

UDC 7

ON SOME GENERALIZED PRINCIPLES OF NEW PIANO PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

It is hard to disagree with Mark Twain, insisting that all generalizations are false, including this one. Nevertheless, it is generalizations that help one to perceive if not the essence, then at least the nature of any phenomenon. Despite the vulnerability of generalizations, the present paper aims to contribute towards a better understanding of some fundamental principles of the contemporary (new) piano performance by means of chains of generalizations. Against the background of a general historical analysis of piano performance, the paper considers some topical aspects of modern musical language, philosophy and aesthetics that influence contemporary piano performance.

Keywords: performance, emotion, aesthetics, expression, perception

It is hard to disagree with Mark Twain, insisting that *all generalizations are false, including this one*. Nevertheless, it is generalizations that help one to perceive if not the essence, then at least the nature of any phenomenon. Despite the vulnerability of generalizations, the present paper aims to contribute towards a better understanding of some fundamental principles of the contemporary (*new*) piano performance by means of chains of generalizations.

Generally speaking, the piano performance has always been associated with emotional expressiveness. Owing to the specific character of its sound the piano has become a main instrument of musical Romanticism. But the radical changes taking place in the aesthetics of New Music set *new* challenges not only to performers but to the instrument itself, especially to its sound.

The piano and its sound are generally known to be a result of a reconsideration of the priorities taking place in the 18th century art. Against the background of global *subjectivization* of art, as the inner life of an individual – a *subject* – gradually became a central theme in art, and in music particularly, the spirit of the new epoch, according to the famous Russian musicologist and pianist Samari Savshinski, “demanded rather spontaneous reflection of emotions” [1, 179]¹. The necessity to express flexible emotions created a need for a new instrument producing more dynamic and flexible sound than a harpsichord – the leading keyboard instrument of the preceding era. At that stage of music history the new instrument – the piano – confronted to a certain extent the *objective* sound of its ancestor. (Another Russian musicologist Mikhail Druskin explains the reason of this *objectivity*: On account of the specificity of the functional arrangement of the harpsichord, the intensity of the contact between the player's hand and the production of sound is minimalized. As a result, “there is something in the sound of the harpsichord that enchains the individual feeling, the individual will of a performer, some kind of objectivity, which opposes the piano” [2, 41]).

Thus, the piano offered a wider range of possibilities to the performer to interpret the score in a subjective manner that emphasizes the *subjective* nature of the instrument. This nature was in a full accord with the subjective expression of musical Romanticism, which, consequently, assigned a central position to the piano throughout the 19th century. But the present epoch compels the pianists to deprive the piano sound of its immanent feature, as it is this subjective nature that is out of accord with *new* priorities of the new age.

¹All translations are the author's except where otherwise noted.

Let us generalize these priorities.

Almost every important representative of New Music talks about liberation of music from the *individual*, with his taste, emotions and tendency to self-expression – in whole, from the *subjectiveness*. “Time of exaggerated emotions in music is over,” declared Karlheinz Stockhausen in a conversation with me². John Cage, inspired by Zen Buddhism, almost in each of his writings and lectures rejected the idea of music serving as the primary means of self-expression of composers and interpreters. Christian Wolff considers a concern for *objectivity*, almost anonymity as a basic one of New (Experimental) Music.

“The ‘music’ is a resultant existing simply in the sounds we hear, given no impulse by expression of self or personality. It is indifferent in motive, originating in no psychology nor in dramatic intentions, nor in literary or pictorial purposes. For at least some of these composers, then, the final intention is to be free of artistry and taste” [Quoted in 3, 30].

It is important to realize, again by means of generalization, why a whole generation of composers tries to distance itself from, to quote Stockhausen, “psychological emotionality” [4, 148].

For centuries, music has been composed and performed by a Man. To express his spiritual and emotional world has always been the main function of music. However, in the history of development of art music quite an interesting transformation of this function can be traced.

Western historical classical music, rooted primarily in the traditions of Western liturgical music, on the initial stage of its development set a task to bring the Man closer to God. Nevertheless, gradually, the individual inner world and emotions of the Man claimed more space. Progressively, the Man in music prevailed over God. In the end music deviated from its initial function (to be a mediator between the Man and God) serving primarily as a means of expression of a rich and diverse emotional world of the Man (this process culminated in Expressionism.). At that very moment, New Music was born, resulting from the need of "a retraction of all subjective burdens" (Stockhausen, [4,148]), imposed on music by the Man.

The first signs of this tendency emerge in Anton Webern's music, which impersonates the 20th century mankind, "tired" of world cataclysms, fleeing from chaos caused by intense *psychologization* of emotions (Romanticism and Expressionism) to take shelter in all-determining system (Serialism): the German composer Hans Vogt defines this process as an “escape into system” [5, 25]. While listening to Webern's Music, one finds himself in “one of the rare cases, where a meaningful and comprehensive statement about the infinite is arrived at by precise and finite means” [6, 351]. The words of the Hungarian-born British writer Arthur Koestler, pronounced by the prisoner of the World War I in a prison cell while observing the mathematical symbols scribbled on the wall, incarnate, according to Vogt, the essence of a *new* philosophy of Music [5, 25].

The new method of organizing musical material offered by Webern “protects” music from the unpredictability of a human nature. The responsibility for composing is almost completely devolved on the objective system, which provides, to quote Vogt, “security against accidents and imponderability characterizing human intuition” [5, 25]. This kind of security especially rises in importance “when all conventional meanings of security do not make sense anymore” [5, 25].

Incredible as it may seem, *chance operations*, used by John Cage, do not essentially differ in this regard from the total Serialism, the arch-father of which is considered to be Webern. The responsibility for composing music is handed over from the *system* to the *chance*. If the first in total Serialism is generally based on numeric proportions (with numbers representing the *infinite*, aspired to by Koestler in the prison cell), the latter in Zen is considered to be a manifestation of the Divine Will. Thus, music again brings the Man closer respectively to the Universal Structure and Order or to the Universal Mind (the transformed images of God in modern culture).

² The conversation took place on January 20th, 2006 in Kürten, Germany.

As a result, New Music sounds differently, in a truly new way, demanding a new – *meditative* form of listening. We spend most of our time reflecting on the *past* or dreaming about the *future*. Meditation (deriving from the Latin verb *meditari*, meaning “to think, contemplate”) – a deep concentration on any object or idea – helps us to grasp, to feel the *present*, and to attain through concentrated thinking an emotional, spiritual and mental condition, where we “get closer” to the Universal Mind³.

Therefore, while listening to New Music it has become so important to *think* – to direct our thoughts towards every single second of the sound, to perceive the structural entities of a piece, to combine them with each other. This mental process focuses our full attention on music sounding at that very moment, depriving us of associations that lead us either to the past or to the future. Only in this case we achieve the condition that helps us to grasp the essence of this music. “The purpose of music is to sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences,” quotes Cage in his “Autobiographical Statement” Gira Sarabhai, an Indian singer and tabla player (7, para. 8). This method is especially effective in case of long pieces that give a listener enough time to attain a meditative state.

If in the past the art music tended to influence the spirit of the Man through his feelings, the New Music affects his spirit through his mind (in his article “The Art, to Listen” Stockhausen writes about intellectual perception of music) [8].

That could be the main reason of incompatibility of the contemporary listener and New Music. The majority of music lovers as well as of professional musicians refuses to shift to a *new* thinking of the new epoch, or does not acknowledge the necessity of such a shift, “demanding” from New Music and his interpreter to deliver a “traditionally” intense emotional charge.

Under the conditions described above, the role of the interpreter gains in importance. He is the one who mediates between music and the listener. But mediation is effective only when this role undergoes a deep transformation. The interpreter should resemble a meditating Yoga, trying to get in touch with the Universal Mind through thinking about the essential. Thoughts about the essential, completely devoid of glamour, could be manifested through “obsessive” counting of every individual beat or second of a piece of music (pieces completely devoid of meter make the interpreter unable to memorize complex rhythmic figures), through intense concentration on producing every single sound (especially in case of some contemporary scores filled with successions of dynamic signs and articulation marks, still alien for performers), through continual perception of a musical structure of a piece throughout the whole performance, etc. Of course, every performance ideally leads the performer into the meditative state, where the process of performing is conducted by unconsciousness, not by consciousness. But in case of New Music, the path to such a state goes through concentrated mental work rather than through emotional excitement (exactly as in a Yoga exercise).

Thus, getting *free of artistry and taste* is one of the main goals of the interpreter of New Music.

Usually, the pianist (it is time now to bring him back in the present paper) follows his inner excitement, which arises as a result of the influence, made by different components of musical language (such as motives, melody, harmony, etc.) on his emotional state. According to Pierre Boulez, this “musical language is the established, common code” [9, 61] (based on the universal musical syntax or the habitual emotional clichés: while hearing a minor third, a feeling of sadness automatically descends upon the listener). Performing the components mentioned above, the pianist follows the impulse born out of emerged feelings. The impulse, on its turn, gets transformed into

³ Adverting to the Universal Mind I am emphasizing some aspects of *new* aesthetics, with no reference to religious issues.

the emotional tonus affecting *directly* the art of playing piano⁴. It was this factor that contributed mainly to the victory of the piano over the harpsichord in 18th century.

But in case of the new musical language, which rejected *the common code*, the pianist is confused. In most cases, he tries to adjust the old code to particular motives or melodic phrases, using phrasing techniques typical to tonal music. Moreover, he usually attempts to provoke particular feelings in himself, following his fancy and *common, established* taste. That is what the expressive piano demands. But that is also the main problem.

Of course, it is impossible, even undesirable to “purify” the piano performance of all kinds of emotions. But there is a possibility of reducing emotional tonus that would create the necessary state of aspired *objectiveness*.

Sometimes performers get help from composers. Piano preparation invented by John Cage could serve as an example. The preparation not only alters the overtone spectrum of piano tones, but also reduces the possibilities of the performer to control sound dynamics: a complex sound producing mechanism gets blunted to a certain extent, reducing the exactness of projecting an intention and an emotional tonus of the pianist to the instrument. The similar process takes place when live performed piano sounds are transformed through electronic manipulations (live-electronics).

But in case of the “traditional” acoustic piano the objectiveness could be achieved through enhanced concentration on sound producing and counting. This kind of performance resembles a compositional process of Cage, Boulez or Stockhausen who worked with number matrices and charts of sonorities: sounds make successions, and the form is built up “by itself” (Cage defined this process as making “an un-aesthetic choice” [quoted in 10, 71]).

Thus, the interpreter should aim at reducing his interference in sound events. This goal is hard to achieve, especially, with a musical education developing the opposite characteristics and skills. One has to work with one's will. This is an issue of discipline that, to quote David Revill, Cage's biographer, “is a clearing exercise carried out by the will on the ego which allows this to be the case” [11, 117]. Another interesting idea by Revill: “In the modern West, the will is widely misconstrued as primarily functioning to force the edicts of the ego on the outside world. Its foremost tenable function is to mediate between ego and reality, reconciling the former with the latter” [11, 117].

The confrontation between the *subjectiveness* of the piano sound and the aesthetics of the new epoch, tending to *objectiveness*, transforms itself into the confrontation between the will and the ego. Only the ego can allow the reconciliation, but this is the issue of the will of every single pianist.

With this quite a daring generalization I *will* conclude the present paper.

⁴ The similar process accompanies performance of any instrumentalist or vocalist. The pianist takes here a central role on account of the major topic of the paper. However, conclusions could be generalized and applied to some extent to any instrumental or vocal performance.

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