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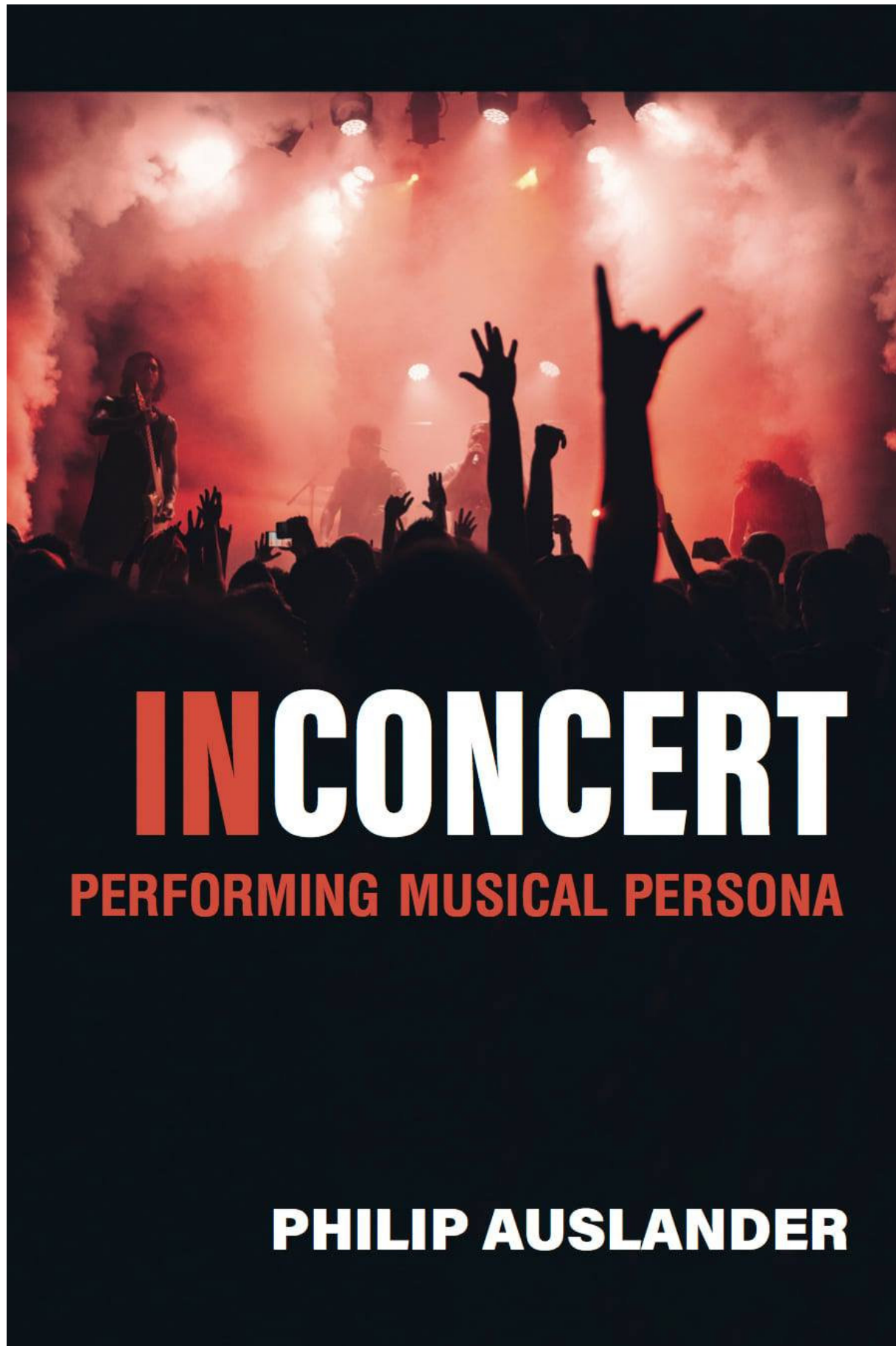
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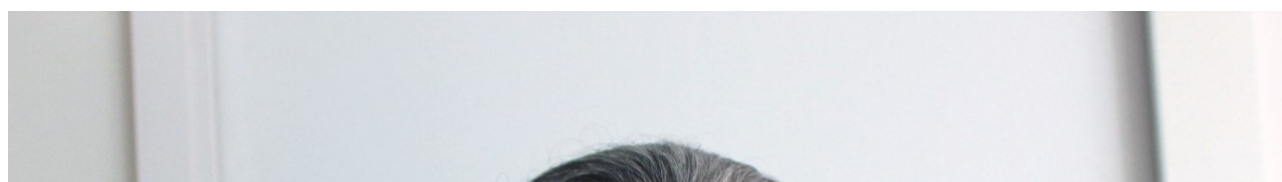
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Philip Auslander, *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona*, University of Michigan Press

Philip Auslander

with José Alberto Ferreira





Philip Auslander

Philip Auslander writes about the concept of performance in relation to art, technology, media, and music. Through his books, which include *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music*, *Reactivations: Essays on Performance and Its Documentation*, and *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance*, Auslander has helped shape the evolution of the field of Performance Studies. These books address the tensions surrounding performance within the conditions of postmodern culture. In his most recent book, *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona*, Auslander engages questions he has been working on since 2004 that bridge performance studies and musicology in innovative and challenging ways. How are musicians to be perceived as performers within the variety of musical idioms that make up the contemporary cultural landscape? And how do these performers present their personae, either in live concerts or in more complex mediatizations?

In our dialogue, we explored some of the issues about musical performance that Auslander addresses.



The Many Personae of David Bowie. Courtesy of Living is Easy with Eyes Closed

José Alberto Ferreira: In your new book, *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona*, you say that neither Musicology nor Performance Studies pays much attention to the ways musicians are performers, a position you first took in 2004. Do you still feel that this is the case?

Philip Auslander: The overall project of which *In Concert* is a part is motivated by my desire to create dialogue between those interested in music and those interested in performance, to develop a vocabulary for talking about musicians as performers, and to analyze their performances. There were some people doing good work of this kind at the time that I started bringing attention to this gap and there are probably more people doing it now. I still think there's room for careful and detailed analyses of musicians' performances. I'm also interested in defining musical performance not as "music plus performance," not as two separate and independent things that are brought together, but as a single phenomenon in which the music cannot be distinguished from its performance.

Isaac Hayes performs "Shaft" at the 2002 Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony

Isaac Hayes performs "Shaft" at the 2002 Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony

JAF: Your approach gives the musician as performer a central role. You envisage the distinction between the empirical being and the persona, and between the persona and the characters that the performance brings forth. What are the consequences of this, and can they be extended to the actor (either in theatre, film or performance)?

PA: Musical performance is primarily about performing a social identity as a musician and the transaction between performer and audience this entails. The music is a means of doing this, not its end. Musical identities are performed not just through sound but also visually in terms of the musicians' appearance, physical comportment, gestures, and interaction with the audience. Of course, the identities and relationships being performed are partially functions of the music and its genre, which create expectations concerning the kinds of identities one will encounter in the performance and their relationship to audiences. So, the identities of symphonic musicians and their relationships to their audiences are quite different from those of, say, heavy metal rockers.

Your question about actors is interesting. The idea of musical persona is somewhat similar to the idea of star identity in film acting. Think of a movie star such as Al Pacino. There is a version of Pacino we expect to see whenever we see him on screen through which he portrays the various characters he plays. The Pacino persona is a constant across his performances even though those performances differ from one to another. A difference is that all musicians enact a persona, and that persona derives more from the social expectations surrounding their musical genre than from the specific music they perform. To return to an earlier example, symphonic musicians look and comport themselves the same way whether they're playing Beethoven or Brahms. This comportment is the classical musician's persona and they do not portray fictional characters. I don't think this works in the same way for actors.

The Block Strap Preview Video - "Bach in the Streets"



The Block Strap Preview Video - "Bach in the Streets"

JAF: You give a central role to the relation between performers and their instruments, stressing how they tend to objectify the instrument and thus the skills of the player. Is this a feature one would take as constant in the model of analysis you propose?

PA: Not a constant feature, no. Musicians assume a myriad of different relationships to their instruments, which can be performed as if the instruments are their partners, objects of their love, combatants with which to spar, extensions of their own bodies, and so on. All of this is also inflected by musical genre. Rockabilly players hold the double bass perpendicular to their bodies and don't lean over it as jazz bassists frequently do, for instance. I find that people frequently overestimate the degree to which the physical properties of the instrument determine the specifics of the performance or persona. I've seen cellists play in the usual seated position, but I've also seen cellists perform while standing or with the cello strapped across the chest like a guitar.

JAF: What about the singer's voice?

PA: I find the singer's relationship to their voice as an instrument to be a fascinating phenomenological question. Do singers experience their voices while singing as parts of themselves or as something outside of themselves? Or both? I wish I had a good answer to this.

Darius Rucker - Wagon Wheel (Official Video)



Darius Rucker - Wagon Wheel (Official Video)

JAF: One can think of the musical persona also as an index of changes in musical idioms, historicizing the connection between persona and musical genre. I'm thinking of the Presley persona, which was so radical and so new at the time, or the punk generation or, of course, Glam Rock.

PA: Yes, absolutely. New musical genres require new personae. Those who pioneer a genre also create new musical identities, which become models for those who start performing in the genre later or after it's established. But these processes do not occur in a vacuum; they reflect larger social, cultural, and political questions. In the book, I discuss what how Darius Rucker's persona articulates his position as an African American in country music, a genre long associated with whiteness. In the early 1970s, Marc Bolan and David Bowie both developed pansexual male glam rock personae that went against the grain both of rock culture and of British society, in which homosexuality had only been decriminalized in 1967.

John Cage - 4' 33" Death Metal Cover by Dead Territory

JAF: Your book proposes to cover a wide range of musical idioms, while at the same time engaging more clearly with popular music (following your previous interest in Glam Rock, for instance). Did you try to apply your model to the realms of contemporary music, and do you think it can apply? I'm thinking of the way much of contemporary music tried to escape or renegotiate the frames within which musicians, academics and publics understand music, and so changed the relations with instruments, performers and audiences. I think of John Cage's work as an example.

PA: Thanks for asking this question. I don't talk about this kind of experimental music in the book. But watching Cage perform *Water Walk* (1959), for instance, I realize that the deliberateness and precision of his movements, the fact that he's wearing a jacket and tie, and the cool concentration with which he performs what are in some cases deliberately trivial actions are all central to the effect of the piece. The same is true of David Tudor performing Cage's famous 4'33" (1952). His presence at the keyboard, the way he turns the pages of the score, which is spread out on the piano, to mark the passage of time that he measures using a stopwatch (also a key element of *Water Walk*), and the relative informality of his appearance stand in contrast to William Marx's performance, in which he gives the piece the full recitalist's treatment. He wears formal dress, sits upright at the piano, and has the score upright before him on a music stand making it necessary to lean over to turn the pages in a large gesture. In all of these cases, the performer's presence, actions, specific choices as to how to execute their actions, and persona constitute the music even more than in conventional cases. The usual interpretation of 4'33" is that Cage was trying to draw the listener's attention to ambient sound heard as music. Thinking about it from the perspective I propose, it appears to be something very different in which the performer's presence and persona are paramount, not self-effacing. As far as instrumentation is concerned, *Water Walk* involves a host of objects not usually considered to be musical instruments as well as a grand piano, also the instrument in 4'33". This is a question of framing, something I discuss extensively in the book. Since these compositions are framed as experimental musical works, unconventional instrumentation or unconventional uses of conventional instruments do not come as surprises, especially to the relevant audience.

Lady Gaga - Bad Romance (Official Music Video)



Lady Gaga - Bad Romance (Official Music Video)

JF: In the last chapter of *In Concert*, you look deeply into mediatization, the way culture absorbs and is defined by media, a concept you have been working with for a very long time, as part of postmodern culture. You show that contemporary mediatization works very differently from what it was in the early 80s. Could we assume that different mediatization implies differently performed personae?

PA: Yes. Although I don't think our current mediatized culture requires a redefinition of the idea of musical persona, it certainly provides accelerated and intensified opportunities for its performance, including on social media. For me, Lady Gaga is the perfect exemplar of this cultural moment in that she both embodies and problematizes the concept of musical persona through her constant shifting of identities and platforms. Unlike David Bowie, whose continually shifting identities were sequential and tied to specific albums and projects, thus allowing the feeling that they were all manifestations of the same underlying entity, Gaga morphs seemingly at will and at random creating a proliferation of identities rather than a sequence.

[In Concert - University of Michigan Press](#)

For a review of *In Concert*: <https://www.artsatl.org/review>



Philip Auslander writes frequently on performance, music, and art. He has published seven books, of which *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona* is the most recent. Auslander is a Professor in the School of Literature, Media, and Communication at Georgia Tech, and the Editor of *The Art Section*.



Jose Alberto Ferreira has been the Artistic Director of the Art and Culture Center of the Eugénio de Almeida Foundation since 2018. He is a Guest Lecturer at the University of Évora, Portugal, and has published books on Portuguese theater, artistic research, and puppetry. He has written for national and international newspapers and magazines and has curated projects on the visual and performing arts.