

Reading music: a listening process, breaking the barriers of notation

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Abstract: In order to build an individual relationship with the works they perform, musicians should be able to break the barriers created by pre-established models or "performance's tradition" which is normally the result of reading mistakes. Notation, analysis and other resources that exist to help musicians explore and assimilate a musical message, have become in many cases a source of misunderstandings, sometimes replacing the music itself. Combining the opinion of music psychologists, musicologists, theorists, philosophers and musicians, the author explores three stages of listening during the preparation and execution of a piano performance, emphasizing the value of theoretical and musicological information to not impose, but enrich interpretation, making each performance an unrepeatable event and guaranteeing the immortality of great works.

Keywords: music reading, listening process, music performance, music notation

Lendo música: um processo de escuta, quebrando as barreiras da notação

Resumo: Na construção de uma relação pessoal com as obras que toca, os músicos deveriam ser capazes de quebrar as barreiras criadas por modelos pré-estabelecidos ou da "tradição de performance", o que geralmente resulta de erros de leitura. A notação, a análise e outros recursos que existem para auxiliar músicos a explorar e assimilar a mensagem musical, em muitos casos, se tornaram uma fonte de mal-entendidos, algumas substituindo a própria música. Combinando a opinião de especialistas em psicologia da música, musicólogos, teóricos, filósofos e músicos, são explorados três estágios da escuta durante uma preparação e performance no piano, enfatizando-se o valor da informação teórica e musicológica, não para impor, mas para enriquecer a interpretação, tornando cada performance um evento insubstituível, garantindo assim a imortalidade das grandes obras.

Palavras-chave: leitura musical, processo de escuta, performance musical, notação musical

1- Three Stages of Listening

Let's first consider that music doesn't need to be written in order to exist. From the beginning of music history until the beginning of the 19th century, performer and composer were almost always the same person, who eventually used the score as a personal guide. It is not difficult to imagine how natural, fluent and convincing sounded their performances; music came from where it was conceived: each phrase was anticipated before being performed and while the physical result was being listened to, the next one was anticipated, in a continuous motion until there was no more to be said.

This process can also be observed in jazz players' improvisations: fluent and naturally colored by dynamics and quality of sound. Since interpreters access the music they perform through the score it becomes evident that they need to redo the compositional process from the printed music back to the composer's inner-ear, absorbing the music as if it was their own, recreating the sense of improvisation.

According to BLACKING (1979, p.4-5), "the composition of music has always required its re-

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composition by performer and audience, if it is to move out of the private mind of the individual composer." He also states that "some, if not all, of the mental processes involved in composition are also required for intelligent listening." Indeed listening is present in all stages of music making. REIMER & WRIGHT (1992, p.231) consider it the "foundational interaction with music," and summarize the whole process: "the composer listens while composing, the performer while performing and both produce sounds to which others will listen."

Within this concept, three stages of listening can be defined involving musical performance: the first stage basically consists of "listening from the score"; during this stage, a sounding image of the piece is built which will guide the entire preparation process. The second stage involves practicing consciously guided by inner hearing; physical hearing is also activated, checking whether the live sound matches the model previously shaped in the mind. There will be moments for re-reading and re-listening, for thinking about the music, considering and deciding, whistling or humming the melodic line or reading about the composer and his work. There will also be moments to let the piece aside for a while to give place to what Jonathan DUNSBY (1995, p.10-11) calls "unconscious assimilation." The final stage, the performance itself, gives evidence of what the performer was able to hear from the score; it involves primarily the process of monitoring the performance. The musical stimulus comes from the inner-ear before playing, the results are checked and the connection to the next musical stimulus is made. Combining alertness and profound involvement with the music, the performer will also enjoy the music as a listener.

We will dedicate most of this paper to the first stage of this listening process, namely the act of reading music: decoding what is registered in the score, involving the understanding of notation, the visual grouping of the elements accordingly to the relationship among them and finally, the ability to make sense out of it. This is already lots of work since it builds the foundation over which the architecture of individual performances will be sustained.

2- Rebuilding the path from the score to the composer's mind.

"How did musical ideas appear there?" Certainly using sensory-perceptual schemas stored in the long-term memory. We will call this stored sounding material auditory memory, accumulated through life-time musical experience - from the most primitive musical manifestations one may have access to, to the most sophisticated acts of listening and analyzing works by composers from all periods of music history. Supported by a great amount of curiosity and creativity and enriched by all kinds of extra-musical experience, it is the indispensable tool for composers to generate and develop their own musical ideas and for performers to perceive them – in the words of C.P.E BACH (1949, p.148) "to make the ear conscious of the true content and effect of a composition."

Unfortunately, notation, analysis and other resources that should help musicians to explore musical texts, became a source of continuous misunderstandings, sometimes even occupying the place of music itself. Music being a performing art, there is not too much sense in developing theoretical, analytical or musicological knowledge which won't serve to enrich the activity of music making.

For instance, if one of us happened to read a text aloud leaving aside the meaning of its contents, in spite of correct pronunciation and the ability to classify all the language aspects, this person

would be immediately diagnosed as illiterate. An analogy can be made with vocal or instrumental executions: no matter how perfectly decoded and analyzed, if what is written in the score is not transformed into meaningful sounding material, the musician in question could be diagnosed as "musical illiterate."

As a first possible cause of musical illiteracy we could mention the fact that musicians have been divided into categories - composers, performers, teachers, musicologists. Relying on this kind of division, many performers comfortably began to consult fellow musicians to help them solve problems related to basic skills of music reading. In other words, they depend on someone else's reading of the texts they are supposed to incorporate. Another common practice is to call "interpretation" or "tradition" all the bad habits one may achieve through incorrect reading. The immediate consequence is that performances are not any more the result of a long term individual relationship between performer and work; consistent and unique interpretations are disappearing, threatening the immortality of great works.

We could consider as a second cause, the general acceptance that interpretation and accuracy are not correlated. Todd, quoted by AIELLO & SLOBODA (1994, p.260) describe "two extreme ways of approaching a score," based on "the amount of license given to interpreters": one is to try to transcribe what is indicated as accurately as possible, the other is to regard the score as providing a series of basic forms which musical meaning should be re-created by the player. Long before him and in a more radical way, the Greek philosopher Aristoxene de Tarente (BELIS, 1986, p.210) stated that "when auditory impression and theory contradict each other, it is the theory which has to yield." My question is "why should they contradict each other?" The fact that readers belong to different areas of music making, doesn't change what is in the text and therefore shouldn't alter the essence of the message that's extracted from it. In my opinion, what is actually happening is that an incredible emphasis is being made on interpretation, neglecting the fact that in order to interpret we should first read what is written.

Accuracy yes, because we want to bring to life what is in the score having already to accept that:

- a) it is impossible to actually know what was in the mind of the composer since musical ideas sound for the performer out of written information.¹
- b) interpretation will always be present, in the same way that the reading of the same text by two different actors will never sound alike for the simple reason that they are two different individuals.

3- What is in the score?

As a performer, I would like to begin with what we first see when looking at it: structure, form and the notes. No matter how musical ideas were conceived in the composer's mind and how originally they were registered in the score, the final result has structure and form. For many musicians, structure consists the essence of musical meaning; it is within the structure that musicians will explore the contents of the score in a organized and meaningful way.

¹ The maximum we can have, mostly involving twenty century music, is the composer's statement about an specific performance as being in accordance to his conception; even then we cannot be totally sure.

Structure and form's main function is to model a line of musical thoughts; a line which may be neither melodic nor harmonic, but needs to be coherent. This line is formed by all the elements and resources of music notation, including the notes. These elements are connected to each other, in a constant interrelationship: supporting, completing and sometimes explaining each other, but above all, transporting musical ideas. Combined with the awareness of structure and form, the "line of coherence" will lead the performer through the musical text, making him able to later, conduct listeners through the sounding product he captured from it.

Sir Adrian BOULT ([n.d], p. 21) suggests that performers have to present to the public one big score opened as a picture to be admired and profited from; a whole and complete work with meaning. However, it first needs to be stored in the performer's mind as such.

I would like to go through a first reading of *Debussy's Étude No.3 Pour Les Quartes*. It can be approached as a story telling, full of surprises. The beginning of the piece suggests a peaceful environment (measures 1-6) suddenly invaded by an avalanche of fourths *sonore* and *martelé* in *Stretto* (measure 7). The peaceful mood returns in measures 8-9 and prevails through measures 10-17 until a new surprise erupts; this time *Risolto in poco stretto* (measure 18) and then *molto diminuendo* into a new tender theme (measures 20-28) which transforms into a dance (measures 29-36) *Balabile e grazioso (poco animando)*. Everything seems calm until the avalanche of fourths returns (measure 37) and after giving the impression that it is going to calm down (measures 38-39), it reappears (measure 40). This time the *Ritenuto* introduces the listener to a mysterious setting in *sostenuto* (measures 43-45). Still mysterious but *sempre animando* (measures 46-48) and then *scherzando, accelerando*, a new avalanche of fourths appears, this time in *p leggiero* (measure 54) and is repeated enlarged with punctuating G sharps *marqué* (bars 56-57). The *molto crescendo* provokes a more powerful avalanche (measures 59-61) until it stops in *p* (measure 62), which sounds *subito* since it appears right after a *crescendo* indication. The last part of the piece (measures 65-85) suggests a peaceful setting, *p, dolce sostenuto, leggiero, piu p, pp, con tristezza, lontan, pp volubile*, until it disappears (*estinto*).

Of course, since the above paragraph is the description of a sounding image built out of printed material, it won't have a meaning unless the reader decides to pick up the score and explore it. It has been proved to be almost impossible writing about music using only excerpts as examples; they won't make sense unless the reader has a sounding reference of the whole musical message registered in his mind. That is probably the explanation for the increasing number of publications about music including a CD;² authors began to be concerned not only about their ideas being misunderstood but also about really achieving the goal of their writing. (CHUEKE, 2000, p.64).

4- What is in the notes?

Now that we've talked about the main picture, let's consider what is in the notes: SCHOENBERG

² Charles Rosen publications are some more excellent examples. The very dissertation which originated this paper – Chueke, Zelia. Stages of Listening During Preparation and Execution of a Piano Performance. University of Miami, 2000 – included an attached CD with all the musical examples recorded integrally. It is therefore recommended to look for the scores of the works mentioned in this paper, read them and build a sounding image out of them, in order to actually know what is being talked about.

(1975, p.326) states that "among a thousand musicians scarcely one will be found who has the will and ability really to decipher and play what is in the notes." The main reason, according to him, is the fact that music doesn't present a material-subject. Indeed, music is sound. Jeanne Bamberger (AIELLO & SLOBODA, 1994, p.31) believes that "musicians are more likely to talk about their hearing of a piece than about knowledge." Musicians should keep in mind that theoretical and musicological knowledge are not meant to transform sound into something palpable, but to serve as an aid for musicians to make reference to certain aspects of their "hearings" of a piece.

Analytical techniques are not meant to put the music in a pre-existing frame, but to enrich interpreters' approach to the works by composers from different periods. What I am suggesting is that we could let all these techniques collaborate together in our search for the line of coherence. Musicians should be attentive and avoid being imprisoned by knowledge, breaking all the possible barriers which block the discovering of the new even in familiar contexts. The most correct and thorough analysis or all the musicological information about composer, period and style are good guides to the grouping³ of related elements during the act of reading, but will never substitute the sounding experience.

A good antidote for this kind of attitude is the experience with works from which there is no auditory memory: it prepares performers to deal with eventual surprises in musical texts from all periods, liberated from any kind of prejudice or anticipation. In fact it forces the interpreter to exercise actual reading skills, namely, transform written music in sound, instead of exploring it already immersed in previous auditory experiences.

The Austrian pianist Rudolf Buchbinder affirms that the most difficult pieces to play in public are those that "every aunt and cousin play." He says that when pianists play Schumann's *Traumerei*, nobody is actually listening because they are singing their own interpretations in their minds. The same happens to musicians which begin to explore pieces that they already know and instead of "making the ear conscious of the true content and effect of a composition" (C.P.E. BACH 1949, p.148) they just have a look at the score listening to their own auditory memory.

Ideally, theoretical and musicological information should serve to reinforce our relationship with the text. For example, the introduction of Beethoven's ninth symphony could be defined as a V-I⁴ which would be a very poor description, to say the least. However, realizing how ingeniously Beethoven created this unique passage with only those two chords, may help the conductor to sustain the proper tension implied by the sounding image formed in his mind. The information about Brahms intentions concerning the indication < > (COBBET 1930, p.182)⁵ confirms what is already clear through score reading; we can take as an example the opening Capriccio in D minor of the Fantasien Op.116 (measures 25-28). Another example is the association between

³ "Strictly speaking, music can only be produced by performance, and its meaning is the sense that individuals make of it." (BLACKING 1979, p. 3).

⁴ V (measures 1-16), resolves in measure 16 with the root D; although both are missing the third, the V-I function can be clearly heard. The confirmation of the whole passage can be heard in the beginning of the theme (measures 17-22).

⁵ The score corroborates Fanny Davies's comments: "the sign < > as used by Brahms, often occurs when he wishes to express great sincerity and warmth, applied not only to tone but to rhythm also. He would linger not on one note alone, but on a whole idea, as if unable to tear himself away from its beauty. He would prefer to lengthen a bar or a phrase rather than spoil it making up the time into a metronomic bar."

Beethoven's *Piano Concerto in G major Op.58*. with the legend of Orpheus entering Hades's domains to rescue his beloved. No matter how pertinent and inspiring this comparison may be, we go on stage neither to represent Orpheus nor Eurydice but to perform Beethoven 4th piano concerto for piano and orchestra. Otherwise, Beethoven himself would have provided a libretto.

Apparently, beginning with Beethoven, composers have been feeling the effects of leaving everything to performers' imagination and becoming more accurate in their indications. However, things seems to be getting worse, considering the kind of remarks composers have been finding necessary to make nowadays, explaining what should be obvious to any professional musician just by looking at the score. In one of his studies (*Fanfares*) Ligeti explains in a footnote that the "the bar lines are only meant to help the synchronization of the hands. The articulation of the motifs does not depend on the bar-division." However, bar lines have already been justified only as a means of reference in the works by composers from all periods. For instance, in the middle section of Brahms' *Capriccio n.7 in D minor Op. 116* (measures 21-46), the main melody sings in different registers as if dialoguing with itself, through the other melodic design in triplets which seems to be doing the same, "dividing themselves between both hands as waves entering one another in syncopation, *legato*, *sostenuto*" (CHUEKE, 1996).

5- Conviction: the main goal of education

Finally arriving to the last stage of the listening process, in order to communicate the sounding image, fruit of their exchange with composers' musical ideas, performers need to be convinced and conviction comes from knowing the composition: how the notes are organized, related, structured and composed to the point of having music coming from within.

Accepting that musicality cannot be taught and interpretation shouldn't, teachers are left with the mission of encouraging students to access musical ideas through their own listening experience providing them with as many tools as possible, beginning with consistent reading skills. After all, if it is true that on stage what matters is the interpreter, it is not because he is more important than the composer or the piece being played but because he is the one who will bring music into life. A choice is proposed by Alfons Kontarsky (CHUEKE, 2000, p.51): the school who prepares performers to enter the stage "to show what they made with the music" and the other who teaches them "to share what the music made with them." *À nous de choisir!*

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Since her first recital at age 8, **Zelia Chueke** has been developing her career in the United States, Europe and South America with almost 200 solo and chamber recitals and concerts with orchestras, including many works dedicated to her by composers from all over the world. She holds a DMA in Piano Performance from the University of Miami School of Music with Academic Merit, a Master of Music from The Mannes College of Music (New York) and a Bachelor in Piano from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Summa Cum Laude. Her teachers include pianists Grant Johannesen, Hans Graf and Homero Magalhaes and conductor Sergiu Celibidache. She served as Professor of Music at the University of Miami and University of Florida and Music Director of the "Notes, Strokes and Movement" concert series at the Lowe Art Museum and of the University of Miami Dance Program. Presently, she works as an associate researcher with the Observatoire Musical Français-Sorbonne, Paris IV. Her most recently released CD includes works by Debussy and Brahms (www.cdmail.fr).