

# THE ROLE OF SPECTACLE IN CREATING SUCCESSFUL LIVE MUSIC PERFORMANCES

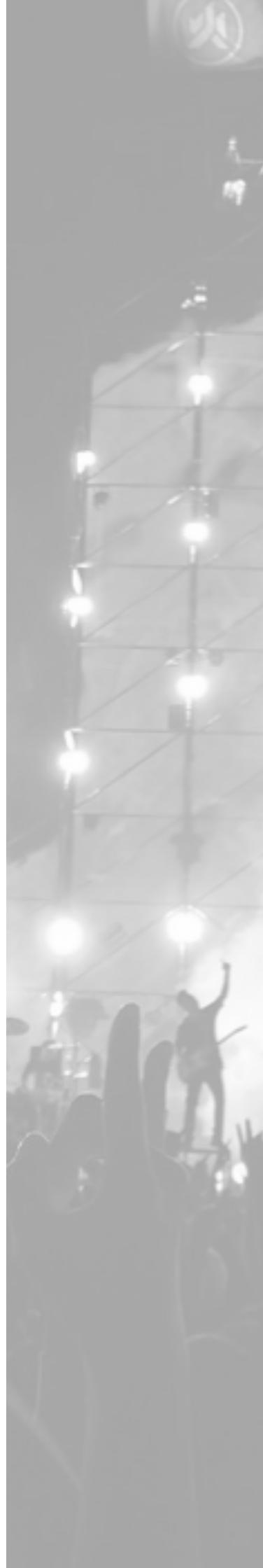
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We've all been there. We've all gone to a boring, unengaging musical performance. The type that turns minutes into hours and makes you wish you were somewhere...anywhere...else. The singer/guitarist performing to the back of heads in a pub. A student performer so focused on technique that they don't engage with the audience. A technique-limited performer overcompensating by getting in the audiences' face. Art music genres that demand the audience to make a concerted effort to understand and appreciate the music. Ugh.

These performances eschew spectacle and engagement. Sometimes this is by choice in a noble search for musical purity. Sometimes it is because the performer is uncomfortable with audience engagement. Sometimes performers don't understand why experience is essential. And yet, if we were to ask them ... or you for that matter ... for the best concert in their experience – the most memorable one that has become the metric for measuring all other performances – it's almost certain that, no matter the genre, there was some element of spectacle in it.

There is a divide in contemporary musical performance practitioners on the primacy of technique and spectacle in creating a successful musical performance. Many musicians, particularly those undertaking education, concentrate on developing their technique. Highly technical players are lauded and rewarded in technical exams and performances. Many regard spectacle as cheating, as fluff designed to detract from serious art and are uncomfortable incorporating performative aspects in their gigs. However, industry professionals focus on (to use a gendered term) showmanship and spectacle. They consider it key to creating exciting performances citing musicians who possess extraordinary technical ability and create successful performances and careers. They cite legendary concerts, such as Queen at Live Aid, as evidence for the primacy of spectacle in creating a successful experience.

In this paper, we draw on the voices of musicians and industry professionals to consider the role of spectacle and technique and consider how popular music performances are situated across the spectacle/technique divide. Data is drawn from interviews with musicians, venue owners, and industry professionals and analysed using a grounded theory methodology. While we acknowledge that this data is drawn from before the live music gamechanger that is the COVID pandemic, we argue that the ability to construct an engaging and memorable performance has become more complex, but even more critical



during the pandemic with many performers performing online. It is notable that this performance mode omits a lot of what creates the spectacle in live performance – the visceral, sensory adventure that is more than merely the aural experience of the music. Performers need to find new ways of incorporating the spectacle in online live situations. We find that musicians tend to focus more on the role of technique – aspects that are under their control and capable of being worked on in private. Other research participants, often within the industry, recognise the importance of the spectacle and experience of live music.

## The Experience

Humans experience. It is part of the human condition. However, an *experience* is different. If we are talking about performances as experience, we need a working definition of an experience. The answer is complex as an experience can be different things to different disciplines. Significantly, Dewey (1932) distinguished between experience in general, something ongoing and a part of human existence, and an experience with significance and duration. To anthropologists (such as Turner 1982, 1983), experiences are significant and memorable events. They are a mixture of the sensory, ritual, and spectacle and may be a liminal process. Musical performances exist within this paradigm. Spectacle is an aspect of the experience. Palmer and Jankowiak (1996), performance studies scholars, distinguish between the spectacular and the mundane. A "participatory spectacle" (St John 2020) is one where the relationships between audience and performers are blurred in the way that live music performances often are. In business studies, the "experience economy", a concept articulated by Pine and Gilmore (2011), an experience is a commercial venture designed to immerse consumers and generate revenue by constructing a hyperreal (Eco) and fabricated (Baudrillard) immersive event. It is designed to be captivating, sensory, have duration and place, and to be memorable. Popular music performances certainly fall under these banners. Although often it is the recording industry that receives attention from many music scholars (Darmer 2008; Tschmuck, Pearce & Campbell 2013), live music is also palpably (and more demonstrably) an experience (Morrow 2013; McCarthy 2013). A musical performance in the modern industry is either a commercially viable event or at least designed to move towards being a commercially viable event. It exists within the music industry to generate revenue. At its best, it is carefully designed to be sensory, immersive, or engaging. However, some performances are not sensory, immersive, or engaging.

Live music is a lived experience, regardless of whether it is lived by attending a venue or lived by watching an online performance. Take the example of classical music. Despite its reputation for conservatism and careful ritual, we invite you to consider the Hungarian pianist Franz Liszt. Liszt was a masterful pianist and composer, but he also knew how to exploit the sensory experience of art music, within the confines of the genre of the day. Schumann described a performance:

Within a few seconds, tenderness, boldness, exquisiteness, wildness succeed one another; the instrument glows and flashes under the master's hands [...] he must be heard and seen; for if Liszt played behind a scene, a great deal of poetry would be lost. (Schumann's quoted in Morgenstern 1956: 155)

Some of the most broadly successful performers in art music have gone beyond these strictures, establishing a more engaging performance experience and seeking a wider, popular audience. Consider the widespread fame and success of Władziu Liberace, Richard Clayderman, or André Rieu. The classical music world may dismiss these performers, but they were extremely successful to a wider audience. Liberace was reportedly worth \$110m when he died (Larry King Live 2001). While critics have called his act *schmaltzy*, Rieu wrote that he was not bothered. "I rather see it as a

compliment," he said. "I'm trying to create a 'Gesamtkunstwerk' where music, décor and costumes all add up to a magical evening" (in Siegel 2016). In short, an experience.

## The Role of Technique and Spectacle in Creating Successful Performances

Musical ability and spectacle are two of the most significant aspects of creating a performance. Through spectacle – meaning the performance environment plus the non-musical aspects of performance – musicians engage the audience. At the same time, musical ability permits musicians to perform to a professional standard. While often asserting that one was more important than the other, our research participants acknowledged the existence of both in popular performance. In our research, we sought the opinions of 121 industry professionals on the role of spectacle and technique in creating a successful performance. 107 musicians, venues, and music industry personnel completed a survey. This was followed up by interviews with fourteen participants drawn from the industry. While this research draws dominantly on the views of Australian professionals, it was also informed by previous research undertaken in the UK, the United States, and India. This data was analysed using a grounded theory methodology. When our participants were asked to choose whether they thought musical technique or the creation of spectacle was more important in the creation of a successful musical performance, participants were divided in their views almost precisely in half. 51% stated that they believed that technique had the greater role, and the rest asserted that spectacle was more important. However, the majority acknowledged that the other aspect also carried significance.

Spectacle has its roots within performance studies and anthropology. Debord's (1970) seminal work on spectacle saw it as a fetishised and superficial performance, tied to Marxist work on *Warenfetischismus* (the fetishisation of commodity). Initially regarded as a reading of texts and structures, Conquergood's (1989) work with the Hmong refugees in Thailand changed the emphasis to the creation of meaning within the performance itself. Turner (1986) believed performance to be reflexive and reveals humanity to itself. Whittam (2015) observes that musical spectacle can include colourful costumes, non-musical accessories, and other strategies. Beeman (1993) includes a broader definition describing spectacle as presentation to an audience of a symbolic reality in a way that is meant to be entertaining.

Early anthropological work saw spectacle as primarily visual, perhaps understandably. The word itself comes from *specere*, Latin for "to look". There is a parallel here with tourism studies, which also considers spectacle part of the tourist object or performance. Tourism studies, basing its early work in the occularcentrist views of Urry (1990), initially regarded tourism experiences as a primarily visual experience. However, as our understanding of tourism has deepened, the tourist experience has come to be regarded as multisensory. The spectacular experience can be regarded as involving many senses (Andrews and Leopold 2013, Whittam 2015, Moss 2018, Cashman and Garrido 2020). Spectacle within music has been relatively little studied. We argue that spectacle is an important multisensory performance mode within live music. While visual engagement is important in, for example, the costumes of a performer, the stage lighting, and the venue's design, the construction and performance of spectacle and experience is an active process and can include audience interaction, multisensory engagement, and other performance processes.

Musical technique is an important aspect of a musician's life and their performance. It is the ability of instrumental or vocal musicians to exert fine control over their instruments or voice to produce the music they require. It can involve sight-reading from sheet music, playing difficult work without error, or improvising within popular song forms. It is developed by musical practice which can range from scales and instrumentally based practice regimes, to improvising using backing tracks such as those produced by Jamie Aebersold or programs such as iRealBook Pro. A period of

intense practice designed to increase technique – often called "woodshedding" – exists in various music cultures, including jazz (Haidet and Picchioni 2016), Indian traditional music (Cashman and Garrido 2020), and Barbershop vocal music (Brandt 1993). Musical technique is emphasised as one of the core masteries when studying an instrument (Schiavio et al 2019; Reid 2001). This focus shapes many musicians' value system, according greater social status and value to musicians who have strong technique. For example, highly virtuosic players such as Jaco Pastorius, Sting, and James Jamerson are valued more highly than other bass players whose ability to contribute to play "in the pocket" (play appropriately, but not necessarily spectacularly, to the genre).

## The Primacy of Musical Technique

The development and the exhibition of musical technique is an important aspect of live music. Some of our participants, often musicians, asserted that musical technique was of greater import than the construction of spectacle. This is, perhaps, understandable given many musicians' focus on developing and maintaining technique. Research participants that focused on the role of technique asserted that technique fascinated them, ensured sustainable and successful careers, created what they considered to be good performances, and was authentic. While some (not all) acknowledged the role of spectacle, they maintained that it was less important than having good technique.

It is understandable, then, that many musicians prefer technically brilliant music. Musicians (and some musically-informed audiences) comprehend and assess the virtuosic merits of such performances more easily than performances that rely on spectacle. One research participant, a well-known and talented performer, confessed:

I'm guilty of being someone who entirely focuses on performance excellence and quality of performance. And being a performer and an instrumentalist, I set a very high bar in what I think is quality playing. And despite my best endeavours I find it very hard to listen to music that's poorly played. I can do it, but my preference is definitely technical expertise.

Musicians may even focus on technique to the abrogation of all else. Another participant observed, "I'm not here to hear you talk; I'm here to hear you play."

Different research participants had different explanations for their support for the primacy of musical technique. One participant believed that musicians with good technique had a greater chance of sustaining a successful musical career.

Anyone can dance and put on a show, but the technical skills shown in the musical ability will always keep fans loyal for many years. If there's no musical ability there's no show really. A showman with a rubbish voice is forgotten soon after.

Clearly in some cases this is true. The annals of the music industry are filled with people like Lil Hardin Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Karen Carpenter, Steve Vai, Jaco Pastorius, Aretha Franklin, Jon Batiste, Alicia Keys, Lady Gaga, Sarah Barellis and Snarky Puppy, and the like, whose technique was a core component of their success. However, equally there are many others for whom an average technique (of a level appropriate to the genre, for not all genres require enormous technique) was compensated for by other aspects, such as the development of extraordinary experiences. Ed

Sheeran is not a technically brilliant guitarist but is a master of live performance. He recently completed the most financially successful tour of all time.

Many musicians equated musical technique with authenticity and spectacle as detracting from the pure art, permitting less technically proficient musicians to create a career. One observed:

A gig of pure showmanship and no skill is an episode of Australian Idol. It's superficially entertaining, but empty and unsatisfying. The McDonalds of music.

The role of authenticity or "realness" in music is an academic minefield. It is not our intention to attempt a detailed discussion of technique as authenticity but to report and analyse our research participants' view. Some of them derive authenticity in performance from two demonstrated skills: high-level technical ability and masterful songwriting. High-level technical ability, these participants asserted, was not possible to 'fake' as other aspects of the performance. Others observed that songwriters such as Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Joan Baez, Joan Armatrading, Adele, Taylor Swift, and Ed Sheeran are (or were) not particularly strong technical players, but have technique as songwriters. Musicians with less technique who performed covers were cited as inauthentic. Their shows may have been spectacular, but without demonstration of either performance or songwriting technique they were considered inauthentic. Musicians, however, acknowledged that such shows were successful performances.

Some research participants equated technique with good performance and showmanship with poor and 'empty' performance. One participant posited:

You can make a good concert with a shy but wonderful musician, maybe it's not a show in the bigger sense of the word but it's a good concert. With only showmanship you have an empty concert, which can become boring fast.

While some acknowledged the role of spectacle, they saw it as less important than the role of technique.

If there is musicianship without showmanship, the audience will be satisfied. If there is musicianship with showmanship as well, the audience experience will be greater and more intensely satisfying and memorable. If there is showmanship without musicianship, the audience will feel conned.

Technique is an important aspect of music, and many musicians are fascinated by it. They understand it and rightfully claim it as a central aspect of creating a live music performance.

### *The Primacy of Spectacle*

Half of our research participants proposed that spectacle was more important than technical prowess in constructing a performance. While some of these participants were musicians, others were industry professionals. Just like musicians understand technical facility in music and struggle with spectacle, live music workers struggle with understanding technique. They are at home with the construction of spectacle. It is their job, after all, to construct compelling musical experiences. Some venue owners, in particular, spoke of spectacle. One said:

We've found many a time with many of our bands, those who put on shows or have interaction with the audience will do a lot better than those that get up and play their instruments and then walk away again.

Others will refuse to book an act that does not perform a show. A known performer summed up these feelings.

Well, I think spectacle's more important [than technique], I really do. I mean you can have an absolutely amazing musician and they're boring to watch, it kind of ruins it for me. I like to see performing, showmanship, spectacle. I've seen plenty of musicians I've thought just absolutely amazing, but to sit there for two hours and watch someone who doesn't move, doesn't talk to the audience, but is just an absolutely brilliant musician, that's great but, yeah, I think it's a bit boring.

Other research participants agreed with this assertion of the primacy of spectacle. Some observed that it was important for musicians to concentrate on developing stagecraft to construct such performances. Some participants even dismissed technique as an active participant in creating a successful performance.

To me, [technique is] very unimportant. I deeply appreciate it, but I'm not a technically brilliant musician myself. I adore lo-fi performances with zero musicianship, and high-tech performances with zero live performance chops required.

Research participants that asserted the spectacle stimulated the senses (an important aspect of Pine and Gilmore's experience) and permitted greater audience engagement.

As observed, the visual is a crucial sense stimulated within a spectacle. Musical performance has never been an entirely aural art (Thompson, Graham and Russo 2005). Some research participants observed the importance of the environmental aspects of performance. In particular, they spoke of the space within which the experience occurs and how the performers looked. One participant, a venue owner, observed that a

great performance will certainly be made much greater if things like the audio quality and the lighting and the ambience of a room is being taken care of, definitely. And you can make an ordinary performance better with better lighting and better production for sure.

This participant spoke of two visual aspects (the lighting and the ambience of the room) and one auditory (the audio quality). It is possible to perform in poorly designed venues. Indeed, much music (such as busking that adopts spaces) needs no lighting and other music (such as festivals) adapt spaces (Kronenberg 2012). However, this participant regards considering and improving these aspects as enhancing performance. Certainly, audio is a critical performance aspect. One participant told us that she regards the sound engineer as the most significant member of the band as far as performance goes. Another participant, a high-ranking industry executive, acknowledged the importance of the appearance of the musicians.

Studies show that we are very quick in judging ourselves as human beings. When we meet someone, we will make a huge number of assumptions within the first

second of meeting them. Those assumptions are quite difficult to break. So, in performance, appearance matters. That doesn't mean you've got to dress [for] people, there's got to be a correlation between what you're doing and your appearance.

Another participant observed that the multisensory experience of being at a concert – the rumble of the subs, the smell of sweat from dancers, the taste of alcoholic beverages of dubious quality, the proximity of other humans – heightened the experience of being at a concert. Another spoke of the “buzz of being at the performance”.

The other aspect of spectacle that research participants cited as essential to creating a successful performance was in-performance audience engagement. Audience engagement means interacting with the audience, making the performance memorable and personal. In practice, there are several stages in an arc of engagement occurring both before and after the performance (Brown and Ratzkin 2011). In this instance, we are interested in audience engagement while the performance is happening. Our participants often regarded the success of a performance in terms of engagement with the audience, describing aspects such as attentive listening, eye contact, movement, connection, and enthusiasm. Research participants sometimes articulated the results of negative audience interaction.

I went and saw [redacted] when they played out here at the Big Day Out. I was just bored out of my mind. They just stood there and sang. There was no interaction with the audience, they just stood there and played. I thought what's exciting about this? There was no communication with the audience, there was no, you know, I could have been listening to the record. So, you know, you've got to have some pizzazz, you've got to make it personal.

Another research participant said that successful engagement requires

communication skills. And some artists are better at it than others. I saw the [redacted] at the Sydney Opera House. They've got some great music, but God, it was dull as dishwater. They looked like they were playing for themselves individually. There was no interaction with the audience. I'm not saying that artists should have to speak to the audience and all the rest of it, but there's got to be some tension between what's happening on stage, with what's happening off stage.

## The Importance of Both Spectacle and Technique

Despite some research participants on both sides of the discussion proposing that technique or that spectacle was all one needed to construct an effective performance, the majority – sometimes grudgingly – acknowledged at least some requirement for both. Most proposed the primacy of one or the other, but a few proposed that both were needed to create compelling live music performances. One participant, a venue owner, observed the necessity to intertwine spectacle with authenticity.

For me showmanship is best when it's completely intertwined and genuine with the musical message. When showmanship is as an add-on, it repulses me, I can't

watch it, I don't enjoy seeing that. [...] Gary Bartz, Freddie Mercury, their showmanship is coming from every cell of their body. It's not like "I'm going to play this music and I'm going to do all those physical attributes that make people like that I'm engaging". It's the personality.

When asked how a performance was memorable, one music industry participant said

Generally speaking, [a performance is memorable] when everything just connects – the artist, the audience, the acoustics of the room, the interface with the instruments and the technology, the PA mix, the material, the pacing of the show, the artist's responsiveness to the audience... those are all the ingredients of a classically successful show. But I'm also attracted to downright weird renditions, which break all the rules of what good conventional performance practise is.

## Analysis

A pianist we interviewed summarised the quandary between technique and spectacle for musicians. She said:

I'm quite happy sitting in front of a piano all day and practicing. But how can you practice playing to an audience unless you're sitting in front of one? It's only through actually doing it that we get better at it and the stakes are higher in performance. It's all I can do to not hit wrong notes let alone smile and wave at an audience. In your head you're going "What if they don't like me? What if they don't like my music?" It's very confronting.

To performers, technique is a tangible and quantifiable aspect of music. A musician can play their scales at crotchet one hundred and twenty-one day and then upgrade it to one twenty-two the next day. They may laud someone who can play even faster. The development of good technique is something a musician has control over. The development and reception of spectacle, by contrast, is something that involves other people; audiences and technical staff. As our participant noted, it is harder to learn how to create a spectacle. Musicians can undertake stagecraft classes or perform in front of a mirror. However, there is little substitute for actually performing in front of an audience. As this participant notes, the stakes are higher in performance than in rehearsal. Another participant spoke of their mistrust of spectacle because it is constructed in partnership with non-musician industry personnel.

Among our research participants, there were very strong views on the role of technique and spectacle. Many musicians equated technique with authenticity and spectacle with artifice and fakeness. This was summarised in one particular pair of comments. A young musician said:

I would rather watch musicians who stand stock still focusing on their parts and playing them well than a pop singer who struts about the stage amongst an entourage of dancers, with no real instruments in sight and no technical ability on display. The latter feels incredibly fake/hollow/inauthentic.

An industry booker, however, observed:

I think Tina Arena is absolutely brilliant. But then you've got Kylie Minogue who is not even close to being as good as Tina Arena. But she is one of the most financially successful female singers ever out of Australia. With limited vocals. She didn't want to be a singer; she wanted to be an actor. But she fell into the singing thing and people just love her and she's just, [...] it's the performance. I know some amazing singers who [will] only ever be singers because they haven't got that performing gene.

Kylie Minogue's performances clearly fall into the realm of the former category of performances. Minogue is not a songwriter nor the most technically brilliant singer. Yet she is a very successful performer. Her performances are memorable and financially rewarding for all concerned. This is due to the spectacle of her shows and her constructed authenticity as a performer rather than by her musical technique.

Perhaps this divide is because of the fundamental differences in how musicians and industry perceive a show. Musicians can prepare their technique. They focus on it for many years before they perform and continue to develop it their whole life. They admire musicians who are technically accomplished and denigrate ones who are not. Musicians understand technique and music and are suspicious of performance aspects (like spectacle) that are not directly aligned with the music. However, industry personnel are more involved with ensuring the success of the performance. They worry less about art and more about viability. So, they deal with audience engagement and with spectacle. If they are not musicians, they may not understand the processes of technique and art, and are likely to be as suspicious of these.

## Conclusion

One of our older research participants spoke of their most memorable performance as seeing Duke Ellington's band perform. He said every aspect of the performance – spectacle, technique, publicity – was:

important to engage them with a broad audience. They were incredibly talented and skilled and had great people working with them. And to see them go from playing the Royal Antler in Sydney to 100 people, to playing to 10,000 people at the LA forum or, you know, in one of those many other major venues that I saw them in when they sort of became international, that was pretty exciting. And to be a part of it, you know, to know that I've been involved in [...] the machinations of it all was exciting.

In large performances like this, or in a Pink or Taylor Swift, or Michael Bublé tour, where there are separate publicity personnel, arrangers, producers, directors – different people to manage the experience and the musicality – musicians can afford to be specialists and focus on making their music extraordinary. However, many musicians do not have that luxury and have to do it all themselves. If they focus entirely on musical technique, they risk becoming one of the performances outlined at the beginning of this article. We do not assert that technique is unimportant: it is vitally important to have the level of technique appropriate to the genre that is being performed. However, it is not the entirety of the performance. In recent years, musicians such as Dirty Loops, Lady Gaga, Ariana Grande, Florence Welch, Jon Batiste, Vulfpeck, Adele, Janelle Monáe, Cory Alexander Henry, and MonoNeon have begun to merge technical brilliance with the

creation of spectacular performance. Musicians, especially emerging musicians, need to engage with both in order to construct a sustainable and successful career.

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