

## Mastering Piano Performance, finding the balance between Ideal Style and Personal Choice

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**Rezumat:** *The Art of Piano Performance* it is a complex and fascinating aspect of classical music. This involves not only learning the instrumental technique and accurate reading of the compositions, also finding a balance between the Ideal Style and the Personal Choice of the pianist.

*The Ideal Style* refers to the interpretation that comes closest to what the composer intended when he wrote the work. This style is 'decoded' based on historical research, music structure's study and an understanding of the context in which the piece was composed. Finding the balance between the ideal style and personal preference is an important challenge for any musician. To find a right balance it is important for any concert- pianist in order to master a repertoire, a music style and the context in which a particular work was created. It is also important to have a solid piano technique that enables him to effectively express interpretive intentions.

**Keywords:** *ideal sound form; stylistic path; professional rendition act; Interpretative Pragmatics; musical grammar; personal choice of performing music;*

### Introduction

Mastering *the Art of playing an Instrument* remains a subject open to debate, even in the 21st century. A very good knowledge of sound production means to always release the wanted (and expected) timbral and intonation effect, in the case of untempered instruments, and are *sine qua non* prerequisites of the professional instrumentalist.

When we think of the Grand Concert [Acoustic] Piano instrument. we have in front of our eyes a complex aggregate that combines strings, keyboard and mechanisms (operated by levers, calibrating proportions precisely established by calculating the tensions involved), in various wood, metal, textile and many others textures materials, all necessary for its outside and inside structure. That is a remarkable technological construction, summary made up of approx. 12000 individual pieces, specially calibrated, so that with a simple touch of the keys, a stable intonational and qualitative centered sound, placed on a sound frequency range from 27.5 Hz to 4186 Hz, that can be easily released.

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Apart from a mastery handling of an instrument, when referring to the rendition of some repertoires that belong to strict musical styles, which we generically include in the terminology of *classical music*, the pianistic interpretation characteristics of an individual, specially trained in this direction, is subject to additional assessments.

At the beginning of the 18th century, a prototype recognized at the time of its construction as a „cimbalo col piano e forte"<sup>2</sup> until the dawn of the XXth century turned into a powerful and complex contemporary instrument, the contemporary piano. Illustrious classical composers created a huge amount of music for the instrument that follows a *stylistic path*, consequently having *intrinsic (musical)* as well as *contextual*, characteristics.

Today, more than in other historical Eras, a piano classical music performer is educated in a specialized musical institution, his musical product - the interpretation of a repertoire that spans over 400 years of music – is carefully evaluated, generally involving the consideration of several parameters and performance levels, related to technicality, expressive capacity, accuracy with the musical style and last but not least, a subtle form of authenticity, therefore the artistic distinction of the resulting interpretation (a performing act).

## 1. Issue & Objectives

*The Interpretative Act's construction goes towards the reconstruction of the Ideal sound Form*, that is assumed to exist in the composer's imagination when is composing his work [*the Ideal style*]. Objectively, impossible to achieve, because with each interpretative act, a series of historical-chronological conditions, a series of particularities in the instruments' construction, of their musical tuning, of specific cognitive perceptions dictated by age and level of musical preparation, of different temperamental human configurations, the ability to concentrate on the management of the Act of Performing (training and directing the attention in a distributive, volitional and intensified way) - all these considerations - apply interconditionally.

Additionally, who performs Music and is taking into account a professional rendition act, is assuming inevitably, a blending of the stylistic rigors with their own vision [Personal Choice], regarding the understanding of the musical messages, extracted from the composer's score, actually is assuming a slightly different (version of) „semantic and ecto-semantic decoding act”.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> It is about the invention of *Bartolomeo Cristofori (1655-1731)*, a harpsichord maker from Padua, Italy, who diversified the construction method of the old instrument, adding a mechanism actuating the strings by pinching, with the help of additional hammers. His new instrument was able to produce a sound by striking the strings. Certain information about what this new type of instrument could have been called, since the time of its construction, can also be extracted from the title of a musical work that has reached us over time, published in 1732, namely *Sonate by Lodovico Giustini di Pistoia*, and completed by the description „*Cimbalo di piano e forte detto volgarmente, di martelletti*” [n.n. my English translation: Harpsichord of soft and loud sounds, in a popular way named, with little hammers] bringing into question for this type of instrumental device, the ability to release sounds of low and high intensity.

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<sup>3</sup> From a hermeneutics and informational aesthetic point of view, according to some of the latest theories advanced by current researchers (*Jean- Paul Resweber, H. G. Gadamer, Hermann Kretschmar, Pascal Bentoiu*), when is about musical interpretation, everything comes in correlation with a musical meaning and its transcription through a Performing Act. This is viewed as a product of the joint effort of *conceptual thinking* (which performs *semantic decoding operations*), and that of *musical thinking*, (which performs *ecto-semantic decoding operations*), also very clearly explained by the pianist and PhD professor from the National University of Arts „George Enescu” Iassy, Mircea Dan Răducanu, in 2003: „between the structural language (of the musical text) and the mental language (of the psychic configuration), at least two forms of correspondence can be

## 2. Material and Methods

To explain the relationship between the ideal form and what succeeds in bringing the interpretive act itself, it is important to investigate some concepts related to both the mechanisms of musical rendition and the aesthetics of the interpretive act.

Any pianist who is facing the interpretation of a diverse stylistic repertoire that belongs to the classical creation of the great composers (specific to the artistic cultural heritage of Western Europe), for his musical rendition has simultaneously in mind, both in the ergonomics of the individual study<sup>4</sup> and in the final performance on the concert stage:

- *the musical text* in the published score's form (intonational, rhythmic parameters, expressive, dynamic, agogic parameters, structural balance derived from the written construction of the musical form);

- *general and specific characteristics of the musical creation, genre/chronological period* of the composer's creation, derived both from the available to him knowledge of the composer's time and his time perspective, articulated as an applied set of acquired 'instructions', which forms a particular understanding manner of the composer's musical style;

- a mixture between the general configuration and his own perspective, about the musical message(s) delivery nature- actually named his Performing Act. This aspect articulates itself as a multi-layered auditory construction and requires both a mastery level of the technical passages (of a high level of difficulty) and of the musical expression rendition (a polished phrasing level, refined sonority, a good range of sound diversity obtained through the exploitation, from the point of view of timbral and temporal placement, of the harmonic-rhythmic textures displayed in the Piano's sounds). Briefly said, a fluid and solidly articulated Auditory Musical [Rhetorical type] Construction.

Important to this article's topic advanced understanding, I consider of high relevance a recently theoretical contribution published in Romania, that focuses on the broad explanation of the Structure of the Performing Act.<sup>5</sup> From the perspective of the auditor, implicitly of the performer who is involved in a pre-process of internal audition of his instrumental results offered to the public, *the Performing action can be perceived in two major layers:*

- the first one is related to the higher level of expression (poetics), „the domain of the subjectivity that creates the atmosphere, the suprarational communication with the listeners [...] the moment when *the psychological music imaginative perception* is formed, *the world of expressive sound differences*, and *the realm of a personal artistic way of feeling customization*”<sup>6</sup>.

*established: a simple semantic decoding, which translates the text into signs placed in equivalent relationships with the symbolism of the text (instrumental performance), and an ecto-semantic decoding, which translates the structure into signs saturated with aesthetic meanings, which underlines the meanings discovered and then used by the musicians, during their interpretive experience*”.[n.n. in my English translation] Mircea Dan Răducanu.2003. Introduction to the Theory of Musical Interpretation [Introducere în Teoria Interpretării muzicale], Iași: Editura DAN, p. 109-110

<sup>4</sup> The Ergonomics of the Pianist's Individual Study of a musical piece consists of four major stages: the first contact (introductory information and the sight- reading of the musical piece); the effort of motoric-expressive acquisition of the text; the fluidity of the interpretative act (a moment to which is contributing also the act of memorizing the text and the act of articulating the own musical rendition plan); the synthesis of this labor effort, by refining the interpretative act into a finite form.

<sup>5</sup> The research of the Romanian pianist and PhD Professor *Constantin Ionescu-Vovu* from the *National University of Music Bucharest*, published in two volumes in 2020 with the title „Musical Interpretation. A specific thinking mode [Interpretarea Muzicală. Gândirea specifică].

<sup>6</sup> Constantin Ionescu- Vovu.2020. Musical Interpretation. A specific thinking mode [Interpretarea Muzicală. Gândirea specifică], vol.1. București: Editura Grafoart. p. 23.

- the second layer is subdivided, as the author says, in the ascending order of its degree of abstractisation, into three important subcategories: *Instrumental Technique*, *Interpretive (Musical Performing) Grammar*, *(Musical Performing) Interpretive Stylistics*.

If the ability to develop instrumental or vocal technique, as a flexible and solid pre-tool, usable to serve any type of interpretive conception, has been extensively investigated and discussed in most musical treatises, the researchers of the musical phenomenon are recently taken in consideration a specific *Interpretive [Performing] Grammar*. With a good and very good level of technical handling of the instrument, we gain access to a superior sound organization of the musical material, a fact that allows the outline of psycho-sound structures, to form energetic relationships emphasized between sounds (interconditioning bonds based on the tensions and solutions of type arsis-thesis on which it rests, from the very articulation of the sound musical language). these structures become signifiers (therefore bearers of meaning) and act as verbal structures (in comparison/parallelism with the rules of grammatical linguistic articulation, from which the term is borrowed, and the principle is observed). The correlation with the three main categories of Linguistic Grammar (lexicon, morphology, syntax), without forcing the analogy, can be done on three other levels. The first structures to be formed with a meaning, (like words), can correspond to the level of elements, equivalent to the lexicon. Dynamic relations, articulation, metric determinations, harmonic relations, that are seen as sound microstructures forming a level of relations, therefore equivalent to morphology. For syntax we refer to significant constructions, the way phrases are organized, harmonic movement, in the sequence of tonalities, tempo, ways of structuring the musical form while playing.

However, the aspect exposed above is a musical performing grammar not only a theoretical analysis of the score, but an analysis of the way in which the score is auditory, 'articulated' (internally and externally of the performer), so *a grammar in sounds, that sits temporally, with input and through contribution of the performing instrumentalist, during the act of playing*.

Although there are many systems that analyze in detail the Theory of Communication<sup>7</sup> in the musical field, much less is written and spoken about *Interpretative Pragmatics*. Starting from Henri Bergson's theory, time might also be measured in personal intuitive experiences, therefore the interpretive musical discourse is a collection of *forms set in motion through sounds*<sup>8</sup>. Music, like temporal art, creates spatiality<sup>9</sup> through its unfolding, using the voice of the interpreter. The management of reference in discourse, speech acts (rhetorical structure), and thinking of performed music as an auditive language form enunciation, refers to a pragmatic process (as in Linguistics). Like choosing words with the proper intonation during communication, the musician finds a proper sound projection (in sonority considering all score's musical parameters), process that stays in the realm of the Performer (pianist) work and articulates as the Performing Act itself.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Studies that appeared during the 20th century that fall into the field of Semiology, among which those proposed by *Jean Molino (Musical Fact and the Semiology of Music, 1975)* and *Jean- Jacques Nattiez (Music and Discourse, toward of Semiology of Music, 1987)* and in Romania by *Octavian Nemescu (Semantic capacities of Music, 1986)*, were widely debated and disseminated.

<sup>8</sup> Eduard Hanslink. 1854. *The Beautiful in Music* [Von Musikalish- Schönen], Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, pp. 24-25. [Electronic version]. Retrieved April 20, 2023, from <http://www.ibiblio.org/guruguha/MusicResearchLibrary/Books-English/BkE-HanslickE-Beautiful-in-Music-0114.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Gisèle Brelet. 1949. *The Musical Time* [Le temps musical], vol 1, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, p. 86.

Retrieved April 20, 2023, from <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k3372208v.texteImage>

<sup>10</sup> „The being of Music is the very act of realization, the incessant transition from the Possible to the Act [...]any interpretation[n.n. performing act] is a complete and fundamental revision of the idea.” Gisèle Brelet. 1951. *Creative Interpretation*. [L'Interprétation créatrice, essai sur l'exécution musicale], vol 1, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, p. 6.

The set of interpretive options is closely linked, or better said, directed by an historical situation of the approached creations. That aspect regards the way of expression contained in musical language form, characteristic to a civilization, ethnicity, briefly, *the musical style* in which the respective musical text is composed. *Interpretive (Performing Music) Stylistics* viewed either as a whole/retrospectively (a set of interpretations from different centuries that refer to a particular piece of music) or individually (a particular performer performing a particular piece of music) overwhelmingly is influenced by the type of expression is allowed to release. While performing a specific musical style is like putting a template on free (random) expression, and we start talking about typologies in interpretation. From another point of view, there are aurally perceptible differences between two individuals interpreting the same musical work. But the level of freedom, therefore left to personal choice, is extremely narrow. The score (therefore, the written musical style) remains the defining elements from which the sound reconstruction starts.

### 3. Conclusions

Certainly, we never will be able to reproduce, in all aspects, what the composer imagined at the time of composition, as long as the inscription and the reading process of these intentions contained by the score remain mechanisms that depends on an interpretation of a graphic code, called the written musical language. Gathering information related to historical and stylistic factors, using newer and older instruments, (or tuned to different intonational parameters), each performer, by enriching his area of investigation and application, can reach multiple musical knowledge (forms/phases) of a certain musical piece.

Perfecting the Instrumental Technique, gaining more dexterity in articulating mentally and emotionally a cohesive Interpretive Musical Grammar, or progressively familiarizing oneself with Stylistic requirements specific to an era, to a composer, *one's evolution as a musician involves a inevitable change in perception*, so that his interpretive version of the same musical text can supports changes (improvements), through the maturation of one's Interpretive style.

In each of the situations, the variable in use that we call personal choice, is controlled in a different way, but it cannot be excluded or ignored. The close one's to the intentions of the composer, as performer, realizes how important it is for this personal contribution, to be one that serves deontologically the published text and its historical context, to be respected these intentions, and of course, to bring through, authenticity to the interpretative act.

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