

What is the right “Interpretation” and why does it matter

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Abstract: *How to interpret a piece of music? Which interpretation is the right one? What defines different approaches to different works? Are musicians allowed to have freedom in their own understanding of the music instead of following what was written on the score? These are hot controversial questions in the classical music industry. In this paper, I will discuss my view on the subject matter and emphasize the importance of the meanings behind the different interpretations and why I think all interpretations matter. I believe that with a deep understanding of the score and the correct way to express emotions through the music, every interpretation is perfectly different but perfectly refined. Every musician is different, and it is the beauty of music to give such possibilities for the musician to create their own stories and colors through the music.*

Keywords: *Interpretation; Schumann; Chopin*

1. Introduction

Thanks to the development of the internet, we now have many ways to access different recordings of the same piece of music. Even more so, we can now listen to one performer performing one piece of music at other times and in different venues. It is difficult to imagine us not comparing and analyzing the various interpretations of the work. And to try to come up with our favorite, as well as to try to understand the different ways of interpreting a work. Thus, a series of questions arise regarding what it means by interpretation and what defines the correct interpretation. In my view, I think instead of trying to find the right interpretation, we should pay more attention to the understanding of the meaning behind each interpretation. And eventually, we will find out that with the right understanding of the music, and the right emotional expressions of the music, each interpretation has its own way of delivering the music.

When we look into the music scores, we see black dots with stems and words that mark the music expressions and characters. We might start to fall into the cage of an endless sequence of “working process”. To start with, we begin by looking at the tempo marking and the time signature, then we look into the key signatures and overall structure. At last, we start to read the score very slowly and note by note to get the correct harmony and rhythm. It is hard to think that the simple black dots on the manuscript that are basically black dots and lines on a piece of paper are the end results of composers’ countless wearily nights and great efforts. Thus, it is reasonable to understand composers such as Stravinsky, who constantly emphasizes the importance of following the score or delivering what has been written in the score, and the accurate execution from the performer or the interpreter is utterly crucial ^[1].

Now, what defines accuracy? And what is considered an accurate interpretation? For example, is it the fact that we need to do a crescendo when the score indicates for the performer to do so, or the fact that we need to try to think like the composer and try to do what the composer has intended as much as possible, or the mere fact of bringing us as musicians with our own independent thoughts into the score and interpret a piece of art with our own feelings and emotions? In my opinion, interpretation is a word without any special instructions or rules because I believe that there are no fixed rules in music. All the restrictions in music are just ways of emotional expression that music is able to create. I will use Busoni’s philosophy to explore the meaning of music notation to show the fact that the notation itself has less meaning, and it is the performer’s job to put spirit and soul into the notations in order to bring the music back to life. I will then explain the fact that one may only try to execute the music in their own way in order to bring their soul into the music. Thus, there are many different ways to perform the same piece of music. Lastly, I will address my own thoughts on the subject matter of interpretation and give my own conclusion, that is: music is behind the black dots on the staff papers, and it is our duty as performers to bring the soul and spirit into the dots.

2. Scores, detailed analysis, and interpretations

I am always curious about the thought process that composers have when they start to brainstorming a piece that they are about to create. I wonder what is the first thing they would do when they are sitting in front of a desk or a piano, holding a pencil, ready to write down those magical black dots. I asked some of my friends who are composers on this subject matter, and I got different answers. Some said that they tried to catch a melody or a theme first and then started to elaborate upon the theme, while others emphasized the importance of form and overall structure, meaning that they would first construct the form of the piece and then the theme, as well as the key or contrapuntal structures and then try expand on the theme while closely follow the structures of the piece. However, one of the aspects that the answers met in common was the fact that the notations are the fruits of composers' hard work. They went through countless processes of correcting, fixing, and re-arranging the notes, voicing, rhythm, and musical expressions to deliver the final printed edition. Some pieces may even have many editions with corrections made by the composer themselves. In this way, how can we just ignore the efforts that the composers put into their compositions and just play as freely as we want? And how can we improvise without the permission from the composers themselves? In this case, we need to dig into the reason why composers are willing to make such an effort in writing out their music and go through all the changes to their compositions to deliver the final edition. Some of my composer friends even stated that after they finished a piece, every time when they went through the work again, they would add more musical expressions, such as dynamics, or gave more detailed terminology regarding the tempo and character. If we think of the revisions that they are making, could there be different inspirations driving them to make changes to the composition, or do they wish to show the performer or to ask them to do exactly as the score is offering. Either way, this proves the fact that there are myriads of thoughts behind the black dots on the staff line.

Legendary pianist, teacher, conductor, composer, and editor Ferruccio Busoni states that "Notation, the writing out of compositions is primarily an ingenious expedient for catching an inspiration, with the purpose of exploiting it later" [2]. This quote supports the idea that there is something lying beyond the notes on the canvas. Writing down the notations is the composers' way of capturing their source of inspiration and making them available for posterity. Unfortunately, many great composers are no longer available for us to ask them in person about their source of inspiration. We can only use the notations as a guide to try to imagine. As Busoni said, notation is, "to improvisation as the portrait to the living model. It is for the interpreter to resolve the rigidity of the signs into the primitive emotion." Below is an excerpt from Schumann's Sonata No. 1:



Figure 1: Excerpt from Schumann's Sonata No. 1

In this excerpt, I have circled a sforzando marking. When I was reading this passage, I was curious about why Schumann put a sforzando here. I started to look into the voices, and I realized that the voicing created an interval of seconds between the middle voice and the top voice (underlined in blue color). Since this passage is incredibly legato and lyrical, it is essential for Schumann to put an emphasis on the top voice G to keep the flow and to avoid the sound of the dissonant sound of the second (F-sharp in the middle voice, which was connected to the previous beat and G-sharp), and if we look at the top voice, the G goes to an A and then to a B, second sforzando that marks on the B in the last measure of the excerpt shows that the top voice went through stepwise motion and land on the B. Also, surprisingly, even without any indication of musical expressions for the left hand, precisely showed that left hand

should not be the melody and just needs to provide accompany, as well as shadowing the harmonies.

What we just did was to analyse the score in terms of harmony, contrapuntal and voicing, and to come up with statements in what is outcome of the musical writing. If we analyse the score and the notation like solving a math equation, the situation will become as such: when solving a math equation, we do not have any sort of emotions; we are neither sad nor happy; we are simply trying to be a human calculator to solve a math problem. Clearly, given all the quotes by Busoni, the last thing the composers wanted were for us to be like a machine and just play music like a robot. Thus, it is safe to say that it is our musicians' job to bring energy and spirit into the music "equation" (e.g., the notation) since the notation itself does not have any actual emotional meaning; it is the thoughts behind the notations that makes them special.

In "On the interpretation of music" by Gatti and Furst, it is said that: "A poem, like a piece of music, offers in itself nothing but a text, which is, strictly, only a sort of recipe; the cook who executes it has an essential role. To speak of a poem in itself, has no real and precise meaning, is simply to speak of a possibility" ^[3]. This quote brings up an important aspect: If we ask ten different chefs to cook the same meal (following the same recipe), would it be possible for the ten meals to be identical in plating, color, smell, and taste? The answer is: absolutely no. There are so many uncertainties to prevent the meals from being identical, such as the amount of spices to put in, the control of fire, the temperature of the kitchen, the freshness of the ingredients, and so on. The chefs are not robots, and even for robots, I doubt they can be 100 percent sure to make identical dishes and repeat them ten times. Simply because of the fact that even a breeze of air can changes the texture of the food. The same concept can be adapted to reading a poem: everyone has a different tone or voice, and thus it will be impossible to have the same interpretation of a poem. These said, an interpretation of one work varies for every performer.

3. The interpretation of rubatos in Chopin Waltz Op. 34 no. 3

Waltz Op.34 no.3 by Chopin has many recordings that are available to listen to. To give an example on my idea that there are many different interpretations for one work, I found two very different recordings from two different musicians: Alfred Cortot and Soeng-Jin Cho. Both musicians performed this piece beautifully and exquisitely with very clear dance beats. However, Alfred Cortot did many unexpected rubatos and sudden dynamics changes. Compared to Cortot, Soeng-Jin Cho has more steadiness and calmness throughout the music, which also means fewer changes in tempo, and less rubatos. Before we get into a comparison of these two recordings in detail, I would like to illustrate my search for the meaning of rubato briefly on what is the definition of rubatos and the reason when we tend to compare the rubatos from recordings. We often try to catch the different executions on rubatos, therefore, the reason behind the difference between rubatos is one of the key factors in comparing different interpretations.

Richard Hudson describes legato in his article "*Rubato*" as such: "expressive alteration on rhythm or tempo... Borrowed and stolen, contra metric and agogic, or bound and free" ^[4]. This definition can conclude in one sentence: the time taken in music based on emotional expression. I need to refer to the traditional interpretation from the Russian School of music on this subject matter. One of the important aspects from the Russian School emphasizes the importance of singing and speaking quality within the music. My teacher is from the traditional Russian Music School dating back to around 1980 in Moscow Conservatory. During his lessons, he often stresses the importance of colors and speaking-like sound in a phrase and tune. He taught me to play a sentence as if I were talking to a person, and rubatos should imitate the tone when we speak. When we are speaking, we speak with different emotions under different circumstances, we stop at certain phrases to emphasize certain words. And in music, when we imitate our speaking, we would take more time on certain notes, or certain peaks of a sentence, and that is the moment that we are doing an emotional rubato.

Some composers give out specific instructions on how to do a rubato in their music. Chopin, for example, specified that rubato should be only taken with the right hand that is playing the melody; left hand needs to always keep the steady rhythm and tempo while right hand lingering with singing like melody. The Author of the book "Chopin" stated that the great translator Galliard backed up this idea in his translation of Tosi's singing treatise, He states: "When the bass goes an exactly regular pace, the other part retards or anticipates in a singular manner, for the sake of expression, but after that returns to its exactness, to be guided by the bass."^[5] The essential information in this quote is: "for the sake of expression."

4. “For the sake of Expression?”

Now the question remains, how would we like to express a phrase, or how would we like to phrase a line using our own expression but still respect the writings on the score? How would we imitating the tone of speaking, or how do we take time in the phrases? The answer could be simple: by expressing the time in between the sound and giving the time back at the right timing. Given said this, rubatos are the key to making the music vary with different emotions.

Everyone in this world is different from another, which means that they all have different personalities. Consequently, different people express their emotions differently. Since rubato is about our own expressions, different musicians who have different personality will play different rubatos. There, we might just have countless different rubatos or different interpretations. How can we judge what is right and what is wrong? We might not be able to because we need to respect the fact that people are different. Thus, they will play with different expressions and have different understanding of music works.

Although following the waltz rhythm in three (strong, weak, weak), Soeng-Jin played Waltz Op.34 No. 3 in a steadier pause. It sounds calm, clean, clear, and refined. This makes perfect sense since the recording was recorded during his competition in 2015 Chopin International Piano Competition ^[6]. We all know that in order to play a successful competition, we need to try to be pianistically as perfect as possible. Thus, it is not hard to imagine that Soeng-Jin might pay special attention to the cohesiveness of the music. Can we say that this is the final or set interpretation of Seong-Jin? The answer is an absolute no. I found another recording by him on the same piece; it sounded much more free and longing ^[8]. This recording was recorded in a studio. Here, we already have two very different interpretations of a same work by the same performer. How can we possibly decide which one is the best one?

Cortot’s recording is always the classic to listen to because of its lightness and spontaneity. Somehow when we discuss Cortot’s rendition in general, we always give the conclusion that Cortot is so free from boundaries to the point that sometimes he even ignores the score. Yet we forgot the fact that he was the pupil of Chopin’s student. And also Chopin’s music at that time was frequently played in exquisite Salons. It has a relaxed atmosphere and is subject to lots of liberty within the interpretations. Moreover, Cortot, who spent most of his time in Europe, witnessed the beauty of nature and the mountain breeze in Switzerland. I am sure the mountain breeze has different speed and different temperature, and the view of the sky with the clouds from where he was raised must change daily with myraids difference in colors. It is the same in his playing; every phrase has different color and temperature. While having the pause of the mazurka, Cortot did so many special rubatos that changed the speed, the tune, and the temperature of the music, none of which were indicated in the score. And more importantly, all of the special expressions that he does follows the verbal indication from Chopin that the left hand should always stay in the pause. Given said these, can we still try to put negative comments on the fact that Cortot’s interpretation is way too free that doesn’t represent the score? ^[8]

Admittedly, we must respect what has been written on the score because composers wrote down every note and every expression for a reason. However, I would like to think in this way: Imagine music in general as the solar system; the music itself is the sun; scores and those black dots are the orbits, interpretations are the planets that spin around the orbits, and we as the performers are the small cosmos that always try to influence the speed of the spinning planet using our magnetic field or in another word, our unplaced emotions.

Artistic individuality is the key to interpreting music. Of course, one needs to go through and dedicate time and hard work to have a promising technique in order to express what we want in music through hands. And, of course, if we are playing someone else’s composition, we need to respect the score and play the right notes instead of improvising uncontrollably. However, as Gsatti and Furst state in their article “*On the Interpretation of Music*,” we as interpreters have the duty to recreate the music from the score or, in other words, make the piece relive. They also state that “one cannot re-create an artistic reality, a lyrical actuality, without the presence of the spirit, indeed without its domination.” This quote further supports the idea that we need to bring ourselves into the music. Therefore we should encourage performers to devote their emotions fully to the music, not to be stuck in the principle of the “right way to interpret.”

5. Conclusion

In my opinion, the possibilities that music possesses are special, because of how generous music is

to the performer, to the audience and to the composer. When composers create a work, the work will always be there, waiting for us to imagine, to interpret and to perform. Performers can create stories, paintings, and colors using their hearts. We can link ourselves to music and express ourselves with our own personality and character. And the most beautiful aspect of music is that because we are different individuals with different personalities, we are able to create a different sound world and different colors on the same piece of music. Given the prerequisite that we already have sincere respect for the score and music, it is hard for us to judge or decide which one of us has the most accurate interpretation of the same piece of music since we all are unique individuals with different understandings of music. And never to forget it is the magic and the beauty of music to have so many possibilities and interpretations.

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