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**Harris M. Berger on
Stance – Ideas about Emotion, Style, and Meaning for the Study of
Expressive Culture
A Reflexion**

Term paper
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1) Introduction

Harris M. Berger is recently director of the faculty of musicology at the Memorial University – Newfoundland and Labrador's University. He is taking in the Canada Research Chair in Ethnomusicology, is Director of the Research Centre for the Study of Music, Media, and Place (MMaP), and Professor of Music and Folklore. In his numerous books his focus is put on theoretical issues in the study of music and expressive culture in Folk, American Rock, Pop, and Heavy Metal music. In his writing about *Stance: Ideas About Emotion, Style, and Meaning for the Study of Expressive Culture* he points out two goals: To use ideas from phenomenology to shed new light on the interpretation of affect, style, and meaning in expressive culture, and to show how phenomenologist perspectives can be useful for scholars of the humanities.

Expressive culture is clearly defined as any type of social behavior with aesthetic dimension. This concerns aesthetic everyday forms like storytelling, graffiti, fashion, jokes, and ritual, but is mainly the object of observation in the field of the humanities on music, dance, theater, and painting. In chapter one – *Locating Stance* – he is figuring out the many places and forms of stance within a whole production. When we watch and listen to a musical performance and try to find out the stance of a piece of music, we have to differentiate between the stance in the composer's writing, in the way the performers are unfolding and interpreting a piece of music, and as well we have to deal with stance in the mind of the observer and the listener. Further, the special location and circumstances of a performance have an input on the overall happening. It is necessary to take note of the cultural setting of a performance, and to clarify whether the listener is part of the same culture or not.

As the audience or the scholars tend to judge the happening, Berger provides extended tools to think about expressive culture by introducing means of phenomenology in order to value stage happenings through a broader view. He introduces Husserl's phenomenology to the reader, discusses Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, brings in Charles Keil's thoughts about groove and discusses Samuel Tode's critique on Kant's idealism. Before getting into more concrete details of this book it can be said that it is interesting in its philosophical meaning, but also could be a precious guide for journalism about expressive culture and the arts. It is also worth noting that Berger, although being male, is writing the

whole book in female generalization (the composer's view on *her* piece of music, e.g.), and all fictitious persons brought in are female. So I will do.

2) Locating Stance

Locating Stance is the title of the first chapter, where Berger describes the different places of stance. In expressive culture the easiest to define stance is through the performer and her expression. But already at this point we have to separate the stance of the piece of music being played and the stance of the performer. How to differentiate between them? The stance of a composition can be recognized through the written notes and their duration. The interpretation is defined through the performer's timbre and her fine details in dynamic and rhythm, where stance is already manifested. Let us start with the composer herself. No matter if it is about classical music or songwriting, the composer has a certain relationship with her composition. "But what does it mean, exactly, to say that the composer has a relationship with a piece of music?"¹ Arguing the question if a composition can be seen as an ideal object in the way of Platonist thinking Berger describes the fact that a composition is depending on the mind of the composer, and for this reason can't be treated as a completely autonomous object. The composer herself has a stance on its expressive resources, its generic restrictions, its cultural context and boundaries.

While creating, the composer even has an intimate connection with her piece of music. What she hears in her fantasy is getting concrete in writing it down, usually she sits on the piano (or guitar) and plays, listens, judges, writes down, and is physically part of this challenge. Berger calls this procedure an intimate dialectic.

The performer's perception is always interwoven with bodily action. „Most importantly, qualities for emotion, style, and (speaking most generally) value in this productive and constitutive grappling inflect the meaning of the music.”² On stage the acquired imagination of the music goes hand in hand with its physical expression. In pop music, where one member of the group sometimes isn't able to hear the other one on stage, musicians help themselves through imagining the missing sounds to not lose the track.

¹ Harris M. Berger, *Stance: Ideas about Emotion, Style, and Meaning for the Study of Expressive Culture*, Middletown, CT, 2009, p. 10.

² Harris M. Berger, *Stance*, p.13.

The listener has to differentiate between the stance of a piece of music and the stance of the performer. Also, it is up to the listener to understand whether the performer fulfills the intended claim of the composition, if she is skilled or clumsy, sensitive to the written notes and meaning etc.. To be able to divide all these aspects it is necessary to understand that "...stance in the practice of reception is deeply shaped by culture."³ For someone who is not familiar with western music and culture it won't be possible to differentiate the layers and levels as mentioned before.

Berger then describes Edmund Husserl's (1859-1938) phenomenology. In short words objects (as a table) are meant to be understood as an appearance independent from the subject. The subject has to observe the object with intentionality. Intentionality is the heart of this tradition. Noesis means intentional experience, noema is the meaning and judgement found out of noesis. „All experience involves the engagement of subject and object, and the valual quality of that engagement is stance."⁴

3) Structures of Stance in Lived Experience

In his second chapter Berger is exploring the differing forms that stance can take, describes the ways in which stance interacts with other questions of experience and examines the question of stance and time.

Thinking of interpretation in expressive culture we tend to act in judgement or decision, where against active valuing should be preferred. While valuing is an option, stance is inherent in perception. He continues to define stance-quality categories.

“Style is a particularly complex category of stance qualities, mixing the affective timbre of social relationships with qualities of attention and facility. Cool, down home, geeky, soled, flighty, and sophisticated are a tiny collection of possible stance qualities that might fit into the category of style, and teasing out the components of even one of these would be a substantial project.”⁵

Other than style, facility, affect, timbres-of-attention, and identity are further stance-quality categories.

³ Harris M. Berger, *Stance*, p.14.

⁴ Harris M. Berger, *Stance*, p. 22.

⁵ Harris M. Berger, *Stance*, p. 30.

Total stance is the complexity of facet-stance and meta-stance. Facet-stance means the different options in observing, where you can sharpen your focus on a special point or level of a performance, while you pay less attention to other levels. Then you can put your concentration on a different point and so on. Meta stance he defines as something happening especially in pop music, when someone makes a cover version of a piece of music. „The notions of facet stance, meta-stance, and total stance are the basic tools of stance-oriented research.”⁶ To be able to do finely nuanced and multilayered observations we – as listeners, audience, scholars – have to clear our mind ourselves. Berger describes several possible situations that influence our momentary awareness, such as anger about a person, or good news we just got, things of our daily life which have an impact on our condition. The goal is to reach a level in observation that is more or less not influenced by such emotions. In a wider sense we also have to deal with a global mood, collective opinions and common dispositions of valences. All this together describes a certain space. This kind of space in experience is also connected to time. The thought that one happening forms the next ones through repetition is something that works in mathematics or biology but can't be put on lived experience. New iterations may change future happenings, but also have an impact on the possibility of change of the past. “This process is the complement of iteration, and I will refer to it as retrospection.”⁷ And:

“Moving to a higher level of abstraction, we can observe that, underlying both the iterative process of one event coming after the next, and the accretive retention of experiences in the living present, is the fundamental fact that experience must be *sustained*.”⁸

4) Stance and Others, Stance and Lives

Chapter 3 begins with a summary of the before discussed contents. Stance is connected to a social context and got active character; total stance means the combination of facet and meta stance, and valences and meanings move through differing modalities in locations and time. The focus then is put on stance and its

⁶ Harris M. Berger, *Stance*, p. 35.

⁷ Harris M. Berger, *Stance*, p. 48.

⁸ Harris M. Berger, *Stance*, p. 51.

expression. The judgement of an audience about a performance is closely connected to the stance of the performer. But how do we come to interpret the stance of the other? First we have to accept the fact that the other one in my experience is not a mere appearance of my mind, but is a subject as well as I am a subject. The principle basis to share an experience is given through the fact that we both (me and the other) got a physical body and live in the same physical world. Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes in *Phenomenology of Perception* that bodies are not to be treated as objects as it was use in older philosophy. He suggests that “the body is the ground by which objects appear, the agent of perception...”⁹

Back into happenings in practice we may realize with sharpened senses that a bass player is always a little bit upfront the drummer and interpret this behavior as aggressive stance towards the drummer. Being a part of the ensemble or band, I may play a little bit more laid back to balance it out. So to say we experience not only different locations, but also all the other people taking part in an event. Again, if we are not familiar with the processes of popular music (and this special culture) we may draw the wrong lines between composition, interpretation, and arrangement. As mentioned before the composer may have an intimate relation with her song, she may even interpret it herself, but still there are the other musicians being part of the performance, and on this level we can observe the stance of the musicians towards each other. In several forms of jazz the concrete form of a piece is even negotiated while performing. Berger at this point brings in Charles Keil’s theories about groove. In Keil’s opinion a performance needs to be a little bit out of timing and tuning to be really enchaining. This grants the awareness between musicians and there enchanting correspondence while playing. Of course, they may not fall too far apart. But under these circumstances a performance is much more vivid than being regulated by any kind of “metronome”, may this be a conductor or a click. Keil declares people who describe such little discrepancies as ‘wild and crazy’ or ‘irregular’ as being caught in civilization and anti-democratic. Berger argues that we cannot judge others on their musical taste or on their preferences for total time.

Observing performers on stage, the audience as listeners, and ourselves being part of the one or other situation includes one more fact in our attention: Berger calls it long time-scales. It means that we all are not only part of a momentary situation or happening, but also have a history, a past, and an expected future. So, even if we just

⁹ Harris M. Berger, *Stance*, p. 57.

see a three-dimensional body acting in the moment, we have to realize that this action is to be seen as a result of the experiences of the past and is connected with a whole life and its stances. We tend to look at the relationship between expressive culture and the rest of the social world only from one perspective – “a linchpin of revolutionary change, a ventilator of social change”¹⁰ etc. – but the influence is happening both ways. In Husserl’s opinion we can make up a common structure in the many-sided experiences of our lives, and this is intentionality. „That structure is intentionality, a subject engaging an object, not merely passively registering an object but actively constituting it in experience. Stance is the quality with which those engagements take place.”¹¹ Berger goes further and thinks of constitutional experience as social praxis: the active achievement of a person, and a long term-determined phenomenon within social structures.

5) The Social Life of Stance and the Politics of Expressive Culture

In this last big chapter Berger discusses the impact of expressive culture on the social field, its political power, and contrasts Samuel Todes’ practical perception with Immanuel Kant’s idealism. In *Body and World* Todes criticizes the idealistic tradition in philosophy. He argues that the vertical field of gravity is of big relevance for every bodily action and our poised connection with any kind of objects and others, and that Kant’s categories are ‘imaginative idealizations of perceptual [e.g., embodied] categories’¹², reducing perception to imagination. Berger worships Todes existential phenomenology as profound exploration of perception and imagination, even if one should be on the side of transcendent idealism.

This discussion makes sense by means of Berger’s term power-on-stance. In expressive culture we always have to deal with power – even if we don’t think of power in its obvious forms of dominance and subordination, the mere power of “doing” something, “being in action” is a force by itself. By mentioning the work of Jackson Pollock he says that “an individual who has intense emotions, resists conformity, and

¹⁰ Harris M. Berger, *Stance*, p. 95.

¹¹ Harris M. Berger, *Stance*, p. 97.

¹² Harris M. Berger, *Stance*, p. 114.

must constantly break the confining bounds of tradition.”¹³ Further he brings in Joan Baez whose active social engagement definitely had an effect on the minds of people – to bring these issues into their daily life.

6) Conclusion

Berger himself points out his aim: “Throughout this discussion, my goal has been to chart the varying ways in which stance may play into social life in general and into power relations in particular.”¹⁴ Adding to this he maps the terrain where expressive culture is happening and wants to sensitize scholars to the many-layered levels of possibilities of phenomena, also wants to mark the traps of possible confusions between local and universal circumstances. Also, he criticizes simplifications that override the progressive and regressive potential of art. Berger’s attention towards composers, performers, scholars, the audience, oneself and other philosophers is consistently appreciating, his aesthetic perception clearly addresses both, philosophy and art. All the points of stance he is figuring out through his writing are worth being thought of and clear and helpful guides in reflecting expressive culture. Only the topic of emotion, showing up in the book’s title is not worked out on a wider basis. Berger becomes very clear about emotion when saying that people with intense emotions necessarily have to break existing rules. Through the other parts of his book emotions are influencing momentary situations of the performer as well as of the recipient, where he calls to carefully divide between them and the stance we have on special topics. On the whole stance seems to be the missing link of former discussions between ideas and material existence. This is, at least, a cautious assumption. In stance we bare our valences and ideas and are connected with the existing world and the social field around us. Out of this perspective *Stance* is not only a book worth reading and a very concrete guide for the reception of art and expressive culture, it could also be seen as a new term brought up in today’s aesthetic.

¹³ Harris M. Berger, *Stance*, p. 117.

¹⁴ Harris M. Berger, *Stance*, p. 131.

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