

BEYOND INTERPRETATION: MUSICAL PERFORMANCE AS CREATIVE PRACTICE

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This keynote paper had three parts. The first—“Interpretation versus performance”—explored a range of terminological and conceptual issues of relevance both to the act of performance and to the field of performance studies, thereby establishing essential premises for the case study that would follow. Part 2—“Engaging with musical notation”—developed those issues with regard to the primary sources of Chopin’s music, with a view to considering how certain notational elements might be broached in performance. After describing the composer’s characteristic “long accents,” I argued that these features operate not only at local levels but also, in principle, at more remote levels of structure, with a direct bearing on the shape of the music as performed. The final part—“Creative performance in profile”—drew upon the two preceding sections in an autoethnographic study of my experience as a member of the jury of the International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition in October 2015. The aim was to demonstrate how the process of adjudication might constitute, or at least contribute to, an act of artistic research, while also shedding light on the creative agency of performers as opposed to the merely interpretative role that they are commonly thought to carry out in respect of the scores that they use.

The notion of interpretation was in fact the starting point for this hour-long illustrated talk. Having adduced various definitions of “interpretation” and “performance” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, I quoted Roy Howat’s provocative observation from 1995:

Ravel’s request that pianists “not interpret my music but just play it” focuses the question for performers: can we actually “interpret music”? Surely not, except by grossly distorting it. What we can interpret – indeed, can only interpret – is its notation. Since notation, to quote the ever-literal French, “partitions” music (that is, represents or encodes it in a welter of mostly binary symbols, involving variable conventions and shorthands), it cannot help but distort it, and our task is to “read back through” the distortions on paper, employing aural and visual awareness, skill and sensitivity. (Howat 1995: 3)

This prompted the articulation of a series of fundamental principles. The first took the form of a pair of statements:

1. Musical notation is *underspecified/undetermined*; thus, it needs to be “completed”/complemented.
2. Musical notation is *overspecified/overdetermined*; thus, it cannot always be taken at face value.

Conveniently forgotten by those who argue in favor of the pre-eminence of composers’ intentions and the ostensible authority of the score, these simple truths challenge the traditional communication chain that has dominated musical and musicological thought for generations, whereby the composer’s ideas are reified in the form of notation, which putatively forms the basis of performers’ communication of those ideas to listeners. According to this model, performers act as conduits rather than as creative agents in their own right. To “unchain” the performer, I proposed an alternative trajectory, one more in keeping with recent thinking about musical performance as a creative practice:¹

¹ Consider, for example, the work of the AHRC Research Centre for Musical Performance as Creative Practice (CMPCP; <http://www.cmpcp.ac.uk>), including the five books published by the Centre on this subject.

- The composer has ideas about sound, time, gesture, and so forth, which are “materialized” (i.e., reified) in the form of musical notation.
- A performer engaging with that notation “makes sense” (i.e., makes music) of the elements therein; the resultant music is “materialized” in the act of performance.
- A listener/viewer/analyst/etc. engaging with a given performance “makes sense” of its materials, possibly with one or more forms of “materialization” as an outcome.

In respect of the sense-making activities of performers and listeners alike, some further principles about musical structure were expounded:

- Musical materials do not in themselves have or constitute structure(s): they *afford* the inference of structural relationships.
- Thus, musical structure should be seen as *constructed*, not immanent; as *pluralistic*, not singular.
- Furthermore, because of music’s time-dependency, musical structure should be understood first and foremost as a *process*, not as “architecture”—especially in relation to performance.²

It was noted that these points would be applied later in the paper when analyzing a particular performance during the Chopin Competition and in assessing my immediate response to it.

The first part ended with an overview of the field of musical performance studies, with reference to Pace (2017). One of the aims was to note that of the nine or so subdomains identified by Pace, four would be germane to the ensuing autoethnographic study:

- performance-as-research/performance-based research/artistic research into performance, “generally undertaken by practitioners and requiring a practical element”;
- “ethnographic studies of performance and performers”;
- “cultural history and study of performances”; and
- “detailed study of specific performers and groups of performers” (ibid.: 282).

The second part of the paper acted as a pivot between the general principles set out in Part 1 and the case study in the last part. It entailed a closer look at musical notation and consideration of the implications thereof for creative performance. I cast the spotlight on the distinctive long accents in Chopin’s scores, which he typically employed for a range of purposes:

- to give long notes sustained expressive stress;
- to convey a “leaning” quality (i.e., directional impulse) to appoggiaturas, suspensions, and syncopations;
- to foreground groups of notes, among them trills, acciaccaturas, grace notes, appoggiaturas, suspensions, syncopations, and lines to bring out; and
- to ensure the projection of tied notes, especially syncopated notes held over a barline.³

As suggested above, the aim of the discussion was twofold: first, to show how even minute details of the score can yield significant—and highly variable—effects on the shape of music as performed, and secondly, to demonstrate how the principles of shape associated with long accents might operate at a more remote structural level in the case of Chopin’s music as well as more

² For further discussion see Rink (2015).

³ See Rink (2005) for additional details.

generally. Respective illustrations were provided, initially at the keyboard, most notably in describing a passage from the Prelude in E minor Op. 28 No. 4, where a long accent notated by Chopin in his *Stichvorlage* for the French first edition was inaccurately reproduced in the latter, with “corrections” made in the scores of his students in the form of unusual but inspired fingering penciled in by Chopin himself to create the *effect* of a long accent albeit via different notational means. We then turned to the Waltz Op. 34 No. 1, where high-level stress patterns affecting whole sections of the music were illustrated, in particular the “long accent” effect of a passage in the recapitulation, which gives rise to a further extension of the established hypermetrical pattern in order to generate a sweep of energy towards the coda. Properties such as these would be invoked later when analyzing the Chopin Competition performance, building upon the groundwork laid here. Further reinforcement of that groundwork followed by discussing how the dynamic properties of music as notated in the score can yield a sort of “potential energy” uniquely unleashed in the hands of individual performers on discrete performance occasions.

These ideas were put to the test during the final part of the presentation, which began by describing the timetable of the Chopin Competition, namely three successive elimination rounds leading to several days of Finals, stretching in total from 3 to 16 October 2015. The basis for the autoethnographic study⁴ was then established, with reference to four foundations or “axes” for the research project that I undertook long after the Competition,⁵ including scholarly literature on ethnography and autoethnography;⁶ additional literature on adjudication; historical, psychological, and analytical research into music by myself and others; and decades of experience on my part as a performing musician, music teacher, and examiner, and adjudicator. The diverse research resources that I drew on in this retrospective enquiry were outlined:

- extensive interview material detailing the personal criteria that I had used in assessing competitors;
- notes taken by me during each performance for private purposes, not “for research” in the first instance;
- the scores assigned by jury members, all of which were published online after the Competition;
- published reviews and other critiques of the competitors;
- video recordings of the competitors on YouTube;
- editions of the music played during the Competition; and
- other material published about the Competition.

I also cited the overriding qualities that I had sought when judging pianists in the Competition, which I retrospectively identified as outstanding pianistic ability, a “deep understanding” of Chopin (which I acknowledged could be variably defined), and what I termed “imaginative and uniquely personal assimilation of the music (‘ownership’)”.

The remainder of the presentation concentrated on a singular performance in the Competition—that of Georgijs Osokins in Round 1, playing the Etude in B minor Op. 25 No. 10. A video of the

⁴ For the full study see Rink (in press).

⁵ It must be emphasized that during the Competition itself, my sole aim was to carry out my duties as a member of the jury; only later did I realise that I had all the necessary ingredients for a research project, including some initial “problems” or questions; access to a contextualising literature; a full set of documentation; and methods for carrying out the research.

⁶ One item of particular relevance was Scott (1991).

performance was screened, followed by discussion of the strategies that I had gleaned from Osokins' performance while initially listening to it during the Competition, when I had to decide with lightning speed not only what he was doing but whether or not it "worked" in the terms that he himself defined within his performance. Among other things, I argued that the *effect* of Osokins' conception was essentially Chopinesque, even if the means that he employed to realize it were highly individualistic. I also observed that many of the performance features that I described—with reference to the notes that I had jotted down at the time—were consciously apprehended by me as the music was being played, whereas I only felt or intuited others (which is not to deny their validity). In essence, these various features could be boiled down to the strategy—to the shape—outlined in Figure 1, in which the initial retractions and the

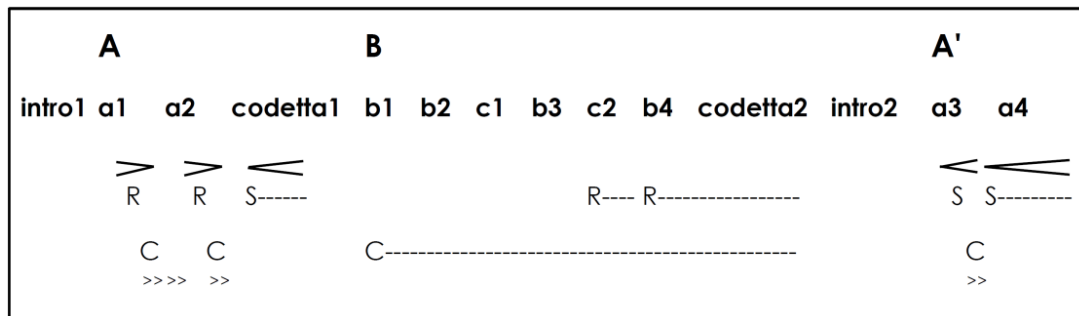


Figure 1

Chopin, Etude in B minor Op. 25 No. 10: A–B–A' form and subsections, with post-hoc representation of the expressive strategy perceived by John Rink in Georgijs Osokins' performance in Round 1 of the Chopin Competition, 5 October 2015. R = retraction; C = contrapuntal foregrounding; S = surge, also denoted by <; > = long accent. Reproduced from Rink (in press).

foregrounded, "long accented" appoggiaturas that I identified created expectations on which I then pegged the rest of the performance. Osokins' ensuing manipulation of tempo, dynamics, pianistic counterpoint, and so forth fed into the emergent musical narrative, which is to say structure, that I both construed and constructed as a listener—one that was not without its surprises. In fact, the power of those surprises—including the "huge panache" that I remarked on in my notes and the reversal of the retraction pattern during the reprise—was astounding. At the same time, Osokins' virtuoso playing channeled Chopin's own pianistic style, if idiosyncratically. All of this explains the unusually high score that I assigned to his performance. It would have been hard for me to imagine a more successful rendition in the terms that Osokins himself seemed to adopt and in respect of the criteria that I had in mind as articulated above.

The presentation ended with a summary of the outcomes of the autoethnographic study, among them the following:

- a "novel approach" to the analysis of performance—emphasizing strategy, shape and other dynamic qualities arising from and pertaining to music as it is made and perceived;
- not just description of experience or the knowledge gained through it, but rather assessment of how that knowledge was generated (see Scott 1991);

- the discovery that much more can occur in the act of listening than deciding whether a performance is good or bad, or whether one likes it or not;
- a reminder that weighing the evidence of experience requires more than face-value consideration of the written notes or verbal commentary of those having the experience in question: if misapprehension is to be avoided, it is essential to combine multiple perspectives along with healthy circumspection about what is present within or absent from such evidence;
- demonstration of the considerable effort expended by jurors in weighing up the artistic character and merits of hundreds of individual performances, often within minutes. The intense concentration required of adjudicators has not been widely enough acknowledged—and in that respect the study illuminates what Ellis et al. (2011: [35]) refer to as “unfamiliar cultural processes,” thereby fulfilling one of the goals of autoethnography in general; and
- a distinctive exercise in artistic research, focused on the one hand on the artistic activity of another musician (which I could understand and describe thanks to, and through the lens of, my own artistic experience and understanding) and, on the other, on the activity of the adjudicator, which the demonstration here attempted to portray as an artistic endeavor in its right.

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