

## On validation and vulnerability

Praise. Affirmation. Recognition. I have been searching for the word that encapsulates the external encouragement that reassures us that we should keep doing whatever it is that we do. When I polled the brilliant women of a random WhatsApp group, one of them suggested 'validation', defined as the 'recognition or affirmation that a person or their feelings or opinions [or work] are valid or worthwhile'. Validation, then, is the recognition that someone is doing something significant. Validation paves the way for professional progression and, step by step, confers status upon that individual.

What does validation mean for a performer? What forms might it take? How can we cultivate a healthy relationship with validation? Can we practise equality and inclusivity within the current models of public validation? And how does validation intersect with vulnerability? What are our vulnerabilities, as performers, and how can we embrace them whilst avoiding exploitation? How can we take care of ourselves and one another?

With my square-bracketed addition of 'work' to the dictionary definition of validation, I suggest that the 'worth' of artists lies in what we make — it is our work that speaks for us and not (or even despite) our personalities, our feelings or our opinions. A performer cannot build a career without validation and the snag is that, whilst we cannot advance without it, it's not something we can generate ourselves. It comes in various forms, and we probably need them all at one point or another. The initial impetus for launching a career as a performer is some combination of self-belief and the active encouragement of people around us. The dream becomes a reality when we start getting the gigs — this is the validation a performer really needs for, in this way, the industry is saying 'yes, we'll trust that you can do this thing and we will pay you to do it'. As a reputation grows, as projects become more high-profile, a public discourse develops around the performer, which is primarily fostered by (or, in the case of more commercial artists, with) the press. At some point, a performer may become 'established' and the validation may shift into a more ceremonial form, perhaps honouring their broader contribution to the industry and suddenly valuing their feelings or opinions. I am categorising these forms as private validation, public validation, practical validation and ceremonial validation.

Private validation is probably what encourages us to set out on such a risky and exposing path in the first place. As an example of private validation imagine someone saying 'you're brilliant' or 'you really have a gift'. This sort of feedback feeds us emotionally. Because we know that this is a subjective comment, it has to be spontaneous and genuine, and ideally come from someone you respect if it is to be meaningful. I have my 'trusted few': a handful of folk who know me well, who have been part of my journey, who know what my desires have been and what I have overcome. Essentially, I trust the validation of these few because I know that they understand the broader context of what I am doing (or making) and because our relationship is strong enough to withstand critical feedback as well as praise. There is also the sense that they can separate the real me from 'Soprano Juliet Fraser', that my 'validity' rests in my personhood and not in my performance.

Public validation may be similarly subjective but is articulated more formally, authoritatively and ... publicly. It most often comes in the form of review. I have always

been suspicious of reviews. So much new music is performed only once, or only once in that territory, so who is a review for? It's too late to drum up an audience, after all. And this very public form of subjective validation lacks the kind of reciprocal trust and respect that makes for meaningful private validation. A reviewer has authority according a) to their perceived expertise in their specific field (minefield) and/or b) to the proximity of their general attitude or taste to our own; discovering to what extent we respect the opinion of the reviewer according to these measures takes an investment of time and energy (for proper engagement with their body of work) that very few of us are willing to make. The challenge for those of us on the receiving end of reviews is that we must hold them lightly — all of them, the good, the bad and the woefully inaccurate. If one becomes too invested in the positive reviews then it's difficult to shrug off the critical ones. It's a devilish balancing act. One friend (a composer) has told me that there have been rare instances in which a thoughtful review offering constructive criticism has confirmed their private doubts, thus validating the process of constructive self-criticism. I haven't experienced this, but it's commonly understood that composers and performers are reviewed in quite different ways. The one way in which I find reviews useful are that they provide inky proof that I have done a thing. These days, in the aftermath of a performance I am sometimes unsure whether it actually happened at all: if the papers say it did, it must be true.

Somewhere between these private and public forms of validation sits that of the audience. As performers we measure the size of an audience, the warmth of its applause and, on social media, the scale of its engagement. We are under increasing pressure to expand our audience base (to satisfy funders) or to attract an audience (to help promoters) or to know our audience (to contribute to a marketing strategy). I can see that in some musical genres and for some performing artists (perhaps especially those that write their own music), it may be possible to recognise and therefore to respond to 'their audience' but, as an interpreter of a wide-ranging repertoire, I don't experience my audience as a pin-downable entity. I mostly feel that I am encountering someone else's loyal audience — perhaps that of a festival, venue or radio programme — and therefore see it as an unwieldy mass of individuals, all of whom may have very different reasons for finding themselves listening to my voice and about none of whom would I presume to know either their level of expertise or the proximity of their taste to my own.

To continue in this vein, I'm interested in the common assumption that we performers perform for the audience. I'm not sure that I do... I mean, I perform for them because I am motivated to communicate when confronted by attentive bodies in a space and they're there in the space, but I am not motivated to perform for their pleasure or entertainment or recognition because 'they', 'the audience', is not a thing that I can anticipate or know. 'They' are shape-shifters. We come together in a given moment to share something, and this something is about vibrations in the air and weird, mysterious, personal connections in the synapses. Reducing live music to words such as 'good' or 'bad' is therefore not a form of validation that particularly interests me. I am thrilled if an audience member has a meaningful experience — this is absolutely what I am hoping for — but a performance is more a means to understanding fully the music I am dealing with and, perhaps, to understanding myself.

Practical validation is the bedrock of a career. I would describe this as the conversion of confidence in a performer into the concrete, practical investment in performance opportunities. This means: promoters offering us a platform (and for a fee, please), companies/ensembles offering us a gig or a position, radio broadcasters and record labels releasing our recordings, funding bodies supporting our projects, collaborators bringing us on board, etc. Throughout a career, no matter how far along we are, it is time on stage or on the airwaves plus cold, hard cash that provides the validation that makes this vocation sustainable; it is the unequivocal proof that we are doing more than shouting into the void or wearing ourselves thin on the hamster wheel.

I have come to see practical validation as a strange dialogue between me and my industry about what is possible. An idea begins as a desire; I share this tentative, often frightening desire with the industry (promoters, colleagues, funders) and see if it sparks any interest; if not, I have to move on but if it does, I then find myself committed to making that desire a reality; only once the idea has become reality do I even begin to know whether I am up to the task. To give a concrete example, at some point I began to feel frustrated working only on projects that someone else had dreamed up. I wanted to do things on my own terms, and so I started to fantasise about a career as a soloist. I offered the industry some solo projects and some promoters gave me a chance. The ideas then had to become a reality and I had to become a soloist: I spent a full year in a state of silent terror. Through this year, I clung to the trust that my industry partners had placed in me, to the validation of their confidence in my latent abilities. I knew, too, that the success or failure of this leap would be measurable in the invitations that followed.

Ceremonial validation is about a performance of a very different kind: the bestowing (and receiving) of awards or prizes. Composers may strive for a Siemens Prize, a Grawemeyer Award, or an RPS Award but, because there are no awards specifically for performers of new music, we sit somewhat outside this particular culture of prestige. Sometimes I lament this because I feel it doesn't reflect the symbiotic relationship between composers and performers, and perhaps reinforces the notion that the composer is the 'genius' and the performer is the lucky 'muse' or 'vessel'. On the other hand, since I question the purpose of awards in the arts and the effects of this particular form of validation, I wonder if we're not better off outside that playground. The application and selection process always feels arbitrary and compromised, no matter the efforts towards impartiality (by introducing blind judging etc.,) and increasingly I feel that the arts are competitive enough (what with dwindling funding and growing pressures to be one thing and not another) without pitting artists against one other for a little statue.

I recently attended the Ivors Composer Awards in London. Officially, I was there because I had been a judge for one of the categories but, really, I was there hoping to have some fun and join in the celebrations if any of my composer friends won an award. The sense of factions within contemporary classical music seems to be exacerbated on a night like that, as the random award categories draw fictional lines between overlapping disciplines and we are inevitably seduced into cheering for our buddies. I wasn't being assessed in any way, I knew plenty of people and I was probably amongst the more established performers in the room, and yet I came away feeling insecure and uneasy. This isn't an attack on the Ivors. My question is: what is the objective of such

awards? If hoping to offer validation to individuals and to our community, does this strange process achieve that? As an alternative, might it not be better simply to throw a big party for our community, include a few bold and pithy speeches about the challenges and the triumphs of the year, and let everyone have a lovely time?

I've had another recent run-in with ceremonial validation: I have just been awarded an honorary doctorate. This caught me completely unawares and is in large part to blame for this essay as I try to make sense of what this peculiar gesture means. I have asked how/if one uses the title and what duties come with it. I have worried that it's like being appointed to the House of Lords — I may shortly be abolished. I have pondered what this means for my long-standing desire to study for a real PhD... I'm none the wiser, but I've accepted it, not least because when I showed my father the letter he said 'Are you sure this isn't a prank?!' (He was joking. I think.) What I do know is that it doesn't mean that I am more important than someone else or than I thought I was; it just provides a moment's reassurance that the colossal effort of my 'output' has had some sort of impact. As chance would have it, this validation comes during a very bleak period when my morale is very low. This makes me all the more grateful and all the more aware of how the lack of validation at a critical moment can allow some people to abandon hope.

When we're low the battle may feel as though it is being fought within us, not between us and the world. Musicians are trained from a very early age to critique their own work — we are 'talented' if we can quickly learn to recognise a bum note, a sloppy rhythm, an inconsistent tone or inelegant phrasing — and can end up with overdeveloped inner critics. I've written about trying (and failing) to tame my inner critic elsewhere, but here I want to tease out the relationship between self-criticism and self-validation. The inner critic is a well known entity, characterised as the inner voice that is brutally quick to say 'no, not good enough'. Only recently, however, did I learn about the inner mentor, the quieter, more nurturing and intuitive guide that should be the equal twin to the inner critic. Why is it that we are so unschooled in developing this more compassionate voice within us? I suspect that, like many musicians, my inner critic is largely modelled on the strict and perfectionist instrumental teachers I had as a child. Well, perhaps it's time to model a new way of teaching.

I am imagining how powerful it could be to foster (in ourselves and in others) a better internal equilibrium; I am wondering what it would take to habituate (in ourselves and in others) the discipline of taking the time to say 'yes, good!' whenever we fix an issue in a practice session, to say at the very least 'well done, you gave of yourself' if not 'never mind the tiny blips, that was awesome!' when we come off stage, to acknowledge quietly but committedly the private challenges that we have overcome in a season or a year. (Journaling helps me with this: I write down the fears when I am in the grip of them and I report back after the event. I write endless round-ups. I achieve better balance in my journal than I do in my mind.) To cultivate the inner mentor's language could be one form of self-validation, in which we practise giving the carrot as much as wielding the stick.

Whilst I'm doing some bold imagining, let's pay attention to how we communicate with our bodies. My inner critic has only ever been rude about my body and often barks orders at its various parts when I am doing my practice. What if we were to enlist the inner mentor's help or, to put it another way, what if we treated our bodies with the

respect and compassion we would treat a collaborator's body? This is not about body positivity, though that might also be worthwhile, but about connectedness. As performing musicians, we focus obsessively on specific areas of 'technique' but applying the same discipline to instilling a technique for constructive mind-body communication as we do for very specific motor skills would lead to a much more holistic approach to the whole business of being a performing body. At the age of 42 I am suddenly confronted with a much more wilful body: it has its own ideas and communicates them forcefully. This is a thoroughly good thing. I would encourage younger performers not to take their bodies for granted but to prepare peaceably for its wilful insurrection. To cultivate an embodied self-empathy could be one form of self-validation, in which we hold the full complexities of a life as a performer and ground ourselves in the things we feel or know deeply, so as to be less buffeted by the unreliable voices outside.

All external validation is fickle. It can bolster us, but it can also puff us up and lead us astray. The goal is to try and distinguish between what is nourishing validation and what is junk food for the ego. There is somehow never enough reassurance to go around and we cannot guarantee that it will reach the people that need it most. The purpose of external validation is surely to spur people forwards, to renew their self-belief and sense of motivation. It should act as a counterweight to the self-criticism we sharpen over the many, many hours of lonely practice. What endures, ultimately, is our work and our relationships, which leads me to believe that it is our self-validation in tandem with the private validation of the trusted few and the practical validation of performance opportunities that count above all else. Validation doesn't make for better work; it just helps us feel better about keeping on working.

There is a mainstream tendency for validation to be gendered. This plays out in two ways: firstly, the degree and sort of validation granted to men and women has not historically been equal (men generally being more publicly and ceremonially validated, women generally being far more 'validated' for their physical appearance than for their skill or knowledge); second, there is a cliché that women seek validation more than men. My hunch is that the need for validation comes down more to personality than to gender. However, it's worth understanding that some people (minorities of all ilk) are more likely to experience a particular form of *slog* in their lives, by which I mean the strain of swimming in the wrong direction or in the wrong way by virtue of not being 'the right sort of person'. In the face of indifference or resistance, what we yearn to be acknowledged is the mighty triumph of doggedly slogging on towards our creative dreams, perhaps more than the actual creative output of our dreams. As Sara Ahmed puts it, 'For some bodies, mere persistence, "to continue steadfastly", requires great effort, an effort that might appear to others as stubbornness or obstinacy, as an insistence on going against the flow' (Ahmed 2017, 82). Most bodies engaged in new music recognise this feeling of going against the flow — classical music, after all, is supposed to be perfect cadences, fabulous divas and topping the charts on Classic FM — but there is no doubt that some bodies encounter less validation and must therefore summon more persistence simply to continue.

Persistence could be described as the daily performance of enacting the being we want to be. Being 'a performer' is about so much more than getting up on stage to sing: I am performing confidence when I walk on stage or when I walk into a first rehearsal; I am performing self-belief when I pitch a new project to a promoter; I am performing 'the

role of the diva' when I am being chatted up by some important man; I am performing gratitude and resilience when it's all going swimmingly and yet I feel broken by the pace and pressure. It was a desperate persistence that persuaded us to return to work under impossible conditions in August 2020. It must have been a perverse persistence that drove me to go on stage a few months ago when I had been told just that morning that a dear friend had committed suicide. Where does duty tip over into lunacy? When are we encouraged to interrogate what professional habits are at play and how healthy they are? The industry rightly teaches young performers to honour their commitments and to be a team player but the past few years have taught me that it's not appropriate to insist that the 'show must go on' at any cost. There is an art to pulling out of a project, and we would do well to discuss this more: we need help to learn to recognise our own vulnerabilities and limitations during periods of difficulty.

To perform is to put yourself in a vulnerable position. You are exposed, you are experimenting, you are laying yourself open to criticism, whether from the press, from peers or from your chatty inner critic. I think it needs to be understood that, for most performers, the fear never goes away; we just learn to manage it. And for many of us it actually gets worse at some points. There may be periods where the pre-concert panic becomes almost crippling, for reasons that we don't really understand. Pressures may be changing, desires may be changing, bodies may be changing, and maybe we haven't yet figured out how to catch up with some new state of being. If there's anything that stops me being overwhelmed by imposter syndrome (still, after 20 years in the business!), it's not that I think 'I've got this' or that I trust, really, what will come out when I open my mouth, it is simply that the invitations keep coming in. And the challenges are fresh every week if one is working with new scores — we are not really in the realm of 'fun'; we are hacking our way through the jungle wondering if the compass is still working. Do not be fooled that because performers do this day in, day out, it is ever comfortable. Performing will always be a very vulnerable act.

Vulnerability can draw a crowd. This is nothing new. An actor weeping is sure to make me weep; a tightrope walker will make me clutch my chest. What protects the performer is their technique: the actor has a method for crying on demand, and the tightrope walker has a method for balancing on that cord. Their techniques have been honed over many years — they don't suddenly find themselves at the centre of this improbable spectacle. Likewise, we prepare ourselves for the vulnerability of standing in front of an audience by beginning young (before we're too self-conscious) and gradually performing for bigger and more judicious audiences, and we protect ourselves against the vulnerability of 'failure' through rigorous preparation. One of the challenges and joys of specialising in new music is the sheer quantity of techniques we need to absorb. I find it liberating not to be confined to a *bel canto* sound, to discover new expressive possibilities within a new score, but it can also be destabilising. Sometimes one can lose one's bearings, almost, but this should be a temporary vulnerability that reflects the stretch to incorporate a new technique; it's a healthy sort of growing pain.

We can also perform vulnerability. Learning how to rest at the limits of an emotion on stage is a crucial part of our craft: we have to embody extreme emotions in order to project them, but we cannot let them engulf us. I have found ways to deliver fury or aggression or violence by vocalising within the safe zone (mostly) but exaggerating the

emotion in some way with my body. This is a very controlled means by which to give the impression of being out of control. Similarly, I might convey fragility by combining a specific vocal colour, character of inhalation and physical posture. Unlike genuine vulnerability, this is a carefully calibrated performance.

One very particular form of vulnerability that I have encountered in new music is what I'll call 'exposed vulnerability', in which the state of vulnerability is the affect explored or exploited in the piece. The idea, I suppose, is that witnessing exposed vulnerability triggers a strong emotional response in the listener — hopefully not in the sense of a sadistic spectacle but in the sense that they recognise and are moved by the humanity and humility of vulnerability. I have performed quite a lot of music like this (I am thinking of specific works by Evan Johnson, James Weeks, Cassandra Miller) and have listened from the audience to more (by composers aligned with or orbiting the Wandelweiser group, for example). What I feel needs saying is that the state of exposed vulnerability is a deeply and unpredictably fragile thing. What is at risk is not so much the material but the relationships. Exposed vulnerability often requires a performer to abandon their habitual performance practice (the way they prepare, their technique, their preferred posture or position on stage), which effectively leaves them extra-exposed and extra-vulnerable: they are suddenly up on the tightrope at 50 feet in front of a crowd *with no training*. In my experience, 'performing' (in inverted commas because the whole idea is that one is 'being', in fact, not performing) exposed vulnerability can be a profound and mystical act when undertaken in a fundamental state of wholeness or 'strength', but when undertaken in a state of personal vulnerability, the cascade of vulnerabilities may be too much to bear.

It should be obvious that any piece exploring or necessitating exposed vulnerability requires that the performer understands and consents to their vulnerability being exposed. A conversation must be had. Travelling beyond the aesthetic justifications to understand the psychological ramifications must be attempted. If a composer is exploring vulnerability, then that aim must be made clear, and if a performer is intended to expose any unorthodox element of themselves and their practice on stage, then that intention must be articulated, ideally in the score and certainly in discussion with the performer. For it is possible that the material does not betray this intention. It is possible for the intention only to become clear to the performer during the act of performance. If the conversation doesn't take place beforehand then the performer can find themselves doubly exposed and, worse, exploited. We could learn something from the acting world and explore how an intimacy co-ordinator would help us navigate these conversations and create something profound on stage without collateral damage. We should remember, too, that we are potentially foisting unexpected vulnerability upon the audience and that other art forms have a long-established practice of issuing trigger warnings.

I am hopeful that very few composers are intentionally exploitative. The few difficult experiences that I have had I put down to the composers' inexperience or insecurity or hastiness, but it really shouldn't be such a big step between settling on the subject of vulnerability or fragility and then following through to consider the performer's perspective. I am writing about this not to berate anybody but to try and understand why I have had the difficulties I have, and what could have been done differently. I worry that if I — a seasoned collaborator who is experienced in singing this kind of

material — can feel caught out, then how much more might a younger, less experienced musician. I also write about this to impress upon performers the importance of interrogating what a piece of music is about before you take it on and visualising what the experience of embodying that subject matter under pressure might be. Perhaps this is particularly important for experimental singers: we're well trained to ask what a song text is about, but I'm not convinced that we are quick enough to ask the same question, really, of the material itself, to calculate its impact upon the body or soul in performance. It's difficult to balance a willingness to take creative risks against a pragmatic self-preservation but, to return to my earlier thoughts on self-validation, I believe we could do a better job of cultivating embodied intuition within our practices.

We are all vulnerable. It's an unavoidable and beautiful human condition, and one that composers and performers have to accept as part and parcel of the bold act of creativity. We're no good to one another if we're broken or brittle; we each have our own particular strengths and vulnerabilities. Through the sheer variety of the music that we perform and the collaborators with whom we choose to work, performers have the opportunity continually to expand our comfort zones, but resilience should be on our own terms. I have been learning a lot from Sara Ahmed recently. She writes about 'survival kits' and I thought I'd close by sharing mine. In no particular order: solitude, silence, sleep, a pen and paper, good (feminist) books, long walks, time curled up with one very wicked small dog, home-cooked food, friends. Hold your trusted few close and learn well how to take care of yourself.

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