Beyond notation: the oral memory of Confini

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Abstract

Several authors have discussed the limits of music notation and considered the importance of an oral tradition to interpretation. In the case of newly composed works, the association with the composer can provide the necessary information for creating an interpretation according to the composer’s style. It is in this process that an oral tradition is often created in contemporary music. This paper focuses on the collaboration between composer Paolo Cavallone and the author prior to recording the title track of the composer’s CD Confini. The discussion is centered on the relationship between notation and its realization in sound, considering the composer’s remarks as indicators of his personal style.

Keywords: Contemporary music; contemporary performance practice; notation; composer-performer collaboration; Paolo Cavallone.

Notation is a powerful aid to memory: from the Guidonian hand to the complexities of contemporary writing, music notation has stood both as a record of a music imagined or improvised and as a blue-print for posterior performances. In discussing music-writing, Charles Seeger points that we have failed to perceive the distinction between “… prescriptive and descriptive music-writing … between a blue-print of how a specific piece of music shall be made to sound and a report of how a specific performance of it actually did sound.” (Seeger 1958: 184). According to Seeger, “… no one can make [the music] sound as the writer of the notation intended unless in addition to a knowledge of the tradition of writing he [sic] has also a knowledge of the oral (or, better, aural) tradition associated with it.”
In Western concert music, that tradition is often passed from teacher to student through the generations, often springing from musicians who were in close contact with composers, such as many of Liszt’s pupils, for instance, who went to become renowned pianist-teachers and carriers of the Lisztian tradition. In the case of contemporary music, the tradition of performance practices is often being created in the collaborative process between composer and performer.

In 2008 I was invited by Italian composer Paolo Cavallone to record the title track of his CD Confini. The piece was composed between 2005-2006, and is dedicated to Giovanni Carmassi, Cavallone’s former piano teacher. According to the composer, Confini is a piano sonata and “…a sort of attempt at re-reading the concept of the sonata, taking historical contingency (and the web that the Western society built all around the word during this century) into consideration.” (Cavallone 2006: iii). We agreed to work together on the piece and to record our collaboration in audio/video. My goal in working close to the composer was to familiarize myself with his style in an attempt to capture the space between the notes according to the composer’s conception of how the nuances should be realized, given the piece’s stylistic complexity alluded to in the score’s preface:

… This multiplicity in today’s world, in a more and more complex environment, in a tired world built as a web all around us, becomes “little fragments,” a few notes that can assume different meaning in order to translate different perspectives. Only in this way, framing the material from the various angles, can we perforate the web that forbids us to get what is called the “poetic truth,” or better, “the borders,” the boundaries between dimensions. Therefore, this piece is a reconstruction of the historical meaning of the sonata as analogy, in a metaphysical sense. (Cavallone 2006:iii)

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1 Mieko Kanno, a renowned violinist of contemporary music, discusses prescriptive notation from a different perspective. According to Kanno, the standard Western notation is descriptive, for she believes it is capable of describing musical works. She assigns the term prescriptive notation to instances where the composer specifies the means of execution. (Kanno 2007: 232).

2 The term nuances is used here according to Bowen: “… everything that is not absolutely specified by the score ... (such as) Dynamics, tempo, phrasing, rhythmic placement, accent, rubato, timbre, use of vibrato and portamento and all of the factors that a performer adds to the pitch content” (Bowen 1993: 148-149).
We met on three occasions during a 45-day period prior to the recording session. The meetings were recorded, and later transcribed\(^3\). The analysis of the data reveals the composer’s input on character, touch, tempo, pedaling, articulation, rubato, and phrasing, as well as his coaching on new techniques for performing unconventional vocal and percussive effects. Some of these effects lacked a more detailed set of instructions in the score, such as “hit the open mouth”, “hit the wood with hand”, and “hit the wood with finger”.

![Confini, performance instructions](image)

Fig. 1 (Confini, performance instructions)

By observing the composer perform those effects, I could hear the sounds exactly how he intended them, as well as perceive the means he used to achieve those results. The “open mouth” effect required a certain amount of tension in the lips, which were, then, lightly hit by the fingers. I also noticed the composer used his knuckles to hit the wood in the passages that asked for “hit the wood with hand”, and used his fingernails in the passages that asked for “hit the wood with finger”. The use of the fingernails produces a brighter sound with higher frequencies, a sound the composer seemed to privilege over the lower sound of an attack using the whole finger, except for the passage in measure 177, at the end of the

\(^3\) The quotes from the composer that appear in the text or in footnotes, when not followed by a reference, are taken from the transcription of the recorded data.
cadenza, where the composer wanted a graver sound. The half-pressure attack appears frequently in the piece as a rebounded note in a gesture that results in a drastic diminuendo effect (fig. 2). The composer wanted the half-pressure attack to have a certain weight to it (indicated by the tenuto marks) This gesture seemed to emanate directly from the composer’s physicality, and he coached me by means of demonstration and the use of metaphors.²

![Fig. 2 (Confini, m. 12)](image)

The percussive effects that involve hitting the body and stomping the heel on the floor stem directly from the composer’s own experience with flamenco dancing. The rhythm figuration assigned to the feet in measures 166-167 (fig. 3) is very difficult to be technically well executed and in the right character without any prior experience with flamenco dancing.

![Fig. 3 (Confini, cadenza, mm. 166-67)](image)

The familiarity with flamenco style is an important element for creating an interpretation of the piece. Aside from the explicit reference to that style in the cadenza, where the composer invites the performer “to stand up while improvising

² The composer offered the image of “throwing stones on the water surface; the second rebonding from the first throw”, and “imagine a fat guy moving”.
(as a flamenco dancer) and study a choreography with a dancer (woman - or a man if the pianist is a woman) for the duration of the improvisation" (Cavallone 2006: iv)\(^5\), one finds that references to flamenco and tango styles permeate the whole second section of the piece. In this section, the Meditativo, comprised between measures 67 and 178, the composer combines the physicality of flamenco movements to tango rhythms. However, the appoggiatura gesture on the second beat of measure 129 (fig. 4) is a reference to blues style, as informed by the composer.

\[\text{Fig. 4 (Confini, mm. 128-29)}\]

Cavallone is a gifted pianist with experience as an improviser of jazz and blues as well as a trained musician educated in the tradition of the piano repertoire. If the second section of the piece alludes mainly to his experiences with tango, flamenco and blues, the first section makes many references to his classical music heritage. In regards to the overall sound quality of the first section, Cavallone always stressed the connection to what he conceives to be the sound of Scarlatti as opposed to Chopin, manifesting his preference for a sound that is present, clear, articulated, and that bears a certain weight. In the passage between measures 52 and 54, he mentioned the sound of Béla Bártok, noting, “The sound should be so heavy that even if you separate (the attacks), it still sounds legato”. Except for

\(^5\) Despite the indication for the performer to stand up in the *cadenza*, the composer himself performed an improvised *cadenza* sitting down at a concerto on November 13th, 2007 at the Kavinoky Theater in Buffalo, NY.
measure 55, which displays an ironic gesture, the composer used the metaphor of a moving train with regards to the overall effect of the passage.

Fig. 5 (Confini, mm. 52-55)

In the passage that follows, measures 56-59 (fig. 6), Cavallone shifts the focus to Tchaikovsky. He demonstrated at the piano the passage from the First Piano Concerto that inspired him\(^6\). He said he wanted the rubato of the romantic phrasing, but to use the pedal carefully, for he did not wish the excessive resonance.

\(^6\) The passage occurs between measures 240-244 in the first movement of Tchaikovsky piano concerto in B-flat major, op. 23.
The sound reference given by the composer for the passage starting on the third beat of measure 60 through the first beat of measure 62 was “Bach with pedal”, whereas the descending gesture on the second, third and fourth beats of measure 62 should be played very articulated, without pedal, and Scarlatti-like.
Fig. 7 (Confini, mm. 60-63)
During the first reading of the piece, I assumed that the passages in mm. 33-35 and mm. 60-61 should produce a similar sonority, and, consequently, that I should employ a similar touch. But according to Cavallone, one should play measures 33-35 as Debussy, in contrast to the sonority more akin to Bach he alluded to in measures 60-61. In the passage that follows, mm. 36-38, the reference turned once more to Scarlatti, but now with the indication con molto pedale (fig. 8).
The analysis of the data revealed the importance of rhythm in Cavallone's style: all gestures involving the half-pressed notes as well as appoggiaturas should be realized in a very rhythmic manner, except for the aforementioned “blues gesture” in measure 129. The composer spent a considerable amount of time coaching the execution of the appoggiatura gestures at the beginning and at the end of the piece (figures 9 and 10). On the other hand, the passages that present polyrhythm (figure 11) should produce a blurred effect, calling for the equalization of the dynamic level in both hands, where the performer should focus on projecting the overall effect instead of clearly articulating the lines independently.
With regards to dynamics, the composer emphasized that he wanted the loud dynamics performed with a very sharp and direct attack, producing a sound that is both sonorous and weighty, especially in passages in which the forte or fortissimo is subito, such as in measures 24, 25, 26, 33, and 39. He demonstrated on the piano the kind of attack he wanted, and gave the image of a punch in the stomach. When coaching the fortissimo in measure 26 (figure 12), Cavallone disliked whenever I involuntarily elongated the first note, which was my natural physical response for performing a broad musical gesture. For Cavallone, that gesture is big but not broad: the attack should occur from the key surface, and the impulse for the attack should come from the stomach.
In a similar passage, in measure 39, the composer offered the image of an angry soldier for the character of the forte subito. At the same time, he pointed out that the thirty-second-notes should never sound mechanical, but the sound should be big and well articulated at the same time. Cavallone’s preference for a clearly articulated sound emerged throughout our encounters. Even in very delicate passages in piano and pianissimo, he favored a present sound with a clear attack over a sfumato sound.

The stylistic complexity of the piece presents a challenge to the performer. Cavallone acknowledged the allusion to several Western composers and styles in the piece as an intentional gesture that incites a dialogue with his own musical tradition. However, that dialogue is mediated by the composer’s experience as a performer, and, in this sense, one can say that Confini is deeply grounded on the composer’s own physicality. It is worthy of note that while the first and the second sections of the piece recall, each in its own turn, performance practices associated with Western classical composers as well as popular styles, the kaleidoscopic coda acts as synthesis of the previous sections by bringing back all those elements in a vertiginous alternation, and, for that reason, is the most difficult section in the piece.

Even though some of the passages require the performer’s choice and improvisation, such as in the cadenza, Cavallone expressly asked me to play those passages as close to what is on the page as possible, justifying his request by acknowledging the status of a first recording as a reference for future performances of the work. The contemporary composer is aware of the benefits of recorded sound and uses it to document his/hers performance practices. In this way, recorded performances done under the composer’s supervision have
achieved the status of a documented practice that, even if not given equal importance in relation to the score, can be, nevertheless, considered to complement it. This phenomenon points to the dual nature of musical works as the score and its performances, suggesting an active dialogue between written and oral traditions in Western concert music. For Bowen, … All musical works are social constructions, which change through the mechanism of performances. … The performance tradition, however, can define approximate boundaries. Conversely, tradition is the history of remembered innovation, and is always changing. (Bowen 1993: 142, 164)

The interplay between the fixed elements of notation and the varied ways for rendering them (the nuances) allows the work to be re-created in every performance. In this way, the music score, far from being an ossified code of a dead language that must be deciphered by the interpreter, can be considered as a portal between the universes of composer and performer, inviting the performer to penetrate and dialogue with the composer's history, ideas and affects. In analyzing the videos of our collaboration, I have noticed my effort in trying to emulate the composer's physicality, which is, in many ways, different from my own. By allowing myself to be impregnated by the composer's imagery, I found myself exploring my relationship with the piano from a new angle. The temporary renouncement of what is second nature to me, gave me permission to expand my own imagery as a performer. In this way, the performance of the piece arose from this zone of contact, of contamination, between composer and performer.

According to Bakhtin,
The first step in aesthetic activity is my projecting myself into him and experiencing his life from within him. … I must empathize or project myself into this other human being, see his world axiologically from within him as he sees this world; I must put myself in his place and then, after returning to my own place, “fill in” his horizon through that excess of seeing which opens out from this, my own place outside him. (Bakhtin 1990: 25).
References


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Author’s biography

Brazilian pianist Catarina Leite Domenici holds a Master and a Doctoral degrees in Music Performance from the Eastman School of Music, where she also received the prestigious Performer’s Certificate and the Lizie Teege Mason Award. She has collaborated with several composers in recordings and premieres of works at contemporary music festivals and concerts in Brazil, the USA, and Central America. She is a Piano Professor at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul in Porto Alegre, Brazil.