

## **Aesthetic values and musical meaning: a developmental approach to performance**

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### **Abstract**

As a violin teacher, I began to suspect that there were certain patterns in students' preferences. In order to verify if, in fact, there is such development in music appreciation, 50 violin students were interviewed, led to talk about their own meanings, narratives/stories, personal associations and values in relation to their favourite repertoire and meaningful performances. The values performers pointed out to be important in their aesthetical appraisals evolved in sistematical order. Answers were subject to qualitative analysis and values for the performers' musical appreciation were grouped into five categories, which were then compared with former developmental studies on music appreciation and on the appreciation of paintings.

Keywords: Performance, aesthetical values, development, education, meaning construction.

### **Introduction**

As a violin teacher, I have systematically tried to motivate my students looking for pieces that they would appreciate. From students' feedback, over the years, I began to suspect that there were certain patterns in their preferences. So, I became increasingly interested in knowing more about the development of music appreciation, but I could not find specific studies on this topic, as developmental theories on music are mostly concerned with musical understanding, focusing mainly on cognitive aspects and/or on the acquisition of competences. On the other hand, I was convinced that students learning and practising regularly an instrument would have specific characteristics and particularities in their development, quite different from those who do not perform. Crossing the literature available on aesthetic education with my personal experience as a violin teacher, it seems imperative that students learn as early and as regularly as possible how to express their own values and

personal meanings when performing in order to improve their skills on musical communication.

In this paper, first, an empirical study will be reported on performers' appreciation, which will result in a preliminary development model; second, this model will be triangulated with the developmental models proposed by Parsons (1987) and França (2004) - which is an application of Swanwick and Tillmann's (1986) model - and, finally, from this synthesis a more consistent development model for performers' music appreciation will be designed.

### **Empirical investigation**

According to the expressionist school of aesthetics, supported by authors such as Collingwood (1958), Langer (1953) and Danto (1988), the arts are more than a handful of beautiful objects and present a way of giving a shape to our internal *self*, articulating with the external world. The interpretation of the arts can have different layers of meaning, depending on the individual apprehension, social and historical context. According to these ideas, the differences between what is important and valued in a work of art for each individual is something that is very personal and subjective. Focusing on music performance, I became increasingly interested in verifying if, in fact, there is development in performers' values for music appreciation. The following questions were drawn: How can performers' aesthetic values be defined and how do they evolve over time? How does practice and age affect this development? And what about social context and enculturation? In order to find answers to these questions, I carried out an empirical investigation based on qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews.

Fifty violin students from ages 5 to 29 and from a classical background, studying in specialised music schools, were interviewed in order to understand how these performers appreciated the pieces that they were playing at the time. These students were also led to talk about their own meanings, narratives/stories, personal associations and values in relation to their favourite repertoire and meaningful performances. The values performers pointed out to be important in their aesthetic appraisals evolved and were influenced by different variables such as: time of contact with the violin, age, personality and

'socio-cultural' context. Answers were subject to qualitative analysis and, consequently, performers' values for musical appreciation were grouped into five categories. Based on these five categories, I designed a development model for performers' appreciation with five stages, which were: *Representative*, *Sensorial*, *Challenge*, *Expressivity* and *Informed Interpretation*. Although this study had a relatively small number of participant interviewees I found significant similarities with other development models, namely, with Parsons' (1987) and França's (2004) elaboration on Swanwick and Tillmann's (1986) Model. The former focuses on the appreciation of paintings and the latter focuses on the skills of undergraduate performers.

Parsons, the author of *How we Understand Art* (1987) carried a study on the appreciation of eight different paintings during almost ten years, based on semi-structured interviews with more than 300 individuals of different ages. Like Parsons' study, I have observed that the values on the appreciation of paintings/music referred by the interviewees systematically changed sequentially over time, depending on their education and knowledge about art/music. Also, in both cases, the values of the interviewees initially had a self-centred reference and evolved over time to a more socially and historically informed knowledge that affected their increasingly broader range of values for appreciation.

França (2004) studied undergraduate performers' development based on *Swanwick & Tillmann's* (1986) *Developmental Stages*, considering the fact that this model is flexible in what concerns age: a more stimulating environment can induce a faster development on the child. Her study is very interesting to describe development in what concerns performers' musical mastery, namely, technical, structural, stylistic and expression.

Taking into account Parsons' (1987) study for the appreciation of paintings and França's (2004) study for the development of performers' technical ability, as well as my own empirical study, *Developmental Model for Performers' Values*, which considered violin performers' aesthetical values and their technical skills - based on a recording of them playing - it seems to me worth to triangulate them and from this comparison to develop a more consistent operative model.

### **Developing an operative model for performers' music appreciation and technical ability in music**

This model is a theoretical hypothesis, which proposes a comprehensive overview of performers music appreciation and technical ability in music, based on the three studies described above. This model is domain-specific and concentrates on violin students of western classical music.

1. *Pleasurable Experience of Sound*: Almost every piece stimulates a pleasurable experience. Extra-musical denotation is valued: Performers value the direct association of the subject of the piece (title of the music, or the pictures in the book) to their personal experience of everyday life, making free associations. Other subjects' point of view is not taken into account. Performance is erratic and inconsistent. Musical flow is unsteady and variations in sound colour and intensity don't seem to have expressive or structural significance.

2. *Beauty and Perfection*: In this stage starts the ability to separate the elements, which are relevant for aesthetic judgement from those that are not important. Beauty and mastery of perfection are also privileged for the appreciation in this stage: Performers like to play beautiful, pleasing and cheerful pieces. They also reveal a special liking for fast and rhythmic pieces. Narrativity or extra-musical references are sometimes referred. They gradually start to appreciate contrasts in dynamics, tempo, tessitura and character. They also like to observe how melodic lines develop and modify. Gradually, the taste for technical perfection and mastery of a style, originality of the piece as well as the taste for technical and interpretive challenge starts to emerge. More control is shown by a consistency in tempo and repetition of patterns. Priority is the (technical) mastery of the instrument and there is no evidence of expressive contour or structural organization.

3. *Challenge, Style and Originality*: The interest on the style and realism of its performance, within the comparison to other interpretations, are mostly appreciated. In this stage starts the development of the idea that what the

observer interprets, likes and feels does not necessarily correspond to others' point of view. Adding to contrast and narrativity, performers like to overcome new challenges – such as fast and high-pitched passages on the violin, as well as double stops - to be able to master acknowledged repertoire, representative of a style in music history. Performers appreciate a challenging piece that is representative of a musical style, with contrasts, like the Baroque, which is appreciated for its lightness, contrast and for fast rhythmic passages with semiquavers – in fast movements – and for big contrast between the movements of the piece (concerto or sonata). This kind of repertoire is usually given to performance students because it is more challenging and representative of a style, as well as it enables an approach to articulation and phrasing. It is also an approach to more-than-one-movement pieces. Finally, the fact that young performers are playing the same repertoire professional musicians play is highly valued. Expressivity finds its evidence in a thoughtful choice of tempo and intensity levels, but the overall impression is of an impulsive performance without structural planning.

4. *Expression*: Beauty, Subject, Realism and Mastery of Perfection are now not so relevant characteristics compared to the expression of feelings and emotions: the piece is judged according to the intensity of the emotions it induces in the individuals' subjective experience during performance. Performers like to feel the music they listen and play, and they also make effort to communicate these emotions to the public. Young performers in this stage like to learn new techniques and explore new expressive possibilities on the instrument. They also like to know and explore new and different things, such as difficult pieces. They admire virtuoso and well-known performers and dream that some day they will be able to perform like that. They also feel the need to master the piece inside out in order to be free for communication with the public during performance. Romantic and Ultra-Romantic Style are preferred in this stage. First, performances show fluency and are conventionally expressive. Melodic and rhythmic patterns are similarly repeated and the performance is predictable. Gradually, performances turn to be more expressive, reflecting stability and some touch of imagination. Dynamics and phrasing are deliberately

controlled or modified with the intention of making evident the structural relations in the piece.

5. *Idiomatic accuracy*: Mean of Expression, Form and Style accuracy are highly valued in this stage. There is a clear distinction between the emotions induced by the subject on the individual and the musical interest of the piece.

Performers have a more informed discourse about what they value in musical performance. Characteristics of previous stages combine with an analytical approach to interpretation, taking style and historical context into account. Expression of emotions is not so important as the clearance of the text and emotions are not interpreted from a personal point of view, but they are more described as an intrinsic characteristic of the music in itself. Different Styles and Periods of History of music are integrated, as well as different interpretation techniques and traditions: the performer has the ability to compare different interpretations of the same piece of music and judge it according to 'aesthetical tradition'. How the performer deals with the unexpected during a performance is highly valued, as well as interpretive variations and communication with other fellow musicians on stage during the performance. Performance reveals a clear idea of style and an expressive characterization based on clearly identified musical traditions. Technical, expressive and structural mastery are consistently presented.

6. *Communicative Musicality*: Appreciation in this stage is subtler and takes into account the values and concepts that were historically established. Judgment is both more personal and social, which means that personal opinion is constantly compared with a community that enables inter-subjective discussion. The perceiver transcends the traditional, cultural established opinion and questions what is considered as a general truth. This attitude requires a global and deep perspective, understanding arts inside its cultural context. Performance shows technical mastery and is convincing in style. There is refinement of stylistic and structural details and the impression of a personal commitment of the performer with the music. Gradually, technical mastery totally serves musical communication. Form and expression merge into a coherent and personal

outcome – a true musical statement. New musical insights are systematically explored with imagination.

### **Future implications**

Having already described its stages, my next step is to prove the validity of this operative model. In the future, I would like to make semi-structured interviews to a broader number of performers questioning their values and analyse recordings of their playing in order to confirm if this relation between developmental stages of appreciation and of technical ability is verifiable. Should this operative model prove consistency then a natural implication would be to consider reviewing curricula design. If teachers were aware of their students' values for music appreciation, they could develop teaching strategies and curricula, which would increase critical listening, motivation, meaningful performances and musical communication. I believe that this is invaluable for promoting aesthetic experiences and therefore for supporting a 'healthier' artistic development.

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**Author's biography**

Maria is a PhD student at the University of Aveiro, having completed a Masters in Performance and another Masters in Education. She teaches violin and viola at the conservatory and is a musician of Orquestra Clássica do Centro. Her research interests are Performance, Musical Communication, Meaning Construction, Aesthetical Values and Education.