

When gesture sounds: Bodily significance in musical performance

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When gesture sounds is a specific reflection about the awareness of expressive movement as a meaningful and complementary element of sound in live musical performance. Given that movement is the motor of sound and intention the impulse of gesture, the inevitable connection between intentional bodily movements and music emerges, allowing us to establish synaesthesia channels which influence expressiveness, understanding, and communication in performance events. This study expounds an approximation to the cognitive aspects of gesture and its significance in relation to musical practice and perception, considering players and audience. The idea that gesture could act as a visual stimulus to perform and perceive music in a particular way is defended. “Times” of gesture are evaluated, with their implicit intentions and meanings. Finally, an incursion into pedagogy intends to examine what of gesture could be taught and, if so, how.

Keywords: gesture; live performance; expressiveness; pedagogy; synaesthesia

Self-awareness in performance is one of the goals that musicians set themselves to enhance good practice and to achieve a personal and effective version of repertoire (Green and Gallway 1986). This theoretical research tries to show that expressive movements do not occur by chance, even when they appear to be a spontaneous and natural consequence of an irresistible corporal experience while playing a musical instrument. Mind, guided by will, addresses the expressive movements attempting to connect body and music. The body metaphor of sound (Davidson 2002, Snyder 2000) is in this sense the result of an “intelligent feeling.” Because knowing develops in mind and mind develops in the brain, some authors argue that “all human knowledge

draws its sustenance from corporeal roots” (Bowman 2004). Avoiding hierarchies, what this argument affirms is indisputably the relationship between body and mind in a dependant unit. Production, perception, cognition, and teaching are the explorative domains of expressive gesture.

MAIN CONTRIBUTION

This research focuses attention on channels of significance (not in a semantic level but in an association one) that emerge when players and audience connect *gesture* with some specific musical parameters, such as character, articulation, quality, and intensity of sound. Players build this connection into a holistic musical performance through a mental process that guides their understanding of musical discourse and their non-verbal expression, while the audience constructs it in a global perception via imagination. The result of this significance may be explained in multiple terms including sensitivity, culture, and musical understanding. A further question, for later research, emerges at this point: does the relationship between music and gesture necessarily coincide for both performer and listener? Apart from sharing the sensitivity, culture, and musical understanding referred to above, any attempt at an answer would have to bear in mind the performer’s intention (Hermerén 1993) and the empathy between performer and audience.

Perceptive dimensions in live performance

In all live performances, two sensorial dimensions exist—the aural and the visual—in which musicians and audience are involved together, performing and perceiving respectively. Obviously, sound is the greatest result of performance but, as we know, sound is essentially movement. Nothing sounds if nothing is in movement (Fernández 2000). The motor of sound, which makes instruments vibrate, is the performer’s movement, or in other words when a proper combination of skeleton, muscles, nerves, and circulation (Ortmann 1962) occurs. The implementation of a sort of body choreography, which includes one kind of intentional movement, the *gesture*, is what some researchers have appointed as “body language” (Davidson 2002, Dhal and Friberg 2007).

Gesture does not really sound, but it represents the factual objectivity of the sound related to its visual perception. To the question “what is, then, what performers do?”, Eric Clarke (2002) responds: “in one stage...they produce physical realizations of musical ideas”. And Wayne Bowman (2004, p. 38), writing about cognition and the body, assures that “perception of musical gesture is invariably a fundamental part of what the music, fully perceived,

is.” We have now, not only a gesture, but a “musical gesture” (Chaffin *et al.* 2007). Two kinds of gesture exist in performance: technical and expressive. The first is necessary to produce sound, overcoming mechanical challenges. The second one is not essential to produce sound but complementary to the combinations of sound qualities in order to feel or communicate expression. When both co-exist, and are perceived as one, the experience of performance becomes free and, paradoxically, the fusion between player and instrument reveals the symptoms, not their realities, of music’s existence; those that Claude Debussy found “among notes.”

To see is to perceive. Seeing performers’ gestures as they play strongly influences the particular kind of data registration that accompanies the listening in the total perception of the performance.

Connections between performer, art of performance, and gesture

By taking into account the performers’ gesture, we are assuming and respecting their identity as “music makers” (Elliot 1995) and not only as “music transmitters.” The role of a performer is not exclusively an executive demand of music to sound, although some exceptional musicians thought this. Ravel and Stravinsky asked performers to “translate” (execute) the score into sound, which implied a resolute attempt to make their own personalities invisible. This is not the commonly accepted theory of performance however (Urmsom 1993). Nowadays, performing is an art (Kivy 1995, Mark 1981), and more ambitiously we say that “music is a performing art” (Elliot 1995, p. 165). The clearest example that supports the assertion that gesture represents sound is the conductor’s work. When conductors move, they produce gestures making a physical and a mental effort to express music with their bodies. In the solitude of a conductor’s personal practice, when music still does not sound through an orchestra, is when the paradigm of gesture sonority appears.

Artists ceased long ago to be the intermediate hand between the muses and the real world and now we have no doubts that when someone is involved in an artistic process, the result depends on his or her personality. One of the singularities of an artistic presentation is its uniqueness. Gesture can be learned, even imitated, but it will never be the same in different individuals because it is part of one’s personality. It is important to clarify that gesture does not refer to simple gesticulation, mimicking, or theatricality with independence of sound, although it could be analyzed as a “nonsonic aspect of musical performance” (Kivy 1995). The pathway has been that sound is motion, intentional motion is gesture, and expressive gesture represents the

metaphor of musical expressiveness in performance. Expressiveness is an aesthetic characteristic of music and, in terms of aesthetic appreciation of gesture, we could observe the elegance, power, sophistication, or discretion of its expression as a beauty sign that only a performer's personality may show.

Times of gesture: implicit intentions

When discussing times of gesture in relation to sound, we can distinguish three moments: time before, parallel time, and time after. While in the time before, the gesture represents the anticipation of musical technical need or expression, in the parallel time this gesture accompanies and is seen contemporarily to the sonorous discourse. When sound is free of any real practical execution, expressive gesture may explain or resolve the expression of sound in the time after. Tracing a simile, expressive gesture in the parallel time could be comparable to the modal complement of a sentence and in the time before and after the verb. Expressive and technical gestures exist in time before and in parallel time, but in time after the truly valid and reasonable possibility is to produce and perceive expressive gestures.

Time before is clearly perceived when a performer is about to play, and manifested in "take impulse" breathing, preparing his or her fingers, arms, or body position, looking around, coming into contact with the instrument, initiating a movement in air, etc. The information contained in this kind of gestures is completely intentional and it warns us about what is going to happen with the coming sound. Parallel time is that in which *gesture* develops itself in the real dimension of musical performance art: the present time. Music, as is any kind of sound, is fleeting, compared to material things. In musical performance, neither the past nor the future exists. Even ideas have past and future: both the past and the future of three plus two are five. The past of the ensuing performance rests on the one hand on the idea of the composer and on the other hand on the score, being its future and its own past. In this context of inevitable "present-ness" of sound, the parallel gesture is shown. Finally, in the time after, gesture becomes significant again, evoking the *past present* of performance.

Gesture in pedagogy

We can deduce from everything said above that to perceive, feel, or understand music, it is crucial to perceive, feel, and understand our body, referring back to awareness. The educational amalgam between body and music, human being and art, physical and aesthetic, has been defined by Richard Shusterman (2004) as "somaesthetic." Of course, we are born with

certain instinct of abstraction, which can mean that what we perceive, feel, or understand instrumental practice or musical listening, which could be conceptualized as well as described. However, we are immersed in multiple contexts (Elliot, 1995) and it is not easy to take part of a non “natural” context as music is, in which abstraction requires a complex effort of perception and cognition. Essential parameters of music, sound, and rhythm are part of the nature of our body expression, but the way to combine them into systems is the result of many cultural constructs. We are not born knowing a culture, so music, as a cultural construction, should have a training stage in which the understanding of its cultural meaning is elaborated. The elaboration around the comprehension of gesture as an image of music needs again not a “natural” but a cultural intervention: method.

Method in music’s pedagogy includes the *hows* of practicing. The basic strategies to teach students how to feel, enjoy, produce, and convince with expressive gestures are usually to initiate them in imitation of gestures in order to develop their own inspiration in their future movements. Some of these strategies include discussing with students their video tape recordings or mirror visualizations, guiding with physical contact the students’ body segments in their movements, adding verbal metaphoric information to the gestures shown, offering students the opportunity to teach what they know and “interpret” about gesture by giving classes to other students, and urging students to use their bodily expression, freely and consciously, connecting it with a new vital dimension in any physical action: not aural, not visual, but spatial.

IMPLICATIONS

Expressive gestures do not supplant the contents of music, in spite of the “musical concerts of gestures” that Milton Estomba, the character of Mario Benedetti’s *Cuento, La expression (Story, The expression)* gave every Saturday. Music is sound, first and over all, but a live concert experience. Gestures are part of a range of human reactions to feeling, sensation and comprehension, and to underestimate them in live performance would mean to ignore human signals in a human invention, which is what music is.

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