

Colloquium December 5, 2025
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Title: “A perfect artist does not deliberate”: Towards a History of Habit and Musical Performance

Abstract:

The complex behavior required by musical performance has long constituted a suggestive example with which to explore different notions about what it means to be human. There seems something paradoxical about the fact that at the moment at which we express our subjectivity by creating music, our physical actions should be so fully detached from our conscious, rational selves. Here I survey accounts of musical performance as embodied, automatic, and non-cognitive by tracing the unexpectedly winding history of a single Aristotelian trope, namely, the Philosopher’s assertion that “Ars perfecta, non deliberat” [a perfect artist does not deliberate]. This claim, initially posed with regard to the ability of natural objects to act teleologically without requiring a reflecting agent, was elucidated by commentators in late antiquity using the act of writing. Just as deliberation is not necessary for natural things, such as an acorn, to undergo the processes inherent in their form, that is, sprout into a tree, competent writers do not need to deliberate regarding letters when they write out words. Six centuries later, however, the Persian philosopher Ibn Sina explained this phenomenon using the case of performing music on an oud, and his account would subsequently be troped by a series of authors ranging from Albertus Magnus to Aquinas to Jean Gerson and Giordano Bruno on various musical instruments. Enlightenment thinkers including Locke, Condillac, and Erasmus Darwin and beyond then picked up this same idea and explained it in different yet related ways. Surveying Renaissance heretics, and Enlightenment physiologists (alongside ouds, kitharas, vielles, and keyboard instruments) this talk demonstrates how unreflecting musical performance played an important role in central philosophical debates around conceptualizations of habit, learning, and ethical behavior.

Bio: *coming soon*