

# Assessing the importance of visual/theatrical features in the perception of music by an audience, using sociological tools

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This paper discusses the interaction of music with an audience, in the specific context of a live performance. This issue is tackled in two complementary directions. Firstly, I propose that musicians should look inside the theatrical universe to find new paths to perform music, especially the contemporary repertoire. This theatrical influence intends to expand the visual dimension of a performance into a more global and flexible perspective. Secondly, I propose the use of sociological methods of analysis to assess the audience's perception of those performances, thus emphasizing the natural context of its production and reception to collect data. The final aim of this study is to contribute towards closing the composer-audience gap, created by modernism in the twentieth century.

*Keywords:* contemporary music performance; theatricality; listeners' perception; sociological analysis

It is my conviction that musicians have a social and pedagogical responsibility. Indeed, it is the performers' task to search for new ways to *make* and to *take* music to people, even if that means challenging the traditional ways of music-making, leading them to experience sounds that they did not expect or even imagine that could exist. Yet this enterprising character is not new; there is a whole line of performers, such as David Tudor (1926-1996), Cathy Berberian (1925-1983), or Vinko Globokar (born in 1934), just to name a few that flourished after WWII, who not only repeated the "classical" canon of music-making but also searched for and experimented with new ways to make/take music to the listeners, especially when they were dealing with newly-made sounds.

Naturally, this adventurous spirit fits more easily with the contemporary repertoire, given that it can more easily accommodate new perspectives around music-making, allowing interpreters to stamp their personal ideas in a more creative manner. However, musicians usually play contemporary pieces as if they belonged to the Classic/Romantic repertoire. The way the instrument is played, the performer's attitude, as well as the stage presentation, repeats the same conventions fixed in three centuries of tradition. It is evident, though, that often the mere transmission of these sounds can be insufficient for a full understanding of the music by the audience. This can be confirmed by the distance that still exists between contemporary music and contemporary listeners (Menger 1983, 1986; Metzger 1983). To capture the spectators' attention to something unexpected is not an easy task for current performers. In order to contribute to reduce this distance I suggest exploring more deeply the visual dimension of a live concert, using the theatrical universe as inspiration.

As we all know, a live performance is not only a sonic event. It naturally provides visual information to the listeners which is absent in the CD/MP3 format. It was only in the 1990s that the visual component of expressive performances started being analyzed in a systematic way. These studies included the analysis of the performers' body movements (Davidson 1994, 1995), the gestures used to perform an instrument (Clarke and Davidson 1998), and the non-musical, expressive, or ancillary gestures (Davidson 1993, Wanderley *et al* 2005). Among other things, these experiments demonstrated that the visual information added by performer's actions was essential to convey expressive or emotional content and to engage the listeners.

Having this evidence as background, I propose to look inside the world of the theatre to find the *theatricality* of music making. That is, to expand the visual dimension of a musical performance to the entire stage, instead of circumscribing it just to the performer's actions or gestures. This represents the first aim of this paper. The second one stresses the importance of developing partnerships with sociologists, making use of their theories and methods for social analysis, to examine the audience's perception and reception to music so that the effectiveness of the musical communication might be assessed.

## MAIN CONTRIBUTION

### **Theatricality in the music performance**

According to the French theatre producer Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), *theatricality* embraces everything that is related to theatre with the exception

of the dramatic text. It includes the staging, the scenery, the lighting, the costumes, and also the actors' gestures, expressions, movements, and moods. Theatricality deals essentially with the visual and spatial dimensions of the show; realms normally out of the sphere of action of instrumental music. Nowadays, musical performance cannot be conceived purely as a temporal art; instead, musicians must be conscious of its visual potentialities to attain more effectively their primordial intentions.

How can the theatrical universe *cross-fertilize* the musical performance? I propose three main points of intersection between them:

1. *Inner theatricality*: Adopting a performance style close to acting. That is, the player assumes another personality, as an actor/actress does, and performs music uniting body and spirit into a global expressivity. To attain this, the performer's expressive toolkit must include a whole spectrum of movements besides the instrumental ones, such as the non-musical gestures, the body postures, the facial expressions, breathings/sighs, and glances.
2. *Outer theatricality*: Making use of the theatrical scenery techniques such as light design, scenario, costumes, and media.
3. *Mise-en-scène*: Entwining music performance into a narrative, where the performer has to make movements other than the musical ones, like speaking, walking, singing, dancing, or mimicking, in accordance with that narrative or script. This happens naturally when musical performance is included in a theatre play, a choreographic event or a cinematographic set. However, it can also take place in an orthodox musical concert, as happened in the 1960s and early 1970s inside the *avant-garde* movement called "music theatre" or "instrumental theatre."

This three-part division is, of course, artificial. It simply aims to illustrate more clearly the variety of elements that we can borrow from theatre to create new artistic achievements. From this point on, each musician must seek his/her own artistic answer, in accordance with various contingent factors such as the music's intention, the performer's ability or comfort to use different tools in his/her work, the technical facilities of a specific stage, and the expected audience.

Given that this enhancement of the visual and theatrical dimensions aims to attract people's attention to a careful and active listening of something outside the usual standards, the subsequent step is to search for the audience's feedback. To understand this, we must enter into the sociological

world and make use of their methods to quantify and qualify their reactions (or non-reactions!).

### **Sociological analysis**

The use of sociological methods to assess audience feedback to performances represents an uncommon strategy for analyzing musical events. The main reason for this choice comes from the fact that it envisages the musical phenomenon as it happens in its natural setting of production and consumption. This approach comes in line with the new paradigm that emerged among the sociologists of music, particularly in the late 1970s, which conceives “the music-society nexus in terms of the pragmatic contexts within which musical works take shape and come to have “effects” in real situations” (DeNora 2004, p. 38). This action-based paradigm opposes the score-based paradigm, mostly influenced by Adorno’s ideas and theories (Adorno 1973), which regard music as something structurally analogous to social systems, structures, or norms (Becker 1995, Shepherd 2003). This concern with the “real world” context is also attracting interest from music psychologists, who are placing the social dimension at the core of their enquiries (Persson and Robson 1995, Davidson 1997, Hargreaves and North 1999, Thompson 2006, 2007).

There is, however, another reason to take a sociological angle to gauge musical phenomena. An audience is a group of people that experience a particular event in a specific time and place. Consequently, to study an “object” that is by essence fluid, multi-shaped, and ephemeral, we must use a multiplicity of methods to better adjust to each case. Therefore, the methodological agenda should include not only moment-by-moment analysis, such as local observation and the use of diaries, but also “post-concert” analysis to get more in-depth data, through questionnaires and semi-directive interviews with a representative group of individuals. Given that the sociological methodologies are extraordinarily wide and flexible, they allow the music researchers to embark upon a broad spectrum of questions associated both with the public’s sociological profile (who are they?) and their receptivity to the artwork (how do they perceive it and express that perception?). These questions may help musicians to better understand the meaning of music in this global and postmodern era; an era that locates musical “meaning and even structure in listeners, more than in scores, performances, or composers” (Kramer 2002, p. 17). Hence, it is the time to bring listeners to the foreground of musical enquiries, emphasizing their creative involvement and showing how they may contribute to musical

productions, which is similar to what happened in both literature and theatre (Jauss 1978, Bennett 1997). This shift of direction represents, undoubtedly, a challenge for all who deal with music in any way.

## IMPLICATIONS

Primarily, this study intends to discuss the existence of other elements, besides the musical ones and consciously taken from the theatre, that are important for an effective communication of music to listeners in a live setting. Additionally, and given the fact that the performer-audience relationship is nowadays understood as bilateral, it will help us reflect on the artistic implications of the audience in the performer's work, an issue not much discussed until now. Ultimately, it can tackle more complex issues like the social role of art in our society. What is the current "place" of art inside a society completely saturated with all kinds of real and virtual stimulus? This looks to me like an intriguing question to pursue in the future.

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