

## Techniques of Expressivity in Music Performance

### Técnicas de expresividad en la interpretación musical

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#### ABSTRACT

Historically all performers had had the same difficulties in ‘making music’ because there is an innate variable in the act of performing: the expression. What do the performers do? The most basic requirement is that a performer should produce the correct notes, rhythms, dynamics, etc. of a musical idea’ (Clarke, 2002, p. 59). In this sense, we may define the interpretation as a mechanical process; nevertheless, an interpretation without expression is not musical. Thus, Erick Clarke clarified that it was also necessary ‘to go beyond’ due to the expert performers are obliged to transmit a musical idea and recreate expressively the score. This statement could be controlled and measured because, in an interpretation, one may observe whether the performer had played the exact musical symbols of the score or not, but the issue is more subjective when we value expressivity. Hence, it is not surprising that the psychology of performance has focused on the question of interpretation and expression with a substantial amount of research such as the GERMS Model (Juslin, 2003). Overall, it is hoped that this approach proposed here may contribute to a greater understanding of learning and teaching expressive skills in music performance.

**Key Words:** Expressivity, Musical Structure, GERMS, Performance, Expressive Skills.



**RESUMEN**

Históricamente, todos los intérpretes han tenido las mismas dificultades para “hacer música” porque hay una variable innata en el acto de tocar: la expresión. ¿Qué hacen los intérpretes? “El requisito más básico es que un intérprete debe producir las notas, ritmos, dinámicas, etc. correctos de una idea musical” (Clarke, 2002, p. 59). En este sentido, podemos definir el acto de la interpretación como un proceso mecánico; sin embargo, una interpretación sin expresión no es musical. De ahí que Erik Clarke aclare que también era necesario “ir más allá” debido a que los músicos expertos están obligados a transmitir una idea musical y recrear la partitura de manera expresiva. Esta afirmación podría controlarse y medirse porque uno puede observar en una interpretación si el intérprete ha tocado los símbolos musicales escritos en la partitura o no, pero el problema es más subjetivo cuando valoramos la expresividad. Por tanto, no sorprende que la psicología de la interpretación se haya centrado en la cuestión de la actuación y la expresión con una cantidad sustancial de investigaciones como el Modelo GERMS (Juslin, 2003). En general, se espera que este enfoque propuesto aquí pueda contribuir a una mayor comprensión del aprendizaje y la enseñanza de habilidades expresivas en la interpretación musical.

**Palabras clave:** Expresividad, Estructura Musical, GERMS, Interpretación, Habilidades Expresivas.

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“We are accustomed to see in other arts man as the centre of art, but we fail to realise that music is not only the expression of man, but that it is a representation of man too” (Lang, 1997, p. 26). Thus, the musical works are our autonomous objects of study to follow the trail of what is the meaning of music in history. In musical terms, this artistic kind of representation, and expression has a peculiar singularity due to the sounds that must be translated into musical symbols and to configure a language to elaborate works. The musical notation in a score, hence, represents music symbols as a language of expression, representation and communication. Nevertheless, comparing the musical works with the works of other arts, the musical works have one unique characteristic; music needs to be re-created while the work of another arts need not be because they are visual works (Rink, Gaunt & Williamon, 2017). Besides, the musical work must be executed to demonstrate its art. Therefore, musical work has two different pathways: (1) Intrinsic where it represents its information, and (2) extrinsic that appears when it is performed:

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In music, the term expression has a twofold sense. It may, on the one hand, refer to the inherent meaning carried in the composer's mind; intending to communicate an intention through of a composition or, on the other hand, to the manner in which the music is played; in others words, the degree of truth with which the performer reflects in his rendering the expression contained in music (Langley, 1911, p. 21).

The difficulty lies in knowing how we should perform music since the performance depends on both a historical and aesthetic context. Therefore, it has been essential to establish the influence of performance style and the study of historical changes in musical practice; just as the attempt to reconstruct historically informed performances. A relevant starting point is that performers of any period of history have had the same difficulties expressing themselves because there is continuously an innate variable in the act of making music: the expression. What do the performers do? Eric Clarke (2002, p. 59) exposed that "the most basis requirement is that a performer should produce the correct notes, rhythms, dynamics, etc. of a musical idea". In this sense, we may define the interpretation as a mechanical process; nevertheless, a performance without expression is not musical. Thus, he added that it is necessary "to go beyond" due to the expert performers are obliged to transmit a musical idea and build expressively the musical act.

The first statement could be controlled and measured because in an interpretation one may observe whether the performer had played the exact musical symbols of the score or not (Gabrielsson, 2003, p. 256). However, the issue is more subjective when we value expressivity. Where is that talent? There are some researches about this controversial issue, but scientifically there is still not clearly demonstrated what factors are more significant between the genetic features and social and cultural environment, although we know well that intelligence is the product of heredity and the environment (Bhattacharya, 2006). This highlights that the musical talent (or the ability to be artistically expressive) is largely innate but at other times is the result of an extended effort, educational formation, and high motivation. Naturally, the ideal would be to combine both levels of perception as in the cases of Mozart and the sons of Bach, but nature only offers those gifts by chance.

It is not surprising that the psychology of performance has focused on the question of interpretation and expression with a substantial amount of research. In the *New Grove Dictionary of Music* in its voice "the theories of performance expression" exposes that several empirical studies realised by Shaffer, Clarke, and others have demonstrated that "the expression cannot be understood as a learned pattern of timing, dynamic, and articulation, but must be generated from the performer's understanding of the musical structure" (Clarke, 2001). The communication of structure in musical expression has been studied scientifically by analysing variations in timing and dynamics in expert performances. A very instructive example identified of the use of timing, dynamics and articulation as a means to convey and emphasised that they may substitute for one another or be used in combination depending on the underlying musical structure (Clarke, 1988). Furthermore, a change of barline position may not only mean a change of the metrical structure but also changes in

group structure and melodic and harmonic function, which also may affect the performance.

For example, a musical phrase tends to speed up and get louder at the start and to slow down and get quieter at the end. Having a computer perform a classical piece exactly as written in the score easily shows this. The result is dull and will probably not affect us emotionally, although there may potentially be some beautiful passages in the score. A musician can, by changing the performance of a piece, totally change its emotional character. How is this possible, and what are the basic techniques used to accomplish such a change? The key is how the musical structure is communicated. Therefore, a good understanding of structure –whether theoretic or intuitive– is a prerequisite for a convincing musical performance.

Nowadays, professional musicians use principles and mental techniques to convey the music structure with personal ideas (or abstract references) such as ‘horizontalities of music’. This kind of verbal terminology should be understood psychologically and philosophically because it is based on the general overview that a performer must develop through his musical discourse (based on his or her experience). Hence, a relevant part of the technical performance is made up of psychological strategies and philosophical ideas to be more expressive and to offer unity to the piece.

Another important issue is to elaborate on an analytical approach to music. The performer uses the musical structure that is normally based on an analytic study of the natural moments of tension and relaxation of music. This systematic method indicates that there is a close relationship between the analysis of music and its performance: “an analysis is a direction for a performance” (Cook, 1987, p. 257). Even the most tonal music has a hierarchical phrase structure, sometimes simply called grouping. The lowest level is the entire piece, which is then divided and subdivided into sections, phrases, sub phrases, and melodic groups. Phrasing and meters are theoretically independent, although phrase and metric boundaries often coincide, reinforcing the musical structure. In contrast, “the performance of contemporary music puts such great expressive demands on performers because the whole piece is sometimes unfamiliar due to many difficulties to convey the musical structure” (Clarke, 1988, p. 17). Objectively, a performer must understand the general structure of a musical piece, although there are different levels of perception concerning the musical structure as it has been demonstrated with the cases of Mozart, Beethoven, and Hindemith who were able to hear or imagine their compositions in a single glance. That structural approach is born since the following reflection: “Though something of an idealization, we can imagine a performer who, at the start of a performance, has a complete knowledge of the generative structure of the piece, from the very highest level, where the whole piece is represented as a unit” (Clarke, 1988, p. 3). Yet, the dilemma appears when the performer is not the composer of the piece that he or she is performing. In this sense, the performer must take care of the historical and aesthetic values of the piece (due to musicians make normally a ideal product of the score). Performers are separated spatiotemporally and geographically, but in the re-creation of the score, the technique and expressivity are contemporaries in tempo during the performance. The expressive aspects of a performance –that is, the deviations in timing, articulation,

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dynamics, and so on- are generated from the performer's structural representation of the piece at the time of the performance.

This may explain the high reproducibility in repeated performances as well as the ability to change the performance according to an alternative structural representation (Gabrielsson, 1999, p. 521). Raising the concern about high reproducibility in performances, Bruno Repp conducted several analytic studies explaining what happened with the shape of time. In his abstract he argued:

The expressive timing of 10 famous pianist's performances of Debussy's prelude, *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, was measured from acoustic recordings and compared to the expressive timing of performances by 10 graduates students pianists [...] Despite the large differences between two groups in preparation, experience, age, date of birth, and national origin, their average expressive timing profiles were extremely similar. Although individual differences tended to be more pronounced among the experts than among the student, the similarity of the average timing profiles suggest a common standard of expressive timing (Repp, 1997, p. 257).

This falls in line with previous studies made by Repp and their conclusions argue that "the similarity of the average timing profiles indicates that both groups followed essentially the same norm or aesthetic standard with regard to expressive timing" (Repp, 1997, p. 264). Also, Clarke has added to this question that "continuously variable modifications of the timing, dynamic, articulation, vibrato and timbre of notes and note groups are identifiable and can be preserved with astonishing precision from one performer to another, sometimes separated by years" (1988, p. 11). This is due to performers trying to imitate models of performing. Normally, if we ask a beginner performer how he conveys expressivity, he or she turns to previous models of information to understand perfectly the musical structure of a piece.

Analysing the modality or tonality and its relationship with the musical structure, one may observe their close relationship. Tonality does not monopolise the musical piece, but it dominates the base of a composition (George, 1970). Thus, the climax, previous small climaxes, or anticlimaxes of a composition normally correspond with a harmonic function in tonal music; just as with the form. Analysts and performers know it and use this knowledge to organise which points of the score have more tension to develop his or her expressive skills. Performers can be more expressive with the help of structurally analysing the piece to know what points are more interesting on a harmonic and melodic level; also with the vitality of fluctuations in rhythm or even turning to historic information or studies made previous musicologists. The expressivity may also be presented by elements of creativity, that performers experiment in creative ways with his or her musical intuition. However, a few other subjects raise such as provocative issue than musical analysis when it is studied in relation to the performance practice (Rink, 2002).

In the musical process of expression, the expressivity of a performer does not solely depend on the function of clarifying the musical structure because “the communicative content in music performance includes the performer’s interpretation of the musical composition, that is, the performer’s individualistic shaping of the piece according to his or her intentions” (Palmer, 1997, p. 124).

Therefore, the performer is the one who constructs his or her own work from the notations that the composer has left. In this view, the different interpretations of the same musical structure of a piece show clearly the evidence of musical variants in performances, which are finally a reflection of the individuality of the performer. In fact, it should be noted that differences in interpretation can account for why the same musical score is performed differently by different performers or why the same performer may perform a piece differently on separate occasions (Palmer, 1997, p. 119).

What are the similarities and differences in separate performances of the same piece? When discussing interpretation, the emphasis is often placed on performer differences. These modifications are probably based on aspects of performance skills, nevertheless, “we value music for its expressivity” (Davies, 1994, p. 164). In reflection, the performance is a re-creative rather than a reproductive act, and each musical interpretation is a realisation of the performer’s conception of the music. Concerning this issue, Juslin & Sloboda took up again an empirical study of Bruno Repp to demonstrate it:

Repp (1998) analysed 115 performances of a Chopin piece in order to study the individual differences among performers. Based on the results, Repp convincingly argued that individual differences at the phrase level do not arise from different interpretations of the musical structure but from different ways of giving ‘expressive shape’ to one and the same structure (Juslin & Sloboda, 2003, p. 156).

The central issue regarding expression in music performance is to understand exactly what the performer adds to a written piece of music. On the one hand, the most common way is to emphasise notes or areas of relatively high tension. However, it is difficult to trace the origins of variations of timing and dynamics measured in real performances since the various tension concepts are often coupled to the phrasing structure. For example, chords that are more distant from the key are often found in the middle of phrases, while chords close to the key are more often found in the beginning or at the end of the phrase. On the other hand, phrasing tends to dominate performance expression, which makes it hard to isolate the more subtle details such as the expression of melodic or harmonic tension. Also, rhythmically regular music often exhibits consistent patterns of timing and dynamics within metrical units such as the measure. For example in waltzes, if the first beat in each measure is accentuated, a dynamic pattern is formed which is repeated in each measure. This kind of patterning is often associated with dance, suggesting that these patterns serve to characterise the emotional character of the piece.

Other factors need to be taken into consideration about expressivity in music. Music performance is a complex process affected by numerous relating factors: the instrument, the performer, the listener, and the performance context (Juslin, Friberg & Karlsson, 2004) and for all these reasons, we can conclude by stating that “the expression of performance it is a musical multidimensional phenomenon” (Juslin, 2003, p. 282). At this stage, it is necessary to ask if one could study expressivity objectively?

Philosophers, musicologists, and musicians have written abundant bibliography about artistic expressivity, which it is often with the implication that there is something mysterious about this concept (Juslin, Friberg, & Karlsson, 2004). However, drawing on previous research, it seems to indicate that expressivity derives from five main sources, collectively referred to as the GERMS model (Juslin, 2003). This model is designed as a computational system to permit simulation of different aspects of performance expression and the empirical test of the validity of the whole or its different components. Evidence and ideas from many different research areas –music theory, speech perception and production, emotion perception and emotion theory, brain mechanism, time-keeper theory, biological motion, and others– were invoked as support for the model, and a first experimental evaluation of the model has been reported (Gabrielsson, 2003, p. 232):

*Generative Rules* (G) mark the idea that expression is derived from the structure (Clarke, 1988) and may increase the emotional impact of the music (Juslin, Friberg, & Karlsson, 2004). These generative characteristics in such parameters as timing and articulation allow a performer to communicate group boundaries (Gabrielsson, 1987), metrical accents (Sloboda, 1983), and harmonic structure (Palmer, 1996).

*Emotional Expression* (E) emphasises the ability of professional performers to express emotions to listeners (Juslin, 2003). In this sense, professional performers can convey emotions and different emotional characters through variants such as tempo, loudness, attack, timbre, tuning, vibrato, and so on (Clarke, 2002).

*Random Variability* (R) reflects human limitations about internal time-keeper variance and motor delays. Each performer has its own limitation in motor precision. It has been revealed in several studies that even when expert performers attempt to play perfectly, there are still small and involuntary fluctuations in timing in their performance (Juslin, Friberg, & Karlsson, 2004).

*Motion Principles* (M) hold that tempo changes should follow natural patterns of human movement. For instance, Friberg and Sundberg (1999) showed that final ritards of music performances preferred by listeners tend to follow a tempo curve similar to that of runner’s decelerations (Juslin, 2003). Thus, those principles prescribe that some aspects of the performance (e.g. timing) should be shaped by patterns of biological motion.

*Stylistic Unexpectedness* (S) involves local deviations from performance conventions. This stylistic unexpectedness reflects a performer’s attempt to deviate from stylistic expectations to add tension and unpredictability to the performance (e.g. Meyer, 1956, p. 206). For Juslin (2003) the performer might be expected to clarify the structure in a certain manner, as described by generative rules, but instead he or she performs differently.

To conclude, these general principles of GERMS model contribute to the perceived expressivity in the performance practice. Nevertheless, statistically, the emotion component (E) has the largest impact on the listener's judgments (Juslin, Friberg, & Karlsson, 2004, p. 254). The emotional expression is directly linked with the generative rules principle and the emotional expression may be understood to be as a result of combinations of variations in timing, articulation, and dynamics.

Those elements are tools that performers use to be expressive in his or her performance and therefore there is a reciprocal relationship between both principles to communicate a musical intention that the score has by itself.

A personal expression of performers may be under voluntary control (Leech-Wilkinson & Prior, 2017); attempting to express specific emotions in their performances due to the performers wish to highlight the emotional quality of a piece of music. Finally, we may understand the expressiveness of how a process of communicating emotions from the performer's intention to express an emotion to the recognition of this same emotion by listeners. The fact that performers might communicate emotions to listeners is an important issue to explain the expressiveness how the ability of performers. From an intuitive point of view, it would seem that much of music's expressiveness lays in patters of changes during the course of performance. In music, musicians work with patterns or expressive standards throughout the performance. Therefore, the music's expressivity lies in patterns of changes or deviations in timing, articulation, and dynamics, where expression can be understood as the inevitable consequence of understanding musical structure (Clarke, 2002, p. 65). For instance, it has been investigated that the human voice can communicate emotions to listeners, using a vocal expression. However, it seems unlikely that this link can explain all of the music's expressiveness (Juslin & Sloboda, 2003).

At this point, it should be noted that we could solely configure hypothesis about the expressivity of performers. Nevertheless, the unique difference that exists between vocal expression and instrumental performers is the timbre. In our historical consciousness, we transport the meaning of the human voice and for that reason, the first 'instrument' was surely the human voice. In western culture, we know only too well that words were staged with music, through of monodic melodies. It is not absurd to think that in the logical evolution from voice to absolute music we associate emotions in music, in addition to the historical transmission of modal and tonal theory related to the effects and influence of melodies, scales and harmonies in our musical perception. It has not scientifically been a proven fact but music can be understood as a language of expression, communication, and representation of man that is why as voice an instrument can be expressive and to go beyond. Performers can, therefore, communicate specific emotions to listeners by using many probabilistic but partly expressive cues in the performance such as tempo, sound level, timing, intonation, articulation, timbre, vibrato, tone attacks, tone decays or pauses, to communicate structural features of a piece of music.



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