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# Musical visualisation – an important tool in professional performance

Ligia-Claudia ŞUTEU [1]

***Abstract:*** *Visualisation and mental imagery represent the main theme of this case study, in which five professional musicians (one composer, two pianists and two violinists) were interviewed. Participants from the Faculty of Music of the Transilvania University of Braşov were chosen, in order to express their opinion of the use of mental training. It was realised an analysis of their musical and compositional preparation, in which psychological projection plays a very important role. Using a semi-structured technique, the results demonstrate how a composer and a musician use musical visualisation as a part of a solid career.*

Keywords: *mental projection, musical visualisation, professional musicians.*

## 1. Introduction

The study aims to highlight the benefits of mental activity to musicians and analyze it. In this case, five different figures have been studied in terms of musical activity and mental projection, body consequences, habits and other aspects that can enrich music psychology literature.

The article explores different approaches to the formation of mental projection and auditory awareness in the interpretative act. As a final stage of the trajectory from general musical activity to the specific one, this study continues to investigate the relationship of images with perception. Projection and visualization are certainly very important for professional musicians.

This study illustrates the point of view of five professional musicians, two violinists, one composer and two pianists.

The case study wishes to find out how they describe the mental projection, how important and how widespread is music imaging in an expert's musical activity and what is its relation to perception? This study is an investigation of these

[1] Transilvania University of Braşov, claudiasuteu@yahoo.com

aspects, analyzing the relationship of mental representations with the music they perceive.

It was used a semi-structured technique, designed to capture the individual experiences of the interviewees. While the respondents were selected because of their work as professional musicians, the intent was not to be considered the representatives of a very broad category of music. The purpose of the interview was to explore the emerging themes of the relation between musical imagination and perception in the musical activity and to allow the respondents to express their own conclusions of the imaginary experience. The interviews lasted from 1 to 3 hours, taking place in the piano class of the Faculty of Music in Brasov. The responses have been carefully analyzed and compared to determine how the mental projection is useful in the musician's career, depending on the habits of the five subjects.

## 2. Methods

It will be given an insight into the participants and working patterns, wishing to investigate the extent to which a balance is struck between the strictly interpretive activity and the visual projection concept described in this chapter.

Semi-structured techniques are specifically designed to create a strict framework based on a well-grounded plan (questionnaires, demonstrations, etc.), through which the subject's creativity is increased and his active participation in the various targeted experiments.

There was a program, there were previously conceived questions, but the discussions were derived from various aspects of mental projection and a number of additions were made.

### 2.1. Participants and stimuli

The participants are students of the Faculty of Music in Brasov, pianists, violinists and a composer with long musical careers, who apply constantly the method of visualization and the mental projection. Although all subjects are musicians, the visions are different, due to the fact that besides soloists, the two pianists also have affinities for composition, the vision being different. Participants are between 19 and 25 years of age, each with experience in musical visualization.

The five participants were interviewed in classrooms without disturbing elements.

A careful analysis of how they apply the mental projection, whether it is the instrumental/compositional preparation or performance-related performance of the violin and piano.

Each case was analyzed separately, repeatedly and systematically to determine the main themes by the musician, being the practitioner of mental projection. At the last stage of the proceedings, the common issues were compared.

### 2.2. Procedures

In the proceedings, the interview of the composer began. Questions have been asked about his musical background, composition, teaching, the direction of contemporary music, and his own mental projection experiences. Emerging key themes were the differences between composing and imaging of music, the respective limitations of visualization and perception of music, conceptual flexibility, musical significance, musical familiarity, consciousness issues, and the control of the appearance and nature of the projected musical imagery.

Regarding questions about perception, image and mental projection, he described the composition process as one of looking beyond what is given to a musician, the instrument and the score. The composition requires experimentation and imagination (Bharucha 2006, 152).

It is important to note that the composer has explained sound manipulation as being the most effective way to extend musical interpretation.

Exploring his own world and exceeding certain limits, he explains the need for external help, this being the mental projection.

This difference between purely psychic musical exploration and the physical manipulation of sound was also mentioned in relation to the relationship of composition with improvisation. The composer explained how improvisation depends on motor pictures and habits, and how detachment from the learned structures requires some kind of exploration and assuming the necessary risks to get out of a known mental representation (Hargreaves 2011, 65).

When doubting the value of the compositional ideas, the subject clearly articulated the need to balance the establishment of ideas and maintain flexibility.

It is not surprising that musical familiarity, experience and perceptual contribution have had a direct influence on their own musical images of the composer. For example, he talks about musicians with eidetic auditory images, recognizing that people with such musical abilities exist, but there is a possibility of unconsciousness of their own abilities (Patel 2003, 39). The composer resorts to

analogies to some extraordinary cases of musical imaging, to familiarize the individual with a certain idiom. He will invoke famous examples of children with autism who could listen to a Chopin or even Rachmaninov work, but if they listened to Schoenberg, it would be impossible to complete an audition like this. The mental images, even in the case of autistic people, are particular, representing a broad area of interest for musical psychology.

As far as the actual experience of mental projection is concerned, the composer has reported the capability of overlapping a mental image of sound, real musical perception. The example he gives is not being able to interpret all musical ideas to the piano, so it is necessary to imagine additional ideas for those who are sung. However, the perception can not be right for the images in terms of veracity of the sound color (Scherer 2001, 389).

The subject described this type of imagination as passive. This description also refers to the difference between the voluntary experience and the involuntary, passive and active image, depending on the role of the projection in the chosen musical activity. Frequently mentioned elements as part of his mental musical image were harmony, tension, movement, spatial imaging, texture and rhythm.

It is important how changes in introspection can change the whole process of imaging.

The key emerging themes that were addressed in the concert pianists interviewing and the two violinists, were the definition and centralization of an orientation concept, the importance of formulating detailed aspects of a piece before interpreting it, the balance in mental preparation, ideals and realities, conceptual flexibility and methods to develop auditory perception (Aitken, 1997, pg. 156).

For pianists and violinists, the ability to imagine the details of a musical piece is a secondary stage of conception, but an essential part of the mental preparation that it considers necessary before interpreting a musical work, be it a piano or any other instrument. They considered the relationship between conception and detail as a cyclical process in progress.

The whole interview focused on this firm conviction that mental rehearsal should precede and lead any physical practice.

During the interview, one pianist was in the process of preparing the polonaises of F. Chopin. He described this activity as a difficult one, placing a particular emphasis on mental training. This explained that he could spend a great deal of the day analyzing the score, without the instrument, mentally going through the soundtrack. It is obvious how such a detailed analysis, far from the instrument, requires a mental representation rather than a perception. The total isolation in mental work, without physical performance, only by projection of the driving

elements, is an extreme method. The extreme isolation of the mental preparation of the interpretative act is in some contradiction with the description of the pianist in terms of a balance which is particularly necessary for the career of a soloist. This balance complements this, refers to the practical aspects of managing the repertoire in terms of physical and psychological training, designing new images daily, in addition to solving technical and expressive problems.

The balance between mental and physical dimensions may change throughout the course of preparation in interpreting, but the guiding conception, a fundamental mental measure, is present throughout. The pianist described his own approach to performance as controlled imprecision, a phrase that exemplifies the necessary balance between conscious and unconscious thinking in a piece. Control must be introduced, this being a predominantly conscious phenomenon. Unwanted unconscious influence should be avoided.

## 3. Results and discussions

All five respondents expressed in various ways the importance of flexibility in the perception and imaging of music. For example, the composition was a delicate balance in setting a musical idea, without letting it become stagnant and rooted, either mentally or through notation and perception. In the case of instrumental performance, flexibility is conceived, this being a schematic frame that allows the change of image and perception (Peacocke 2009, 258).

In the case of the compositional experience, the distinction between the music and its projection is particularly important, namely, the composition and interpretation imply the development of a given material, while the visualization is a means of examining the given material. For the composer, balancing perceived and imagined sound as a source of creativity is essential to ensure both fluidity and fixation in the composition process. Familiarity with music has been described as a source for imagination (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, pg. 47), but too much familiarity with the perception of his composition could stifle the development and topicality of the themes. The composer described the composition by two methods: deliberate projection of music by developing an idea and spontaneous participation in this process through a mental projection session.

Designing musical moments, musicians create a conception of the interpretative act, providing them with a framework in which they can operate with a certain degree of freedom (Lucas, 2010, pg. 403).. The pianists believed that interpreters should be able to imagine their tempo in the same musical work,

managing to change it easily in the mental projection and then on the instrument. Their mental images are not restrictive, but liberating.

The violinists consider that physical limitations, time and ambition are the only factors that can prevent or improve the rendering of an interpretation close to the ideal.

Despite the emphasis on imaging, it is unlikely that the pianist will imagine the road ahead, through full mental performance in real time (Dahlhaus 1983, 236). Firstly, extreme concentration would be necessary. Secondly, the creative freedom offered by the flexibility of images would surely be lost in a mental performance that will deviate from reality, and of course a balance is needed. It is worth noting the attention given to auditory images, kinesthetic preoccupations having a subordinate role in the interpretation of music.

For violinists, mental projection is a particularly important component, but it focuses equally on interpretation and visualization.

They described situations where over-familiarization with perceived music might occur. For the composer, this could involve hearing a composition repeatedly and becoming indifferent to its growth potential, while for the musicians it would be a negative influence on performance, with the risk that it would be driven by factors physical, before a mental conception has been created.

Related interviews demonstrate the close relationship of images with perception in music. Moreover, imagination is an extra dimension, though complicated, not only for composers, but also for any musician who wants to improve and create a personal style (MacDonald, 2012, pg. 189).

As highlighted from the outset, the aim of the study was to gather detailed information about the perspective of individuals on the relationship of image with perception in professional musical life. Despite the importance of considering each interviewed subject as an individual, the common evidence of the five respondents suggests a flow between perception and musical imagination.

## 4. Conclusions

Establishing an idealized concept is to provoke oneself, and this challenge is to fit its interpretation with imagination (Livingstone 2009, 85).

Familiarity with music, through repetitive perception, involves leading to an appropriate mental picture. However, an ideal for the interviewed subjects is to avoid being overused with interpreted music. Their reality is described as a possible loss of freshness. A direct comparison can be made between this artist's desire to

renew his musical ideas and balancing the perception, in order to maintain creative freshness (Ward 2004, 193).

The violinists believe that processes should be automated by mental thinking, more than physical trends. Maintaining in mind an ideal performance, requires images, but also a perceptual feedback mechanism. Trying to do more things at a time, one can design the action, it can be done to be studied and processed. In the light of this processing, ideas can be drawn for the future and for possible changes and improvements (Ward 2007, 31).

Ideally, the formulation of a conception and the subsequent ability to imagine the desired sound will allow musicians to diagnose their own problems (Lakoff 1980, 28).

However, in their role as a part-time teacher, the pianists admitted that in reality, it is difficult to persuade a student to spend time for mental projection, away from the instrument. The pianists approve and support the advantages of the predominant mental and intellectual approach to performance, but recognize the idealism of this idea.

For musicians, it is important to maintain the conception of an ideal. For example, they described their reluctance to study a lot in the concert halls because of the inadequacy of the violin, something that could disrupt their idealized image of music (Seashore 2013, 178). The physical inadequacy of the instrument is largely under their control, while the ideal conception of how performance should take place can no longer be controlled by the soloist.

To conclude, it is argued that musical images are closely related to musical perception and vice versa. Professional musicians use visual projection in a practical way to perform their functions in their musical activities.

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