

Tendencies of piano interpretation in the twentieth century: Concept and different types of “piano interpretation schools”

Sofia Lourenço

Superior School of Music, Porto Polytechnic Institute, Portugal

The aim of this paper is to consider whether the concept of a “piano interpretation school” is a useful concept from which to analyze the quality and development of Western classical piano performance. It is possible to trace lines that seem to share certain common characteristics—namely, aesthetics, technique, history, and the commonly learned and performed repertoire. Throughout my career as a pianist, I have noticed the coexistence of different tendencies in the tradition of piano performance, the most common being the “Russian School” and “German School.” Each seems to define a certain approach to general playing and/or specific repertoire, involving characteristic sonority, favored repertoire, specific tempi, use of pedal, different piano makers, pedagogical methods, and technical interpretive approaches (use of rubato, polyphonic clarity, etc.). The concept of the “piano interpretation school” needs to be questioned and discussed, not only for analysis and systematization, but also for the subjectivity it allows. The privileged relationship of the teacher and student, through the transmission of certain performing approaches and repertoire selections, as well as through the transmission of technical resources, can support the definition of a certain school of piano interpretation. This paper ends by discussing this teacher-student legacy.

Keywords: typification; national piano schools; German; Russian; French

During my research between 2001 and 2004, I analyzed available recordings of 19 mainstream piano works by 29 pianists who started their piano careers prior to 1950. The pianists included C. Arrau (1903-1991), Backhaus (1884-1969), Busoni (1866-1924), Casadesus (1899-1972), Ciccolini (1925), Cortot (1877-1962), Jeanne-Marie Darré (1905-1999), Feinberg (1890-1962), Fischer

(1886-1960), Samson François (1924-1970), Giesecking (1895-1956), Gilels (1916-1985), Ingrid Haebler (1929), Clara Haskil (1895-1960), Josef Hofmann (1876-1957), Horowitz (1904-1989), Kempff (1895-1991), Alicia de Larrocha (1923), Vitaly Margulis (1926), Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli (1920-1995), Paderewsky (1860-1941), Perlemuter (1904-2002), Egon Petri (1881-1962), Rachmaninov (1924-1970), Richter (1915-1998), Artur Rubinstein (1889-1982), A. Schnabel (1882-1951), Alexander Scriabin (1892-1915), Vladimir Sofronitzky (1901-1961). These pianists formed part of a check-list survey used in an attempt to develop a typification of national interpretation piano schools.

The concept of the “piano interpretation school” can be useful. I highly recommend among the relevant literature the following authors: Carl Phillip Emanuel Bach (1949), Alfredo Casella (1936), Luca Chiantore (2001), Edwin Fischer (1956), A. Kullak (1876), V. Margulis (2001), H. Neuhaus (1967), P. Rattalino (1982, 1992), Ch. Timbrell (1992), and J. Zlatař (1997). These authors expand different approaches to general playing and/or specific repertoire, involving characteristic sonority, favored repertoire, specific tempi, use of pedal, different piano makers, pedagogical methods, and technical interpretive approaches. Some of the very important information all musicians gained during their one-to-one lessons since childhood came from the oral tradition of instrumental education. In the above listed literature, I found much of the information written down that I had received from my piano teacher during my weekly piano lessons. That is why they are so important and fascinating for this subject: they show the written word to the users of the spoken word.

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METHOD

Participants

To support my personal observations, a check-list survey was used in order to develop a typification of national interpretation piano schools. This was done by listening to three different recordings of important pianists who developed their performance careers during first part of twentieth century: Vladimir

Sofronitzky (1901-1961), Edwin Fischer (1886-1960), and Robert Casadesus (1899-1972).

Materials

For this research, three recordings of the first movement of Beethoven's Sonata op. 57, *Appassionata* (specifically bars 1-50, which included the exposition—first and second themes) by Vladimir Sofronitzky, Edwin Fischer, and Robert Casadesus were used.

Procedure

Analysis involved observation and comparison of the three short samples, in particular addressing expressive elements like dynamics (crescendi/diminuendi), specific tempi, phrasings, articulation, use of pedal, different makes of pianos, pedagogical methods, and technical and interpretive approaches (use of *rubato*, polyphonic clarity, agogic patterning, etc.).

Three recordings by three different pianists considered to be possible representatives of national piano schools—German, Russian, and French—playing the first movement of Beethoven's Sonata op. 57, *Appassionata*, were used in this present research. This work was chosen because it is a very representative work within the piano repertoire and is easy to obtain because it has been frequently recorded. The main purpose was to analyze by comparison how a pianist of the German piano school differs from one of the Russian or French schools. It is very important to stress the fundamental role of the individual's unique artistic personality when we are listening to a piano recital and not to necessarily associate it with a national "piano interpretation school."

RESULTS

The following recordings are to be used in the presentation as a short demonstration of the extensive check-list survey: Sofronitzky (1901-1961; *V. Sofronitzky vol. 7*, Arlechino, 1939), E. Fischer (1886-1960; *Edwin Fischer Plays Beethoven, Pathétique, Appassionata, Emperor*, Pearl, GEMM CD 9218, 1996, recorded in London, 1935), and Robert Casadesus (1899-1972; *Beethoven Piano Sonatas*, Sony Classical, SBK 46345, 1990). A summary of the results is presented in Table 1.

Comparing the check-list survey concerning dynamics, tempo, phrasing, use of pedal, and textures (as demonstrated in Table 1), we come to certain

Table 1. Beethoven, Sonata op. 57, *Appassionata*, first movement.

	<i>Dynamics</i>	<i>Tempo</i>	<i>Textures</i>
V. Sofronitzky (Russian School)	Unbalanced dynamics	Slower tempo, vocal character, agogic patterning, sudden allargandi, often changing tempo	Polyphonic sonority with weight making structure clearer, showing voice leading
Edwin Fischer (German School)	Balanced dynamics	Stable tempo	Clear phrasing
Robert Casadesus (French School)	Balanced dynamics	Faster tempo than Sofronitzky, instrumental character less vocal	Less voice leading or polyphonic sonority: importance of clear <i>jeu perlé</i> and <i>souple piano</i> playing

conclusions concerning this part of this Beethoven sonata. Those conclusions can be extended to more general ideas concerning the different “piano interpretation schools.”

The Russian school is particularly concerned with character and expression while the German school is more concerned with structure. Comparing the musical textures in the interpretation of this example, we come to the conclusion that “weight technique” is very important for the achievement of a certain musical effect. Sofronitzky shows this effect clearly by his use of polyphonic sonority with “weight,” resulting in a clearer structure and more defined voice leading. Edwin Fischer prefers balanced dynamics and stable tempo, whereas Casadesus chooses to stress the instrumental character and show the importance of clear *jeu perlé* and *souple piano* playing.

Along with Franz Liszt (1811-18186), the important piano teacher Theodor Leschetizky (1830-1915) taught how everything had to sing and to have a colored sound even when it was quiet. As the French pianist Paul Loyonnet (1889-1988) suggests:

The use of weight and arm was not much cultivated in France, that is true. Today of course, the picture has changed. But the Russians and the Germans have always used more, and the reason is that their music demands it. It is a fact that composers engender the education of interpreters. For the French, there can be grandeur without heaviness and passion without violence. The dreamlike aura of Fauré is rarely

appreciated in full outside France, and even there it is not meant to act directly on a crowd, like Tchaikowsky can (cited in Timbrell 1999, p. 191).

The French school is very similar to the German School with regards to “the unconditional respect for the text,” as Marguerite Long suggested (Timbrell 1992). The *jeu perlé* and *claret* of French playing, however, does not usually need the sonority of arm weight technique that the Russian and German schools employ.

DISCUSSION

This work raises a number of questions that beg further investigation, such as whether or not “piano interpretation schools” do still exist after 1950. As well, it would be important to consider whether or not some pianists could be representative of two different “piano interpretation schools.” Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, is the need to explore the balance and relationship between a pianist’s genius and individual artistic ability and their respective “piano interpretation school.” Is one more important than the other for the art of piano performance? Or rather, *should* one be of greater importance than the other? These questions, among others, require further enquiry to better understand the relevance of national “piano interpretation schools” for today’s performing pianists.

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Address for correspondence

Sofia Lourenço, Escola Superior de Musica (ESMAE-IPP), Rua de Alegria 503, 4000-045 Porto, Portugal; *Email*: soloure@yahoo.com

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