

EXPRESSIVITY AS FACTOR OF EXCELLENCE IN MUSICAL PERFORMANCE

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Abstract: *Expressivity is one of the main modalities for listeners to make a deep connection to music and emotionally respond to its messages. Researches have proven that the desire to have emotionally pleasant experiences, by music, is one of the students' main motivational sources. The challenge, for professors, is to find the ways to teach expressivity, along with other music-related elements, with a view to offering the students the possibility to identify themselves more closely with the musical masterpieces, as well as to benefit from more significations.*

The purpose of this paper is to consider how the theory and researches on expressivity may help in the daily practice of the musical study. In the first place, a traditional vision on expressivity is described; then, a revised approach, based on modern researches, is presented. In the end, a new empirical approach is submitted and assessed, which is aimed at increasing expressivity and which is called cognitive feedback (CFB).

Keywords: *Musical Expressivity, Emotion, Creative Strategies.*

1. Expressivity as performing element

The complex structure of the performing art, the multitude of its elements and the possibility of its manifold configurations – they all produce an infinite number of interpretative versions of a composition. While the score, the composer's style, the characteristic features and the qualities of the masterpiece remain historically unchanged, the mode of their achievement depends on the performer's cultural background, sensitivity, imagination, knowledge and intelligence. Likewise, the stylistic convention, specific to the composer's time, by virtue of its being a clear and constant aesthetic reality, is

influenced by the historical circumstances enclosed within aesthetic limits.

The performing art supposes the use of the basic material, the notation of a piece and its entire background, with a certain intellectually controlled freedom to deviate. The invaluable gift of artistic intuition, praised by performers, along with creative inspiration, sometimes really genial, which generally enriches the creative performing act, must be subjected to intellectual verification. The way to re-create is an expression that extends the term of *performance* over a sphere of irrational realities: creative imagination, artistic intuition, emotional quality and openness towards transcendence. It is tangential both to aesthetics and to

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psychology, drawing our attention towards the interpretation of the re-creative spiritual potential. In simpler terms, the analysis above allows us to grasp the structure of the phenomenon called *art of musical performance*. This art encompasses the performer's intellectual capacity, the musical knowledge, the spiritual culture, as well as his/her creative potential, which are the distinguishing sign of real talent.

The performer completes somehow the composer's image. The former explains the places of the accents, determines what has to be highlighted, organizes the latter's nuances and comments. We dare say there is no standard performance of a musical piece. A work of art is a living substance whose spirit has been acting on people, in some cases, for eons. The vitality of an artwork may be perceived and performed in various modes, by performers living in different times and cultures.

All known treaties on the performing art share one thing: they highlight the importance and responsibility associated with the role of performer.

The notion that music is expressive seems to be accepted among researchers, although the concept of expressivity in itself remained evasive. This is reflected, to a certain extent, both in education and in the research of the expression terms.

By musical education, studies have shown that the explicit teaching of expressive competencies was neglected, to a great extent, and that the available learning methods seem to rely rather on traditional theories than on validated empirical knowledge. Why are things regarded in this way? In the first place, the nature of musical expressivity does not lend itself easily to official description. For instance, much knowledge on expressivity is tacit; therefore, difficult to convey by words. In the second place, researchers could not offer the music teachers and

professors, the theories capable of guiding the development of teaching strategies for the expressive competences.

Expressivity in musical performance is usually studied in isolation from any other teaching methods for the expression; and the studies on the teaching strategies do not usually investigate the nature of expressivity in itself. These aspects should not be separated. Fortunately, the last decades' researches allowed the development of theoretical teaching strategies, targeting the nature of expressivity.

Experimental studies on musical performance have been conducted for at least 100 years. The researchers investigated the expression of performance, mainly by measuring the various acoustic parameters of performance, and by relating these measurements to a musical notation. In this particular context, expressivity usually refers to the systematic variations or to the deviation of the tempo, dynamics, timber and pitch, which form the so-called microstructure of performance.

The studies on expressivity, in musical performance, have advanced from merely considering the basic principles of expressivity, towards much subtler aspects. To the deciphering of the microstructure of a typical musical performance, a vast number of factors contribute, which basically influence expressivity. Here are a few examples of influential factors on expressivity, in musical performance:

*musical piece-related factors: musical composition in itself, notational variations, musical style/genre;

*performer-related factors: structural performance, expressive intention of the musical piece, depending on the state it must convey, performer's expressive-emotional style and technical abilities, motor precision, performer's state during performance, body language, interaction

with the other performers, audience's perception and interaction between performer and audience;

*instrument-related factors: available acoustic parameters, instrumental aspects specific to timber, pitch;

*listener-related factors: musical preferences, musical expertise, personality, state of mind during performance, listener's attention to performance;

*contextual factors: acoustic, sound technology, listening context, visual conditions of performance.

Musical performance is a complex process, affected by numerous music-related factors. As a consequence of the practice associated to experimental studies, the researchers were forced to put in parentheses most factors enumerated above and focus instead on the basic principles of musical performance, which go beyond a certain context of the time and place specific to the performance. There are various types of expressivity contributing to the aesthetic impact of a performance. An example of expressivity monitoring are Patrik Juslin's researches [3] focused on what the performers add to music, in order to make it expressive. He submitted the model GERMS, which includes generative rules, emotional expression, motor random variability, motion principles and stylistic surprise. The *generative rules* musically mark the structure. Due to the variations of the parameters of tempo, dynamics, articulation, a performer is able to communicate the borders, metric accents and harmonic structure. The generative aspects may raise the emotional impact of music, especially the rise of expression, inherent in the structure of a musical piece. Consequently, a part of the expression reflects the structure of a musical piece, filtered through the performer's interpretation. *Emotional expression* serves to transmit the audience's emotions. By manipulating all aspects of the

performance, such as tempo, timber and sound intensity, a performer is capable to play the same structure with different emotional characters. Often, the performer will try to support the emotional character conveyed by the musical piece (melody, harmony). *Random fluctuations* reflect human limitations in motor precision. Several studies revealed that, when expert performers try to play perfectly, there are slight involuntary fluctuations in the tempo of their performance. The practice induces consistency in speed, precision and fluency; yet, it seems that random variations contribute to the 'living' character of music. *Movement principles* refer to the fact that a pleasant performance is one where the expressive microstructure complies with the basic constraints of the animated movement. In terms of *stylistic 'surprise'* – they reflect the performer's deliberate attempt to deviate from the stylistic expectations regarding the conventions imposed on performance, with a view to adding tension and unpredictability. This aspect may be the least researched.

All these components reflect the psycho-physical relation, amid the acoustic characteristics of the performance and the listeners' psychological features. In reality, all these five components have different origins, display different characteristics and are processed, to a certain extent, by different parts of the brain. Yet, which are the implications of the five rules, in the musical education? One of them is that, in some strategies, various aspects of expressivity should be learnt separately, as they display distinct characteristics. In relation to the model of the five components above, a performance ought to convey the generative structure of music, to express emotions, to display motor precision, to be suggestive and to deviate from the stylistic expectations, in pleasant aesthetic ways.

Juslin and his colleagues created a computational model, in order to evaluate the effect of each factor. When a factor is isolated, the evaluation reflects the absence of other elements; yet, Juslin concluded that each of these elements might be learnt throughout the teaching process [5].

2. Signification of the term ‘musical expressivity’

The insight into expression and emotion has changed over time, similarly to the expressive characteristics of performance.

Philosophers, musicologists and musicians wrote on expressivity, often with the completion that expressivity hid a mystery. They drew the conclusion that expressivity was an utterly subjective quality, indescribable in scientific terms. Musicians are often incapable or unwilling to define expressivity. Nevertheless, this does not imply the impossibility to study expressivity in objective terms. Note that a common teaching strategy, focused on the development of the expressive abilities, supposes the existence of objective correlations. The professor’s performance offers an acoustic model of what (s)he expects from the student, whereas the student is required to learn by his / her simply imitating the professor. The problem is that the student is required to take the relevant characteristics of the model, which may be difficult for a student, who must know exactly what to listen and how to represent music, resorting to the terms of the specific abilities.

The concentration on emotions may help a performer to naturally translate them into adequate sounds. The listener does not have direct access to the performer’s emotions. What reach the listener are the sonorous properties of music. The emotion is communicated inasmuch as the sound properties contain information on emotion. As noticed by Sloboda [2], the students

seldom monitor the expressive result of their performance. To speak truth, recent surveys indicate that 50% of the students very rarely or never listen to their recordings [1]. Listening to one’s performance reveals the degree of closeness to the expressive intentions, of the performance. Some musicians listen to their own performances: “This may be very instructive. When I listen to it, I wonder why I sang so fast or why I didn’t sing more poetically a certain part”, Murray Perahia stated. [4] Certainly, concentrating on emotions may help the performer activate the existing scheme of the emotional expression. A performer may resort to emotional memories, in order to induce certain states and to pass from one expression to another, within the same musical piece.

The treaties on art focus most times on intuition. Musicians are usually not aware of the details on the substantiation of their expressive intentions, while they play. Insofar as the expressive characteristics are tacitly used, they constitute a problem for teaching expressivity, which is based, to a great extent, on verbal instructions. Moreover, as expert performers do not consciously think how to apply the expressive aspects in their performance, the conclusion may be erroneously drawn that students do not benefit from the methods recommended for applying these aspects. Note that, applied wilfully, these strategies are subject to automaticity, as a result of the study. For instance, although a performer initially applies consciously the expressive aspects, the association between characteristics and emotions will soon be internalized by the performer and is under no conscious control. Recent studies have shown that the explicit instructions are beneficial in learning expressivity; for instance, the most efficient approach to expressive performance implies consciously identifying and implementing the specific expressive features.

The most popular idea nurtured by musicians, on what music expresses, refers to emotion. Nevertheless, emotions expressed in music highly differ from emotions felt in everyday life. Music allegedly expresses emotions so subtle and so complex, that they can't be rendered by words – which mean they are ineffable. A few aspects exist, in musical experience, which are difficult to express in words; yet, this does not necessarily apply to emotions. Probably, the listeners mistake the subtleness and variety of music in itself, with the emotions actually expressed. The concept that the emotions expressed in music are ineffable is not helpful in musical education. How can professors put the ineffable in words?

One of the commonest teaching strategies for the expressive abilities is the use of metaphors, which supposes that emotions expressed in music are similar to the emotions felt in everyday life. Metaphors are useful, as the emotions felt in a non-musical context may help to the formation of the relevant musical emotions. However, the metaphors depend on the performer's personal experience, which includes words and images. Therefore, metaphors may be ambiguous, in terms of direction, for the performer. Yet, the fact that students in music find expressive extra-musical sources suggests that the emotions expressed in music have much in common with emotions felt in everyday life.

The four myths on musical expressivity, described so far, tend to consolidate the fifth. If expressivity is completely subjective and has no connection to an explicit understanding or to emotions, as they are commonly known, then it will be very difficult to teach expressivity to students. The expertise in musical performance is often seen as synthesis of the *technical and expressive abilities*. However, the technical aspects of the

performance are often regarded as abilities that can be learnt, whereas the expressive aspects are considered to be instinctive.

Sloboda says that a consequence of this myth is that musical expressivity would only reflect the musical talent beyond learning and development. It is rather true, as the expressive abilities reflect sometimes the musician's emotional sensitivity. This does not imply the impossibility to develop expressive abilities, by training. Probably, the critical problem is *how* expressivity is being taught to students. The essential, in the teaching and learning process, is to supply a feedback, in order to compare their current strategy with the representation of an ideal strategy. The aforementioned traditional teaching strategies, modelling and metaphors, seldom offer an informative feedback, as they do not provide the performers with the comparison of their current performance strategies and an optimal strategy.

3. Ways of teaching *musical expressivity*

An important requirement in teaching emotional expressivity is the improvement of emotions. Nevertheless, the purpose should consist in offering the performers the necessary methods for developing their own expressivity. The basic criteria for a successful teaching strategy are submitted below, to the performers' benefit.

In the first place, the teaching strategy should comply with the nature of the communicative process. Secondly, the teaching strategy should include three elements required by practice: a well set task, informative feedback and the opportunities for repetition and error correction. On the other hand, the teaching strategy should offer the performer the comparison of his performance with an optimal reference model.

Although there are, currently, various types of software, helping the performers to develop, the software CFB-Cognitive Feedback has some conceptual deficiencies. The issue of developing expressivity raises crucial questions, about what represents an ideal performance. This problem covers several artistic aspects, including originality, beauty, emotion, balance and personal expression. At the same time, there is not clear whether all performers, on whatsoever level, can benefit from this software. For the beginners, this software may be too complicated, whereas the experts have already perfected most aspects treated by the software. In this way, the software might be useful to the performers of an intermediate level.

Resorting to the software CFB brings several advantages: it may offer a non-aggressive critical feedback. At the same time, this software may help performers to attain the desired level of performance in a reliable manner.

The studies on emotional expression, as manifest in the facets of performance (timbre, tempo) have greatly developed, over the last decade. Expert performers are able to communicate the basic emotions, (happiness, sadness, anger, fear, sensitivity) with similar precision, as in the case of vocal or facial emotional expression.

Many studies attempted to describe the 'code' used by performers to convey each emotion. They showed that performers manipulated variables, such as tempo, sound level, articulation, attack, intonation, vibrato, with a view to expressing various emotions.

4. Conclusions

This study proves that modern pedagogy should incorporate the new teaching

techniques, related to expressivity. The cognitive feedback, used in the aforementioned software, offers an efficient teaching method for emotional expressivity, which completes the traditional teaching strategies.

Adopting these strategies in the musical education requires openness from students and professors, to the purpose of their continuous development, so that musicians might resort, to full capacity, to all available resources meant to increase expressivity.

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