

Expressiveness in music performance

Empirical approaches across
styles and cultures

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Part 4

Prospectives

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Implications for Music Studies

Nicholas Cook

The term “express” and its multiple derivatives have a peculiarly checkered history in the study of music. As with so many things, this might be traced back to Eduard Hanslick, who in his book *On the Musically Beautiful* (Hanslick 1854) excluded the expression of emotion from the proper subject matter of musical aesthetics. Instead he claimed that aesthetics should be centered on the purely musical, on tones in motion—and this distinction between the “musical” and the “extra-musical” created the fault-line in the understanding of musical meaning on which musicology and its subdiscipline, music theory, were subsequently built. The telling thing, however, is that with his critic’s hat on Hanslick did not adhere to his own prescription. Maybe his point was that talking about musical expression of emotion is most productive when the musical as well as the emotional dimensions are kept firmly in view. Or maybe he saw no necessary connection between aesthetic theory and life outside the ivory tower. Either way, in his critical writing he continued to speak freely of music’s expressive and emotional properties. Turned away at the front door, expression simply re-entered at the back.

As is evident from the Introduction to this book, the editors had similar problems. With unusual frankness, they reproduce the letter of invitation they sent to the contributors, in which they attempted to prevent the topic from spinning out of control by focusing the idea of expressiveness on variation with respect to some kind of prototype, and by distinguishing between “emotional” and “musical” expression, the latter of which they declared to be the principal topic of the book (these are their first two “Delineations”). Contributors do not always do what editors ask, however, nor is expressiveness to be penned in so easily. The definition of expressiveness in relation to a prototype, at one time understood as deviation from the nominal values specified by the score, is progressively loosened in the Introduction, from the relationship between a given performance and a typical one to any kind of change of state. But even so, contributors stretch it further, applying it to quasi-linguistic syntax, to social organization, or to simply pushing against the limits of possibility. Similarly, they resist the editors’ distinction between “emotional” and “musical” expression, which maps on to the distinction between the transitive and intransitive uses of the term. Emotion emerges as an integral dimension of the multi-dimensional phenomena of expressiveness with which contributors are concerned. They are even reluctant to adhere to the editors’ working definition of expressiveness in terms of auditory parameters, repeatedly documenting the expressive effects of ancillary gestures. Once again, the idea of expressiveness proves too slippery to be contained. Very little ends up off limits.

However, the particular importance of this book lies not so much in its focus or purview as in a radical change of perspective. Critics tend to speak of expressive properties as if they were composed into the score. Whether this is ever really the case is doubtful: you can’t even imagine music in the abstract, that is to say without making probably unconscious assumptions about how it might be played, and so Doğanatan-Dack writes in Chapter 1 that it “is in reality very difficult, if not impossible, to demonstrate that the materials of a musical idiom have any expressive properties in the absence of a (real or imagined) performative context.” But in any case there is a long-standing

practice of using the word to refer to what is “added by the performer,” as Schubert and Fabian put it (see Chapter 16). Slippery as it may be, then, the perspective of expressiveness prompts a reorientation from the world of scores and music-producing artefacts to that of music as experienced, which is to say music as performed (whether live or on record). Seen from this perspective, however, there is a sense in which it is not a matter of adding the expressiveness of the performance to that of the composition, but rather one of reconstructing the object of investigation.

In Chapter 7, Dibben observes that because in popular music the recording is, in Allan Moore’s phrase, the primary text (Moore 1993), the idea of expressiveness has to be rethought for it. Most obviously, in a musical tradition in which notation does not have a prescriptive force, the prototypes or norms in relation to which expressiveness might be understood must be sought elsewhere. The point is repeatedly made in this book. In relation to jazz, for example, Bauer writes in Chapter 8 that its syntax is “no more a function of the music’s written representation than speech syntax is of language’s written representation: in both cases the grammar of performed sound, the oral syntax of narrative utterances, prefigures written modes of transmission.” But then something rather similar might be said of a particularly conspicuous example of music conceived in terms of notation, the repertory commonly known as “new complexity.” In Chapter 6, Clarke and Doffman quote two bars from a piece for solo piccolo by Brian Ferneyhough, and ask what might be understood as the norm against which any irregularities might be experienced as expressive: it is hardly possible, they say, to imagine listeners measuring what they hear against any well-defined, internalized model. And I would claim that the same argument might be made of the western “art” tradition more generally.

For historical reasons that I shall not enter into here, the traditional approach of musicologists—and, as Doğan-tan-Dack says, music psychologists (see Chapter 1)—has been to see music as first and foremost a notated text. That makes sense from the point of view of composers, since they write texts. It also makes sense from the point of view of performers, to the extent that they start with texts. And the purpose of the long-standing educational practice of aural training is to accommodate listeners’ experience to the text, to condition them to hear music as text—that is, as made up of notes. From such a perspective, it is perfectly natural to approach performance in terms of how far it deviates from the nominal values of the score, as did such pioneer researchers as Alfred Binet and Jules Courtier (Judd 1896). However, to explain the experience of expressiveness on that basis is either to assume that everybody hears music as made up of notes, or else to discount the experiences of most listeners. After all, even if this kind of literate listening was ever the preserve of more than a tiny minority of elite listeners—which is doubtful—it clearly does not apply to listeners in today’s world, where musical literacy is a relatively rare skill and recorded music in its multifarious forms accounts for the overwhelming majority of musical consumption. And there is little evidence in this book to suggest that—as the textualist model would imply—people experience the expressivity of composition and of performance as different, complementary forms of expressiveness. Indeed, reporting on listener tests of violin performance, Schubert and Fabian specifically note that the two types of expressiveness appeared to be conflated (see Chapter 16). The obvious conclusion is that, for the most part, listeners simply experience the expressivity of what they hear.

But now expressiveness appears in a quite different light. To approach music in terms of the broadened concept of expressiveness that this book advocates is to reorientate our thinking around experienced sound (a formulation that I intend to encompass both the sound and the people experiencing it). This does not mean that we forget about scores, but that rather than being a matter of understanding sounds in relation to scores, it becomes one of understanding scores in relation to sounds. (That was Bauer’s point about jazz in Chapter 8.) To borrow a phrase from Roland Barthes (1977, p. 180), this is a radical reconstruction of “the musical object itself, as it presents itself to discourse,” and it brings with it significant convergences between the different areas

of music studies that have traditionally operated under such labels as musicology, ethnomusicology, and popular music studies. I would argue that it also opens up the possibility of a properly theorized appreciation of the history, nature, and use of musical scores, which look much less like literary texts and much more like theatrical scripts when you think of music as a performing art rather than as a text reproduced in performance. Other than Jack Goody's work (Goody 1987), there has been little study of the peculiar dynamics of a culture in which the literary and the oral are closely intertwined, as they are in western "art" music. There has also been little work on how scores actually function—on what they signify to who and how—in the act of performance. There has been even less consideration of the relationship between the kind of fact-oriented, declarative knowledge towards which musicology has traditionally been oriented, and the action-oriented, procedural knowledge of which Leech-Wilkinson and Prior speak in Chapter 3. None of these presented themselves as serious issues from the perspective of a musicology predicated on music as writing. Yet all are essential ingredients in the ongoing transition from traditional musicology, which was conceived as a bastion of elite culture and heavily tinged by nostalgia, to a more pluralistic conception of music studies that construes music as an agent of personal and social meaning, a basic dimension of what it is to be human.

Early examples of empirical approaches to performance, as illustrated by Binet and Courtier, were in this way conditioned by the traditional priorities and prejudices of musicology. The textualist bias that Doğantan-Dack detects in music psychology, coupled to nostalgia on the one hand and the practicalities of data capture on the other, goes a long way towards explaining the skewing of studies of performance throughout the twentieth century towards Western "art" music, and more specifically towards piano music—and more specifically still towards nineteenth-century piano music. Both the editors and the contributors to this book make a timely effort to break out of this mould in terms of culture, genre, forces, and period, as well as through a focus on collaborative as well as individual music making. However, it is not just a matter of repertory. Methodologically, the consequence of the traditional discipline's textualist orientation was the approach that dominated music-theoretical approaches to performance in North America during the last decades of the twentieth century, and still lingers on today. In this way of thinking, un-notated nuance and other dimensions of expressive performance are recognized and valorized to the extent that they "express" score-based structure—a usage that echoes the Schenkerian idea of design "expressing" structure, which is itself grounded in Hanslick's structure-expression dichotomy. (It also implies a hierarchy of importance that maps all too easily on to the unequal institutional roles of academics and performers in most universities today.) Contributors to this book, understanding "expression" in a less dogmatic and more inclusive way, recognize that structure remains an important context for understanding expressive performance, but now see it as just one of any number of such contexts that range from considerations of embodiment at one extreme to ideology and belief on the other. And top-down approaches based on scores and score-based theory increasingly give way to bottom-up approaches, whether based on empirical analysis of recordings, data gathered by motion capture, listener responses, or musicians' discourse.

If the development of empirical approaches to performance was in this way conditioned and constrained by musicological assumptions, then conversely the prioritization of expressiveness evidenced by this book has the potential to influence the working assumptions that shape music studies. The focus on expressiveness places experience—not just listeners' experience but that of performers as well—at the center of the field of the study, but at the same time brings a diversity of empirical approaches into play, approaches drawn from a wide variety of disciplinary traditions. Whereas traditional musicology—the study of music as writing—was widely seen from outside as a particularly narrow and rather peripheral specialism, the study of music as performance is today a nexus of cross-disciplinary work. Approaches from biology, computer science, music information

retrieval, psychology, sociology, ethnomusicology, and popular music studies are all represented in this book. At the same time, the necessity of understanding expressiveness in its cultural and historical context is strongly represented as well, and indeed forms the third and last of the editors' "Delineations." But then how, as the editors ask in the very first paragraph of the book, might it be possible to talk meaningfully about expressiveness within a cross-cultural context? It is evident that different contributors would answer this question in different ways. The variety of approaches represented in this book, as well as in the study of expressive musical performance more generally, means that debates of importance across the humanities and social sciences in general—for example, about the relationship between biologically afforded universals and social construction—can be conducted in a richly evidenced-based manner within the disciplines of music studies.

In acknowledging the role of culture and history in the formation and understanding of expressiveness, the editors and contributors call on the expertise of historical and cultural musicologists who up to now have tended to treat empirical approaches with a certain degree of disdain. (John Deathridge, for example, refers to "the mere collection and measurement of data that too often passes for research into the practice of music."¹) However, the reasons for such suspicion are not peculiar to music. If the take-up among mainstream humanities scholars of the computational approaches frequently clustered together under the label "digital humanities" has been less than was at one time hoped for, the main reason is probably to be found in epistemological misunderstandings. Steven Ramsay, who works in the field of literary studies, calls attention to the frequent invocation of inappropriate scientific paradigms, as for example when computational approaches are claimed to "verify" critical hypotheses. As he goes on to say, critical insight is not a matter of objectively verifiable data but rather of "deepened subjectivity" (Ramsay 2011, p. 167).

And that is where the study of expressiveness in music performance might have its most important role to play. As this book makes abundantly clear, there is now a well-established tradition of highly cross-disciplinary collaboration in this area, one for which it is hard to identify parallels in other fields of cultural practice. That means that researchers have become used to the strategies of epistemological accommodation that any such sustained collaboration requires, from translating ideas from one language into another at one extreme, to amused tolerance at the other. The study of expressive performance might then become the model not only for approaches to music studies that bring together hard-edged empirical analysis and thick cultural description, but also for the embracing of digital technology within the humanities more generally. But charity begins at home. And if expressivity is slippery, music is even more so. To have any chance of making sense of it, we need every tool we can get. This book offers quite an arsenal.

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¹ Cover endorsement of Adorno (2006).