Narrative and Music:
A Flexible Partnership on the Performing Stage and in the Rehearsal Studio

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Introduction

As is indicated by the title, this presentation deals with implemented narrativity on two fronts within the complex process of live musical performance: a "concert story" told by the musician in front of the live audience in the performance situation and a structured complex of verbal and non-verbal narrative in the studio during the process of performance preparation.

For Westney, a professional concert pianist and professor of piano pedagogy, the interest in utilizing aspects of applied narrativity lies in re-invigorating musicians' performance and addressing issues with regard to the performer-audience relationship. For Grund, a philosopher who also has experience as a performing musician, analyzing this implementation of narrativity is an important part of exploring the formation of musical meaning from a philosophical standpoint in a practice-based context.

The concert story

Why would a concert musician want to *speak* to the audience at all before performing? Why set out to prepare the audience somehow for their imminent musical experience? One intention is to invite

audience members directly to take part, and thereby enrich their experience, through active use *of their own imaginations*. A performer who faces the audience squarely and speaks to them in an approachable, friendly manner is hard to ignore, and invites them to join him or her in a relationship. This relationship implies that the performer will continue to somehow engage the audience through the sounds and gestures of music, after the transition from words to music has been made. Furthermore, since everyone in the audience hears the same verbal narration or introduction at the same time, the possibility of continued communal experience is enhanced.

Note that by issuing this invitation, the performer is allowing the audience to enter a state of preparedness for participation in the performance situation. Although the audience and the performer have markedly different roles to play in the context of a performance, there is a sense in which the invitation on the part of the performer levels the playing field for a shared experience: the performer, after all, has prepared him or herself in a very context-specific manner in order to fulfill this role; an audience member can get away with just rushing in before the last bells ring - and then staying silent. The pre-performance concert story exhorts the concertgoer to direct attention to the concert situation, attention invested with a certain form of intentionality and directed to non-verbal aspects of sound. Since most, if not all concertgoers will be entering the concert environment from one in which their attention principally has been focused on verbal content whose semantics is structured within a linguistic framework - in conversation, at work, reading e-mails, etc. - a spoken narrative provides a natural segue into a temporally bounded period during which the attention of audience members most appropriately should be directed towards non-verbal sonic processes whose meaning is structured semantically in a manner which is not inherently linguistic (although the degree to which the semantic content of music may or not be understood on a linguistic model is, of course, still a matter of intense debate within philosophy of music).

There are certain traits of the concert story that Westney tends to favor. Often he proposes a loose narrative with events or features that correspond in some way to the piece of music at hand, but this is left deliberately ambiguous and vague so that room is always left for individuals to modify the story as they listen, or to bypass the idea of "story" altogether if they find it intrusive. In any case, the "hook" he proposes to an audience is meant to be an accessible and intriguing one, often with a hint of profundity. It is presented in general terms, so as *not* to be heard as a sort of road map in which the music serves to illustrate the events of a story that has just been told verbally. The concert story is told with a certain hesitancy, perhaps using such phrases as, "for what it's worth, this is what often goes through my mind (if I had to put it into words) when I play this music . . . ." This is meant to be disarming, because it doesn't impose or lecture. Stories generally have the quality of not imposing themselves on a listener the way a lecture would. A good story, well told, is more likely to invite and seduce.

One could be justified in asking: Why not just have printed program notes (which Westney used to use)? For one thing, reading program notes is an individual and separate experience. The storytelling aspect of the onstage narration gives the commentary *itself* event character, which transforms it into something which in turn can be a candidate for a shared experience. The spoken modality allows for a more informal, "I'm-just-sayin'"- character than one could ever achieve with written notes; recall the notion of issuing a gentle invitation, as was mentioned in the above. The *mise-en-scène* provided by the storytelling mode achieves an important, explicit casting of roles as storyteller and participating audience. This event-related aspect would be very easy to overlook or ignore if only written notes or written narratives were provided. As these remarks suggest, much of what is

achieved by the spoken encounter with the audience is the creation of a larger, freer space in which its members may encounter the music with their attention focused on *it*; once this space is created and the attention of the listener is focused, it is up to the performer to provide an experience imbued with richness sufficient to encourage the listener to explore strategies of listening which go above and beyond the nature of the invitation. A pale analogy might be that of inviting someone to a celebration of some sort - by saying that it is, for example a wedding, one sets a stage for the celebration, but certainly in no way comes close to exhausting the avenues of potential experience awaiting the guest who actually participates in the festivities.

Having said this, a concert story is not necessarily to be advocated every time one performs. Continuing with the celebration analogy above, sometimes it is just enough to gather people together for - a celebration, without having the motivation that it is a wedding, a retirement reception, or the like, just letting the guests find their own group dynamic. Some music might suggest this sort of participation more than other music - such as that of Bach, with its solid internal integrity and multiplicity of potential meanings that it seems best not to intrude - and some audiences might prefer this sort of participation.

A case study of two concert story examples: *Nocturne in D-flat major, op. 63* by Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) and *Mephisto Waltz* (from Lenau's *Faust*) by Franz Liszt (1811-1886).
It will be instructive to view and listen to two examples of concert stories. Both occur within a concert given by Westney in Sønderborg, Denmark on November 24, 2009 at the Alsion Concert Hall adjacent to the campus of the branch of the University of Southern Denmark located there. The concert was filmed and subsequently broadcast by ALT - Aabenraa Lokal TV and Offener Kanal Flensburg during January 2010. It is permanently available on the Internet at http://www.aabenraa-lokal-tv.dk/wp/2010/01/04/2723/ This concert took place during Westney's appointment as Hans Christian Andersen Academy Professorial Fellow at the University of Southern Denmark 2009-2010; for more information about Westney's six-month tenure and the cross-disciplinary activity fostered by it, please see http://www.soundmusicresearch.org/HCA_Prof.html. The two examples on http://www.aabenraa-lokal-tv.dk/wp/2010/01/04/2723/ are *Nocturne in D-flat major*, op. 63 by Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) (10:34-12:49) and *Mephisto Waltz* (from Lenau's *Faust*) by Franz Liszt (1811-1886) (26:27-28:37). Westney gives a good deal of thought to the character of the preparatory remarks which he scripts as introductions to his performances and the following remarks address the spoken narratives which may be heard in the above clips.

The back story for the concert story which introduces the piece by Fauré
The following considerations were taken into account by Westney when crafting his remarks:

- The spoken introduction provides a way to tie a contemporary audience in to this piece of music that might otherwise be quite difficult to follow and could run the risk of being experienced as a bit abstruse
- The piece is rambling, harmonically odd, loosely organized - and 10 minutes long . . . some audience members might feel that they neither need nor want mediation, but most will respond eagerly to it and report both a deepened experience and that they have no trouble staying with the music

- The spoken pre-performance narrative in the case of Fauré is not a story *per se*, but rather the suggestion of a gestalt, a candidate for a sense of why the musical structure might be the way it is, with an internal logic which may be grasped by the listener
- What is said to the audience is thus suggestive regarding (1) structure and (2) the quality of the expression itself (here a "daydreaming" quality is posited).

Furthermore,

- Recalling what has been remarked upon in general regarding pre-performance narration in the above, no specific event in the music has been associated with anything said in the narration, rather a strategy for listening has been suggested.
- Even though this piece is entitled *Nocturne* (night-piece), the aesthetic convention is that this is a catch-all title for introspective, flowing compositions, usually rather dreamy, that don't necessitate that one think of night images or themes specifically.
- Again, a possible objection to the concert story is that just mentioning a "thread" like this, no matter how hesitantly or hypothetically one might do so, still plants a thought in the audience's mind (compare: "Don't think of green kangaroos") . . and some experienced concertgoers may rightly object that they prefer to have no mediation of this sort imposing itself. *Thus the artist has to make a calculated cultural judgment in almost every situation.*

. . . and the back story for the concert story which introduces the piece by Liszt

- This piece by Liszt, unlike the example by Fauré, imposes a specific, unusual title which carries a story with it - *Mephisto Waltz,* from Lenau's *Faust.*
- Here the intention is not to strain the audience with too much exactness in tying musical events to images, etc. - Westney definitely does NOT want to turn the evening into a music history lecture! - but rather to intrigue audience members with how entertainingly some of that tone-painting can work for the listener.
- These warhorses of the classical music repertoire are retreating farther and farther into the past with every decade; for a performer who thrives on the audience-performer bond it is important to try to remove any possible barrier. If one can casually explain the Faust legend in a sentence, it is worth doing; how far into the future can we assume that a general audience will understand these cultural markers? The same remarks apply *mutatis mutandem* with regard to what is said about Romanticism.
- As the performer in this example, Westney personally feels much freer to use elements of specific storytelling in the presentation of the Liszt than would ever be the case with Fauré, because he considers the Liszt (to put it bluntly) to be a shallower piece of music. Westney sees it more as a high-class diversion, a brilliantly crafted entertainment - and had calculated it to function in just that way in his full-evening recital program.
- Perhaps one could do without the verbal intro in the case of the Liszt offering entirely, because the piece is so exciting, showy, and well-paced in purely musical terms. The cultural references, however, might be lost more and more over time, as was pointed out previously.

Now to the studio, where verbal - and gestural narration - prove to be of value

As any serious student or teacher in a music studio knows, music flirts often and easily with narrative in many contexts. In Westney's experience, phrases such as "just let that beautiful melody tell a story" without any concern about what that story might be are familiar ones in the supply of exhortations which a professional pedagogue might direct at a student. Westney has found that this sort of indeterminacy actually is *helpful* to the student in many cases, since it inspires the student to think about the dynamics (such as the long-range arc or the momentary contrasts) of a piece, piggybacking on the sorts of dynamics which unfold in a story, but without attending to its content. Music is, after all, a *non-verbal* way of connecting with people through art; one aspect is its sounds, another is what performers manifest through their gesturing. This brings us to the matter of *gestural narrativity* as this can be integrated with verbal narrativity in the rehearsal studio.

The Un-Master Class

The case study which will illustrate this portion of the presentation is that of the *Un-Master Class* (UMC), developed over the course of 25 years by Westney and

> . . . was originally intended to address the problem that many musicians, despite high levels of training, deliver performances that come across as rather lifeless and generic. While it still functions in this way, it has become increasingly apparent that the presuppositions behind the UMC raise deep questions involving the locus of meaning in music and what the character of this meaning might be. (Grund and Westney 2010, p. 33)

The specific examples of the UMC used in this presentation are taken

- from a documentary about the Un-Master Class, shot at the Alsion Concert Hall in Sønderborg on November 24, 2009, by ALT - Aabenraa Lokal TV and Offener Kanal Flensburg. It was broadcast February 8-15, 2010 and is now permanently available online at http://www.aabenraa-lokal-tv.dk/wp/2010/02/08/3242/.
- from a book in photo-essay format produced by Grund and Westney, detailing a two-day workshop at the University of Oslo, Norway, February18-19, 2010, under the aegis of NNIMIPA: Nordic Network for the Integration of Music Informatics, Performance and Aesthetics (then funded by NordPlus; funded by NordForsk since September 1, 2010). The Un-Master Class is documented and explained, since it was an important component of the workshop. The book - *Music, Movement, Performance and Perception: Perspectives on Cross-Disciplinary Research and Teaching within NNIMIPA: Nordic Network for the Integration of Music Informatics, Performance and Aesthetics* (ISBN 978-87-92646-11-8) is also available in an online version at http://www.nnimipa.org/CM.html.

The thesis behind the UMC is that potent resources for revitalization of the entire performance environment lie within the relationship between audience and performer. The initial component of the UMC thus consists of non-verbal interactive exercises where performers and audience members take part on equal footing. Attitudes of perceivably heightened mutual engagement and responsibility

emerge. These are drawn upon to elicit fresh interpretive content from the performances during the ensuing, recontextualized version of the traditional master class.

The following suite of fourteen captioned pictures from Grund & Westney 2010 (page numbers appear as part of the captions) provides some perspective over the structure and content of the UMC. Here are a few words of introduction before proceeding to these excerpts from the book:

The class begins with various warm-up exercises done to recorded music. The seminal theories of Emile Jaques-Dalcroze have provided much of the inspiration for these exercises. Activities involving mirroring, where the roles of leader and follower frequently alternate back and forth, provide embodied insight into the interpretive experience of another listener. This grants participants access to ways of hearing the music which otherwise might have eluded them. When participants subsequently assume their roles as performers and audience members in the latter half of the UMC – the part which most closely resembles a traditional master class – this heightened participatory awareness is still a present factor in the group's experience of the musical performances offered by pre-selected members who have prepared material in advance. As is documented in the following book excerpts, the performer and selected audience members can interact in ways which were adumbrated in the first part of the UMC: These audience members enact various exercises to the now live music, the performance of which, in turn, is influenced by the non-verbal feedback this gives the musician, whose resulting playing then impacts upon the enactors . . . and an interactive circuit of gesturally communicated interpretations is established.

Not all communication of intentions and interpretations in the UMC is non-verbal: as may be seen below, in the performance section of the UMC, musicians are asked to say explicitly what they would like the audience to "get" from their performance, and in a dialogue after each performance, audience members are encouraged to tell the performer what they "got" from it. This discussion is kept free of advice mongering; it is focused on the here-and-now concert experience and is intended to explore its content. Note the active participation of audience members also in this segment of the UMC, even though they are seated in a fashion similar to the way that they would be in a concert hall.

The verbal exploration of content in a here-and-now fashion is augmented by employment of non-verbal means in order to express content: Very often, in the UMC, a performer will verbally aver one sort of meaning or intention or sense of what the piece is "about" - but as soon as an exercise starts in which s/he must embody the music, externalize and mirror it with one or more listeners, that meaning becomes something quite different. For example, the musician might say "this is sorrowful" but his or her body says "this is angry and desperate." This disparity will be evident to everyone in the room, and reveals something to the performer about how variously s/he is relating to the piece. Is one response more authentic than the other? Was one a received idea that doesn't integrate well with this particular performer? Now s/he has new choices. This is a process of discovery that is quite different from finding the right word for something.

The pervasive element of give and take enacts the hypothesis that musical meaning can be negotiated mutually in a tacit performer-listener exchange, moment to moment. The UMC warm-up trains both parties to be ready to engage in this process of meaning formulation during the live performances that will follow.

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Two of the questions, that permeate the warm-up as well as the performance portion, are: (1) What does the body know? and (2) What does the group (tacitly) know?

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Now that the warm-up section of the Un-Master Class is completed, the audience receives instruction and guidance about what sort of feedback is appropriate for the UMC. Feedback from the audience is more than just welcomed; it is actively encouraged, since honest listener reaction to each performance is such a central component of the workshop. In a traditional master class, the master usually gives advice quite freely. In contrast to this, Westney requests that direct advice or suggestions not be offered at all by anyone in the UMC. Instead, feedback in its purest sense is solicited: simple reporting of exactly what the audience and leader "got" from the performance, without reference to any received ideas about how the music is "supposed" to be interpreted. This is facilitated by the open, embodied listening that the warm-up activated, the attentiveness to others that was heightened by mirroring activities, and a certain unguardedness that results when a group has taken some chances together and shared laughter, as they have during the warm-up.

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The intentions and desires of each performer – here, Sebastian Wemmerløv – are elicited by Westney before the performance begins. Questions posed might include:

What do you hope the audience will get from your performance?
What would you most like to know about your rendition and the ways in which it succeeded – or not?
What qualities of this particular piece make you want to offer it to people for their consideration?

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The two individuals doing a mirroring exercise are now using live performance as the musical stimulus for their movement. This gives the pianist the unique opportunity to see his interpretation embodied before his eyes, its specific qualities reflected moment to moment.

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In these exercises, the instruction is not to express one's inner feelings, but rather to respond to musical forms and shapes themselves in a gestural way.

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Whereas the mirroring exercises during the warm-up used recordings, now the mirroring is being done to live music. This provides an added dimension of interactivity, since the movements of the participants in the mirroring exercise now can influence the performer's interpretation as well as being influenced by it.

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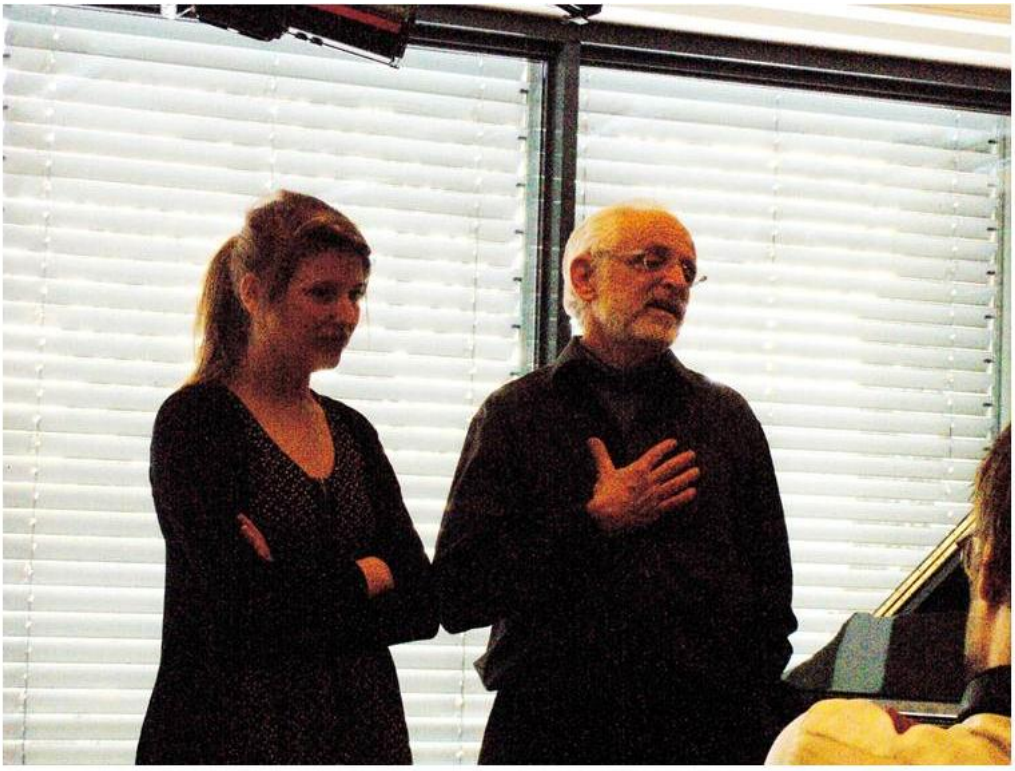

Westney's original motivation for querying performers about their intentions was a concern that well-qualified graduates of music training programs far too often deliver performances that come across as oddly impersonal and lacking in immediacy, believability and vitality. His onstage dialogue with the performers requires them to publicly enunciate their personal stake in what is about to transpire; in other words, to realize and declare to others what they really want - and believe in - regarding the piece at hand. Westney often makes the point to them that if you don't have personal intentions you shouldn't be on stage in the first place.

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Where this now turns a decidedly philosophical corner is with regard to the ways in which these intentions eventually contribute to whatever might be considered the meaning of the music at hand. This is an issue which has engaged Westney throughout his performing life, since he sensed from the outset that there was a tacit and dynamic connection being generated between performer and audience. He found the character of this connection to be elusive, and this continues to be an intriguing area for the UMC to explore.

Here Jon Ludvig Hansen discusses what he would like the audience to "get" before he performs in the UMC.

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What did seem to be indisputable in Westney's experience as a performer was that if he had defined for himself in advance what his intentions were - in whatever terms seemed most appropriate for the music at hand - and he committed to these intentions fully, the likelihood increased that audience members would have a vivid experience of the performance and be compelled by it.

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. . . and Westney continues to believe that if the audience is getting something rather different from what the performer's declared intentions are, this doesn't necessarily imply that the performer's intentions are off-base or mistaken. The nature of the audience members' experience does not need to correspond in any specific way to what is in a performer's mind. Here Lars Graugaard, who is also affiliated with NNIMIPA in Denmark, listens.

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Could these well-defined intentions on the part of the performer rather serve to endow the sound sequences being produced with relational properties that, in turn, imbue the interpretation with a kind of artistic integrity?

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Westney's insights stem from reflection upon his own performing experience, and when Westney and Grund began collaborating in 2008, she recognized in his insights an incipient philosophy of intention that dovetailed with work she had been doing for years on the philosophy of music and meaning. See, for example, the article "Intentionality, Food and Music – A Fictionalist Approach", a chapter from Grund's 1997 doctoral dissertation *Constitutive Counterfactuality: The Logic of Interpretation in Metaphor and Music* at the University of Tampere and published separately in *Metaforer i kultur og samfund*. (Edited by Carsten Hansen. Copenhagen: Københavns Universitet Amager, 61-98. 1997.) This article may be found online at http://www.sprog.asb.dk/cg/metaphor/tekst/2/GRUND.HTM along with references to previous and subsequent publications by Grund on music and meaning, available in print – and online at http://www.cynthiamgrund.dk/Selective_CV.html.

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In order to enliven the tone of his melodic playing, the pianist has been invited to lock his gaze with one "in-the-piano" listener at a time, to think of the piano's vibrations as if they were his voice, and to conceive of the musical encounter as if it were a trusting conversation. (Note that the assumption of a conversational mode here is a conceit; allegiance is not being paid to the view that music is a language or somehow linguistic in nature.) The pianist is to shift his gaze from one to the other whenever the music seems to "say" something new, on the theory that just as in a conversation we say one thing and then another, in most musical styles we can do the same. The goal is to "speak" truthfully and to be believed by the listeners.

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Concluding Remarks: Are there, then, any interesting connections between the concert story and the Un-Master Class, between the uses of narrative in framing a performance onstage and in preparing it in the studio?

Is pre-performance narration as this is practiced by Westney in any way of a piece with what the performer says to the audience in the UMC regarding his or her intentions? Westney notes that in the UMC, there is a much wider bandwidth for reporting "what the performer want the audience to get." The UMC performer could readily include goals such as "be thrilled by the technique" or "be soothed by the music's peacefulness" or "be enchanted by the tonal color" etc. From the stage the narration which constitutes the concert story is always about the material *itself*. Westney does not want to describe to people the sort of experience he is trying to create for them. The concert story is a very gentle invitation, by design, whereas the UMC activities are structure and imposed.

Concert audiences traditionally sit side by side with strangers, anonymously, having personal and often profound experiences at the same time. This can be a beautiful and rarefied experience in its way . . . but at the same time, our minds can often drift away from the music much of the time while we sit in the seats. In the UMC exercises, involvement is taken to a more constant, consistent level - and physicalized. The physical nature of this involvement requires something new: creativity on the part of the listeners.

The group involvement possible in the concert hall should not be given short shrift, however: By sensing that a fellow audience member is having a different sort of experience or engaging in an experience captured by a narrative not appropriate to the one a given individual is having, that individual can perhaps catch a sense of the music's fullness and ever-dynamic quality that might elude him or her when just listening alone. The deliberate vagueness of the concert story leaves a space for the multiple, simultaneous narratives in the concert hall; the UMC takes it farther. In the UMC, each enacted interpretation is made visible to everyone in the room, including the performer, for one thing.

There are thus respects in which the concert story and the various expressions of intended and interpreted musical content in the UMC differ – and respects in which they are importantly similar. The former is limited to a narration about the music itself which is about to be performed for a seated audience; the latter span over a much a much broader range of expressive possibilities, where relatively more ample physical freedom to move and more possibilities for multi-dimensional interaction with the performer and other audience members. What each share is the presupposition that the performance situation is more satisfying both for the musician and for the audience if each is present in the performance situation in a fashion which is as interactive, engaged and filled with mutual trust as possible. Each employs narrative techniques to attain and sustain this kind of concert context.

Both the concert story and UMC are fraught with the conviction that there are productive and constructive depths to be mined in the live concert situation. These depths can yield inspiration for more creative and meaningful performance of music as well as the means for fostering greater appreciation and reception of live music by an audience. We now find ourselves in an era in which participation in live concert situations – particularly of the non-amplified, acoustic variety – is only one option among a plethora of readily available, and often economically more feasible ways to listen to and to play music. We can no longer count on entrenched cultural habits to insure the continued availability and cultivation of the live concert experience. If we wish to see that this way

of making and appreciating music survives, thrives and continues to develop, it is important that its intrinsic value be explored and affirmed. The concert story and the UMC are two suggestions for ways in which this exploration and affirmation may be effected.

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