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## Excess in Art: The Case of Oversinging

### ABSTRACT

“Oversinging” is singing that is excessive in one or more dimensions: too loud, too ornamented, too melismatic, too expressive, or employing too much vibrato. I begin with a characterization of oversinging and establish a context for discussion (Section I). Next I consider performances by Christina Aguilera and Michael Bolton as examples (Section II). In light of these examples, I consider how oversinging might be both aesthetically and morally problematic (Section III). Along the way I raise concerns about authenticity and sincerity (Section IV). Finally (Section V), I consider a “paradox” of oversinging involving the role of skill in artistic performance. My discussion touches on the aesthetics of performance, aesthetic judgment, virtuosity, and taste.

One of Oscar Wilde’s characters famously quips that, “Moderation is a fatal thing. . . . Nothing succeeds like excess.”<sup>1</sup> In this article I discuss one form of excess that may have given Wilde pause for thought: oversinging. By this I mean singing that is excessive in one or more dimensions: It may be too loud, too ornamented, too melismatic, too emotional, or employ too much vibrato.

Oversinging has not been a topic of much philosophical discussion, and with this article I hope to open up a new conversation. Excess in performance is a fruitful line of inquiry for a number of reasons. Questions of discernment and gradation (how much is too much and how little is not enough?) are at the heart of aesthetic and artistic disagreements in every medium. Is that particular shade of red vivid or garish? Was the film highly engaging or manipulative? Is the gumbo nicely spiced or so hot as to be inedible? As we shall see, thinking about excess in performance, and particularly in vocal performance, is an entry point into important questions about aesthetic judgment and taste.

Consideration of oversinging (together with its cousins overplaying and overacting) also opens up questions for the aesthetics of performance more generally. What are the good-making qualities of a musical or dramatic performance? Is an

excessive performance incompatible with a sincere or emotionally authentic performance? And although oversinging is an aesthetic demerit (as I propose to argue), it often requires considerable technical skill. How should we think about virtuosity and technical accomplishment as components of a successful performance?

Besides excess, something else that marks oversinging, overacting, and overplaying alike is that they are hard to delineate. It is difficult to say, in advance, which qualities in a performance would invariably make it excessive and relatively easy to offer counterexamples to any rules we could devise. At the same time, we can readily point to examples and discuss them, giving reasons to defend our judgments. How do we do this? It seems that taste (in the sense of discernment rather than personal preference) is the mechanism of how we distinguish excessive from appropriate expression. It turns out that taste is also the mechanism of how performers make appropriate choices in their work. I will have more to say more about this later.

I begin by saying a bit more about oversinging and setting up a context for discussion (Section I). Next I consider some examples of oversinging (Section II). In light of these examples, I consider how oversinging might be both aesthetically and morally problematic (Section III). Along the

way I raise some concerns about authenticity and sincerity (Section IV). Finally (Section V), we come around to what I call the “irony” of oversinging.

#### I. OVERSINGING IN CONTEXT

As I have indicated, oversinging is singing that is excessive in terms of volume, ornamentation, emotional expression, or all of these. This critical or aesthetic use of “oversinging” should be distinguished from oversinging in a technical sense. When vocal teachers caution against oversinging, they usually mean singing out of one’s comfortable range or too loudly without proper breath support. Oversinging should also be distinguished from overblown arrangements and production. Singers do not always have control over their repertoire or over how a recording eventually sounds. I want to focus here on aesthetic choices made by vocalists, not their managers or producers (although some of the implications will touch them as well).

Like certain other critical terms (“garish” and “trivial” come to mind), “oversinging” implies a negative judgment. Oversinging is related both to overplaying (a musical instrument) and to overacting. It is related to overplaying in that both are musical phenomena. A musician overplays when his or her performance is musically inappropriate for being excessive in one or more dimensions. In jazz, soloists who play “too many notes” or excessively complicated improvisations are overplaying. Overplaying can also happen when a performance fails to fit coherently within an ensemble. It may be as simple as individual musicians or sections playing too loudly. Or it might be what happens when a drummer’s intricate improvisation steps all over a soloist, taking the audience’s attention away from where it should rightfully be. One wise Internet commentator aptly defined overplaying as “personal chops promotion.”<sup>2</sup>

I relate oversinging to overacting because music and theater are both performance arts that require skill and involve interpretation. Public singing performance shares a number of elements with acting. Singers, like actors, sometimes put on a role when they perform a song. And professional singers, also like actors, face their audience with a persona constructed through public manifestations

of temperament, clothing choice, individual style, and personal history. A performer’s public persona may be more or less deliberately maintained, and it may be more or less reflective of his or her actual personality (Bicknell 2015, 41–53).

Oversinging is not a new phenomenon; it has been discussed under different names in the past. I suspect that singers have been accused of excess as far back as there has been criticism of vocal music. Indeed, one historian of singing has written that excessive vocal display has been the object of repeated polemics (Jander 1980, 339, vol. 17). On a related note, teachers of singing have been warning singers about vocal stress and career burnout since at least S. B. Mancini in 1774; there is no evidence of a decline at any one point (Rosselli 2000, 107).

In the early Christian era resistance to vocal music was often on the grounds that the singers’ art drew worshippers’ attention away from God and obscured the meaning of the song’s text. Later Puritans had similar concerns (Finney 1947). Discussions of “florid” (highly ornamented) singing animated critics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, often taking the form of complaints that the indiscriminate use of ornamentation was “empty virtuosity” and served no purpose. That some singers employed vocal pyrotechnics to draw attention toward themselves and away from the composer is another familiar complaint throughout the history of writing about musical performance. Bardi, Gluck, Rossini, and Wagner (among others) complained about the use of excessive ornamentation (Jander 1980, 339, vol. 17).

While oversinging may have a long history, neither the phenomenon nor criticism of it are evenly distributed. Some musical genres more than others encourage and reward showy displays of vocal technique. Different styles of singing put different limits upon the “appropriate” expression of performers’ personalities. And audiences have come to have different expectations for different performers, based in part on performers’ public persona and social identity. In a discussion of stage and screen entertainers in the twentieth century, Stephen Banfield has written that four exiled, oppressed, or manufactured male types were permitted and expected to sing with great expressivity when the dominant culture required it. These types were the Jew, the Negro, the crooning toyboy, and the sentimental Irish tenor (Banfield 2000, 69).

Readers will have noticed that I have yet to offer a real or nominal definition of oversinging and that I have avoided mention of necessary and sufficient conditions. That is deliberate. I am offering only as much precision as I judge the topic will bear, and I think the most fruitful approach is grounded in the discussion of specific examples—which I turn to next.

## II. EXAMPLES

There is something approaching a consensus that Christina Aguilera's performance of the American national anthem at the 2011 Super Bowl is an example of oversinging.<sup>3</sup> At the very least, her performance was widely panned, and one critic said that she "mangled" the tune (Eskow 2011a).

To explain why her performance is an example of oversinging is also to describe what is aesthetically amiss with it. Listeners who found Aguilera's performance excessive could point to a number of features: First and foremost, her liberal use of melisma. Melisma is a group of notes sung to one syllable of a text. Its use goes back at least to medieval plainchant, where it was seen in the final "Amen" or "Alleluia," often in highly elaborate form (Scholes 1983, 1156, vol. 2). Not surprisingly, the controversy over the appropriateness of melisma also stretches back to medieval times. In Aguilera's performance, I think I counted two lines *without* melismatic embellishment, and she often employed the technique more than once per line.

Along with her generous use of melisma, Aguilera takes considerable liberties with the song's rhythm. Now, depending on musical genre, some rhythmic variation may be appropriate in performance. Composers, especially in the Romantic tradition, use the musical term "rubato," from the Italian word for "theft," to indicate to performers that they can "steal" time from one group of tones—playing them a little faster—and give it to another group of tones—playing them a little slower. Such rhythmic variation adds to a performance's expressive qualities. While some level of rhythmic variation is expected and even welcomed, I can barely tell that the song is in triple meter, so much does Aguilera stretch out certain lines, making them sound misshapen.

It is useful to compare Aguilera's performance with a more restrained approach. In 1942 the

contralto Marian Anderson was filmed and recorded singing "The Star Spangled Banner" to launch the S.S. Booker T. Washington.<sup>4</sup> Anderson adhered much more closely to the notated rhythms and used melisma very sparingly. She also takes the song at a quicker tempo. Some of the differences reflect Anderson's artistic temperament, her personality, and her operatic training. But it seems plausible that sometime between then and the present, norms about how appropriately to perform the American national anthem have shifted. Singers are now encouraged, even expected, to put more of their own personality into the performance and to be freer with the song. Even with these factors in mind, the differences between Aguilera's performance and Anderson's are striking.

Another example of oversinging: Michael Bolton, like Aguilera, is a popular performer with a powerful instrument whose vocal style clearly draws on African American musical traditions. Consider his rendition of Paul McCartney's "Yesterday."<sup>5</sup> Bolton's whole manner, his use of dramatic crescendos, melisma, and repetition suggests someone who is emotionally overwrought. McCartney's original recorded version (credited to "The Beatles" although the other three members did not contribute) is wistful and almost delicate. It sounds to me very much like a young person who is beginning to understand that some mistakes are more difficult to recover from than others and that this can have real emotional costs. Under Bolton's treatment the song and its delicate emotions are overwhelmed. To give just one specific illustration, McCartney's rather matter-of-fact: "I said something wrong" becomes "I said . . . [long dramatic pause] . . . I *must have said* something wrong."

Similar flaws (excessive melisma, repetition of selected phrases, extreme dynamic variation) mar Bolton's rendition of "Georgia on My Mind."<sup>6</sup> This song, written by Hoagy Carmichael and Stuart Gorrell, is part of the Great American Songbook and best known from performances by Ray Charles. One aspect of the song's charm is that the lyrics might refer either to a woman named Georgia (some sources say it was inspired by Georgia Carmichael, Hoagy Carmichael's sister) or about the state of Georgia (indeed it was chosen as the official state song), or about both. When Charles sings the song, he preserves that ambiguity; his reminiscences might be (literally) about a

woman he once knew or (metaphorically) about a place. In Bolton's performance that ambiguity is lost. His highly romantic and dramatic approach to the song and the passion he expresses are plausibly related only to a human being.

To sum up: what these performances by Aguilera and Bolton share is that the choices these performers have made are inappropriate to their material by being excessive along one or more dimensions; these excesses do not result in richer experience for listeners.

### III. WHAT IS WRONG (AESTHETICALLY AND MORALLY) WITH OVERSINGING?

My aim in this analysis is not primarily to criticize specific performers or to defend my own critical assessments. Rather, I'm using these performances as emblematic of a more general phenomenon. Considering examples where oversinging is blatant makes it easier to assess, and from there we can move on to more controversial examples.

Returning to our examples, why does Michael Bolton's performance of "Yesterday," for all its vocal power, seem less affecting than Paul McCartney's? And what is aesthetically amiss with Aguilera's performance of the American national anthem? Why does excess, as a feature of a vocal performance, result in an aesthetic demerit?

Artists often push against the conventions of their time and place and against audience expectations; they are sometimes applauded for this, if only by later generations. We expect performers in almost all musical genres to "put their own spin" on works and (within limits) we praise artistic individuality. (See, for example, Dodd 2012 and Kivy 1995, 108–142.) So why does this particular kind of disregard for convention—oversinging—result in a compromised performance? The problem cannot be simply that oversinging and overplaying violate audience expectations. Rather, the problem is that these violations have little aesthetic payoff.

The first argument against oversinging likely to arise is the same one that Christian purists gave long ago: over-the-top embellishment makes the song's text difficult to understand. Listeners cannot understand the words if singers distort them with melisma and stretch them out of shape by taking rhythmic liberties. Now, sometimes the fact that listeners have difficulty understanding

a song's text may be a genuine problem. Early Christians who wanted the words of sacred texts to be understood by illiterate listeners had a legitimate concern. But I do not think that this is always a problem, and I would argue that it is not the only problem (or indeed the main problem) with Aguilera's or Bolton's performances. Surely everyone in the intended audience already knows the words to "The Star Spangled Banner" and "Yesterday."

As I mentioned above, some musical genres condone little of what we might think of as a singer's personal expression and emphasize fidelity to a score. As we have already seen, early Christian Purists tolerated little vocal embellishment. Other musical traditions have different expectations and may value performers' expression highly. Singers in those genres are expected to adhere to different conventions regarding personal display and vocal embellishment. Aguilera's liberties with regard to pitch and rhythm go beyond those normally granted to performers of the American national anthem. Although norms with regard to "The Star Spangled Banner" have shifted, they have not have shifted so far that Aguilera's performance was accepted as appropriate. (And as a side note, depending on one's ontological commitments about the role of the score in differentiating performances, one could argue that Aguilera's numerous deviations from the score mean that she has not performed "The Star Spangled Banner" *at all*.)<sup>7</sup>

Another, more troubling, aesthetic consideration is that oversinging can obscure or distort a song's meaning for listeners in ways that have little aesthetic pay-off. The "logic" of oversinging runs toward heightened expressivity. The opposite of oversinging—when performers perform with little ornamentation or emotion—runs the other way and such a singer can sound bored or blasé. Both may be at odds with the text and music of a song. Other kinds of musical variations in song performance (including those that have nothing to do with oversinging) can also compromise song meaning. We typically accept that cover versions of popular songs may alter their meaning, sometimes radically. And as performers present a song for new audiences and different generations, different meanings emerge (Bicknell 2015, 108–117).

While such alterations in meaning are well within the bounds of our aesthetic practices, it does not follow that all song performances

that alter meaning for audiences are aesthetically successful. I hinted as much about Bolton's strongly expressive performance of "Georgia on My Mind." Bolton's excessive emotional treatment oversimplifies the meaning of the song. In making the song unambiguously about a human being he compromises its meaning (that it might also refer to the state of Georgia). Now, both heightened and lowered emotional expression or even an expression that seems at odds with the source material may be aesthetically effective. While it is not clear that a more complex presentation of a song is always better, at least in Bolton's case it is arguably worse. There is not enough aesthetic payoff to justify the changes in meaning created by Bolton's strongly expressive performance.

So far I have framed the question of a performer's "faithfulness" to a work as a musical-ontological issue and an aesthetic issue. It can also be framed as a moral matter. Artistic performance has moral dimensions, and (again, depending on musical genre and tradition) singers may have duties to themselves, to other musicians, to composers, and to audiences. Here I focus on the most salient: duties to other musicians and to audiences.<sup>8</sup>

Let us start with singers' duties to other musicians. Recall a phrase introduced earlier—"personal chops promotion." Overplaying by one member of an ensemble can draw listeners' attention away from other members. The result is a *musical* demerit if overplaying by one musician obscures the main musical theme or idea presented by another musician. But it can also be a *moral* error. Members of an ensemble subordinate their personalities and their personal expression in service of a musical whole. When one member of a group has a solo, the rest of the ensemble is supposed to support the solo, not draw attention elsewhere. Engaging in an instrumental dialogue as an equal partner with a soloist may be musically appropriate and morally permitted; "shouting" over him or her is neither.

Aguilera sings a cappella, so she is not in danger of overwhelming other musicians. Bolton is a very popular entertainer, and the accompanying musicians are there to support his performance; the nature of their relationship is already unequal. It would make little sense to say that he overshadows them. However, both Aguilera and Bolton may have failed in their duties to audiences. As I

have argued elsewhere, in some cases singers have duties to audiences both in their choice of material and in the details of their performance (Bicknell 2015, 81–91).

We can see this most clearly in Aguilera's performance. When a solo vocalist sings the national anthem, she does so less *for* an audience than *on behalf of* an audience.<sup>9</sup> The special standing of national anthems and their shared significance make poor performances of them problematic for reasons that go beyond aesthetics. That is why a poor public performance of a national anthem does not offend merely for aesthetic reasons. Aguilera's technical display threatens to overwhelm the song. In failing to treat the song in a *musically* appropriate manner she also treats it in an *ethically* inappropriate manner. The effect of her performance choices is to draw attention to herself and to her vocal prowess and away from the song's function, namely, to "honor America" (as the sportscasters often say).

So performing "The Star Spangled Banner" presents performers with distinctive challenges. Can the Bolton examples be treated in the same way? What sort of duties does he have to his audience? Here I think we must resist the impulse to overmoralize the aesthetic domain. While some artistic choices have moral ramifications, not all of them do. Singers have distinctive moral duties to audiences when they perform songs that have meaning and significance for racial, cultural, or national groups, whether or not the songs have official status. "Yesterday," a straightforward (if beloved) song intended for performance, would not seem to present particular moral difficulties. "Georgia on My Mind," as both a work intended for performance and an official state song, falls somewhere in between.

Before we leave the moral sphere, a few words about cultural sensitivity. The writer John Eskow's article on Aguilera's performance was called, "Christina Aguilera and the Hideous Cult of Oversouling." Eskow explained that "oversouling"—a term he credits to legendary music producer Jerry Wexler—refers to "the gratuitous and confected melisma" that "hollows out a song and drains it of meaning." He goes on to say that oversouling "is a kind of vocal minstrel-show, a theft of real feeling in the service of corny show-biz" (Eskow 2011a). In later remarks, Eskow explained that he found Aguilera's singing to be the twenty-first century

equivalent of Al Jolson putting on blackface and singing “Mammy” (Eskow 2011b).

Strong words. Whether Eskow’s assessment is fair or not, he is far from the first listener to hear melisma and other vocal embellishment as a misguided attempt by white singers to sound “black.” One problem with this critique—not lost on readers when Eskow’s original article was published—is that his remarks flirt with essentialism. Simply put, there is no one way to sound “black.” Eskow’s remarks imply that blackness is a kind of performance and that there is a way of singing and making music that is “black”—thereby overlooking both the great diversity in African American musical practice and the complex ways in which black and white musicians copied, learned from, and inspired one another (Brown 2013).

If Eskow’s critics are correct, what, if anything, follows for Aguilera’s performance? Rhythm and blues singing—one of the traditions Aguilera’s singing draws upon—is heavily influenced by African American musical traditions, in particular the church. It is notable that Whitney Houston, whose musical formation was in the Black church, is credited with bringing melisma into 1980s pop music with her hit “I Will Always Love You.” Because of these associations, audiences of popular music tend to associate melisma with African American vocalists, although we have seen that the practice is ancient. When Jolson performed in blackface, the intention to “put on” or “perform” black musical traditions seems obvious. It is a more difficult question with Aguilera, who is singing in a tradition that has developed in conjunction with African American practices.

However, not all errors arise from bad intentions; that is why I have framed the question around cultural “insensitivity” rather than around “appropriation.” Does Aguilera show a lack of cultural sensitivity by co-opting so many elements of African American music in her performance of “The Star Spangled Banner”? I raise this question only to leave it open. Perhaps the real problem is not that she drew upon a particular tradition of popular music but that she did so ineptly. The duty to sing with sensitivity and to perform well can sometimes be heightened for reasons that are moral as well as aesthetic. I suspect that, had Aguilera’s performance been celebrated as a success, we would likely not even be asking the question. The issue of insensitivity arises mostly

because her performance was an aesthetic and musical disappointment.

#### IV. OVERSINGING AND AUTHENTICITY/SINCERITY

There are many ways to approach the issues of authenticity in musical performance. Different accounts have been offered by Kivy (1995), Stephen Davies (2001), and, more recently, Dodd (2012). All of them take (implicitly or not) a proscriptive view. That is, the logic of their remarks points to recommendations for performers (how to be authentic or how not to be inauthentic) and critics (how to judge the authenticity of a performance.) My concern is different. I am interested in listeners’ perceptions of authenticity. Listeners in every genre of music are concerned about authenticity. In jazz, blues, rock, and popular music worries about authenticity take the form of concerns about the sincerity of performers’ emotional expression (Bicknell 2015, 57–58). There are a few ways to think about listeners’ perceptions of authenticity and how they might be related to oversinging. Two considerations seem most apt: expectations related to a singer’s public persona and expectations related to sincerity.

When Eskow criticized Aguilera for “oversoul-ing” he was in effect saying that her performance was insincere. He accused her of “a theft of real feeling in the service of corny show-biz” (Eskow 2011a). The implication is that a sincere performance (one with “real feeling”) could not at the same time be a technical display. If a performer is trying too hard on the technique, she cannot be really feeling it. While not every instance of oversinging is liable to this criticism, it seems apt sometimes. In all singing, there is a tension between expression and self-expression. If a performer is out to impress an audience with virtuoso technical displays or the intensity of his or her own emotion, then other considerations (accompanying musicians, the significance of the source material, any nonartistic duties to audiences) will be secondary at best. I would argue that Aguilera (on account of her showy technical display) and Bolton (on account of his heightened expressivity) are both vulnerable to being perceived as giving insincere performances.

I have argued at length elsewhere that all musical experience is intrinsically and fundamentally social rather than personal or individual



(Bicknell 2009). The way that I understand music, even listening on headphones alone in a room is a social experience, through and through. Music's social character can be seen in the role it plays in every culture, past and present, in creating and reinforcing social bonds, whether these are bonds between caregivers and infants, adult partners, friends, or among members of social groups and subgroups. Music is typically made in interaction with others, with a score coded by others or according to traditions developed by others, with instruments made by others. Even a seemingly individualistic experience of music is derivative, secondary, and carries a social meaning. If a musician were to make her own instrument, compose or improvise her own music, and decline to play in front of others, then we might say that her music-making was an individual activity. However, what she did would be understandable as "music" only if we could connect her actions to some larger musical practice.

What holds true about the social character of music is, if anything, true in a more fundamental way for singing. Singing is an art and also a form of interpersonal communication. A song can feel like a personal communication even when the listener is just one of many in a crowd. Insincere communication—or communication that is perceived by the recipient to be insincere—damages relations between people. The insincere apology, the disingenuous compliment, the reluctantly given invitation—all of these can be source of tension between people and can end relationships.

Reciprocity—understood as treating others in a way commensurate with how they have treated us and expecting others to treat us as we have treated them—is a powerful social norm. When fans feel genuine enthusiasm and affection for performers and music, it is only natural that they want these emotions to be reciprocated sincerely. They want to feel that the singers they admire are just as eager to perform for them as they are to listen. They do not want to feel that performers are just "doing their job" or "in it for the money." Hence the expectation that singers be authentic in the sense of "performing" sincerity effectively. As audience members, we want to be the recipient of a sincere communication.

What this means for aesthetic experience is that we expect singers to be sincere in relation to source material and in their communication to us. I argued earlier that singing a national

anthem has extra burdens. Among the emotions expressed, audiences expect a sincere expression of patriotism. I suspect that our more rational selves know (or should know) that singers and other performers cannot possibly feel all of the emotions they project in performance, each and every time they perform. If singers did in fact experience all of the emotions that they must project, their work would be too difficult and draining. Yet, at another level, we want to believe that singers are performing in a genuine way and conveying something true of their own lives and experience. Oversinging, trying too hard, puts the perception of sincerity at risk. When attention is drawn away from the source material to the performer him- or herself, his or her sincerity and his or her relation to the source material are called into question. Again, the performances under discussion seem vulnerable to these criticisms.

#### V. THE IRONY OF OVERSINGING

We come, finally, to what I have hinted at as an "irony" of oversinging. Generally speaking, displays of a performer's skill enhance a performance. Other things being equal, a more-skilled performer will give a better performance than a less-skilled performer. (That is simply part of what it means to be a "more-skilled performer.") Yet in the case of oversinging, displays of skill do not enhance the performance. In fact, they result in a *less* pleasing performance. So we have a case where the exercise of skill seems to be self-defeating.

While oversinging is (by definition) an aesthetic demerit, it is not easy. The kind of performance that Aguilera and Bolton gave requires skill, planning, and practice. I doubt that these artists simply woke up in the morning, arrived at the stadium or at the recording studio, and sang how the mood struck. Far from being improvised or spur of the moment, these interpretations were worked out beforehand and practiced. What I have been discussing as "oversinging" is different from the oversinging and overplaying more commonly done by amateur musicians. With less skilled and developed musicians, excesses usually come from a lack of technique or a shaky grasp of style or from misguided attempts to imitate performers whose level of skill they have not yet acquired.

We can see the irony of oversinging more clearly if we compare (again) singing with acting.

When amateur actors overact, it may be because they have been poorly directed or they do not know how to convey emotions subtly or their performance choices are inappropriate for their source material. Yet amateur actors are far from the only ones guilty of overacting, and amateur actors are as likely to *underact* as to overact. In fact, much overacting is done by skilled professional actors. Notice, for example, the considerable overlap between the “best actor” lists and the “worst overacting” lists. A few who regularly appear on both (although usually for different roles) include Nicolas Cage, Al Pacino, Samuel L. Jackson, Meryl Streep, and Jennifer Jason Leigh.

Like overacting, oversinging and overplaying can sometimes brush up against virtuosity. Playing “too many notes” in a jazz solo is not easy. Aguilera’s melisma may have been “gratuitous and confected” (as Eskow charged), but it took considerable skill. If oversinging and overplaying sometimes require virtuoso-level skills, then what is the difference between awe-inspiring technique and simply overdoing it? Philosophers of art have so far had little to say about virtuosity, and discussions about virtuosity have tended to center on virtuosic musical works rather than bravura performances (see, for example, Mark 1980).

Virtuosity is only one among many musical values. To treat it as an end in itself seems mistaken or immature. The musicologist Carl Dahlhaus traced the development of virtuosity for its own sake to the growth of the performer as interpreter and the split between object (musical work) and presentation (performance). Displays of technique can be thrilling. Yet if prolonged and too abstracted from a musical context, they can become tedious. To quote Dahlhaus, in virtuosity, “music sinks to the level of an almost meaningless and intrinsically worthless substrate of technical and gestural-mimic display” (Dahlhaus 2004, 346).

Although we praise virtuoso displays of skill, we rarely esteem sheer technique, absent from the presence of other musical values such as expression or interpretive skill. How then might we start to make the distinction between (admirable) virtuosity and (aesthetically defective) overplaying? As with many questions in aesthetics and value theory more generally, the fact that we cannot draw a hard and fast line does not mean that there is nothing to be said. Let me try to answer

this question with regard to performers. So the question is not which performances are admirable and which are defective. Rather, the question I am interested in is, what kind of error are oversingers and overplayers making? If we can agree that a particular performance was excessive, what were the choices on behalf of the performer that made it so?

To answer this question, we need to think about taste. We most often think of artistic taste as something possessed by audiences and spectators, fans and critics. It underlies preferences for one artwork over another and helps us judge works of art.<sup>10</sup> But “good taste” in the sense of “appropriate discernment” is also important for performers and creators. In fact, it is difficult to conceive of a great artist or performer who lacks taste when it came to their own area of expertise.<sup>11</sup> But what is good taste in a musical performer?

Dahlhaus is one of the few writers with much to say on this topic. He called taste “the aesthetic equivalent to social sense of tact” (Dahlhaus 2004, 338). His analogy has much to recommend it. Musical taste, like social tact, requires sensitivity and concern for others. The tactful person thinks about how his or her actions will affect others in a social setting and adjusts his or her behavior accordingly. The tasteful musician thinks about how his or her performance choices—when he or she plays, how loudly, with how much expression and complexity—will affect other performers and listeners. This is not to imply that a “tasteful” performance is always the intended outcome, any more than tactful behavior is always warranted. The point is that the truly tasteful musician (or tactful individual), when he or she transgresses against taste or tact, does so intentionally and purposefully. Their “lapses” support a goal that would be inconsistent with the maintenance of taste or tact.

I would go further than Dahlhaus. Good musical taste requires more than the sensitivity required for social tact. Good taste is also a kind of musical intelligence or faculty of judgment. It is the means by which good musicians know how loud is too loud, how much melisma is the right amount, how much rhythmic liberty will enliven a performance without making it incoherent, and even which works to perform.

An example can help us to understand the functioning of good artistic taste in musical performance. Earlier I compared Aguilera with Marian



Anderson to show stylistic differences and different approaches to “The Star Spangled Banner” over time. Admittedly this is not an equitable comparison, since much divides these two singers (likely the only repertoire they ever shared was “The Star Spangled Banner”). A more fruitful approach is to compare Aguilera and Bolton with another exemplary vocalist from a tradition closer to contemporary pop. I have in mind the great Aretha Franklin. Aguilera’s performance at the Super Bowl, and much of her repertoire, is in debt to rhythm and blues singing that Franklin helped create. Bolton is also squarely in this tradition.

Franklin is undeniably a great singer, however you care to define that. What is great about Franklin is not just the power of her instrument or her formidable technique. It is what has been called her “musical intelligence” (Remnick 2016). Listen to any performance, in the studio or live: her vocal embellishments and technique are expressive, but not simply self-expressive. They are always in service of her material and performed so that audiences are not lead to question her sincerity or commitment.

Compare her performance of “Yesterday” on the Mike Douglas TV show in 1979 with Bolton’s.<sup>12</sup> She uses some of the same techniques as he does, including melisma, dynamic and rhythmic variation, and repetition of key phrases for emphasis. But unlike Bolton, her use of these is judicious. She employs fewer of these techniques and employs them with less vehemence. If Bolton’s performance is heavy-handed and seems exaggerated, hers is discriminating. In fact, the effect Franklin achieves is difficult to talk about, as it can often be traced back to what she refrains from doing, rather than what she does.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Even if one agrees with Wilde’s Lord Illingworth that moderation is overrated, it does not follow that excess is praiseworthy without reservation. While oversinging (and other performance “excesses”) require skill, an ironic result of that skill can be a performance that falls short.

Questions of discernment—how much melisma is too much? What is the right level of dynamic variation?—are at the heart of creative artistic taste. Singers and musicians have the challenges of making their performance expressive to the

right degree and of making sure that their expression does not draw attention to itself. This is all the more difficult when the source material, by its nature, demands a high degree of expression. Oversinging or overplaying, when the result of decisions made by a performer, indicates a lack of musical intelligence or sensitivity; in short, a lack of taste. When performance choices draw attention away from the material and toward the performer’s technical or expressive display, the goal of conveying sincere or authentic expression is undermined. What counts as “appropriate” expression (i.e., not “overdoing it”) depends on musical genre, performance practice, public persona (remember the four male types permitted and expected to “sing their hearts out”), and audience expectations.

Of course, audiences are not monolithic, and some fans may esteem a singer for the same reasons that others will avoid him or her. As one historian of singing has observed, “History’s recurring screeds against vocal ornamentation tend only to show, however, that audiences over the centuries have been persistently receptive to the delights of well-performed vocal *fioritura*” (Jander 1980, 339). Aguilera and Bolton have many fans who esteem them *because* of what I have identified as oversinging, not in spite of it. If taste is also the mechanism by which listeners and critics judge performances as appropriately expressive, how do we handle disagreements?

Judgments of appropriate expression and ornamentation do not, I believe, pose any special difficulties as compared to other kinds of artistic and aesthetic judgments. In fact, to repeat what I claimed earlier, such judgments are probably at the heart of many disagreements of taste in every artistic medium. Judgments of music (especially popular music) may indeed pose particular difficulties; however, not for conceptual reasons. Preferences for music tend to be formed in adolescence when other aspects of personality are coalescing. A disagreement over musical taste can feel like a personal rebuff. Such fusions of taste with identity do not make the task of locating musical true judges any easier, nor the giving of weight to their judgments any less controversial.<sup>13</sup>

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1. Lord Illingworth in *A Woman of No Importance* (Wilde 2008, 138).

2. See <http://www.drummerworld.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-80696.html>.

3. Available at <https://youtu.be/dTdSCEr3028>.

4. See [https://youtu.be/\\_iYcheeUS5A](https://youtu.be/_iYcheeUS5A).

5. See [https://youtu.be/pl-M0\\_yEyLA](https://youtu.be/pl-M0_yEyLA) for the studio version and <https://youtu.be/rAJqxnLIQN8> for a live performance.

6. See <https://youtu.be/o4YiD36sBVc>.

7. I allude here to Nelson Goodman's views on the ontology of music (1976, 177–192).

8. I set aside the thorny problem of singers' (and other musicians') obligations to composers. The issue is complicated by factors such as the particular composer's status in a musical community, the composer's own attitude to his or her work (whether he or she thinks of it as a work of art or a commercial product or something else) and the relationship (if one exists) between the performer and the composer.

9. For more on the taxonomy of songs as works intended for performance, works for participation, and works for participation–performance, see Bicknell (2015, 28–29).

10. This is, of course, a considerable philosophical literature on taste. It arguably begins with (and rarely surpasses) David Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste." A notable recent contribution is Kivy (2015).

11. As a side note, I believe that this is one of the reasons for the interest in the art collections of great artists.

12. Available at <https://youtu.be/KT-Q6wcjhXA>.

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