

# Antagonism and Mutual Dependency. Critical Models of Performance and “Piano Interpretation Schools”

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## ABSTRACT

To polarize and, coincidentally, intersect two different concepts, in terms of a distinction/analogy between “piano interpretation schools” and “critical models” is the aim of this paper. The former, with its prior connotations of both empiricism and dogmatism and not directly shaped by aesthetic criteria or interpretational ideals, depends mainly on the aural and oral tradition as well the teacher-student legacy; the latter employs ideally the generic criteria of interpretativeness, which can be measured in accordance to an aesthetic formula and can include features such as non-obviousness, inferentially, lack of consensus, concern with meaning or significance, concern with structure or design, etc. The relative autonomy of the former is a challenge to the latter, which embraces the range of perspectives available in the horizon of the history of ideas about music and interpretation. The effort of recognizing models of criticism within musical interpretation creates the vehicle for new understandings of the nature and the historical development of Western classical piano performance, promoting also the production of quality critical argument and the communication of key performance tendencies and styles.

**Keywords:** *Critical Models, Aesthetic Consciousness, Piano Interpretation Schools, Performance, Interpretation.*

## INTRODUCTION

Several studies (e.g. Danuser 1992, Sundin 1994, Bazzana 1997) approach musical performance using models of aesthetic thinking and other critical argument, an exercise that involves a complex articulation of several domains of study, namely history, aesthetics, technique, repertoire, and critical reception. The embodiment of these models in concrete performance can also be read on available research (e.g. Rattalino 2001, Lourenço 2005) regarding both tendencies of interpretation and different concrete performing styles, an investigation that has secured the preconditions for a more well-defined schematization of interpretational quality patterns.

“Philosophizing” about the nature and the identity of these models encourages, in our view, relevant questions to the contemporary listener and performer searching for meaning beyond the performance itself. Interpretation in music, viewed as both understanding and performance (Kramer 2010), knowledge and reflectivity, tends to secondarize the physical circumstances of performance, or even the external world—i.e. the reception of performances/interpretations are somehow in potential conflict with the characteristically reflective attitudes of listening, performing, and giving meaning to a work. Perhaps a kind of platonic musical idealism, in which “music is primarily mental and secondarily physi-

cal” or “musical ideas are more real than their physical embodiments” (Payzant 1984, pp. 80-81; Thom 2007, p. 3), supports this very idea of interpretation in music.

## I. MAIN CONTRIBUTION

### 1.1 CRITICAL MODELS

One can ask first if a model or an abstract idea of performance assumes the character of familiarity. Ideal interpretations presuppose ideal intended audiences. Interpretation is not just interpretation-of and interpretation-by, but also interpretation-for (Thom 2007, p. xvi). Since performances are aesthetic experiences, understanding them motivates emotional response and subjective judgment (Scruton 1983, p. 58). There seems to be no subtle introduction to the question.

A survey of critical models would certainly have to include true established paradigms—e.g. the Schoenberg Circle and the Second Viennese School, the musical theory and criticism of H. Schenker, the Darmstadt School, or the historical performance movement—with the purpose of finding critical material or a logic set of musical ideas regarding performance and interpretation within the range of these models.

If these models are exemplified in tendencies of interpretation and in different concrete performing styles, the evaluation of this link is strictly qualitative and open to subjective debate.

#### 1.1.1 PERFORMANCE VS. CRITICAL INTERPRETATION

According to Levinson (1993), interpretation involves having words in mind; it falls under the verbalized, follows explicit thinking, and thus is restricted to critical interpretation. Interpreters, unlike performers, are primarily writers or speakers. A critical interpretation provides “an account of a work’s import and functioning”, “aims to explain or elucidate a composition’s meaning or structure” but does not engage in wordless assumptions. By contrast, in performative interpretation, the performer is playing, hearing of feeling the work as it is, expressing it in action and not searching for, or thinking of, any words. In critical interpretation, the sounding object may be absent; in performative interpretation, it is the work as a critical object that ultimately fails to make sense.

Such a rigid conception of interpretation, according to which interpretation only occurs at the level

of meaningful production and critical evaluation, is open to debate. A more liberal view of the concept of interpretation (e.g. O’Dea 2000, Thom 2007) sets to find more similarities than differences between the two activities.

#### 1.1.2 CRITICAL VS. POSITIVIST INTERPRETATION



1 | Fig. 1. Sofia browsing the piano music score.

Texts, like musical works, exist only in the act of performance, preferably in critical as opposed to positivist performances (Adorno 2005). In positivism, argues Adorno, the performance or interpretation aims to mirror the work’s surface meaning without probing its depth: the surface tells us “all that is the case.” In critical interpretation, by contrast, one aims to jump out of the mirror; a leap is attempted in the way that “one traces instead the dialectical movement in the work by moving hermeneutically around and between the subject and the object, or the author and the work, as a way to ‘turn’ to the critically thinking interpreter” (p. xlvi)

Because there is no structured criticism against

Adorno's approach to performance, one can also admit that his model enables the criticism of a current system of interpretive practice, in a given social context:

In turning to the interpreter the work turns away from the self-enclosure of its aesthetic form to the public conditions and dimensions of its interpretation. To read a work critically is therefore to read a work against the appearance it gives in a mirror. It is to read it for what it does not show, to expose the social conflicts and antagonisms it conceals. To read a work critically is to read it simultaneously as aesthetic form and a social document of the (perhaps) barbaric history in which it is produced" (p. xlvi).

## 1.2 PIANO INTERPRETATION SCHOOLS

The concept of "piano interpretation school" provides a somehow linear understanding of the history of Western classical piano performance, with its privileged relationship master-student (oral tradition of the individual lesson), and the transmission of certain performing approaches and repertoire selections. The designation being common of, "Russian School", "German School", "Russian Technique", in terms of definition of a certain approach tradition of the general and specific repertoire, characteristic sonority, beloved repertoire, tempo, use of pedal, different piano builders, pedagogical methods, technical-interpretation approaches (use of rubato, polyphonic clearness, etc.), it is difficult for the individual performer to detach himself from the coherent context in which s/he is recognized or associated.

One might argue that artistic personality is favored over a certain performing tradition: when we attend a piano recital it is the individual artistic personality that stands out and not a certain piano school. There is still the reality circumstance of the individual career of each international artist, with frequent contact with distinct cultural influences (Lourenço 2010).

On the other hand, a history of critical models can provide an alternative understanding of history where different approaches, attitudes, and ideas about music and interpretation coexist simultaneously. This means that the positions are not in contradiction, but merely detached from each other by a historical absence of links. Perhaps this particular history embodies already today's performing artist: she/he does not represent a particular tradition or school, nor does she/he fully ignore the aesthetical

principles of performance from the past, instead she/he tries to place her/himself autonomously above any ideal coherent context or general category such as "school" or "interpretative model." But this statement needs elaboration.

## II. IMPLICATIONS



1 | Fig. 1. Sofia trying out the piano music score.

Asking reflectively what it means to engage with musical interpretation in conscious performance requires the recognition of critical argument and the production of meaning and its communication

regarding interpretive decisions and perspectives. The two main concepts exposed here work both as analytical tools and generic categories, and can help placing the critically thinking interpreter (or the performative performer) in a given context or performing tradition, or draw a diachronic line of interpretive practice. Further investigation can criticize the assumption that these categories truly highlight a development of coherent performance aesthetics. Also deriving from a single composer or performer a set of performance principles can lead to misleading or imperfect conclusions. As Adorno reminds us:

Concepts and ideas can never be attributed exclusively to any one figure since their articulation often implicates a number of thinkers; nor can their interpretation be routinely narrowed to their specific meaning within the work of any one philosopher or philosophical system (Campbell 2010, p. 61).

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**Rui Cruz** is a Ph.D. Student at the Research Center for Science and Technology in Art, School of Arts, Portuguese Catholic University, having earned his Licentiate degree in Piano, and a Master's degree in Piano Performance, from Porto Superior School of Music. His research interests center on critical and aesthetical approaches to musical performance and on the qualitative theories regarding performance analysis and reception.

**Sofia Lourenço** is a pianist, born in Porto, where she concluded graduate studies (Conservatory of Music of Porto, Faculty of Arts, Porto University). Pupil of Helena Sá e Costa since 10 years of age, was also guided by several pianists of reference (Sequeira Costa, V. Margulis, A. Larrocha, G. Sebok, C. Cebro, G. Sava, L. Simon). She obtained a Diploma in Piano Soloist (Abschlussprüfung Klavier) at the Universität der Künste Berlin, a scholarship by the Gulbenkian Foundation (Lisbon). She is a professor of piano at the ESMAE / IPP since 1991. Completed the degree of Doctor of Music and Musicology at the University of Évora in 2005. Senior researcher since 2007 (Director Musical Studies) at Research Center of Sciences and Technology of the Arts (CITAR) of the School of the Arts at Portuguese Catholic University. Dedicated to the dissemination of Portuguese music, has recorded three solo CDs for the label Numérica (in 2008, "Romantic Porto: Mazurka and Romanza"). Integrates the "Oficina Musical", resident group in Porto since 1978 with their activity oriented to the dissemination of contemporary music.