CARRYING MUSIC THEORY TO PERFORMANCE

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Interpretation and performance rest upon the foundation of comprehending the relationship of every note in a piece to every other note, and a player cannot convey the meaning of a piece of music without a true understanding of the way the piece is put together. Can an actor be successful speaking in a language of which he/she is ignorant of the grammatical construction, pronunciation, and punctuation?

The commonly used and misunderstood term, "music theory," should more accurately be called the "language of music." It is wonderful that nearly all piano teachers now, in contrast to 50 or 60 years ago, include music theory workbooks in their curriculum from a student's first lessons. However, a major deficiency in teaching so-called "music theory" is the fact that very frequently a connection is not made between what is learned in theory textbooks, workbooks and classes and the act of actually playing music. The two of us have adjudicated several thousand students over our past combined nearly 100 years of teaching and most of the students have been required to play chord progressions such as I-IV-V-I. Of all these countless students, no more than four or five of them ever played their progressions with any dynamic variety among the chords. What is the point of students learning the names of the chords, if there is no application of their differences when playing them? Why should a player learn any "music theory" unless it is relevant and applicable to performance?

Students are often taught abstract definitions. However, defining terms is only a first step. If one only memorizes vocabulary and grammar without putting the language into an aural context one will not speak the musical language with understanding and expression. We need to show students the musical elements they are studying as they appear in their pieces. What may seem obvious to us as teachers is not obvious to the student. We must never forget that music is an aural art, and not a visual or purely intellectual one.

It is not sufficient if a student only plays the correct notes with a steady rhythm and the notated dynamics. Composers have provided the player with a tremendous amount of information crucial to interpretation in addition to the notes and dynamics printed on the page. While talent cannot be taught, musicianship can be taught from the first lesson. A music student is never too young to be asked to express beauty and play with understanding. A music student is never too young to be shown the messages that composers send to us through the elements of music, and how to use his/her ears to convey these messages to a listener.

For example, at the beginning of study a student can learn to play a dissonant note or chord louder than a consonant note or chord. After all, Western European music is founded upon the relative degrees of dissonance (representative of tension and instability) and consonance (representative of peacefulness and stability). Without a cognizance of consonance and dissonance a student will merely be playing notes. Students need to perceive from the beginning that musical composition, performance, and listening are built upon the concept of tension and release of tension It is by continually asking oneself how tension has been created by the composer, how we can identify it, and how to respond to it, that we can become better musicians and pass that understanding on to our students.

Chords and key relationships are what the musical language and structure of Western European music composed between 1700 and 1900 is founded upon, and the harmonies and keys determine the development and progression of the various emotional states in a composition. During this 200-year period, known as the ”common practice period,” and to a considerable extent in previous and subsequent years, music was systematically organized around a home key, with other keys having relationships to that home key. These other keys are either more closely related or more distantly related. Musicians during this period commonly associated emotional qualities with each individual key, and our knowing the qualities they perceived for each key can furnish us valuable clues to the character of the music.

When allowing other keys to become a temporary home key, composers employed modulations. It is essential to understand what that new temporary home key implies, and how the composer arrived at that key. This is especially crucial in works in Sonata-allegro form, a dramatic form which, in its essence is a battle and conflict between keys, and where the supremacy of the home key is established in the end. To view Sonata-allegro form as a collection of themes, as has far too frequently been done for the past century and a half, misses the original reason and purpose of the form.

Throughout the Baroque and Classic Eras, the use of closely related keys (those differing by not more than one accidental from the original tonic) was most common. Therefore, if a “foreign” key was introduced it was very shocking. As time went on, these more chromatic relationships became more common and added much color to the music. These “wrong” keys resulted in heightened emotion, surprise and sometimes humor.

A player should be sure to highlight the emotional and coloristic differences, not only between key areas, but also between successive chords. Most early level pieces consist almost exclusively of I, IV, and V chords, and even early level students can be asked, and expected, to play the different harmonies with different dynamic levels--the V chords usually louder than a I chord, and the IV chords usually softer than the V chords. The simple act of rounding off at the ends of phrases and playing more quietly after chords of increased tension will in itself go a long way to creating an expressive performance.

Chromatic chords, which lie outside of the diatonic scale, demand special highlighting. Diminished and augmented chords can be representative of various aspects of tension--mystery, ambiguity, uncertainty, anguish, and even terror, depending upon their context. Players frequently fail to bring out the implications of augmented sixth chords. On most occasions these chords are most successfully interpreted by increasing the intensity and volume on the subsequent V or I 6/4 chord. Chords such as the Neapolitan (bII) or the bVI (a chord borrowed from the parallel minor) which are intended to provoke a sense of awe and wonder, need to be approached with much care and can be interpreted as louder or softer than their preceding harmony. Something as simple as a shift of just one note, such as when a minor chord moves to a parallel major chord or vice versa, can represent a transformation from one emotional world to an entirely different world. Not highlighting the significance of unexpected chords is like thoughtlessly stepping on and crushing beautiful flowers. A performer can illuminate events such as these through subtleties of timing as well as subtleties of dynamics.

Experiencing a piece of music is akin to taking a journey . Without having a map, a plan, of where the music is going, there can be no direction to the journey, and the experience can resemble aimless meandering. The great universal genius , Goethe, wrote that "music is liquid architecture; architecture is frozen music." A musical composition very definitely has a structure, and a performance without a sense of architecture is akin to the proverbial "house built on sand."

A player must convey that some notes and chords assume more structural importance than others and that some notes serve a more ornamental function. Just as when one diagrams a sentence in English, prioritizing the nouns and verbs over the adjectives, adverbs, and articles, one should not respond to all the chords and notes of the piece as if they are equally important. Lesser priority notes and chords should be felt and played as if drawn towards the more important notes and chords, and as if the important notes and chords are magnets pulling the lesser ones towards them.

Feeling a sense of forward motion and direction towards the most significant points in a piece is a crucial, and frequently overlooked, aspect of musical interpretation. Composers do not have notation to show us this. However, in order to avoid a deadly squareness, a player must sense the music flowing forward to these destinations. The significant points of arrival are frequently determined by the choices of harmonies. When one feels the arrivals at the destinations the knowledgeable and expressive musician will stress these significant structural points by holding the notes slightly longer than notated, and frequently playing the notes at the arrival points louder. (For musical examples and discussion one can refer to Mozart_The_Ambiguous.pdf (dersnah-fee.com) pages 20-22) It is important to remember that the high point and emotional destination of many phrases is a I 6/4 chord, a V, or a V7, which then resolves to the tonic.

The harmonic punctuation at the end of a phrase is of much significance in perceiving and communicating the degree of tension. A composer can choose a conclusive cadence (one that ends on the tonic) or a non-conclusive cadence (one that does not end on the tonic). The conclusive cadences V-I (authentic) or IV-I (plagal) differ in their levels of tension. The authentic cadence contains the extremely powerful and inherently intense leading tone (the seventh note of the scale) in the V chord which creates a strong expectation of resolution to the tonic. The plagal cadence still draws us to the tonic chord, but since the tonic note is already present in the IV chord and the tension is not as great , it creates a calmer effect. The two non-conclusive cadences create two additional types of tension. The half cadence ends on the V chord, creating a completely open feeling of expectation and the need to continue until the tonic is reached, much as a semi-colon or colon functions in speech. The deceptive cadence does just what its name suggests. It deceives us by arriving at the V and then not going to the tonic. In its avoidance of the expected resolution, it must be given care through dynamics--louder or softer, and a sense of timing to enhance the feeling of thwarting its intention. The music must continue afterwards until the V is again reached and successfully resolved to the tonic.

The voicing at a cadence is also significant in representing the degree of tension – which notes of the chords are in the soprano and which notes of the chord are in the bass. The measure or measures before a cadence also must be examined. Often the harmonic rhythm (the rate at which the chords change) increases leading into a cadence (sometimes called the "drive to the cadence").

It is vitally important to feel a sense of breathing and relaxation after the arrivals at cadences, as well as many other important destinations in the music. Failure to do so is equivalent to ignoring punctuation in speech, and therefore creating run-on sentences. Especially in the 18th century, musicians universally harped on the fact that music was to be performed as if delivering a speech, and that the crucial goals when performing music were to convey what was to be stressed and unstressed, as well as observing the relative degrees of punctuation. For more on this subject see the essay "Relevant Advice From the 18th Century on Playing 18trh Century Music Microsoft Word - Dissertation Summary.docx (dersnah-fee.com) .

Shaping a melody is a fundamental and essential aspect of musical interpretation, and therefore melodic aspects of every composition need to be examined to highlight the points of greatest tension. Every interval has its own inherent qualities, and all students learn the names of intervals. However, too often they do not perceive what the intervals represent emotionally – for example, the instability of the augmented 4th, (known for eleven centuries as "the devil in music,") the warmth of the major 3rd and major 6th, the bitterness of seconds and sevenths. Melodies with much chromaticism warrant special expressivity.

Although there are many instances where a rise in a melody will benefit from a crescendo, it is often forgotten that there are also many instances where softening on a melodic ascent will be the most communicative. A descending melody will more often than not be played with a decrescendo. However, a player must be alert for those instances where a descending line is most effectively played with a crescendo and perhaps also a broadening. Regardless of the quality of one's voice, singing melodies out loud, or to oneself, very often reveals an ideal shaping for a phrase.

Rhythmic elements contribute to tension in music. One of these is syncopation (the repositioning of emphasis) which can appear on several levels. A syncopation can appear on a weak beat in the measure or on a weak portion of a beat by employing a longer note or an accented note. The feeling of accent can be shown either with an accent sign or by a leap away from the previous pitch. The same syncopated effects can be created using chords or intervals as well as with single notes. An offbeat pattern suddenly changing onto the beat also creates rhythmic tension. Most of these rhythmic devices can be enhanced by slight delays or carefully chosen rhythmic placement.

Aspects of meter are a crucial aspect of feeling music. Downbeats are usually the weighty beat in a measure. However, an upbeat inherently contains enormous energy since it catapults the music across the bar line to the downbeat. The downbeat for its stability, and the last beat for its energy in leading forward, are the most significant beats in any measure. Utilization of this fact in performance provides a swing, a lilt, and a lift to our playing. However, long notes, high notes, dissonances, and syncopations can alter the usual rhythmic prioritization.

Successful note groupings can involve grouping several upbeat notes together to lead a phrase forward to the beat. To determine logical note groupings within a phrase, one can look for skips and for changes of direction. These will often start a new group. This important subject is discussed in more detail in the companion essay, "Musical Interpretation Simplified" Essays & Educational Resources (dersnah-

fee.com) (For a musical example, the reader can refer to http://www.dersnah-fee.com/ExploringGreatPianoComposers/Mozart_The_Ambiguous.pdf pages 20-22 and (579) Bringing Music Alive with Earlier Level Students through Music Theory - YouTube

It is a common mistake in the analysis of music to learn rules and formulae and try to fit every piece into a mold. Elements which bring a piece to life frequently are those which do NOT fit a mold. When studying a piece of music, we should not try to fit it into a box. We should look for the unique and unusual aspects of every piece--for the elements that seem "wrong"--and bring them out, emphasizing them by delaying or stretching time, or by dynamic shaping. By making these unusual occurrences stand out, the performer is appropriately highlighting the tension.

Knowing well the language of music improves a player's sight- reading ability, as well as allowing faster learning of pieces and more efficient memorization. One is also more able to perceive notes as parts of groups, rather than as individual, isolated events. The practice of ear training also enhances one's sensitivity to the aural elements of music. Our ear needs practice, just as our hands do, and everyone's aural skills can improve from the level at which he/she begins. Recording our practice in order to evaluate whether we are conveying all the musical elements successfully, and mental practice away from the instrument are both very useful tools. (For more on this subject, see the companion essay, "Of Study and Performance " in Essays & Educational Resources (dersnah-fee.com)

We teachers should demonstrate at the instrument for our students the ways they can use the elements of the language of music to create a more expressive performance. We can also have them listen to the great artists of the past and present who provide examples of consummate artistry, and we can point out what makes those performances exemplary. (For some present day exemplary pianists , see the list "Some Exemplary and Legendary Pianists of the Past" and Some Exemplary Pianists Performing Today.pdf (dersnah-fee.com)

Since we pre-hear the sounds we are intending to produce a split-second ahead of actually playing them, performance is simply a revealing to others of what is already in our inner ear as a result of our analysis and practice. Some might believe that if one has an excellent ear, that analysis is not essential or that analysis could inhibit one's feelings for the music. However, expressive instincts and emotional feelings are not sufficient in themselves to reveal all the many aspects of a piece. Analysis heightens our sensitivity to what is present in the music, and what the music is about. The tools of musical analysis provide a player with an infinite number of interpretive possibilities, many of which would not occur to a player not possessing analytical skills and knowledge. It allows us to convert and transform the notes on the page into a sensual and emotional experience for ourselves and our listener.

However, a performer must be careful to not fall prey to "paralysis by analysis." It takes an ideal combination of "head and heart", of thought and feeling, to create a deeply satisfying musical performance. While analysis furnishes the foundation of musicianship, the performer's ultimate responsibility, after having thoroughly analyzed the music, is to go on stage and play with warmth and love, to make the performance appear to be spontaneous and effortless, and to allow the music to transport the listener to a higher world.