

Literal Improvisation?

Recovering the Electric Guitar Solo as a Collaborative Achievement in Multimodal Specifics

In a recent essay, the French sociologist of music Antoine Hennion reflects upon different versions of baroque music, their technical performance, and the notion of historical authenticity (Hennion 2016). To the question “what makes music baroque” his essay replies by encouraging its readers to listen to selected music extracts, whilst inviting them to contrast their listening experience with the successive contextualizations and recontextualizations of those extracts, notably in terms of 20th century music record, publication, and production history. The present paper takes its cue from Hennion’s essay by turning its conceptual reflection on “fakes in music” into a phenomenon, not in terms of a detached and individualized listening experience, but as part and parcel of the collaborative achievement of musical performance (which includes both hearing out and watching one’s fellow musicians). Drawing upon an ethnomethodological video ethnography of 1980s cover bands at work, the paper homes in on their joint rehearsals of electric guitar solos in multimodal specifics, *in situ* and *in vivo*. In particular, the paper examines a cover band’s tentative achievements of a coordinated entry into, play through, and exit out of famous guitar solos (e.g., Prince’s solo on *Purple Rain*). How do its members, and its guitarist in particular, achieve the solo as a “literal improvisation,” displaying both technical accuracy and lively style? In tackling this question (see also Sudnow 1978:14), the outlined paper not only re-specifies the conceptual reflection on “fakes in music” (by examining how it is dealt with by cover bands in the rehearsal space), but also contributes to current discussions on enactment and reenactment in and across contemporary art, ethnomethodology, video and conversation analysis (e.g., Fraser 2014; Sormani 2016; Tutt & Hindmarsh 2011). Incidentally, the paper examines how cover bands themselves “work with video” (Broth et al. 2014) as they strive to emulate both the distinctive sound *and* visual appearance of original performances. The “electric guitar solo” thus offers an apt opportunity to reflect upon the notion of performance (often including “hoaxes, provocations, [and] commercial stunts”, Hennion 2016:86) against the ambivalent background of contemporary art, too. Indeed, the latter typically collapses traditional distinctions between visual and performing arts, including music (e.g., Rebentisch 2013), whilst outwitting both commonly available and more elitist forms of “pop culture” (including 1980s pop and rock music, as well as “baroque” recordings, if not classical music more broadly).

References

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