

Our Obsession with Perfection Is Bad for Art

By Eric Felten

When Jennifer Hudson stepped up to sing “The Star-Spangled Banner” at the Super Bowl, there was a sense of high drama. This was her first appearance on the national stage since the October murder of her mother, brother and nephew: Would Ms. Hudson be able to master her emotions and make it through the anthem? In the end, it was a cinch. There was nary a catch in her voice, no unwanted, creeping tremolo. In fact, her vocal performance was remarkable in its near-perfection—or would have been remarkable had she actually been performing. Instead, the voice we heard was from a track she had prepared in a studio well in advance. So much for high drama.

Ms. Hudson’s producer made no apologies for her lip-synching. “That’s the right way to do it,” Rickey Minor told the Associated Press. “There’s too many variables to go live. I would never recommend any artist go live because the slightest glitch would devastate the performance.” His justification echoed Itzhak Perlman explaining why the all-star classical quartet at the Obama inauguration was prerecorded. “It would have been a disaster if we had done it any other way,” Mr. Perlman told the *New York Times*.

“This occasion’s got to be perfect. You can’t have any slip-ups.”

My, what a standard of perfection is now demanded. No longer is a good or even a great performance good enough. Now we must have performances free from the “slightest glitch.” And since no one—not even a singer of Ms. Hudson’s manifest talent nor a violinist of Mr. Perlman’s virtuosity—can guarantee that a live performance will be glitch-free, the solution has been to eliminate the live part.

Where does this expectation of flawlessness come from? Perhaps it’s of a piece with our age: Plastic surgery and air-brushing are no longer sufficient improvements on models who already possess impossible beauty—now it’s common for their images to be digitally manipulated, their lithe figures stretched into even more preposterous images of perfection. Or perhaps the trend is rooted in something more mundane—a fear of YouTube. Embarrassing flubs that once would have been reserved for the occasional blooper reel now go into immediate and eternal replay online.

Whatever the motivation, the fear of risking mistakes has led musicians to deny who they are as performers. The most disheartening thing about the Inauguration Day quartet’s nonperformance was the length to which they went

to make sure that nothing they did on the platform could be heard. Cellist Yo-Yo Ma put soap on the hair of his bow so that it would slip across the strings without creating even a wisp of sound. The inner workings of the piano were disassembled. There is something pitiful and pitiable about musicians hobbling their own voices.

Not only are we told that prerecording is “standard operating procedure,” but we’re supposed to believe that it is a virtue: The performers, you see, care too much about their art to risk presenting something substandard. But what is art without risks? Any live performance is a high-wire act. Nowadays, it seems that—when it really counts—musicians are willing to put the wire on the pavement and walk along it as if they were doing something daring.

But far worse, the emphasis on technologically assisted perfection is at odds with a human conception of artistic beauty. “In all things that live there are certain irregularities and deficiencies which are not only signs of life, but sources of beauty,” wrote the 19th-century British critic John Ruskin. “To banish imperfection is to destroy expression, to check exertion, to paralyze vitality.”

Which is what happened at the Capitol grandstand: An opportunity for glorious exertion and vitality was missed. Imagine the sight of some of the world’s greatest musicians struggling against

the elements—coaxing sound out of their reluctant instruments, willing their numb fingers to be nimble. I suspect it all would have come together quite well, if a bit out of tune here and there.

But what if it hadn’t? What if Mr. Ma had suffered one of the catastrophes of which he warned—a broken string? Imagine the heroic struggle as he switched his fingering on the fly to find the necessary notes on another string. Mr. Ma is among the rarefied artists who could have pulled something like that off (and probably pulled it off with none but his fellow musicians even noticing). How fantastic it would have been to see him do it. Instead we got play-acting.

But what of the conceit that a Super Bowl or an inauguration can somehow be ruined by a less-than-stellar musical performance? I would suggest that the great events of our lives are rather more sturdy than imagined, and the musical accompaniment to them somewhat less important than the musicians would like to think.

Barack Obama’s big day survived the mediocrity of the official poem and the stumblings of the chief justice. It would have

survived even a piano with saloon intonation. The real threat to such events comes from unrealistic and unreasonable expectations: The bride who demands a “perfect” wedding nearly ensures that her veil will be one of tears.

The synthetic perfection of faux-live performance may enjoy an appealing gloss, but you can say the same thing about supermarket apples—and we know how good they taste. One of the main challenges of the organic food movement has been to get people to see past the scuffs and dents and blemishes of honest produce, to focus on authentic flavors. Velveeta, of course, is flawless in its way, but over the past few years some have found that rough-hewn blocks of stinky, crumbling cheese are preferable to the homogeneous perfection of processed cheese product.

I wonder if, just as there have been efforts to label organic foods with a seal of green approval, there might be room for some enterprising organization to offer a seal of authenticity in live performance. It might be quite the task—rather on the order of sending arms inspectors to track down traces of plutonium in Pyongyang. But we now know there are at least a couple of easy tests to determine the veracity of a live performance: For starters, check the cellist’s bow for soap.



Jennifer Hudson

Since when is
'great' not good
enough?

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