis Armstrong’s’. That is why, on my album *Jazz-Philosophy Fusion*, I have hired a professional; and one of the best, too. Philosophy deserves it.