

Narrative construction as strategy to memorising

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Aim

The main purpose of this research is to find a way to enhance expressivity and memorisation in performance through deep personal involvement in meaning construction. The proposed strategy aims to go beyond the performer's background knowledge concerning style and technical issues by actively searching a way of connecting his/her personal meanings and/or imagery to the construction of musical meaning.

Background

A theoretical framework will be proposed in order to explain how a process of narrative construction can consciously integrate musical interpretation through the use of imagination, having the goal of enhancing expressivity and memorising. First, it will be explained how personal experience, emotion and imagination are linked to the process of meaning production. Then, the idea of structuring an emotional narrative connecting the performer's personal experience to the music through the use of imagination will be argued, including its implications in expressivity and memorisation. Special attention will be given to issues concerning memory and imagination.

The Process of Meaning Production

Experience is stored in a bodily-based stock of knowledge and affections, which are inherently kinaesthetically and symbolically charged. Each particular perception will be articulated with one's personal experience in order to build a meaningful interpretation of what has happened. Imagination plays always - from the simplest cognitive operations to the most complex - an important role in the process of meaning production (cf. Johnson 1987).

According to this knowledge, a piece of music that is heard or interpreted has a particular association to our past experiences, frequently without being noticed, unconsciously. Since music is a non-verbal way of communication, it interacts with one's own bodily experience involving unconscious levels of meaning production and this makes it available for *intermodality*: "Due to this human ability of intermodality, we can express through different modalities - auditory or visual - the same forms and gestural dynamics" (Correia 2007:80, my translation). As consequence of this ability, a performer can develop a phrasing or a musical gesture working on particular sounds but having a frame of pictures as reference, for example. He/she can consciously add meaning to the sound he imagines by relating it to a particular picture; and still, he will remain in the domain of pre-verbal language, although actively using his imagination to make this intermodal connection. Additionally, the

resulting action metaphors within this process will be embedded in the performer's mind and body and he/she will have, thus, better chances of incorporating the emotions he/she wants to express within the music.

The Process of Narrative Construction

The task of relating paintings to sections of a piece of music stimulates the metaphorical process involved in developing an interpretation through the analogy between both. Trying to make them correspond and interact will stimulate a response from the body; emotionally exploring the context in this kinaesthetic process will lead to the choice of gestures according to the meant expression (Correia 2002; Gil 1996). Narrative construction is a way to structure our experiences to more conscious levels of meaning production because it associates our bodily stock of affections and knowledge with a specific event or action. Narrative construction not only structures our experiences in a timeline as it also charges them symbolically and emotionally.

Taking into account the importance of narrative construction to structuring and memorising events, due to its inherent personal and symbolical charge, the idea of building a personal narrative related to a piece of music seems to be an interesting "match" and challenge. The aim of building both an expressive performance and of memorising it seems in this way be facilitated.

There is another important role in associating musical meaning to a narrative construction. We can charge it not only emotionally and episodically, but we can also relate other intermodal information to its meaning. Narrative construction is in this way a territory that we can fill with different kinds of information: it is a kind of hook on which one can hang different kinds of associations. These can be aural, visual, tactile and intellectual. Some examples of this are expressive gestures, melodic patterns or even technical performative choices. The role of imagination is crucial in this associative process.

Memory and Imagination in Practice

Focusing on another area of research, memory, we can assume that the most important memory systems to musical performance are: auditory, motor, visual, emotional, narrative, and linguistic memory – where "the inner speech provides a means of mental control that can be used to implement plans and strategies", for example, in mental rehearsal. These separate memory systems interact with each other, fortifying altogether the information to be retrieved. (Chaffin et al., 2009). Emotional memory is especially referred by Susan Gathercole (1998:18), who asserts that emotionally charged personal experiences are easier to memorise than other: "emotional experience appears to play a critical role in the establishment of enduring autobiographical memories..." and "...the degree of personal involvement and emotional experience accompanying an event are important determinants of its memorability (Conway 1995 in Gathercole 1998:18). She also writes that "...the greater the narrative coherence at the time, the more organised the resulting memory trace and the closer the match with the narrative schemas applied to interpret the incomplete traces many years later" (Gathercole 1998:19).

Simon Fischer (2004) proposes several ways of enhancing memory of a piece. The author suggests that each type of memory – aural, visual, motor, structural, etc. – should be independently rehearsed, in order to establish different kinds of associations to the musical text. He also points out the expressivity should be the "hook on which to hang all other associations" (Fischer 2004:292). Keeping this in mind, choosing an emotional narrative with the support of paintings may help the performer to have the aimed expressivity to be played in the music incorporated through different ways: visual (the painting, the score, the hands on the instrument), motor (incorporating the line of the narrative), aural (hearing the desired expressivity to be performed). In this case study, the paintings are aimed to work as a retrieval

cues, that enable expressivity, sound and gestures to be more easily remembered. More, they are related to important structural units of the music and mark different projected emotional atmospheres in a sequential line of time.

The importance of imagination in practice and its relation to memorisation has been studied by Simon Fischer (2004) and Patricia Holmes (2005). Both authors stand for first building an expressive, deep and detailed mental idea of the music to be played, using different kinds of imaginary – aural, visual, tactile – in order to make performative choices according to it, “... performers at the highest levels will carry an internal, constantly refining blueprint of their ideal performance and are prepared to work long and hard in order to follow it. This level of intensity during learning is likely to contribute significantly to effective memorisation” (Ericsson, Krampe & Tesch-Romer, quoted in Holmes 1995:225).

We can assume that meaning construction derived from the expressive association of the music to a narrative can help to structure a mental frame with different types of information in a sequential line. Personal experience is in this way connected to performance through the use of metaphorical projections and will have determinant influence due to the inherent performer’s emotional involvement. Again, elaborating a rich frame of different associations to musical meaning will have impact on and can lead to a successful memorisation.

Methodology

The model proposed by Correia (2007) “Um Modelo Teórico para a Compreensão e o Estudo da Performance Musical” (“A Theoretical Model to the Understanding and Study of Musical Performance”, my translation) was applied to the Prokofiev violin sonata op.94a but adding to the historical contextualization a pictorial universe to which I am particularly sensitive. Correia (2002) argued on the important role personal meanings play in the construction of a context and how they connect, unify or *provide the gestural continuities* that will turn all the information that the interpreter has collected to create a unique emotional subjective amalgam, which will lead to an effective gestural realization in the real time of the performance: “Whether historically grounded or not, the chosen context seems to be just a starting point, an amalgam of cultural references and technical resources, which has the function of simultaneously constraining and stimulating the performer’s imagination” (Correia 2002: 96).

Adopting this model and recognizing that my musical experiences have often imagery associated, I decided to study the possibility of developing an interpretation based on a pictorial universe, giving thus free course to my peculiar way of experiencing music (but not rare, since many have reported on imagery associated to music experiences, cf. Holmes 2005) and consciously look for inspiration on paintings to create my *subjective symbolically charged embryonic amalgam* (cf. Correia 2002:160). So, paintings were associated to the music.

The method: first, an acculturation process took place. I listened to several recordings, read the score carefully and analysed musical structure, including aspects such as phrasing, piano-violin dialogues and form. In this stage, I built an overall impression of the work that would be refined in the next stage. After that, I tried to evoke the feeling that the rough idea of the music brought to influence my choice of matching paintings. Some of the paintings came like a flash in my head; others were a result of searching in various books. Different paintings were associated to specific parts of the musical structure. The criteria for choosing the match between paintings and music were empirical and looked forward to reinforce expressive meaning through both kinds of art, one, temporal, the other, spatial. Ultimately, a narrative construction was associated to musical structure and

paintings, determining a frame for building different associations, such as the performative choices (appropriate gestures) – dynamics, fingerings, bowings, articulation, etc. The appropriate gestural continuities of the expression to be achieved were formalised and compared to other similar passages, phrases or motives, adjusting tone, phrasing, colour, etc. and afterwards repeated several times in order to develop automaticity with the least effort. A recording of this elaborate procedure was made, carefully examined and constantly refined to correspond to the “constantly refining blueprint of the ideal performance” (see above). Other recordings were compared to the idea that had been created.

By connecting paintings to the music I was looking forward to enhance the awareness to different performance cues – for example structural, expressive, interpretive, motor performance cues - through the use of a net of related memory systems - auditory, motor, visual, emotional, narrative, and linguistic memory - helping to elaborate a mental map of the piece that would make me able to keep track of where I am as the performance unfolds. This association aims not only to reinforce associative chaining of musical events (“what you are playing reminds you of what comes next” Chaffin et al. 2009:355); one picture reminds of the next through the line of the narrative that unfolds as well as to prepare multiple starting points through the use of content addressable memories.

Taking into account that “the musical character and expression is the ultimate ‘hook’ from which to hang everything else” (Fischer 2004:292) and that “memories for emotional events are formed more easily and are less likely to be forgotten than non-emotional memories (Chaffin et al. 2009:355), my first step after decoding the musical text was the expressive association between the music and the paintings, with an underlying narrative. Then only the correspondent performative choices that would serve the expressive purpose of musical communication were decided and memorized.

Conclusions

The proposed methodology of study seems to be an effective way of building a meaningful musical frame for interpretation of a piece prior to performative choices and practice. Building a focused mental image (visual, aural, tactile) sets a target to study that combines not only style and technical issues, as it also focuses on expressivity, musical meaning and memory.

Different kinds of memory – auditory, motor, visual, emotional, narrative and linguistic - are stimulated by this studying proposal, leading to more effective memorisation due to the diversity of options accumulated.

The proposed strategy of study could be a way of developing a consistent personal interpretation, where imagination stimulates expressivity, leading to successful memorisation. It tries to go beyond the performers’ background and to explore a field – expressivity in relation to one’s personal experience - that rarely is taught in classes (cf. Correia 2007), although expert performers always keep in mind during their study a finely elaborated idea of the expressivity they want to achieve (cf. Holmes 2005). The ultimate goal is to build a global and at the same time detailed idea of the piece, exploring different modalities such as the visual, sensorial and auditory systems to achieve better learning of the piece, culminating in a better performance and communication to the public.

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