

Reflections on the Art of Musical Performance

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Musical performances run the gamut from those that even the parents of the performers can't bear to hear to those so moving and captivating that one's attention is riveted to the music at hand. Beyond the obvious—execution of the correct pitches, rhythms, etc.—what are the factors that separate a truly stellar performance from the painful or common?

Reflecting on this matter over the course of many years has led me to the creation of my own paradigm for analyzing performances. This personal scale is just that—personal. Hopefully, though, the following thoughts will find resonance with you or, at the very least, stimulate some reflective thinking from you about the art of musical performance.

CLUELESS

Performances that fall into this category comprise a lack of awareness and/or execution of basic musical details. The performer's "clueless" approach may include misinterpretation of written pitches and rhythms, unacceptable tone quality (e.g., uncharacteristic or contextually inappropriate), disregard for dynamic markings, an ear that is out-of-touch with the tuning system called for by the composer, unsuitable articulations, and/or other such "musical sins." Ensembles made of several such players will undoubtedly be difficult to listen to!

CARELESS

This category of musical performance is easy to identify. The performer obviously has the basic skills needed to render a decent realization of the composition, but lacks the self-discipline and/or awareness of the musical context necessary to do so. Many elements of the music are, therefore, casually approached: tone quality may be inconsistent, intonation may "wander," never being quite centered, rhythmic integrity is often lacking, and dynamic markings are half-heartedly attempted, etc. One is left frustrated by such performances, because the gift that music is has been overlooked.

CAREFUL

Careful performances, for better or worse, are those most commonly heard in concert halls. A "generic," but "correct" approach to the music being played or sung characterizes these presentations. We certainly hear the "right note at the right time," generally "in tune" and within an acceptable stylistic framework. However, the dynamic range used is often narrow and attention to the specific context—i.e., what the composer really created—is not strongly present. These "safe" performances tend to treat each composition as an etude full of performance problems to be solved, rather than as an individual work of art. In short, what I call careful performances are low-risk, "one-size-fits-all" affairs. While I applaud the attention to fundamentals and "correctness" in such performances—fundamentals that are sometimes near-perfectly executed in these cases—I frequently find them aesthetically colorless and musically tedious.

CARING

What distinguishes caring performances from careful ones is the focus on context, the overall mindfulness of the music making, and a degree of musical risk-taking by the musician(s) involved. In such cases, the performer is using his/her musical intelligence and technical skills to help nurture all of the musical details in the work. A wide range of articulations and dynamic levels are considered, creating a context-specific musical rhetoric; there is attention paid to the

music's micro and macro architecture; and, in ensemble settings, individuals demonstrate an awareness of their place in the music's fabric by balancing their lines according to the ever-changing musical textures. In short, the performer is fully engaged.

CONVINCING

These performances take caring music making and "kick it up a notch," the music performed with confidence and interpretive conviction! Top-notch professional performers and ensembles spend most of their time at this level. The keystone of convincing performances is the projection of a cogent realization of the work to the listener. The performer's command of all fundamentals required to play or sing the music at hand is very secure—i.e., the performer's technique serves the music. In ensemble settings, one readily hears near complete unanimity of interpretation and a noticeable devotion to the composer's intent.

CAPTIVATING

At this rare altitude, the listener's ear is held captive by the performance. Most people listening to a captivating performance are emotionally touched and intellectually stimulated. Often, the synergy between performer and listener is so complete that both are "in flow," each completely unaware of "the self" and the passing of time. The performer is completely invested in every aspect of the music using varied, context-specific tone and color, demonstrating a high sensitivity to harmony, structure, and line, and manifesting deep comprehension of the music through assured projection of its essence. The difference between a convincing performance and a captivating one is similar to the difference between the chicken's and the pig's contributions to a breakfast of eggs and ham: the chicken is intimately involved, but the pig is fully invested! Hearing such compelling performances leads critics to write glowingly. "Without ever seeming didactic, he revealed the complex structural layout of the work with as much insight as...any master Brahms interpreter of the past." "The symphonies had great weight and an edge-of-the-seat intensity." "The cliffhanging cadential phrases and the converging of submerged inner voices in...[her] playing sound unusual if not extravagant, at least next to the customary and 'generic' Beethoven performance. But they are not willful...the small drama [she] puts in motion--so forceful that the ear is held captive--arrives at conclusions carefully plotted and bravely reimagined."

A performer or ensemble hoping to one day achieve the highest level of performance must first commit to spending all of their time, in practice as well as on-stage, at the caring and convincing levels. Only then, after living a musical/personal standard that never allows merely "careful" renderings of music, can one realistically hope to strive for totally captivating performances. This is not to say that backing off and practicing fundamentals as needed is unimportant: it is often mandatory! Rather, it is to suggest that a *laissez-faire* approach will seldom result in a magical outcome. May you find and employ the passion necessary to accomplish such performances, for they are what make life as a professional musician worth the dues that must be paid daily.