

A Rough Guide to Musical Interpretation

Intro

This 'guide' began life as a document for members of Philharmonia Britannica in about 2007. It was an attempt to lay out what I see as some principles by which to interpret music. It is for performers that I am writing. I think it is a good idea for orchestral musicians to have some musicological understanding and so would recommend this to all orchestral players.

Whilst I hope that these thoughts are relevant for practical purposes I claim no use for them beyond that. I make any claims to being comprehensive - that would require far too much writing (and reading!). I've just chosen to highlight the issues which I believe are the most important. And I don't claim to have the final word on these things, it is all very much work in progress, a 'starter for 10' as they say on University Challenge!

I will be looking here at music from the Baroque to the Romantic periods. These ideas don't fit too well with more recent non-tonal music, which will be dealt with in sections on the individual pieces.

Firstly, in this document, I shall outline the principles. Then there are other articles focusing on one work each, with examples of the application of the principles. I'd recommend getting a score of each piece and spending some time studying it. Hopefully my thoughts will kick start some useful ones of your own. Then you can come back to me on the things you don't agree with ...

Harmonic Principles

The main harmonic principle in the language of western classical music during the period in question is that of tension and resolution through the tonal system. Each piece of music (and section of a piece) has a key. If a piece is in the key of C major then arriving at the chord built on C (C - E - G) gives a feeling of completion, of resolution, of 'home'. Indeed it is to this home that the music will come at its end, providing (at least some amount of) resolution to whatever has come before. The feeling of 'away', of incompleteness, of tension, is provided by anything other than C. The simplest and most common example of this is provided by the dominant (if the key is C then the dominant is G). Try to finish a piece of music in this period on the dominant and you'll feel distinctly dissatisfied, perhaps even a bit tense, because you haven't got back 'home'. This tension and resolution principle is the core of what makes this kind of music tick.

There are two basic options as to what we do with this information (and much else that could be said about harmonic relationships):

1. It is all theory and has no bearing on musical performance practice. It is simply a method of describing what a composer is doing and how the effects s/he is after are achieved.
2. The tensions and resolutions which come from harmonic principles should be reflected in performance practice.

In short: let it happen or make it happen. To my mind (or ears, rather) performances where 'let it happen' is (probably subconsciously) the overriding philosophy are often dull. Especially in music of the Baroque and Classical eras there is little in the way of phrasing, little to give dynamic and rhetorical shape to the music (because the composer didn't indicate it). I'm quite sure that is why I disliked Baroque music as a child. A judicious amount of 'making it happen' feels right to me, and, importantly, accords with what we know of performance practice in the era we are looking at.

A good example is the appoggiatura. Heinrich Koch in his *Musikalisches Lexicon* of 1802 showed very succinctly how to play an appoggiatura and its resolution:

"It is agreed that in delaying a melodic main note by means of the appoggiatura, one should markedly bring out the appoggiatura itself with a particular accent ... and then slur the following melodic note to it softly or with decreased strength."

In other words the point of tension is played louder and the point of resolution softer. Examples of how this was the expected manner of performing appoggiaturas occur right through this period – including the Romantic period.

As a principle I find that this stressing of the 'away' and relaxing onto the 'home' works well a lot of the time - though like all good 'rules' it certainly doesn't work all of the time. I will give more examples of this in the sections on specific composers / pieces. For now, suffice it to say that this is a good example of how playing music along with its basic harmonic tensions and resolutions works in practice. Two equally long quavers of equal volume violates this principle and is, quite frankly, dull.

Articulation

Slurs

I remember being puzzled at school when my piano teacher kept on insisting that slurs were phrasing marks and that I had to lift my fingers – albeit slightly – at the end of a slur (I think I was playing Beethoven at the time, badly). As a violinist I knew that slurs told me when to change the direction of the bow and it had never occurred to me that they could mean anything else. Indeed this is what slurs have come to mean for much orchestral playing throughout the 20th century. The ability to play a 'line' is prized, resulting in singers and wind players who consider taking a breath to be a necessary evil, envying the ability of string players to spin a seemingly never ending succession of notes who in turn envy keyboard players who actually can. Given this, it is interesting to note that it is principally the organist and harpsichordist (and sometimes pianist) who are left holding the older view of slurs as phrasing.

This 'older' view was that the dynamic would fade through a slur and there would be a shortening of the final note in the slur. This was especially true of slurred pairs (see the appoggiatura example above). For another example here is what Mozart's father Leopold wrote in 1756 (he was the best known violin teacher of the day):

"The first of such united notes must be somewhat more strongly stressed, but the remainder slurred on to it quite smoothly and more and more quietly."

Although this view was fading in the second half of the 19th century Brahms expected slurred pairs to be phrased off and considered it generally appropriate to phrase off after a slur of any length. As far as execution goes, putting an actual hole after a slur may sometimes be appropriate, but in general I believe it is best to find a way to make the last note of a slur fade, trail and almost stop sounding – but not quite. It's worth practising this on very simple music to test out the different possibilities. Note that the speed of the music will have a significant effect on this – e.g. this is more applicable in slower music.

Dots etc

I hold a composer's score in the highest regard. "Come scritto" as Toscanini used to say. But actually this leaves a significant problem. To perform (say) a 19th century score we need to know what was intended by such and such notation rather than what a composer a hundred or more years later would have meant by that same notation. A look at the dot will illustrate this tension between what the composer intended his/her notation to mean and what we think it means.

If we see a dot over a note in, say, a Beethoven symphony we easily interpret it after our own (recent) traditions and consider the dot to be an indication to play a very short note. So a wind player gives a sharp tonguing, and a string player bounces the bow. But the meaning of the dot throughout the period in question was much broader than that.

Essentially there were three uses for dots (or wedges – a mark with a similar and sometimes identical meaning to the dot – in fact in Beethoven's symphonies they were often wedges):

1. To shorten notes
2. To simply indicate that the notes were not to be slurred. This was common in the latter part of the 18th century and first part of the 19th.
3. To indicate an accent.

Again I will give some specific examples later, but for now the following observations will suffice:

- The context is very important. For example dots in fast movements tended to indicate a greater shortening than in a slow one.
- The period was not uniform in these matters. For example 19th century players tended to play fast notes longer than did their 18th century counterparts.
- Bouncing the bow was frowned upon, especially in Germany, in the early part of the 19th century. Short notes were effected on stringed instruments keeping the bow on the string.

Tempo

Criteria for determining a good tempo will include a number of factors, including some or all of the following:

Tempo/mood words

The idea that you can give makings such as Presto or Andante a narrow range of metronome marks (as written on many metronomes) is dangerous, to say the least. But understanding something of the meaning of these words as used by different composers can be of great benefit. For example Handel seems to have used the indication *Larghetto* on occasions to mean 'quite fast, but not at a breakneck speed', whereas for later composers it suggests a slow pulse.

In fact when playing music from the 18th and 19th centuries which is marked with one of the 'slower' indications I believe it is often played too slowly. One simple corrective is to realise that just because a movement says, say, *Adagio* it doesn't mean that all the notes in the piece most feel slow – some might go past very quickly indeed! It is the pulse of the piece that must be slow. Also we should note that many pieces didn't have a slow movement, especially in the 18th century. A slower movement to be sure, but not an especially slow one.

Metronome markings

There's nothing wrong with the use of metronome markings - the problem is that we sometimes use them badly. As with many of these things there are two extremes here, each of which I'd rather avoid. At one extreme we have a belief that a metronome marking must be adhered to irrespective of any other factors, and at the other the marking is ignored as either unworkable or simply irrelevant. Beethoven's metronome marks are a good case in point, and have received much discussion. I am of the opinion that we should try out his markings and not dismiss them out of hand. But we should be prepared to alter them if other factors impinge. One such factor could indeed be that the music feels very wrong at the given tempo - so long as one has made a serious attempt to be convinced of the rightness of the indicated speed.

Time signatures

With time signatures I shall just mention one specific thing: the size of the beat unit. Compound time is of particular interest here. The time signature 6 / 8 has a beat unit of 2 (unless there is an indication that it is very slow and therefore needs to be felt in 6). So when thinking of an *Andante* in 6 / 8 it is the dotted crotchet pulse (and not that of the quaver) that must be considered. Hence a Mozart *Andante* is quite probably not going to be that slow at the quaver level at all. The earlier you go, the more relevant this seems to be.

Length of the notes / phrases

The length of the shortest notes (things can only go so fast) and the length of phrases (wind players / singers only have so much breath) will also influence a tempo.

Factors external to the score

There are other important factors external to the music proper. For example the size/experience of the musicians, the size/acoustics of hall, and to be frank, how the conductor and musicians are feeling that day!

Dynamics

As with all of the issues we are dealing with here, dynamic markings are contextual. They must be seen within the context of:

- The range of markings used in a piece. If, for example, the softest dynamic in a piece is ppp then p won't be as soft as if p is itself the softest marking in the piece.
- That composer's dynamic usage in general. But remaining aware that some composers were inconsistent in their markings and changed their usage over time.
- More widespread usage. The general context for dynamic markings during the 18th century is that they were in their infancy (e.g. by the time Mozart wrote his final symphonies terms such as *cresc* and *dim* were only just becoming commonplace).

Take forte (f) as an example. During the 18th and early part of the 19th century this was used both as a dynamic marking but also as a symbol for an accent. This version of the accent (still visible in the music of Beethoven) almost universally became *sforzando* (sf – though interestingly Beethoven used both types). Hence on seeing a forte marking we have to decide if it is an accent (and if so what type), or if it is just a reminder that the dynamic is forte, or if it indicates a dynamic change.

Another, related marking, is the *fortepiano* (fp). Whilst this sometimes meant a sharp drop from forte to piano (as Haydn wrote should occur) it can also mean a drop to piano on the following note, or a *diminuendo* to piano. Mozart sometimes clarified things by writing fp: (presumably indicating a sharper drop) or f:p: (presumably indicating a drop on the next note), but even he is not entirely consistent. Context is again crucial in making a decision.

Vibrato

Having had several decades of the 'early music movement' we are now reasonably used to the idea that 18th century should be played without a constant vibrato. It may come as a surprise, however, that for much of the 19th century the story is the same: vibrato was considered a form of ornamentation. And as ornamentation declined so did the use of vibrato, until it was picked up again much later on. Here are just a couple of the numerous examples where a constant vibrato was condemned. Back in 1761 Leopold Mozart damned those who "tremble consistently on each note as if they had the palsy". And as late as 1921 Leopold Auer, a pupil of Joachim, wrote that "those who are convinced that an eternal vibrato is the secret of soulful playing ... are pitifully misguided in their belief."

Another dimension to this is that although ornamental vibrato was encouraged, and may have resulted in a good deal of vibrato-like playing (especially on longer notes), it was seriously discouraged in an orchestral setting. Louis Spohr, for example, explicitly prohibited string players from using any vibrato in an orchestra.

Of course when you've been used to playing with a constant vibrato as part of your sound for many years it's not something you can easily just switch off. It takes some time to get to grips with how to make a good sound without vibrato so I wouldn't recommend a sudden blanket ban – the result can be an anaemic sound which is certainly not what we want. Instead of a vibrato ban, I would suggest you:

1. Practice the mechanics of vibrato so that you know how vibrato works. This will improve the quality of your vibrato and enable you to vary your vibrato at will.
2. Try playing with no vibrato and consider how you need to modify your playing so that you don't produce that anaemic sound!

Outro

It's important to consider that when performing music a whole bunch of stuff is going on at the same time (NSS!). It may be that in a piece of Mozart there is a slur (suggesting a diminuendo) but the last note of the slur forms part of a dissonance (suggesting it should be stronger). Problem. I don't want to give you the idea that we can simply apply a set of formulae in our performances: that is simply not good enough. But having no principles is also unacceptable, both for historical, harmonic, and structural reasons but also because I want an audience to be excited by the music and I believe this is part of the way to reach that goal.

I've only scratched the surface. But I hope I've done enough to give you some ideas to think through, disagree with (!), and also to whet your appetite to find out more about these things.