

MUS 8590 Performance Theory
Final Paper
Instructor: Dr. Guerino Mazzola
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Eunhye Grace Choi

Processes of Music Performance from Learning to Performing

With example musical passage from Sonata for Clarinet and Piano in F minor op.120 No.1 by

Johannes Brahms

Abstract

There is no popular textbook about how to learn a piece of music in specific order. There is no particular rule or equation like mathematics to fix a trouble spot from a learning process of music. How do musicians learn music without specific direction? Can only musical genius and prodigy who already know how to learn a piece play the music? How do teachers teach students about learning process? They all might have subject individual verbalized teaching methods but not written. Those questions are easily leading us to that we are in need of the musical performance theory. Performer should be able to explain about their performance based on rational ways. There is no right or wrong way to perform music. Every performance with reasonable interpretation is acceptable. However, can musician explain about a process of their performance or theory of their performance? I want to examine a possibility of verbalizing performance processes from learning to performing on this paper. I will use an example passage (measure 1-4) from the first movement of the sonata for Clarinet and Piano in f minor op.120 no.1.

Introduction

According to a dictionary, presentation is the activity of presenting something. How do you prepare a presentation? Do you know where to begin? Here are some agenda for how to prepare a presentation. First of all, you will select a topic. This could be done either subject or object. You might have to choose a specific topic that you have to present under the circumstance or you want to present a free topic in liberated setting. After selecting a topic, you want to plan an outline. This step is to draw a big picture with many possible imaginations. Then, you want to write a draft paper for the presentation. This is a step that imagination becomes a real project. However, you don't have to worry. There is always a chance to change what you drew. That is an editing step. After you edit a paper, you want to add some impactful point to elaborate a presentation. Use of nice paraphrasing, adding some helpful gesture, and thinking about a variety of vocal tone of presentation are good ways of elaborating the presentation. If you do all the steps above, the next step is a practice of your speech over and over. Now, you are ready to present your effort.

Context

Performance is a public presentation of music. You need a good procedure to prepare a good performance. After you choose a piece to learn, there are several different ways approaching to interpret music. Many different versions of definition could be used to describe the steps of learning music and processing performance. I will use the order of preparing a presentation for process a performance. Meanwhile, the starting point for every musician to learn new music would be either listening a recording or sight-reading a score. In this paper, I will only address a process of performance proceeding with music score.

- A. Select a topic: select a piece that you want to perform.
- B. Plan an outline: sight-reading a music score, listening a recording

- C. Write a draft paper: based on sight-reading process, play the piece through with necessary analysis until you get familiar with the music. Observing local analysis; 1) Harmony, 2) Mother tempo, 3) Articulation, 4) Dynamics on this step is recommended.
- D. Edit a paper: Add more advanced analysis such as an emotional and gestural; 1) direction, 2) Voicing: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass, 3) daughter tempo
- E. Add impactful point to elaborate a presentation: making more shape in several different ways such as 1) melody, 2) rubato, 3) dynamics
This step helps to enhance a gestural analysis on previous step.
- F. Practice: keep practicing everything to make sure working together fine.
- G. Presentation: Performing the piece.

Method

I will use the 4 measures of beginning of the first movement of the sonata for Clarinet and Piano in f minor op. 120 no. 1 by Johannes Brahms to demonstrate a process of learning.



A. Sight-reading: Sight-reading is just reading a piece of music for the first time without studying. You will have some basic overall observation about the piece at this step. However, depending on the level of performers, the observation could be completed at this step. Now, you will sight-read these 4 measures of passage. The very first step is checking the key signature. If the music is written without a key signature, you could ignore this step. Then, check the meter and play the notes as correct as you could. You have to pay attention about sharp, flat, and natural as marked on the score if you don't have a key signature written. At the excerpt from Brahms sonata, we could figure this passage was written with four flats (could be either A flat Major or f minor). Then, you will notice that this passage includes three voices, but all is unison. Right hand consists of octave passages and left hand consists of single notes.

B. Add local analysis: now you are ready to observe more than notes and key signature. What is the dynamic on this passage? It says poco forte and has a decrescendo marking on the 4th measure (at the end of the phrasing). So, you could set your poco forte (a bit strong) and keep the dynamic until the phrase ends. Then, practice based on tempo Allegro first and you could edit (mostly accelerating, but sometimes slowing down) tempo in the next step. If you have a tempo marking like quarter note=70, you can practice with a metronome. But, start slowly first until you play notes comfortably. What kind of articulations can you see in this passage? I will say a legato which means tied together. You should try both finger legato and pedal legato. Writing down the fingering is a helpful tip. You could use a hand crossing technique on this passage because of unison writing.

C. Add advanced analysis: Where is this passage going eventually? Setting a direction distributes huge to play a mature performance. Let's look at the first note only from the each measure. That are C, D-flat, B-flat, A-flat (G-flat), and F (5th measure) and you notice they are descending toward tonic note (F in 5th measure) in f minor. Then, play only those first notes few times until you feel a direction. Next, you can add selected down beats of the note like C, E-flat, D-flat, E-flat, B-flat, C, B-flat, A-flat, G-flat, F. Playing the first note only could set a mother

direction and following each added down beat sets a daughter tempo. The little twisting line of second and third measure's direction could be considered as a granddaughter direction. Rubato could be added at this point. Rubato means stealing time. If you stole the time, you have to give it back at some point. Otherwise, the balance of tempo collapses and it causes dragging or rushing. Rubato usually helps to have rhythmic flexibility on moving notes and passages. I would add some rubato in passage of eighth notes in measure 2 and 3. After you find a direction and play with the rubato, you could set the real performance tempo at this step. To add an emotional analysis to this passage, I would feel a depression and bitter sad feeling from descending direction with a twisting line from this passage. Every performer plays different tempo and delivers different emotional consequences from this passage, it is important to be convinced yourself first.

D. Shaping: After you observe dynamic, tempo, articulation, direction, and voicing, you have to shape them to make more sophisticated level of performance. Shaping dynamic, melody, and rubato are most common kinds of shaping. You will stay in poco forte from measure 1 through 3 and prepare changing a dynamic to go down to the piano in measure 5. Measure 4 is functioning as a bridge to smooth this dynamic change. For shaping the melody, this is not a good example passage because there is one melody line. However, if you have more than three or four voices on one passage, you need to figure out which voice is most important to bring out than others. For shaping the rubato, I will make a tenuto on the first note on measure 3 and move for the rest notes on the measure. Finally, melodic weight should be on the first beat of the measure 4 because it is right before a period of the sentence and pick up to the next new phrasing at the same time.

E. Practice: This is the step to wrap up for all the procedure that we've gone through. In this step, you will sum- up your practice of techniques and add emotional musical sense.

F. Performing the piece: Once you perform a piece you have learned, it is not the end.

That is a rehearsal for the next performance and you are still processing to learn. Every performance should be different because you are growing up and getting better.

Conclusion

Performance procedure is the most complicated thing because there is no rule and order to make a final work. However, it is always nice to organize the process and thought of learning music in rational way. Performance should be planned like preparing a presentation. I demonstrated a process of learning a simple passage, an excerpt from the sonata for Clarinet and Piano by Johannes Brahms, with using proper rational analysis following through different steps. Each step that I addressed in this paper could be mixed or switched depending on the music. However, it is very important that performer knows what they are processing in learning a new music and be able to explain the procedure they went through.