



## Musical interpretation: philosophical and practical issues

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### *Editor's introduction*

Performance is one of the core areas of music teaching and learning. Although many take it to be quite straightforward and pragmatic, performance is an area that encompasses many important practical, philosophical, aesthetical and psychological issues. In this very poetic and rich article, Silverman considers some of these issues in order to discuss musical interpretation. Her purpose is to examine the nature of musical interpretation in light of philosophical themes borrowed from literary theory and criticism.

Silverman opens by suggesting that there are two divergent views of musical performance currently in vogue: a *formalist* one and an open (or *subjective*) one, as well as some *interpretive* stances in between them. From these definitions she moves on to discuss the ways in which the teaching and evaluating of performance have been viewed by music education. This discussion serves as background for Silverman to introduce readers to a theory proposed by literature scholar Louise Rosenblatt, which, according to her, has many parallels in music interpretation.

A thorough explanation of Rosenblatt's theory, known as transactional theory, is provided. According to Silverman, the theory is based on three main principles that may be applied to musical interpretation: (1) text is a composition of printed signs that point to something beyond themselves; (2) meaning 'flows' from the reader-text interaction; and (3) readers construct meaning by drawing from previous experiences.

Silverman's analogy between Rosenblatt's theory and musical interpretation uses as arguments excerpts of narratives by expert performers. These examples certainly bring a very vivid dimension to the article – something that readers who are unfamiliar with philosophical music education research will certainly appreciate. These examples also sustain her interpretive view of musical interpretation. On that note, she argues that interpretation is more than 'an aural photocopy of a score'. It is the act of 'bringing one's whole being – intellectual, social, cultural, artistic, physical, emotional and personal – into the performing event'.

Music educators are likely to enjoy reading this paper and to reflect on many issues. The article is of an inquisitive nature, and as such, Silverman asks many important questions that are central to music education: What are the processes of and conditions for musical performance-as-interpretation? How can these processes and conditions be recognized and realized in music education?

Silverman reflects on these questions and also provides some clear implications for performance teaching and practice. These implications are very important for music education, because implications for practice are not always drawn upon philosophical papers. Needless to say, this is a paper that is worth reading. And commenting upon.

*Abstract*

This article builds an interdisciplinary perspective on the nature of western classical music performance by combining concepts from literary theory, music philosophy and music education philosophy. The article concludes with practical proposals for the education of music performers.

*Key words*

aesthetic, efferent, musical expression, musical meaning, performance, transactionalism

Given its long history and ubiquity, one might reasonably assume that all questions about western classical performance have been asked and answered. In fact, there is considerable evidence to the contrary. For example, a wide variety of publications in music education, music psychology and music philosophy during the last 15 years offer teachers, performers and scholars competing views on the nature and teaching of western classical performance.

At one end of the spectrum, some scholars, performers and teachers view performing as a situation in which a performer only sounds out a notated score in strict accordance with a composer's instructions. On this view, a performer (or conductor) 'reads' the formal dimensions of a score (e.g. notated pitches, rhythms, dynamics) and produces the written score for the contemplation of an audience. Advocates of this concept of performance emphasize 'letting the score speak for itself'; a performer is merely the 'servant' of the composer.

Music philosopher Stephen Davies (2004a) seems to support this view: 'Performance calls for concentration on the business of sounding the work. The player needs to focus, not to emote and not to simulate experiences she does not have' (p. 2). Music psychologists who take this strict line of thinking about performing usually concentrate their studies on the technical skills, practice time and/or 'talent' required to sound out musical scores (e.g. Chaffin & Lemieux, 2004; Sloboda, 1985). Let us call this the objective or *formalist* view of performing.

*The New Harvard Dictionary* (Randel, 1986) moves one step beyond a formalist view:

The boundary between notation and performance . . . is not as clear as it has sometimes seemed, for the notation of every period is in some degree incomplete and functions within a set of expectations or conventions that guides (or guided) its realization. Thus, in its narrowest sense, interpretation depends on historically informed taste transmitted (most often in notation) to the performer . . . (p. 399)

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the open or *subjective* view. Writers, performers and teachers of this persuasion believe performers have 'poetic license' to interpret and realize a score based almost entirely on their unique feelings or desires. In an interview with James Briscoe (1999), Pierre Boulez remarked on the subjective view in relation to the performance practices of some 19th-century pianists: 'Listen, for example, to what certain pianists were doing with Chopin – there were certain traditions of romanticism that were truly terrifying' (p. 187).

Along the spectrum between these two poles we find various positions that give more or less weight to the view that a musical score (or 'text') is an incomplete or inexact record of, or a guide to, a composer's intentions. Underlying these intermediate views is the belief that a score cannot contain a composer's full range of intentions (conscious and subconscious), let alone the full range of meanings a work can express. Depending on their views about these considerations, scholars, performers and teachers hold that performers have the right and/or responsibility to interpret a score's instructions, and uncover and communicate its meanings, in accordance with a range of variables (structural, expressive, referential, historical styles and so forth). For example, and in contradiction to the formalist view Davies (2004a) expressed elsewhere (cited above), he offers this:

Performance involves not just the preservation of the music's sense and structure, it also requires the player somehow to engage personally and on the spot with all that, so his performance counts truly as a personal statement of his, made at the time of playing. (Davies, 2004b, p. 183)

In sum, and in addition to formalist and subjectivist extremes, commentators, teachers and performers hold a variety of *interpretive* stances on performing.

Similarly, scholars in music education differ widely in the attention they give to performance and in their concepts of its nature and value. For example, books by philosophers Keith Swanwick (1988, 1994), Estelle Jorgensen (1997, 2003) and Bennett Reimer (1970, 1989) are generally vague about the nature and teaching of performance. For example, Jorgensen (1997) touches briefly on skill development and 'interpretation' as something that is formed 'musically and culturally' (p. 36). Swanwick (1994) goes slightly further in his discussion of criteria for evaluating performances in terms of 'technical, expressive and structural control' (p. 109) and the need for student performers to develop 'a plan' or a 'blueprint' of the work they want to produce. And, when he suggests the use of metaphors and mental images in teaching performance, Swanwick restricts these strategies to teaching technical know-how. Reimer's concept of musical expression (1970, 1989) in performance is limited to giving students opportunities to make decisions about production issues: for example, how loud or soft (or how short or long) tones should be (p. 191). Reimer (1989) fails to discuss musical interpretation. Indeed, and because his philosophy depends on the '*absolute* expressionist' theory of Langer (1942, 1953), Reimer (1989) denies that composers and performers are able or should attempt to communicate emotional or conceptual messages (p. 59). He argues that music cannot 'communicate': the value of music is 'inside' the structural relationships of musical works (hence the term '*absolute*' expressionism), not in anything 'outside' these structures: 'Absolute Expressionism insists that meaning and value are internal; they are functions of the artistic qualities themselves [formal, structural elements] and how they are organized' (Reimer, 1989, p. 27). Accordingly, performers have little leeway to interpret a musical work; they must adhere rather closely to the craft and technique it takes to realize the structure of a work. And if 'imagination' or 'sensitivity' is allowed, as Reimer (2003) now admits, how do we know this is happening if meaning and value are 'inside' the formal elements of a work?

The purpose of my discussion is to examine the nature of musical interpretation using philosophical themes from literary theory and criticism, as well as selected ideas from expert performers' narratives. In offering support for an interpretive view of performance, I will ask: What are the processes of and conditions for musical performance-as-interpretation? How can these processes and conditions be recognized and realized in music education?

I hasten to add that my effort to illuminate aspects of music interpretation and performance through literary theory and criticism differs from what other writers have done.

That is, I am not attempting to compare music and language in terms of phonetics, syntax or semantics; and I will not be discussing musical works as non-discursive symbols of feeling (e.g. Langer, 1942, 1953), or music as a 'language of the emotions' (Cooke, 1959). As I hope to show now, I will be attempting to do something quite different. I will attempt to unpack and analyze the concept of musical interpretation with the help of insights from Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reader response.

### Rosenblatt's transactional theory

As far back as 1938, Louise Rosenblatt (1905–2005) was probing the importance of the 'reader' in her classrooms. She rejected the so-called New Criticism movement of the late 1930s (through the 1950s) that rested on the belief that 'the text' itself is central to the nature and value of literature. According to the New Critics, teachers should teach English literature students how to analyze a novel or poem through concise and attentive analyses of the text. By emphasizing concise and attentive analyses, the New Critics meant to dissuade teachers and students from expressing their personal views about a text's meanings, feelings or associations.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, a shift occurred in the literature classroom. The focus of attention moved from the text as 'authority' to the roles of the *readers* and their relationship with the text. When teachers of literature turned their attention to the minds of their students, they began to understand and apply what Rosenblatt had been proposing for many years. Teachers began to see the relevance of Rosenblatt's thesis that a reader's engagement and involvement with a text is what 'makes' poems. In other words, a poem is not something that exists on the printed page; it is something that happens at the intersection – at the joining – of a reader and a text. Rosenblatt (1938) explains:

The special meaning, and more particularly, the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to him. The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine her response to the particular contribution of the text. (pp. 30–31)

At this point it is important to explain three key principles of Rosenblatt's transactional theory. The first principle concerns Rosenblatt's distinction between a text and a poem. To Rosenblatt, a text is a matter of 'printed signs' that serve as 'symbols' that (potentially) point to 'something beyond themselves'. Her concept of a 'poem' is completely different: a poem is an *event in time* that comes into existence when a reader 'meets' a text. A poem is not something that exists a priori on a page; it is something readers construct, moment-to-moment, when they *activate* the marks on a page (of any type of literary work).

Rosenblatt's second principle is that *meaning* flows from the reader–text transaction process. Rosenblatt views the reader and the text as partners in the interpretive, meaning-making process. From this perspective, readers do not 'find' the meaning of a work in the 'text itself', nor can they 'locate' the meanings of the verbal symbols in themselves alone. The meanings involve both the written text and what readers bring to it.

A corollary of Rosenblatt's second principle is that the same reader can 'make many different poems' in relationship to/with the same text, because a reader's preoccupations, moods, needs and experiences are always changing. This stance gives readers permission to approach texts with an open mind – with an expectation that their personal reader–text

transaction processes have the potential to yield a plethora of interpretations over time. In this view, it is very possible, and likely, that a change in circumstances – time, place, personal knowledge, feelings – will yield a different poem ‘in’/for the reader.

Not surprisingly, Rosenblatt’s views clashed with conventional (or formalist) teaching practices of her day, which held that an author’s text presents *fixed* meanings. Thus, the teacher’s role was to authoritatively reveal and assist students to uncover these implicit meanings. In fact, post-Romantics became immersed in the search for and revelation of ‘intent’ in all manner of texts. For example, New Critics, such as Wimsatt and Beardsley (1958), wrote about the distinction between an author’s intention and their accomplishment in the text.

This is not to say that authors and texts have a second-class status in Rosenblatt’s theory. Not at all. Authors create texts, and we must never underestimate the role or value of the text. Without the text, the reader is not prompted and guided to make meaning. What Rosenblatt is saying, however, is that once a text is sent out into the world, it is no longer in the author’s domain. The words (symbols) on the page do not have any meaning until a reader activates them and *lives through them*. Thus, whatever authors may state about their intentions, interpreters must ‘read’ and apply such statements cautiously. Nicholas Karolidis (2000) agrees: ‘As compositional theory establishes – and writers themselves often attest – composing is not altogether conscious; the subconscious also operates during the composing process . . . the author may not be aware of revealed meanings’ (p. 12).

Rosenblatt’s third principle explains how readers make meaning. This principle depends on a crucial distinction between two reading stances she calls the *efferent* stance and the *aesthetic* stance. These stances determine what kinds of meanings readers construct and how they do so. According to Rosenblatt, a reader of (say) a newspaper, encyclopedia article, scientific text or cookbook evokes the ‘work’ in the sense that they must draw upon past experiences to construct meaning from the coded symbols on a page. But if this is so, then the question remains: What is the difference between a ‘poem’ and an encyclopedia article?

Basically, the difference lies in the *type of activity or relationship* that a reader applies (knowingly or unknowingly) to a given text. More precisely, in a non-aesthetic or efferent reading, readers focus their attention on data that remain important once the reading event is over, such as the information a worried mother needs to know when she realizes her child has accidentally swallowed a poison. The mother would read the label on the bottle as quickly as possible, trying to decipher the necessary practical information. In her situation, the mother’s (reader’s) personal responses to the label (‘text’) are unimportant. The key factor is that the reader’s attention and response to the printed words or symbols are directed *outward*, so to speak, toward concepts to be retained, or actions to be performed after the reading. Rosenblatt calls these types of readings *efferent*. An efferent reading is the act of reading analytically to abstract information or ideas that will be useful once the reading is over.

In contrast, an *aesthetic* reading is primarily concerned with what happens *during* the reading process, with a focus on how a reader *lives through* the literary work of art.

Though like the efferent reader of a law text, say, the reader of Frost’s ‘Birches’ must decipher the images or concepts or assertions that the words point to, he also pays attention to the associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that these words and their referents arouse within him. ‘Listening to’ himself, he synthesizes these elements into a meaningful structure. *In aesthetic reading, the reader’s attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text.* (Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 24–25; italics in original)

Note, again, that the differences in these two stances do not necessarily lie in the text itself, but in the attitude the reader adopts and the activities they carry out in relation to the text. Stanley Fish (1980) agrees: 'It is not that the presence of poetic qualities compels a certain kind of attention but that the paying of a certain kind of attention results in the emergence of poetic qualities' (p. 326).

At the efferent (or formalist) end of the spectrum, readers are not concerned with any personal or qualitative aspects of their response to the verbal symbols. Their focus is on the information they need from these symbols.

At the aesthetic end of the spectrum, the readers' primary purpose is fulfilled *during* the reading event as they concentrate their attention on the reading experience they are living through. Such concentration permits them to experience a wide range of responses that *they* generate in their moment-to-moment transactions with the text; the literary work of art is what enters into their awareness due to their personal construction of the materials they select, understand and weave together from their experience of the text.

Interestingly, Rosenblatt (1994) describes the entire reading transaction as a *performance*. When readers engage themselves in the journey of 'making a poem' and finding meaning through the symbols on the printed page, they are 'above all, a performer, in the same sense that a pianist performs a sonata, reading it from the text' (p. 28). Rosenblatt (1994) continues in this musical vein (and inserts a comment by Aaron Copland):

[A]n even better analogy for the reenactment of the text is the musical performance. The text of a poem or of a novel or a drama is like a musical score. The artist who created the score – composer or poet – has set down notations for others, to guide them in the production of a work of art. Some might say that the performer, whether musical or literary, has only to be transparent, to obediently hit the exact notes decreed by the author of the work, but a contemporary composer reminds us of 'the preponderant role of the personality of the performer . . . honesty compels me to admit that the written page is only an approximation; it's only an indication of how close the composer was able to come in transcribing her exact thoughts on paper. Beyond that point the interpreter is on her own.'<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in the literary reading, even the keyboard on which the performer plays is – himself. (p. 14)

## Rosenblatt's theory and musical interpretation

Since Rosenblatt utilizes the comparison between reading a poem and performing a musical score, let us do the same. And just as Rosenblatt made important distinctions between a text and a poem, let us contrast the differences between a musical score and 'the music'. Music education philosopher David Elliott (1995) emphasizes a key aspect of the distinction: 'although a written score stipulates many features of a composed work and therefore guarantees its basic identity across times and places, the being of a composed work is not the same as a musical score because scores are seen and not heard' (p. 201). Of course, as most classical musicians know very well (and as many laypeople do not), most well-educated musicians can hear (and/or are trained to hear) music notation 'in their heads' (and, of course, some are better at this than others, most notably Mozart, Mahler, Beethoven and Messiaen). But I digress. The next and more complicated point I am aiming at is articulated clearly by Elliott (1995):

Performing is not a matter of re-creating a composer's written intentions as obediently as possible. For what a composer hears in his or her musical imagination and commits to paper is not a real performance. As a result, what a composer writes in a score is not the

final word. In a real performance, decisions are being made and completed (successfully or not) such that every detail of the performance is determinate. In contrast, a composer's imaginary hearing (or 'audiation' [or inner hearing]) of her own work requires no such concrete decision-making. In other words, an imagined performance of a composition is indeterminate. (p. 166)

In summary, the sonic event we call 'music' is, like a poem, *an event in time*; it is constructed and experienced in the mind of listeners or performers when they 'meet' a notated score (text). Ethnomusicologist Christopher Small (1998) agrees: 'Music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do. The apparent thing "music" is a figment, an abstraction of the action, whose reality vanishes as soon as we examine it too closely' (p. 2). Small posits that there is no such thing as 'music' and that to ask the age-old question 'What does music mean?' is futile because it is unanswerable. Small asserts that the *activities* 'we call music, whose meanings have to be grasped in time as it flies . . . cannot be fixed on paper' (p. 3).

So, Small turns the question 'What does music mean?' into the question 'What is the meaning of the work (or these works) of music?' But while his solution (altering the question) assists our critical thinking, more reflecting needs to be done. For if music is an event in time, the next question is: 'What does a particular piece of music mean to *me* at this particular time and place?'

Philosophers have grappled with this question for centuries. In the context of this discussion of performing, let us turn to E. T. A. Hoffmann (1989), who echoes themes we have already heard in Rosenblatt's theory:

I feel then as though I and the music I have heard are as one. I therefore never ask who the composer was; it seems to me of no importance. It is as though at the greatest intensity only one psychical entity is in motion, and as though in that sense I have composed many excellent works myself. (p. 149)

To emphasize Hoffmann's point: the reader-performer of the score, and/or the listener, plus the sounds (mental or actual sounds), creates musical meaning. In a sense, listeners take on the role of 'creator' because they are supplying the meaning through their transactions with the score/sounds. Another way to state this is to say that if music is an event in time, and if it only exists during a performance, and if a score exists for performers to *interpret* and make music *from*, then musical meaning is very largely the responsibility of the performer. Moreover, if interpretation is going to take place, then performers should be aware of the fact that they are sharing with their listeners what they think, believe and feel about the meanings of a particular score at a particular time and place. Performers have this power.

Of course, performers of the absolutist persuasion will confine themselves (and their students) to sounding out a score in a way that is as technically accurate as possible, based on their understandings of the 'objective' notations and the composer's written directions, if any. By following and rendering these instructions to the best of their ability, the underlying belief is that their listeners might find their performance 'beautiful'.

We can also argue that this kind of absolutist performance fails to count as a musical *interpretation* because it is nothing more than an *efferent* reading of the score (text). Indeed, and in stark contrast with this kind of efferent reader-performer, the *aesthetic* performer (reader) will seek to interpret the score by *living through* the notated signs and symbols. In living through the symbols, the aesthetic reader-performer will create a single, solitary, unique meaning and performance that exists only at one specific time and place. As Christopher Small (1998) writes:

[E]ven within a literate musical culture such as the Western classical tradition the exclusive concentration on musical works and the relegation of the act of performance to subordinate status has resulted in a severe misunderstanding of what actually takes place during a performance. That misunderstanding . . . had in turn its effect on the performance itself – on the experience, that is, of the performance, for both performers and listeners – an effect that I believe to have been more to impoverish than to enrich it. For *performance does not exist in order to present musical works, but rather, musical works exist in order to give performers something to perform.* (p. 8; italics in original)

This key point can be taken a step further. Performers who accept absolutist views of music tend to think of their role as 'subordinate'. Small (1998) explains these views as follows: 'musical performance is thought of as a one-way system of communication, running from the composer to individual listener through the medium of the performer' (p. 47). This way of thinking moves us backward to the idea that meaning lies in the text alone. As previously discussed, Rosenblatt argues persuasively that meaning lies in the lived-through experience of a reader in transaction with a text, not in the text alone. So too with music. It is only a performer's actions of interpreting and performing music (i.e. creating and 'projecting' a personal vision of a score) that music can begin to 'live' beyond the silent notation of a score. Through their transactions with a score, performers formulate and instantiate their personal understanding of what and how a score 'means'.

Clearly, in order to create an artistic-aesthetic interpretation of a score, performers need to understand from the outset that they have multi-dimensional responsibilities. Fundamentally, they must read the score and live through it. When performers have Rosenblatt's principles in mind, they do not view themselves as a re-creator, but as *co-creator*. The musical score is their point of departure, not arrival. To interpret and express the meaning of a score, performers must 'read' (i.e. perform and listen to performances of) the musical score both *efferently and aesthetically*, at all times.

A completely efferent approach will not suffice. The efferent details in a score usually include such things as notated pitches, harmonic structures, rhythms, metronome markings, tempo indications, key signatures, time signatures, dynamic indications, and so forth. Performers study these details and their interactions toward interpreting and performing a piece. Although some of this information is easily understood and reproduced as part of an efferent reading, a performer never knows for certain how some musical parameters should be rendered. For example, how softly should one play a passage marked 'forte', or 'p', or 'decrescendo'? And consider this instruction in a score by Debussy that asks the performer to increase the tempo of a passage as he seeks to play it expressively: '*Cédez, au mouv't expressif, retenu*'. Clearly, these are highly relative matters. How a performer decides to interpret and enact these directions depends on a host of variables in the score and, more importantly, in the performer's immediate experience of 'living' – of performing – the music, considered aesthetically, as an unfolding event in time.

Summarizing to this point, while scores include many efferent details, and while these details direct a performer to take certain musical actions, they cross the border into the aesthetic realm. A truly 'comprehensive' approach to music performing cannot and should not avoid an aesthetic approach to a score. As Rosenblatt (1994) writes: 'Only if the reader turns her attention inward to her experience of "the journey itself," will a poem happen' (p. 28). Interpretation is a process of selection. To make *meaning* through a work of art, a reader or performer must make choices. This is the key to artistic and aesthetic understanding. Meaning making depends on a host of variables: remembering in relation to educated understandings, personal experiences, associations, images and activating these during a performance, thereby creating the personal context from which further meaning



will be derived. 'Awareness – more or less explicit – of repetitions, echoes, resonances, repercussions, linkages, cumulative effects, contrasts or surprises is the mnemonic matrix for the structuring of emotion, idea, situation, character, plot – in short, for the evocation of a work of art' (Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 57–58).

So, interpretation is the act of bringing one's whole being – intellectual, social, cultural, artistic, physical, emotional and personal – into the performing event. If this is not done, the result is nothing more than a production; it is merely an aural photocopy of a score. Conversely, without careful attention and study of a score, a performer will offer little more than pure subjectivity. Artistic-aesthetic interpreting depends on the continuous interplay of efferent and aesthetic processes.

Pianist and critic Charles Rosen (2002) affirms the crucial distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading processes:

In difficult passages . . . the problem is to disentangle the mind and allow the body to take over on its own. This is certainly why Liszt advised his students to read a book while practicing, as Moriz Rosenthal reported . . . a provisional decision must be made about the interpretation, and the hands learn to play the passage without any further interference from the taste or intelligence of the pianist. Then, at last, the interpretation can be refined. (p. 39)

Josef Hofmann (1976) agrees. During his studies with Anton Rubinstein, he recalls the Maestro offering this advice: 'Just play first exactly what is written; if you have done full justice to it and then still feel like adding or changing anything, why, do so' (p. 55).

Rosenblatt (1994) adds that there is not a strict dichotomy between the two stances in forming interpretations. During the process of interpretation, the reader or performer *works along a continuum* in which their consciousness selects the appropriate mode of analyzing:

We do not have the cognitive, the referential, the factual, the analytic, the abstract on the one side and the affective, the emotive, the sensuous, on the other. Instead, both aspects of meaning – which might be termed the public and the private – are always present in our transactions with the world. The difference lies in the mix – the proportion of the public and the private, cognitive and affective aspects of meaning – attended to during a reading. In readings that fall somewhere in the efferent half of the continuum, the reader selects our predominantly more public than private elements. The aesthetic stance, in contrast, accords predominantly more attention to the penumbra of private feelings, attitudes, sensations, and ideas than to the public aspects. (p. 184)

Nicholas Karolides (2000) concurs: 'Potentially, there are readings at either extreme end of the aesthetic-efferent continuum' (p. 11). But he acknowledges that readers are more likely to blend the two stances, depending on the situation. We can apply this idea to the interpretation of a score. Because music is an event in time, the circumstances surrounding the event greatly influence the interpretation: for example, performers may play more freely in the comfort of their home than in a concert hall, or at a competition. Then again, perhaps not, as Rosen (2002) observes: 'Playing in public is not the most nerve-wracking form of performance: playing for one or two friends who are musicians can be even more frightening' (p. 138). Rosenblatt (1994) makes the point in different words:

. . . as the reader draws upon her past life for the substance from which, under the guidance of the textual signs, to build up the work, special and sometimes tangential preoccupations, preconceptions, and misconceptions emerge. Such intrusions may interrupt

the experience, and even when recognized as irrelevant to the text, may still provide overtones, diversions, interruptions, that diminish the wholeness and integrity of the experience. (p. 38)

Thus, many circumstances, both exterior and interior, can radically alter an interpretation and therefore change the meaning evoked through one's transaction with a score. Extreme nervousness might cause a performer to hold tightly to efferent details; a personal history of standing ovations might give another performer the confidence needed to play in a more personal, reflective or individualistic way and, therefore, to focus and perform deeply in the aesthetic mode. The degree of blending of these two modes, or the extent to which a reader or performer moves back and forth along the spectrum between these modes, is not only different from situation to situation, but from person to person, and time to time, even when performing the same musical works.

Before leaving this part of the discussion, let me consider briefly what the above ideas might mean for a recent example of the 'interpretation dilemma': the so-called Early Music Movement. Many university music professors and students have been heavily engaged in this movement in recent years. Like John Eliot Gardiner and Malcolm Bilson, numerous university music programs engage students in performing classical music repertoire on authentic, period instruments, trying to recapture the ways in which the music of the past was actually performed.

However, Richard Taruskin (1995) contends that 'Early Music is just the late twentieth century's way of adapting past music to present taste' (p. 16). Roger Scruton (1999) agrees: 'Glenn Gould's performances of Bach are far removed from any that would be countenanced by the "early music" specialists: but they are animated by the intention to be true to Bach's musical inspiration' (p. 444). In other words, we can never get back to the 'real' performing and listening of the 18th or 19th century. 'The range of potential responses and the gamut of degrees of intensity and articulateness are infinitely vast, since they depend not only on the character of the text but even more on the special character of the individual reader' (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 49).

## Final reflections

What can musicians, teachers and listeners gain from the viewpoints expressed above? How are these philosophical tools useful for artist-teachers and their students?

First, on a conceptual level, I suggest it is crucial to enlighten all students – performers, listeners, composers, music educators – about the various views that scholars and performers hold about the nature of music performing and interpretation. Knowing these stances, performers 'have permission' to develop their own ways and means of forming an individualistic musical work of art. I have made it a point to note a number of readings for teachers' consideration, but there are many more views along the spectrum of views on performance-interpretation that teachers may wish to consult and summarize for students' consideration (e.g. Chaffin & Lemieux, 2004; Davidson, 2002; Davies, 2003, 2004a; Godlovitch, 1998; Partington, 1995; Samson, 2000; Sparshott, 1982; Talbot, 2000). It is worth noting, however, that most contemporary sources support the view that it is not sufficient to educate performers as good or excellent sound-producers. Students must reflect critically on the various levels of meaning in the musical works they are interpreting and performing before, during and after they make and listen to their music, as Elliott (1995, pp. 62–63; 98–99), for example, emphasizes.

Second, performers need to consider the nature of musical works. What is 'in' a musical work to be expressed, communicated or conveyed to an audience? Here, too, there are a variety of views on the nature of musical works, along a continuum ranging from the absolute formalist, to the absolute expressionist, to the referentialist, to the praxialist concept. Arguably, the praxialist view (Elliott, 1995) is the most comprehensive view because it admits a wide range of meanings that traditional (modernist) writers in music and music education have deemed nonmusical. Bowman (2005) agrees:

. . . the praxial view is not so much an alternative music philosophy as a dramatic effort to redefine the traditional bounds of music philosophical discourse. Clearly, the praxial turn draws into the 'musical' fold much that conventional thought has strived to lock outside. (p. 56)

Third, Rosenblatt (1995) emphasizes the importance of teachers introducing certain texts at certain times. She states: 'Too often . . . the classics are introduced to children at an age (or to adults at a stage) when it is impossible for them to feel in any personal way the problems or the conflicts treated' (p. 206). The same holds true for music. Knowing *when* to introduce the works of certain composers is vital. Pianist Claudio Arrau studied with Martin Krause, who was a student of Franz Liszt. Krause believed in planned development. He was against beginners playing Mozart concertos, and he held that Schumann should not be taught early in a pianist's development. He would teach Hummel and Moscheles before Beethoven (Horowitz, 1992, pp. 40–41).

Often, performance teachers do not teach this way. They 'cram' the classics into students' fingers and heads when it is too soon for them to grasp all the inner complexities and subtleties of major works. Indeed, if a teacher introduces certain scores to students at times when they are not able to feel any personal affiliation to them, how can they truly interpret these scores? If interpretation is the constant interplay between the efferent and the aesthetic, and the aesthetic mode has much to do with personal selections, then it seems improper for a teacher to force students to interpret something before they are ready to do so.

Related to the above considerations is the need for performance teachers to view themselves as musicians *and* educators, not just performing artists. We have all witnessed the case of students who complain, rightly, that their teacher is a fine performer, but one who cannot or does not want to teach. In short, enabling students to find their 'own voice' as performers requires performance teachers who respect and develop the rich amalgamation of knowings and sensitivities that Elliott (1995) calls 'educatorship':

*Educatorship* is another kind of working understanding. It is not a skill, nor a habit, nor a knack, nor a science, nor a collection of facts about educational psychology or philosophy. Educatorship is the flexible, situated knowledge that allows one to think-in-action in relation to students' needs, subject matter criteria, community needs, and the professional standards that apply to each of these. (p. 252)

At this point, it is important to connect what I have said about 'reading', performing and listening to the broader issue of *democratic* teaching, which is a theme that Rosenblatt's transactional theory shares with the educational theories of John Dewey, her colleague and contemporary (see, for example, Dewey & Bentley, 1949). The thrust of Rosenblatt's view is captured in this passage:

'Democracy,' as Dewey said, 'will have its consummation when free social inquiry is wedded to the art of full and moving communication' (*Public*, p. 350). Such a vision of our role can free us from the polarities of academic and political debate and inspire a fruitful meeting of the minds . . . (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 188)

When teachers dictate 'interpretations' to their students, they prevent students from forming personal bonds with a musical score. To use a literary parallel, although someone else can read a text efferently for us and acceptably paraphrase its meaning, no one can read aesthetically for us – that is, experience the evocation of – a novel or poem. If students and performers accept the view that they have some degree of responsibility for creating meaning through their own evocation of the musical work of art (the degree of responsibility will depend on each person's 'philosophy' of interpreting and performing, of course), then they will free themselves from the old formalistic ideology that reduces performers and performing to the bloodless sounding-out of visual notations. Doing so will allow teachers to grant students the freedom to find and express musical meaning through their personal, aesthetic transactions with scores, rather than dictate to a student how an interpretation should be formed.

Rosen (2002) advocates an approach to educating pianists that embodies Rosenblatt's principles:

The greatest teacher does not impose an interpretation but tries to find the way the student wishes to play and to improve the effectiveness of the interpretation. This is psychologically difficult for any teacher, who has naturally developed a set idea of the proper style of playing and of the correct interpretation, and the temptation to force this on every student can be overwhelming. Trying to let the student's personality reveal itself demands a renunciation on the part of the teacher, even sometimes an abdication of taste and of the legitimate prejudices and wisdom of a lifetime. (p. 109)<sup>2</sup>

Hofmann (1976) supports Rosen's position in these words about his famous teacher Anton Rubinstein:

He explained, analyzed, elucidated everything that he wanted me to know; but, this done, he left me to my own judgment, for only then, he would explain, would my achievement be my own and incontestable property. I learned from Rubinstein in this way the valuable truth that the conception of tone-pictures obtained through the playing of another gives us only transient impressions; they come and go, while the self-created conception will last and remain our own. (p. 64)

I suggest that the lack of musical individuality, originality and creativity that I and perhaps many other listeners often experience when listening to live and recorded performances stems mainly from the kind of conservatory 'drilling' traditions and competition procedures that exclude the personhood and personality of student performers.

To my ears, many of today's so-called 'great pianists' sound the same, as if they had been stamped out on an assembly line. In the course of attending a wide variety of classical performances, my personal experience as a critic and avid listener over many years has been disappointing. Based on what I have been suggesting here, the reason is that, over and over, venues like Carnegie Hall (for example) present pianists (for example) who have nothing personal to 'say'. Over and over, year after year, one after the other, each one produces more or less the same 'copy' of the same piano repertoire.

Sadly, listeners who cannot tell the difference merely assume that a performance is 'great' because the musician in question has 'made it' to Carnegie Hall. True, in order to appear at this venue a musician must be technically adept. But as I have been arguing throughout this discussion, technically perfect *efferent* readings and performances are not satisfying because they fall short of what educated and sensitive listeners want to hear. I suspect that many uninformed listeners recognize and feel this lack of aesthetic satisfaction. But because they lack basic concepts and distinctions of the sort that Rosenblatt offers, not to mention an

awareness of the many dimensions of musical meaning that musical works can communicate, as Elliott, for example, explains (1995, pp. 199–201), these listeners do not know when and how they are being taken advantage of. Thus, they pay ‘top price’ to hear the ‘classical artist of the month’ play (say) Beethoven’s ‘Hammerklavier’ Sonata. And while they may feel involved or ‘moved’ enough in the concert to participate in a standing ovation for the so-called ‘great’ artist, in many cases this is not deserved. Moreover, perhaps the difficulties that classical music organizations are facing today has something to do with performers producing aural photocopies of scores, instead of creating (or being educated to create) original performances.

For the sake of preserving and advancing the best aspects of western classical music performance, I believe it is incumbent upon teachers, critics and scholars to make certain that students and listeners can distinguish between the interpreting artist and the mere translator. Indeed, listeners have a right to know what to expect and how to judge performances accordingly.

When teachers impose rigid, pre-established models of performing, they do a disservice to the field of performance; they compromise the aesthetic and artistic nature of musical performance. Becoming a copy of one’s ‘great’ teacher, or molding oneself to a recorded performance by a famous player who has won competitions might secure a performer a career position. But is this kind of music-maker really a performing ‘artist’, or just a ‘music-notation processor’? In *Great Pianists*, Rudolf Ganz (1999) offers his view:

with that kind of practice and very arbitrary courses of study the pupil was able to do a certain number of set tasks and nothing else. There was not enough musical or pianistic *culture*. The pupils were a manufactured product and little else. Like all fabricated contrivances, they were limited to one set of operations and lacked independence . . . . Indeed, the training of some teachers and some schools was so arbitrary that it was easily possible for an acute observer to determine the identity of the teacher by hearing a pupil play a given work. I know of one teacher whose pupils play a certain Beethoven sonata so much after the same fashion that one might think that they had swallowed the same piano-player roll, and that the perforations were going through their automatic intellects with the same mechanical precision that they would through a piano-player. It seemed to be a case of making *pupils* out of *would-be-young-artists* instead of making *young artists* out of *pupils* . . . (pp. 311–312; italics in original)

It seems fair to say that a preoccupation with what ‘should be’ can lead a teacher to neglect their students’ basic democratic freedoms. Living and working in a democratic context requires that people exercise their freedoms in relation to moral and ethical responsibilities. This is as true in artistic subjects as in any other domain. On one hand, a complete neglect of what ‘should be’ in art takes us to an extreme – a loss of morality. On the other hand, artistic creation thrives on individual freedom of expression within bounds (from rigid to generous). In other words, there needs to be a balance between extremes of freedom and immorality in art. One of the greatest examples of this balance in art was Beethoven, who severed connections with classical form – to a greater degree (perhaps) than most true Romantics. Still, he was a passionate advocate for moral values in art. He believed that art ought to be used as a tool for the expression of what humanity should aspire to be. A prime example of bringing these two elements into cohesion is found in Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*, particularly Chapter 8, which is dedicated to Beethoven’s last Sonata, Op. 111. Mann (1999) writes: ‘Beethoven’s art had overgrown itself, risen out of the habitable regions of tradition, even before the startled gaze of human eyes, into spheres of the entirely and utterly and nothing-but personal’ (p. 52). Mann observes that Beethoven’s late works, even though they break the rules and regulations of ‘classical form’,

are an 'effect more majestic and awful than any reckless plunge into the personal' (p. 53). Claude Debussy (1977) makes a similar point in *La Revue blanche*:

Beethoven's real lesson to us was not that we should preserve age-old forms, nor even that we should plant our footsteps where he first trod. We should look out through open windows into clear skies. Many people appear to have closed them, seemingly for good; those successful so-called geniuses should have no excuse for their academic contrapuntal exercises, which are called (out of habit) 'symphonies'. (p. 15)

A major internal struggle interpreters must confront is the struggle between their individualistic impulse to explore freedom and to limit this freedom according to the musically ethical values inside themselves. Interpreters must live through the score to find their own unique meaning, but they should, simultaneously, respect the score. Achieving this balance in one performance (let alone in many performances) marks the artistry and personal stature of the artist.

The next issue concerns *when* to encourage students to begin interpreting a score: after they have mastered the efferent details, or from the outset of their performing and practicing? Here again, there is a range of views. Based on some sources I have reviewed here, a performer should read more or less efferently before aesthetically living-through the score and developing meaning. Once a score becomes ingrained in one's subconscious, the aesthetic mode of reading takes precedence over the efferent during the act of an *interpretive* performance. Rubinstein agrees with this sequence – recall his advice to Hofmann, cited above: 'Just play exactly what is written', and then add or change things as one sees fit.

However, this advice seems to run counter to Rosenblatt's belief about the need to 'read' a text or score with a blend of efferent and aesthetic stances and infuse education with democratic principles. This view accords with Elliott's perspective (1995, p. 219). He challenges the assumption voiced by some music educators and laypeople that performing and 'creating' are distinct, such that performing can never be creative, only 're-creative'. Elliott argues, instead, that in western classical music (and many other styles) there are *two* works of art: the composed work (notated in a score) and the artistic-creative 'work' of performers who integrate their understandings of the work with their sense of musical ethics and obligations – artistic, moral, social and so forth – such that a unique, personal instantiation of the work is created (Elliott, 1995, pp. 167–168). Consequently, Elliott discusses a variety of strategies (p. 234) that music students of all kinds can learn and employ from the outset of their performing, improvising, composing and arranging. He believes these creative strategies should be part of all students' musicianship and 'listenership' (Elliott's term, p. 94). Since Elliott is concerned with enabling all students to engage in music-making (of all kinds) and listening as part of learning to 'make a life' (as opposed to 'making a living' in music as professionals), a studio teacher preparing professional performers might challenge Elliott's view. However, one might also argue that if students were taught according to Elliott's guidelines from their earliest years, then it would be more likely that students who did choose to pursue a professional performing career would be the kind of 'reflective' and creative practitioners with the dispositions, abilities and insights needed to create the kinds of efferent-aesthetic performances that I, for one, often fail to hear at Carnegie Hall.

For the sake of advancing *musical* performing, I believe we should educate performers (and all music students) more holistically and comprehensively than music institutions have tended to do in the recent past. Specifically, future performers need to 'know-about' and 'know-how' to *balance* the efferent and aesthetic requirements and opportunities presented

by works of western classical music. They need opportunities to reflect critically on their options regarding interpretive freedom and their musical-ethical obligations to listeners, composers and scores. Clearly, all of this requires far more than the cultivation and mastery of technique.

Following Rosenblatt's theory, and similar views proffered by some music and music education philosophers, I suggest that teaching music performers (composers, conductors) and listeners (of whatever age, ambition or level) would benefit positively by replacing absolutist notions of music with multidimensional concepts of the processes and products of music-making, by teaching students to think critically about how they are being taught and what others recommend about (say) 'authentic modes' of performing, and by emphasizing creative strategies from the outset of music performance education. In addition, everything I have discussed thus far points to the importance of placing students' selfhood at the center of the teaching-learning process. By this I mean that our students might be more fully prepared and self-fulfilled if we encourage them to value and reflect on who they are – individually, artistically and socially. Perhaps these suggestions will be useful toward empowering our students to reveal themselves through the music they perform.

### Notes

1. Rosenblatt is quoting Aaron Copland (1952), pp. 50–66. Copland makes additional points. He writes: 'All questions of interpretation sooner or later resolve themselves into a discussion of how faithful the performer ought to be to the notes themselves. No sooner do we ask this than a counterquestion suggests itself: how faithful are composers to the notes they themselves put down?' (p. 59).
2. Rosen continues: 'Once when I refused to play a piece the way my teacher, Hedwig Kanner-Rosenthal, thought it should be done, she said, "All right, play it your way, but at least make it sound beautiful," and then she proceeded to help me do just that. Not many teachers, not even some of the finest, would show such a tolerant breadth of spirit.'

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## Abstracts

### ***Interprétation musicale: questions philosophiques et pratiques***

Ce papier construit une perspective interdisciplinaire sur la nature de la performance classique occidentale en combinant des concepts issus de la littérature théorique, de la philosophie de la musique et de la philosophie de l'éducation de la musique. Le papier conclut avec des propositions pratiques pour l'éducation des interprètes musicaux.



***Musikalische Interpretation: philosophische und praktische Gesichtspunkte***

Der Artikel entwirft eine interdisziplinäre Perspektive auf westliche klassische Musik, indem Ansätze der Literaturtheorie, der Musikphilosophie und der Musikerziehung miteinander verbunden werden. Der Beitrag schließt mit praktischen Vorschlägen zur Ausbildung von Musikern.

***Interpretación musical: temas filosóficos y prácticos***

Este trabajo construye una perspectiva interdisciplinaria sobre la naturaleza de la ejecución de la música clásica occidental, combinando conceptos de la teoría literaria, de la filosofía musical y de la filosofía de la educación musical. El trabajo concluye con propuestas prácticas para la educación de los ejecutantes de música.



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