



October 2023

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Thien-Tin M. Le
info@ubiquitypress.com

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Recommended Citation

Le, Thien-Tin M. (2023) "Musical Platonism: A Challenge to Levinson," *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/ijurca/vol4/iss2/8>

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Musical Platonism: A Challenge to Levinson

Abstract

Musical Platonism's central thesis is that a musical work is a sound structure and nothing more. Given this, three consequences follow. First, musical works cannot be created. Second, if two musical works have the same sound structure, they are the same musical work. Third, a musical work's instrumentation is not a necessary feature of its identity. Jerrold Levinson denies these three claims. He argues that musical works are created; that even if two musical works have the same sound structure, they are nevertheless two different musical works; and that a musical work's instrumentation is a necessary feature of its identity. In this essay, I challenge Levinson's views, and I make the case for a more feasible alternative.

Musical Platonism: A Challenge to Levinson

Thien-Tin M. Le

California State University, Bakersfield

Published online: 07 June 2012

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Abstract

Musical Platonism's central thesis is that a musical work is a sound structure and nothing more. Given this, three consequences follow. First, musical works cannot be created. Second, if two musical works have the same sound structure, they are the same musical work. Third, a musical work's instrumentation is not a necessary feature of its identity. Jerrold Levinson denies these three claims. He argues that musical works are created; that even if two musical works have the same sound structure, they are nevertheless two different musical works; and that a musical work's instrumentation is a necessary feature of its identity. In this essay, I challenge Levinson's views, and I make the case for a more feasible alternative.

I. Introduction

A musical work can be performed. But it cannot be identified with its performances. Performances emit sounds. Sounds die out. Performances begin and end. Yet a musical work endures. A musical work can also be scored. But it cannot be identified with its scores. Scores can be destroyed, lost, or forgotten. Yet a musical work endures. A performance is an acoustic instantiation, and a score is a physical instantiation, of a musical work. A musical work is something over and above its instantiations.

The *Hammerklavier* Sonata (*HK*) is a musical work. Suppose there are two scores of it on a table. What makes them similar or different? One is on the left. The other is on the right. They are clearly not the same thing. If they were the same thing, there would be only one score on the table, not two. But they have something in common. They are both instantiations of *HK*. So there is a "thing" that is physically instantiated by the scores. This "thing" is *HK*. But what makes this "thing" *HK*? What are its identity conditions?

Suppose there are two performances of *HK* at Carnegie Hall. One is played on a piano; the other, on a synthesizer. What makes them similar or different? One is played on a piano; the other, on a synthesizer. They are clearly not the same performance. But they have something in common. They are both instantiations of *HK*. So there is a thing that is acoustically instantiated by its performances. This "thing" is *HK*. In both cases, it is clear that the instantiations are different from one another, and that they both instantiate *HK*. But what makes *HK*, *HK*? I know this seems ridiculous. *HK* just is *HK*. It is a musical work. But that begs the question. What makes a given acoustic instantiation of *HK*, *HK*? What are its identity conditions?

Musical Platonism is the view that a musical work is its sound structure and nothing more. Thus, a sound structure is a necessary and sufficient condition of a musical work's identity. It is a Platonic

universal, or repeatable, an abstract entity that can have many instantiations. Abstract entities are nonspatiotemporal and acausal.¹ They exist beyond space-time and causation. I can see, touch, taste, and smell a score of a sound structure. I can hear a performance of it. But I cannot do so of a sound structure per se. A sound structure can never cease to exist, even if it becomes forgotten, even if all instantiations of it are lost, or even if there are no longer sentient beings to perceive it.

Jerrold Levinson argues that a musical work “is more than just a sound structure per se.”² It is not just a “pure structure of sounds — a Platonic universal ... but instead a sort of universal brought down to earth: a contextually qualified, person-and-time-tethered abstract object[.]”³ Thus, a sound structure is a necessary but not sufficient condition of a musical work’s identity. Musical Platonism’s central thesis is that a musical work is its sound structure and nothing more. Given this, three consequences follow. First, musical works cannot be created. Second, if two musical works have the same sound structure, they are the same musical work. Third, a musical work’s instrumentation is not a necessary feature of its identity. Levinson denies these three claims. He argues that musical works are created; that even if two musical works have the same sound structure, they are nevertheless two different musical works; and that a musical work’s instrumentation is a necessary feature of its identity. In this essay, I challenge Levinson’s views, and I make the case for a more feasible alternative.

II. Creatability

Musical Platonism’s central thesis is that a musical work is its sound structure and nothing more. If a musical work is its sound structure, then it cannot be created. A sound structure is an abstract entity. Abstract entities are nonspatiotemporal and acausal. They cannot be created or destroyed. If a musical work cannot be created or destroyed, then it has always existed and will continue to exist forever. Thus, musical works are discovered, not created. Peter Kivy subscribes to this view. Levinson does not. In this section, I characterize the creatability debate between Kivy and Levinson, two prominent philosophers of music. Then I evaluate what I take to be the upshot of their debate.

Levinson gives three main reasons why we should accept the view that musical works are created. First, the view that musical works are created is ubiquitous in how we think and speak of music, because “Musicians ‘make’ music, they don’t ‘find’ it; pieces are ‘written’ or ‘composed,’ not ‘described’ or ‘registered;’ we have biographical titles such as ‘Beethoven the Creator’ but not ‘Beethoven the Discoverer’[.]”⁴ Second, we should hold onto that view because “it is one of the most firmly entrenched of our beliefs about art.”⁵ Part of the reason why composers seem to exude a special aura is because we conceive of them as true creators. Third, there is an essentially intimate relationship between artist and artwork, one of unique possession. For instance, “Columbus’s America wasn’t ... logically his in virtue of his discovering it. But Ives’s symphonic essay *The Fourth of July* is irrevocably and exclusively his, precisely in virtue of his composing it.”⁶

Kivy responds that the view that musical works are discovered is also ubiquitous in how we think and speak of music. He draws an analogy with how we think and speak of mathematical discoveries. Mozart is playing pool with Salieri when “all of a sudden, he know not how or why, the theme of the Allegro section of the overture to *Don Giovanni* just pops into his head[.]”⁷ Pythagoras is walking across the Agora when “all of a sudden, he knows not how or why, the theorem that bears his name just pops into his head.”⁸ Mozart discovered his theme and Pythagoras discovered his theorem. The theme popped into Mozart’s head, and the theorem popped into Pythagoras’s head. But if so, then Mozart did not create his

theme, and Pythagoras did not create his theorem. The theme was there all along. Mozart was searching for it. It then came to him in a moment of clarity. The same can be said of Pythagoras. But then Kivy runs into a problem. If musical works are discoverable in the same way that mathematical theorems are discoverable, then they should be co-discoverable just as mathematical theorems are co-discoverable. Newton and Leibniz co-discovered the calculus. Yet there have been no co-discoveries of musical works. Why so? Kivy concedes that there is an essentially intimate relationship between artist and artwork, one of unique possession. But he argues that this does not preclude the discoverability of musical works. Kivy has to explain why musical works are unique yet discoverable, and why they are discoverable yet so unique as to be not co-discoverable. He explains that “some ‘objects’ are so unique as to be discoverable only by people uniquely constituted to notice them.”⁹ Take Picasso’s *Head of a Bull* for example. Picasso “‘discovered’ the form of the bull’s head in a bicycle saddle and handle bars ... There was nothing, really, to ‘create:’ the saddle and handle bars were already there.”¹⁰

The creatability debate is not decisive in deciding what a musical work is. Kivy is committed to the view that musical works cannot be created, because he is antecedently committed to the view that a musical work is its sound structure and nothing more. Levinson is committed to the view that musical works are created, because he is antecedently committed to the view that a musical work is more than just its sound structure. This is a clash of competing but equally plausible interpretations. The view that musical works are discovered is seemingly as plausible as the view that musical works are created. The creatability debate is and will remain non-probative, unless one view can be shown to be clearly preferred over the other for objectively clear reasons. But this is unlikely. Both views are consistent with how we think and speak of musical works. Both views are fairly entrenched. No view clearly one-ups the other.

Given this parity, if the issue is going to be settled as to whether a musical work is created or discovered, we must first determine whether a musical work is its sound structure and nothing more, or whether a musical work is more than just a sound structure. That is, we must first determine whether a sound structure is a necessary and sufficient condition, or a necessary but not sufficient condition, of a musical work’s identity. Once we establish what a musical work is, we will then know whether musical works are created or discovered. Levinson admits that his creatability argument is the “least firmly grounded” of his three arguments against Musical Platonism.¹¹ This is not to say that the creatability debate is not important. But settling that debate depends first on settling the debate over what a musical work is.

Before I move on to more decisive arguments, I would like to draw attention to one of Levinson’s remarks in his debate with Kivy on creatability. I find the following remark very interesting.

Since it seems incontestable that works in the fine arts and in a number of other arts as well are, as either physical objects or events ... literally created, it seems perverse ... to stick to a conception of musical (and perhaps literary) works that separates them from their fellows in the other realms of art ... Shall paintings, drawings, etchings, sculptures, palaces, dances, films, and so on all be truly creatable, in the full sense of the word, and only symphonies and novels denied this possibility? There would be little profit, and false economy, in that.¹²

Levinson thinks that a divided treatment of the arts should count against Musical Platonism; that a divided treatment of the arts is the substantial cost that comes with endorsing it. He implies that

endorsing his view comes with the substantial benefit of allowing for a uniform treatment of the arts. Indeed, Musical Platonism denies the creatability of musical works. But Musical Platonism does not imply global Platonism. That is, Platonism in music does not imply Platonism across the arts. Conceptually, we can allow for a divided treatment of the arts, such that plastic artworks are creatable, but musical artworks are not.

Uniform treatment of all artworks requires that we think and speak of musical works according to a certain model,¹³ which we might call a *parent-offspring model*. To close off this section, I analyze and explore this model. Think of the relationship between parents and their children. Children uniquely belong to their parents, but in what sense? Biological parents cause their children to come into being. But the causal relationship in this case is special. Normally, just because an outcome has a cause, it does not necessarily follow that that cause is the sole cause of that outcome. If I put a loaded gun to your head and I pull the trigger, I would cause your death. But my doing so is not the only way you could die. You could die of some kind of disease for instance. But the sole cause of your coming into being is that you were conceived by your biological parents. Moreover, if your biological parents caused you to come into being — if they conceived you — then you could not have been conceived by anyone other than the biological parents that you do have. You are individuated by your father's 23 chromosomes and your mother's 23 chromosomes. Had your mother and father never met, or had your mother or father met someone else, there is no way that you could have existed.

Analogously, Leonardo da Vinci painted the *Mona Lisa (ML)*. According to the parent-offspring model, *ML* belongs to him in the sense that it shares a special causal connection with him. He caused it to come into being. In a sense, he gave birth to it. *ML* is irrevocably and exclusively his, precisely in virtue of his painting it. *ML* could not have had a "parent" other than da Vinci. There can be only one *ML*. There can be no other. Had da Vinci never met Lisa del Giocondo, or had he met someone else, there would be no way that *ML* could have existed. According to the parent-offspring model, plastic artworks are unrepeatable. This is rightly so, because it respects how we think and speak of plastic artworks, such as *ML*. Even if there were technology to create an atomic replica of *ML*, we would deny that that atomic replica is *ML*. Why can't the same be said of Ives's symphonic essay *The Fourth of July*? As Levinson remarks, "Ives' symphonic essay *The Fourth of July* is irrevocably and exclusively his, precisely in virtue of his composing it."¹⁴ But if the same can be said of *The Fourth of July*, then how we conceive of musical works conforms to a parent-offspring model. But if so, then how we view musical artworks is no different than how we view plastic artworks. By conforming how we think and speak of musical works according to a parent-offspring model, we allow for a uniform treatment of the arts. Levinson thinks that a uniform treatment of the arts is a substantial benefit that comes with endorsing his view.

III. Fine Individuation

Levinson is pushing for a uniform treatment of the arts. This requires that we conceive of musical works according to a parent-offspring model. Previously, I analyzed and explored the causal connection and causal uniqueness features of this model. There is one more feature. According to Levinson, musical works are not only causally and uniquely connected to their composers. They are also finely individuated by their having been composed by a certain composer in a certain way at a certain time. In this section, I analyze and explore this fine individuation feature of the parent-offspring model.

Musical works are composed by a certain composer in a certain way at a certain time. According to Levinson, composers bestow musical works with a certain set of musicohistorical, artistic, and aesthetic properties by composing them. A musicohistorical property is a musical work's property of being composed in a certain musicohistorical context. An artistic property is a musical work's property of being composed in a certain way at a certain time by a certain composer, with respect to that composer's training, knowledge, style, etc. An aesthetic property is a musical work's property of being composed to sound a certain way: say, craggy or smooth, whimsical or pensive, extravagant or minimalist, etc. These properties finely individuate musical works.

According to Levinson, musicohistorical, artistic, and aesthetic properties are not essential properties of musical works. But they are "relevant ... to *individuating*" musical works, and they "*truly belong*" to musical works "in a *reasonably determinate* fashion."¹⁵ Composers bestow musical works with certain musicohistorical properties by composing them in a certain musicohistorical context; with certain artistic properties by composing them according to a certain compositional style, such as twelve-tone serialism; and with certain aesthetic properties by composing them to sound a certain way. Composers "connect with" musical works "by *creating* them — by mixing their labor and identity in with them, so to speak, and thus assuring their uniqueness[.]"¹⁶

Suppose that composers, Mozart and Schmozart, compose works with exactly the same sound structure. Although these works are identical in sound structure, they differ in many ways. Mozart composes in a different musicohistorical context than Schmozart. Mozart has a different working knowledge of music theory, a different compositional style, a different oeuvre, and Mozart is differently influenced by predecessor composers that he finds inspirational. Thus, Mozart's work has musicohistorical, artistic, and aesthetic properties that Schmozart's work does not have. Leibniz's law states that if two entities are identical, then they share the same properties. Since Mozart's and Schmozart's works do not share the same properties, they are not identical.

Levinson's view closely resembles a cluster concept theory of reference.¹⁷ For Levinson, a musical work is finely individuated by a unique cluster of causally or historically determined descriptions, or properties, predications, concepts, etc. If Mozart's and Schmozart's works are identical, then they are finely individuated by the same cluster of descriptions. But they are not finely individuated by the same cluster of descriptions. Mozart's work has a certain cluster of descriptions: 'that which was composed by *this* composer, at *this* location, at *this* time, etc.' Schmozart's work has a different cluster of descriptions: 'that which was composed by *that* composer, at *that* location, at *that* time, etc.' The former cluster of descriptions fixes a certain referent: Mozart's work. The latter cluster of descriptions fixes another referent: Schmozart's work. These two clusters of descriptions refer to two distinct objects. This implies that Mozart's and Schmozart's works are not identical. If they were identical, they would have the same cluster of descriptions, and it would fix the same referent. But this is not the case.

Suppose that Mozart and Schmozart both compose *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (*EKN*) in 1787, and they both coincidentally name their musical works *EKN*. In this possible world, Mozart and Schmozart have no knowledge of each other's existence. Mozart's most avid patron learns that Mozart's *EKN* is going to be performed on a Saturday at Mozart's venue. The patron then learns that Schmozart's *EKN* is going to be performed on a Sunday at Schmozart's venue. Intrigued that two composers with such similar names have composed musical works with identical titles, the patron decides to attend both performances to see

about the matter. The patron attends the Saturday and Sunday performances. How many types of musical work does the patron hear performed?

A Musical Platonist would say that the patron hears only one type of musical work performed twice, since the patron hears one sound structure performed twice, and that sound structure is *EKN*. Levinson would agree that the patron hears one sound structure performed twice, but still insist that the patron hears two different types of musical work. This is because Mozart's *EKN* has musicohistorical, artistic, and aesthetic properties that Schmozart's *EKN* does not have, and vice versa. Moreover, Mozart composed his *EKN*, whereas Schmozart composed his *EKN*. Mozart has an exclusive causal connection with his *EKN*, whereas Schmozart has an exclusive causal connection with his *EKN*. The patron hears two aurally indistinguishable performances, since they both acoustically instantiate the same sound structure. But the patron nevertheless hears two different types of musical work.

IV. A More Feasible Alternative

Levinson's view obscures fundamental differences between two categories of art: plastic art, which includes paintings, sculptures, printmaking, etc., versus performance art, which includes music, dance, theater, etc. As abstract objects, performance artworks are fundamentally different than concrete objects, such as rocks, trees, skyscrapers, etc. As repeatables, they can be multiply instantiated, at different times and places. Given this, they are fundamentally different than non-repeatables. A fine example of a non-repeatable is the *Mona Lisa (ML)*, since there can be only one *ML* at any given time and place. Plastic artworks are concrete objects. Performance artworks are abstract objects. *ML* is a physical, spatiotemporal, causally responsive concrete object. The *Hammerklavier Sonata (HK)* is a nonphysical, nonspatiotemporal, causally inert abstract object. Levinson's view obscures these fundamental differences.

The parent-offspring model is the incorrect model for representing how we intuitively think and speak of performance artworks. Indeed, the parent-offspring model is the correct model for representing how we conceive of plastic artworks, since we conceive of them as non-repeatables. But we think of performance artworks according to a different model,¹⁸ which we might call a *repeatables model*. This is the correct model for representing how we think of performance artworks, since we think of them as repeatables. For instance, we think that there can be only one *ML*, and it is exclusively located at the Louvre. If you wanted to see it, you would have to be there. Yet we think that there can be many instantiations of *HK*, at different times and places. You could pick up a score of it at any music store that has it. You could hear a performance of it in Chicago today, and Seattle tomorrow. Since we do not think of performance artworks as non-repeatables, we do not think of them according to a parent-offspring model. Despite this, Levinson goes through great pains to squeeze our conceptions of performance artworks into the parent-offspring model. In doing so, he distorts how we intuitively think and speak of performance artworks.

Fundamental differences between plastic versus performance artworks, and between how we think of them, become especially conspicuous when we consider situations in which artworks are replicated or forged. If an artist produces a rendition of *ML*, we would call it a copy. But if a pianist produces a rendition of *HK*, we would call it a performance, which is an acoustic instantiation. Copies and instantiations are different, and we treat them differently. If an artist produces a rendition of *ML*, and tries to pass it off as his own, we would call it a forgery of *ML*. But if a pianist produces a rendition of

HK, and tries to pass it off as her own, we would still think of it as a genuine performance, and not a forgery, of *HK*. We think that plastic artworks are forgeable, but we think that performance artworks are non-forgeable.

If Levinson wants a uniform treatment of the arts, then he has to explain two things away. First, he has to explain away why we *intuitively* treat copies and instantiations differently. Second, he has to explain away why we *intuitively* consider plastic artworks to be forgeable, but not performance artworks. But Levinson will most likely encounter difficulties explaining these away, since they are deep-seated intuitions, and deep-seated intuitions are difficult to explain away. Even if he does manage to explain them away, his explanations will most likely be strained. But if he does not explain them away, then he cannot have a uniform treatment of the arts. If he acknowledges that we do in fact treat the arts differently, then he concedes too much. Levinson is in a difficult position.

My view pays close attention to the nature of musical works. This is not to say that Levinson does not pay close attention to the nature of musical works. Levinson is a prominent philosopher of music, and a savvy musician. We also previously witnessed just how fine-grained, complex, and nuanced his view is, as evidenced by his thoughts on creatability and fine individuation. Indeed, Levinson pays close attention to the nature of musical works. Yet he obscures fundamental differences between plastic and musical artworks. Moreover, even though the parent-offspring model is the incorrect model for depicting how we intuitively think and speak of musical works, Levinson nevertheless tries to squeeze our conceptions of musical works into it, as if it were a one-size-fits-all model. One diagnosis is that he is pushing for a uniform treatment of the arts. There can be no uniform treatment of the arts, unless the fundamental differences between plastic and musical artworks are deflated, and unless we think and speak of both plastic and musical artworks according to the parent-offspring model. Another diagnosis is that Levinson is trying to meet “the demands of *theoretical unity*.”¹⁹ In a sense, Levinson is paying close attention to the nature of musical works. In another sense, he is distorting the nature of musical works so as to make it fit his theory. Based on observations of music, and of how we intuitively Platonize how we think and speak of musical works, Musical Platonism is recognizably the theory that most accurately accounts for the nature of music, and the repeatables model is recognizably the model that most accurately depicts how we think and speak of musical works. Musical Platonism gets it right. I chose the theory, and the model, that most accurately fits the phenomena. Levinson distorts the phenomena so as to make them fit the theory and the model.

Musical Platonism is the more flexible view. The ancient Greek poet Archilochus once said, ‘The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.’ Plato was a hedgehog, because he had one grand theory for explaining everything. Aristotle was a fox, because he had different ideas about different topics. Levinson is a hedgehog, because he has a grand one-size-fits-all theory, or model, that he tries to make legislative across the arts. But one size does not fit all. Levinson’s view is too inflexible. My view does not require that Musical Platonism, or the repeatables model, be made legislative across the arts, since Musical Platonism does not imply global Platonism, and the repeatables model applies only to how we conceive of performance artworks. Given this, a divided treatment of the arts is not unjustified or unreasonable after all.

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¹ Chris Swoyer, "Abstract Entities," *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 13-14.

² Jerrold Levinson, "What a Musical Work Is," *Music, Art, & Metaphysics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 64.

³ Jerrold Levinson, "What a Musical Work Is, Again." *Music, Art, & Metaphysics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 216.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁵ Jerrold Levinson, "What a Musical Work Is," 66.

⁶ Jerrold Levinson, "What a Musical Work Is, Again," 218.

⁷ Peter Kivy, "Platonism in Music: Another Kind of Defense," *APQ* 24, no. 3 (1987): 248.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 251.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Jerrold Levinson, "What a Musical Work Is, Again," 216.

¹² *Ibid.*, 220-221.

¹³ Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1980), 110-113.

¹⁴ Jerrold Levinson, "What a Musical Work Is, Again," 218.

¹⁵ Jerrold Levinson, "What a Musical Work Is," 84.

¹⁶ Jerrold Levinson, "What a Musical Work Is, Again," 230.

¹⁷ Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 64.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 83-92.

¹⁹ Jerrold Levinson, "What a Musical Work Is, Again," 220.