

## **Musical interpretation strategies An ethnography of piano master classes**

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### **Introduction**

The idea of an ethnographic research on instrumental master classes of western concert music didn't rise from ethnomusicological issues. The inspiration came from reflections on the aesthetics of musical interpretation. Briefly, it was concerned about understanding how an art which intends to find a universalizing tradition, in fact appears, while performed, in historic-anthropological contexts.

It was not supposed to accredit *a priori* a context to this music, as attributed to any cultural production, and search for what could corroborate this premise, but to believe in its premises, radically believe in its 'universality', so that everything around this music should be sure indexes of it. Although, under this naive ethnographic view, anthropological and extra-musical roots of concert music performance are better indicated – the body, the gesture, the babbling, the verbal images; these will be examples of field notations.

### **Methodology**

The pretence investigative naïveté is false. The hypothesis that the preparation for concert music performance triggers an extra-musical gangue was the expression of my experience in master classes, and I was astonished to see that musicians who defended its purity also believed in the 'character' of a particular melody or harmonic sequence. To plan an ethnographic research was to anticipate that extra-musical references were more than a simple belief (or theories) but also expressed a necessary act of "territorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980: 381), an act to turn expressive the musical forces: "The expressive qualities, which we call aesthetic [qualities], are neither 'pure' nor symbolic qualities, but proper-qualities, i.e., appropriative ones" (Id.: 397). The expectation was to be able to capture the emergence of this phenomenon.

Therefore, the starting point was my own experience, the hermeneutic "pre-comprehension" (Gadamer, 1996: 286), but a pre-comprehension that would not let itself to be conditioned by the acquired manners and could face the "things themselves". Here, we are in the confluence of phenomenology and hermeneutics. In Grondin (2003), "the phenomenology is not the name of a domain of objects, a method or a philosophic tradition, but a quality or a virtue. A study, a reflection, a phenomenological philosophy is not a philosophy that follows a particular method (...), but a thought that gets to see the phenomena" (Id.: 120). Grondin reminds us that, when Gadamer said that "a little more phenomenology would be useful", he didn't endorse wider reading on phenomenology, but that "it was necessary to make an effort to open our eyes and speak directly of things themselves, instead of quoting texts or a secondary literature disposing the propositions without looking to the thing" (Id.: 123). Still in Grondin: "One way out of two: we just repeat what we have heard, what is said, or we only speak about what we have really seen" (Id.: 122). It's the return of ethnographic issues through another angle.

It's important to remark that "interpretation", the "thicker" (Geertz, 2008: 3) it is, doesn't replace the listening of classes and pieces. Non-verbal is irreducible to verbal. The present





<p><i>in the harpsichord there is no uniform dynamics, the uniform dynamics actually doesn't exist, there is agogics variation in the harpsichord".</i></p>	
<p><i>He says that there are several solutions, but "what we must not do is to lay a uniform dynamics and accentuation in all notes. It doesn't render an aesthetic effect to the music". He says that the way she plays is a good way to give rhythmic assurance. "But neither the singer, nor the wind instrumentalists sing or play with uniform sonority in the bass and in the sharp. With a uniform sonority, the music becomes too literal, too objective". (...)</i></p>	
<p><i>MC proposes an exercise. He asks who has a good first sight reading, chooses a listener, and asks him to play at four hands with the student. He will play "the upper part [soprano], doubling in octaves. The student plays the contralto and doubles the bass. They played a small passage.</i></p>	<p>Pedagogy/Polyphony</p>
<p><i>MC isn't satisfied yet, the desired effect wasn't obtained. He wants to try something else. The student plays the bass, another one plays the contralto, and a third one will play the soprano, standing up. They start. MC asks the contralto not to sound so forte. At that moment, we clearly listened to polyphony, because each student has a different "toucher". I really heard the voices more clearly.</i></p>	
<p><i>Then, the student tries playing everything alone. MC asks her to play the bass more sustained. The result is immediately noticed by everybody. MC looks happily at the listeners who approve the new performance. He smiles and says: "Your imagination hearing has improved very much. It was almost a stereo effect!"</i></p>	<p>Invention/Imagination</p>
<p>(...)</p>	
<p><i>He continues: "Articulation is different from accentuation. The accentuation, the contrast is practically impossible to obtain on the organ, on the harpsichord. An accentuation of tempos, in bars, begins with Haydn, Mozart. But there is never equality in tempos accentuation. There is not this kind of democracy".</i></p>	<p>Articulation/ Accentuation</p>
<p>(...)</p>	
<p><i>MC: "Articulation comprehends phrases and words; do not do similar words, but different ones. It comes from (...) [poetic] versification, a heritage of poetic rhythm". He says that when there are notes in a uniform pulse, it's necessary to induce differences. It's necessary to see iambic, anapaestic and trochaic rhythms. How do we do to show that there are words? It's necessary to make little cuts. It's necessary to articulate, explain words and syllables, without accentuating everything in the same way. It's the elocution model".</i></p>	<p>Prosody  Poetic rhythm</p>
<p><i>MC notes another important aspect: everything articulated, everything related to everything give continuity to the discourse. "Pay attention on not to do much exaggerated dynamics. You can't scream, the piano doesn't sustain it, in spite of the scream". MC searches a word in a trochaic rhythm – "rosa", and sings it with the music, puts words in a passage of the music, asks her to do the same. She starts playing</i></p>	<p>Prosody</p>



*natural intervals. Why is it so important? Because the performance changes according to the 'intervallic' sensibility; it interferes in the way of playing, for it's necessary to do something musically interesting' (...) 'Nowadays the tuning is very complicated for many reasons: tuning fork is rising, repetitive listening; the composer didn't have this idea, of repetition. [The result is that] we need a lot of precision and average tuning'(...) [For instance] the shorter note many times belongs to the harmonic rhythm. There are many rules, it's necessary to choose. [When they say] Fisher-Dieskau didn't know the rules! How could it be?! He made the rules! The problem is not making legato or staccato, but what the function of all of it is!'*

I will only comment the idea that 'good tuning depends on the sensibility to natural intervals'. There is here, of course, the question of enlarging the repertoire well known by pianists beyond the one for their instrument, but also the question of knowing how this sensibility will interfere in the musical performance in a tempered instrument, how will it interfere with the *toucher*, the timbre? How will this sharp sensibility modify the interpretative approach of chamber music?

## Conclusion

The transcriptions here presented don't have the descriptive 'thickness' required for an actual interpretive text, although some quick drafts came out for future elaborations. 'Thickness' will appear together with interviews, and the interviewed persons won't be 'informants' (see Titon, 2000: 176). In this sense, a 'thick' future of the research could be polyphonic (example in Salustriano et al, 2006). Students and teachers are subjects of their practices, while bringing out their acts and confirming the efficacy of pedagogies, thus, directly or indirectly speaking about the initial hypothesis.

On the other hand, each category or theme demands new research engaging new interviews. It's possible to extend this research to chamber music rehearsals or even private classes. It's also possible to visualize a team work: different points of view could enlighten different categories about the same event; comparative frames can be built on the observation of different groups of instrumentalists, different teachers or different musical practices coming from different traditions.

I finalize with the certainty that a still wide exploratory fieldwork is needed. Although promising, the elaboration of categories and further conclusions depends on extensive empirical data.

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