

# Performance Practice and Musical Expressivity

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## Editorial

### Performance Practice and Musical Expressivity

**Roland Jackson**

During a recent *Nova* television broadcast (*What is Music?*),<sup>1</sup> a thought-evoking exchange took place regarding the question “what constitutes musical expressivity?” To help toward an answer pianist Malcolm Bilson was asked to play two musical excerpts (one by Mozart, one by Brahms), at first *with* musical expressivity and then *without* it. It was supposed that a comparison—observing what was present in the first, while lacking in the second—would afford a means of determining what made the first (in each case) musically expressive.

The director of the experiment, psychologist Caroline Palmer (Cornell University), while acknowledging that various factors may have been involved, singled out one that she believed to be primary: subtle rhythmic change (a melody out of synch, a minute elongation or contraction, a slight shift of movement). This kind of alteration, present in the initial performances (of Mozart and of Brahms), but conspicuously absent in the more rigid or mechanical second performances, was suggested as providing a special key to the nature of musical expressivity. It became apparent that what Ms. Palmer

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<sup>1</sup> *Nova: What is Music?* Available on *Films for the Humanities* (Princeton, 1993).

was alluding to was an aspect of expression frequently described in musical writings, namely the kind of *rubato* known as "melodic" or "contrametric".<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, another element of expressivity was equally prominent in Mr. Bilson's performances, the presence (in his first versions) of slight variances of dynamic level as he proceeded from one note (or chord) to the next. Such changes, introduced spontaneously, went beyond any markings present in the musical scores. And although unnotated, they contributed substantially to the shaping of the melodic contours and harmonic successions.

These changes seem to belong to something intrinsic in musical expression, and have very likely always played an essential role in it. Composers in the past have taken such shadings for granted, so much so that they have not found it necessary (or even possible) to indicate them, while theorists and writers on music have subsumed them under the general concept of "taste" (*bon goût*). Because of this it is difficult to find much verification of their existence in past music or musical performance.

One writer, however, did exceptionally make reference to dynamic variances of this kind (from note to note, from chord to chord). This was Daniel Gottlob Türk, in 1789, who spoke at length about dynamics, not only in a larger sense (within entire works, within entire sections), but also as it applied to individual tones,<sup>3</sup> the very quality noted above as being so communicative in Mr. Bilson's playing.

Türk emphasized the need for playing with just the right degree of volume, not only in works as a whole or in sections, but (very significantly) in the individual tones of a musical continuity.

It is equally important to determine exactly the required heaviness or

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Sandra P. Rosenblum, "The Uses of *Rubato* in Music, Eighteenth to Twentieth Centuries," *Performance Practice Review* 7 (1994), 33-53.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Gottlob Türk, *Klavierschule* (Leipzig and Halle, 1789). For Türk, a proper tempo, a clear staccato and legato, and dynamic gradations constituted the three most essential components of musical expressivity (p. 348). In the section of his book devoted to dynamics (pp. 348-53) he set forth in detail how essential differences of volume were in establishing the overall character of a work, in distinguishing clearly between the individual sections of a work, and in pointing up certain dissonant sonorities or sudden modulations.

lightness of execution at all times and in every individual place *or tone*.<sup>4</sup>  
[italics mine]

As for the dynamics that affected these note successions, certain tones, in Türk's estimation, called for a more forceful execution than did the remaining ones.

Above all, **individual tones** [bold in original] of importance need to be presented more emphatically than the others.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, he pointed to the difficulty, nay the impossibility, of designating precisely such minute nuances within a musical score. Moreover, they were something a listener could only gain awareness of through refined and discriminate listening.

How profusely, however, these words [*forte* and *piano*] would need to be added if every single note requiring a particular shading had to be so designated.<sup>6</sup>

Certain refinements of expression cannot be described, they can only be heard.<sup>7</sup>

This manner of playing, then, in which successive tones are subtly variegated in their volume, lay, for Türk, at the heart of musical expressivity. At the same time it was something that could only be attained through each performer's innate sensitivity and individual discretion.

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<sup>4</sup> “. . . eben so unmöglich ist es, den erforderlichen schwerem oder leichtern Vortrag jedesmal, and bey allen einzelnen Stellen oder Tönen, genau zu bestimmen.” (p. 353)

<sup>5</sup> “Überhaupt müssen sogar **einzelne Töne** von Bedeutung nachdrücklicher angegeben werden als die übrigen.” (p. 350)

<sup>6</sup> “. . . wie überhäuft würden aber diese Worte beygefügt werden müssen, wenn jede einzelne Note, welche eine besondere Schattirung verlangt, damit bezeichnet werden sollte.” (p. 348)

<sup>7</sup> “. . . gewisse Feinheiten im Ausdrucke lassen sich schlechterdings nicht beschreiben; sie wollen **gehört** seyn.” (p. 348)

In a recent *New York Times* column Richard Taruskin characterized historical (or early music) performance as being embarked upon "a drift toward uniformity, and (by implication) dullness."<sup>8</sup> In the view of a number of critics (according to Taruskin) ". . . guiltless performances [i.e. without any deviation from the criteria of performance practice], . . . are ideally alike." In other words, by the very process of returning to the original manner of realizing a work, historical performances begin to lose all distinctiveness, and performers any claim to individuality.

There is, to be sure, an element of truth in this. For a certain sameness would seem appropriate and even essential if performance practice is to achieve anything approaching a true historical reenactment, or being at one with the mind of a composer. But it remains questionable that this will necessarily lead to "dullness." If we consider a parallel in the visual arts, any great painting or sculpture necessarily remains "the same" for each viewer. Yet such art works by no means become tedious or boring because of this. Similarly in music, the restoring of a work to its original manner of performance need not have the effect of making the work wearisome. On the contrary, as has been experienced in numerous recent performances, musical works, by virtue of being played more nearly as they were initially, take on surprising and unexpected qualities that we were scarcely aware of before. And by directing the attention more entirely to the musical work and its intrinsic properties, rather than being beguiled by the subjective aspects of this or that interpretation, a musical listener will become more akin to the discerning observer of a visual art work.

But despite all this, certain differences will inevitably remain between one musical rendition and another. This is where the unnotated and unmarked qualities, rhythmic or dynamic (spoken of above), come into play. They have the effect of lending each performance a unique and individual expressivity. Composers throughout history have unfailingly been drawn to certain musical performers over others, not simply because they more faithfully executed their notes or markings, but because they possessed a special sensitivity, this being displayed primarily through the subtle nuances of their renditions. If in the past such sensitivity was the main quality that set apart one performer from another, this remains just as true today, whether in the standard concert world or in the world of "historical" performance.

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Taruskin, "Why Do They All Hate Horowitz," *New York Times*, Sunday Classical Musical Recordings View, Nov. 28, 1993.