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Three stages of listening during preparation and execution of a piano performance: Exchanges on the model and its application

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As a pianist, the author of this paper has previously investigated the listening activities which occur during the preparation and execution of a piano performance. Three stages of listening were established: the first involves basically inner hearing or “listening from the score,” the second consists of consciously monitored practice combining inner hearing and physical hearing, and the final stage, the performance itself, gives evidence of what the performer was able to hear from the score. Reviewed literature involving musical analysis, psychology, perception, and cognition was combined with the results of interviews conducted with selected pianists of international renown, generating suggestions/guidelines for the proposed listening stages. For the present experiment, the author has worked with a graduate student in piano performance during the preparation of Brahms’s *Fantasien* Op. 116, applying these guidelines as a means to optimize performance preparation. The whole process is hereby described and discussed, exploring the connection between listening parameters and the achievement of coherent execution both during preparation process and final performance.

Keywords: performance; preparation; listening; optimization; pleasure

The listening process during performance and practicing has been explored from psychological, cognitive, analytical, and historical aspects (see Aiello and Sloboda 1994, Miklaszewski 1982, Reimer and Wright 1992, Rink 2002), and yet, it is almost impossible to be fully accessed, since it occurs in the performer’s inner ear. The three stages’ model which guided the present research is based on the fact that listening is the essence of music making. The first stage involves basically inner hearing or “listening from the score,” the second consists in consciously monitored practice combining inner hearing

and physical hearing, and the final stage, the performance itself, giving evidence of what the performer was able to store his/her inner-ear during this whole process.

Needless to say, these three stages are not disconnected from each other; trying things on the piano during the first stage is not unthinkable, and obviously, analysis continues during the second stage, enriching the relationship with the piece. Verbalizing this process is impossible for an outsider; the performer is the only qualified person to do that. Therefore, interviews were conducted with great pianists such as Alfons Kontarsky, Rudolf Buchbinder, Andrés Schiff, Jörg Demus, among others, whose experiences were undoubtedly successful, who described their own process, confirming the pertinence of the proposed three stages. The experiment which followed is summarized in this paper. It consisted in supervising the conscious appliance of the model by a piano graduate student preparing a recital.

Brahms's *Fantasiën* Op. 116 was chosen by the student, and during instructions and exchanges, references were made only to the score and to performances recorded during practice. The graduation recital was considered as a final result, where the extension of the proposed model's application could be verified. The research's main purpose was to explore ways to optimize performance's preparation process by means of well defined parameters. During the experiment, the student's own decisions, even if diverging from initial instructions, were not commented or altered.

METHOD

Participants

A masters student in performance and the author took part in the research.

Materials

Voice and Sound Recording MP3 archives sent-by email were used for process description, as well as professional video recording for concert performance, provided in DVD format.

Procedure

According to the proposed model, the student was instructed to avoid listening to any recording. After having built a sound image of Brahms's Op. 116 as a whole, practicing on the instrument should follow a certain order, namely, *Intermezzi* 5, 2, 4, and 6 followed by the *Capricci* 3, 7, and 1 due to musical complexity and related technical issues. The student was also recommended

to establish an aural connection between pieces, so that one would sound in the inner ear as soon as the previous was performed. Verbalized initial analysis, away from the piano, was accessed via MP3 archives and author's comments and guidelines were sent in writing. When instructions were not strictly followed, the student provided detailed explanation for personal listening choices. Similarly, performances during preparation were recorded and sent by email; the relationship between student's listening parameters and subsequent performance results were verified and registered.

RESULTS

The student has followed the recommended order of pieces for a first approach on the piano (*Intermezzi 5, 2, 4, and 6* followed by the *Capricci 3, 7, and 1*) which she understood as based on form and structure complexity level. In her first testimony, she declared that not having to play at once has helped to mentally build a "phrasing map" of each piece, as well as enhancing consciousness of their different characters. Listening parameters determining form are shown in Table 1.

First reading followed this order, which the student admittedly did not keep for practicing; order of pieces during the second stage, on the piano, were based on musical preference as well as inner-hearing easiness. It is important to mention the misunderstanding which occurred here: the proposed order was meant for practicing, regarding the second stage of listening; the first stage's main goal, away from the piano, was to build a sound image of the work as a whole. However, as intended, no comments were made by the author, and the experiment followed.

Some discrepancies were verified between student's previous analysis during the first stage, and what could be perceived through recorded performances. For instance, although perceiving one "big picture" based on harmonic structure of *Intermezzo 5*, she declared not being able to determine phrases in section B. However analytical issues did not prevent good performance achievements; we hear the tension held by the V chord on bar 24, and the subtle rest implied by the subsequent resolution (V-I, bars 24-25) which initiates immediately another intense phase. Similar discrepancies were observed as in *Intermezzo 2*, as illustrated in Figure 1.

After having heard a first recording of this *Intermezzo*, the author suggested a relaxation of the hand, "closing it" after each time she reached the top notes of the sixteen notes groups; according to her response, it did indeed work.

Table 1. Parameters of listening after a first approach of the score away from the piano.

	Cap. 1	Int. 2	Cap. 3	Int. 4	Int. 5	Int. 6	Cap. 7
Harmonic rhythm	x	x	x	x	x		
Rhythm patterns		x		x	x	x	x
Tonality changing			x			x	
Texture							x
Phrasing	x	x*	x	x*		x*	
Metric accentuation	x						x
Polyphony		x					x
Tempi		x					
Elements' recurrence					x		

Note. * Items mentioned during previous analysis but not entirely verifiable during performance.



Figure 1. *Intermezzo 2*, section B. Left: Description. Right: Performance.



Figure 2. *Intermezzo 6*, bars 1-4. Left: Description. Right: Performance.

Phrasing described for *Intermezzo 4* did not actually influence phrase shaping. For instance, in bar 4, V-I is considered (2nd to 3rd beat), disregarding the tonic sustained in the bass which is exactly what keeps the flow of the discourse. However, the final performance naturally reveals what is actually written. Phrasing described for *Intermezzo 6* was also not heard in recorded performances. Following what is registered in the score, discourse flows from bar 1-8, according to hierarchic concepts, as proposed by Lerdahl and Jackendoff (1983), illustrated in Figure 2.

Similarly, the student's previous analysis of *Capriccio 3*, section B, reveals a somewhat disconnected phrasing, which is not present in the final performance.

Analytical features that could be easily verified in performance include the three sound plans in section B of *Capriccio 7*, and phrasing for *Capriccio 1*

Table 2. Brahms's *Fantasien Op. 116*: Tonal plan.

<i>Dm</i>	<i>Am</i>	<i>Gm</i>	<i>EM/Em/EM</i>	<i>Dm</i>
I	V	IV	II	I

guided by metric accentuation and special harmonic features, such as the II chord in bar 8.

The student affirms that approaching the piece away from the piano has facilitated her reading and understanding. Declaring not to be particularly skilled on first-sight reading, this first approach has helped her defining musical goals to guide her reading. However, she declared having managed to build an idea of the piece as a whole only one month prior to the aimed performance; her own deduction was that this was due to having approached pieces separately during the first stage, delaying the performance of the entire work as presented in the score for too long. Even when feeling more familiar the whole, she was still unable to establish an aural connection between pieces.

DISCUSSION

During this experiment, we have dealt with possible “hearings” of Brahms Op. 116, and recorded performances proved to be the best way to access musical results.

When hearings coincide, verbal exchange is rather facilitated. For instance, the specific technical procedures indicated to perform *Intermezzo 2* middle section were successfully applied, because both student and instructor were listening to the implied linear polyphony.

Most of the discrepancies perceived between analysis and performance are related to “whole and detail,” which could have prevented simple analytical synthesis during the first steps, such as a tonal plan, as exemplified in Table 2.

The fact that the order suggested by the instructor for a first approach on the piano was followed during the first reading away from the piano instead, might be considered as one of the reasons for not having interiorly built a sound image of the whole piece from the beginning; afterwards, practicing could focus on any of the pieces.

The student declared not being able to establish aural connection between pieces, except for *Intermezzi 4, 5, and 6*. It is apparently easier to connect those; *Intermezzo 4* ends with an E Major chord, whereas *5* begins with an E

minor chord; similarly, *Intermezzo 5* ends with an E Major chord, and 6 begins with the same chord. Nevertheless, this approach does not reflect the multi-piece established by Brahms himself; besides Op. 10, this is the only case of a group of pieces meant to be published together.

Reading the piece as a novel is what brings to the performer's inner hearing the story to be told. We are facing two concepts: the notion of the piece as a whole which guides practicing and building of interpretation, versus the same notion built during practice. Of course, initial analysis is carried through the second stage of listening, being reinforced and enriched, but approaching the piano with a broad idea already built of the whole piece, is comparable to the actor who goes to the first rehearsal having incorporated his/her as part of a context. Chosen listening parameters should guide musical discourse's direction from the first to the third stage of listening; connection between analysis and performance must be continuous and coherent.

As it has been perceived in this particular case, and frequently happens with talented musicians, innate musicality surpasses lack of analytical awareness; however, it should be captured and verbalized, either for teaching purposes, or to communicate with others, but mainly to build conviction, the main priority to go on stage.

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