

Book Review: Expressiveness in Music Performance: Empirical Approaches Across Styles and Cultures

Eds. Dorottya Fabian, Renee Timmers, & Emery Schubert (OUP 2014)

Musical expressiveness is an elusive concept, one that music practitioners and researchers alike have struggled to discuss in common terms. *Expressiveness in Music Performance* represents an ambitious effort to address this. In their introduction, the editors state that their “goal was to bring together research from a range of disciplines that use diverse methodologies to provide new perspective and formulate answers to these questions about the meaning, means, and contextualization of expressive performance in music” (p. xxi). By simply scanning the breadth of topics in the table of contents, it is quickly apparent that this was accomplished.

Such breadth could have been a hindrance to achieving cohesiveness across the book: part of the difficulty in examining musical expression lies in agreeing upon the terms of discussion, and this is magnified when multiple contributors from a variety of disciplines are asked to come together. However, the editors have clearly recognised this and offer a novel solution. They provide, in the very first page of the introduction, an extract of the initial letter sent to the contributors intended to guide their approach to the topic. This outline can be paraphrased as such: (1) expressiveness “refers to the effect of auditory parameters of music performance”; (2) it “refers to the variation of auditory parameters away from a prototypical performance, but within stylistic constraints,” later emphasising that variation from standard performance practice should be considered rather than simple variation from the written score; and (3) it does not necessarily convey a specific emotion or mood (p. xxi). These instructions are preceded by an explanatory note that authors could “adopt, but also question or reject our definition”. Upon reading the text it is clear that the majority of the authors accepted this guide, offering distinct advantages as well as some potential limitations as will be seen below.

The first section, “Reception and Aesthetics of Western Classical Music Performance,” will perhaps be the most familiar to the music practitioner. Chapter 1 begins with a discussion on the philosophical underpinnings of musical expression, with emphasis on the role of the performer and composer in the Western classical tradition. These considerations are then examined from a variety of applied perspectives: first from the language used by professional music critics when discussing the performances of others (Chapter 2) and then by the metaphors and heuristics used by performers with reference to their own practice (Chapter 3). Chapters 4 and 5 proceed to examine expressiveness through a historical perspective, making considerable use of audio recordings and piano rolls. These discussions are augmented through the book’s use of spectrographic images and accompanying audio excerpts via a companion website. The section’s final chapter (6) considers the context of expressiveness within Western contemporary music, the role of an interpreter in adding an expressive layer to music for which there is no standard

performance practice, the role of the composer in communicating to an audience in an unfamiliar language, and the general lack of empirical knowledge focussing on this repertoire.

Section two, “Expressiveness across Styles and Cultures.” is a fascinating cross-section of vastly different musical paradigms and is perhaps the book’s strongest contribution to the literature. The range of genres discussed is impressive: popular music through analyses of performances by Adele and Kanye West (Chapter 7); jazz via analyses of Louis Armstrong’s recordings (Chapter 8); the funk genre of the 1960’s and 70’s through the lens of Stevie Wonder’s “Superstition” and Parliament’s “Give Up the Funk” (Chapter 9); and several case studies in cultural style and tradition with vocalist Kesar Bai Kerkar’s classical Hindustani performances (Chapter 10), historical recordings of Estonian songs (Chapter 11), and the expressive musical traditions of the relatively isolated Bedzan Pygmies of Cameroon (Chapter 12). It is in this section that the editorial focus on expression as aural variation becomes most effective. Adele’s use of portamento to begin phrases, Kesar Bai’s improvisatorial ornamentation, and inter-ensemble intonation differences within a Bedzan Pygmy ensemble are analysed and discussed using the common language of micro-variations in vocal pitch. The measurement of minute timing difference between notes allows for quantification of the elasticity in jazz ‘swing’, the rhythmic discrepancies against funk’s steady ‘groove’, and the relationship between sung and spoken inflection of Estonian text, the last of which also relies heavily on syllabic emphasis much like the text setting of West’s hip-hop lyrics. What could have read as a disparate collection of traditions is given a narrative cohesiveness through the use of common terms and deep analyses of specific examples (again supported with audio examples, score excerpts, and graphics), suggesting that it is indeed possible to discuss aspects of musical expression as human universals rather than constructs of any one style or tradition. The implications and the imperative for further cross-cultural research become obvious.

The third section returns to the paradigm of Western classical music to discuss approaches in modelling and quantifying expressive performance. Chapter 13 provides methodological context for the several preceding chapters (i.e. 4-12) that employed some form of audio analysis. Considerable time is spent discussing methods of motion analysis (more on this below) and continuous response techniques, the latter of which open the possibilities of understanding expressive perceptions as they happen rather than relying on post-hoc summaries following a performance. The measurement of expressive perception is also discussed in Chapter 16, which compares historical difficulties in defining terms of expressive measurement with modern efforts to develop an expressive taxonomy. Chapters 14 and 17 explore the role of technology, the former in algorithmically quantifying and generating stylistic variations and the latter in surveying how augmented visual and aural feedback technologies may help in developing expressive skills, as well as students’ awareness and use of such possibilities. Finally, Chapter 15 discusses ensemble performance and the difficulty in balancing expressive dynamic and rhythmic micro-

variation with the need to maintain synchrony. While these chapters have a strong technical focus, they also contain useful information for performers and teachers with an emphasis on how expression might be measured, fed back, and taught in a formative context.

These three sections are followed by a series of short Prospectives, in which notable authors were invited to comment upon the book's varied content and how it can inform related fields. This includes implications for music studies by Nicholas Cook (Chapter 18), cognitive studies by Catherine J. Stevens (19), ethnomusicology by Jonathan P. J. Stock (20), empirical research by Jane W. Davidson (21), and education by Aaron Williamson (22), as well as a final reflection by the editors. As with the common terminology, these additions serve the editors' hopes to bring together a range of approaches and contexts into a cohesive discussion. In particular, they highlight the challenges faced by every one of the authors, including the narrow (and highly Eurocentric) focus on cultures and repertoire in the literature, the difficulty of separating emotional from expressive content (if this is indeed possible), the expressive relationship between composer, performer, and audience, and whether the concept of musical expression can indeed be measured and taught.

Several of these final commentaries highlight the various deviations of the authors from the terms set about by the editors, the advantages of which have already been discussed. They note the conflation of emotion and expression and the need to refer to contexts other than performance practice to define expressive variation, particularly in those contexts where standard performance practice is not fully understood or does not exist (e.g. contemporary music). They also mention the tendency to incorporate visual expressive cues into the discussions, despite the editors' initial statement that "expressive movement is not a focus of the book" (p. xxviii). One wonders, though, whether such an exclusion was justified. In Chapter 13, in their presentation of methods to analyse expressive gestural movement, the authors do not hesitate to cross the boundary into visual perception. In fact, they go so far as to suggest that "the communicative content of musicians' movements has been shown to strongly influence and even overrule the auditory information" (p. 222). In the context of a volume describing expression via solely aural terms, this is a strong statement, though it is supported by a wealth of recent performance research that emphasises how musical perception (again, in the Western classical tradition) is the result of an interaction between aural and visual experience (e.g. Vines et al. 2011; Platz & Kopiez, 2012; Tsay 2013; Silveira, 2014). One is left wondering whether we can truly consider aural information alone in the visually-dominant world of, for example, popular music (Chapters 7 and 9) without considering the personalities conveyed via image, behaviour, and setting—a world which performance research is beginning to examine closely (e.g. Lehmann & Kopiez, 2013). One also wonders what role visual expression might play in the cultural styles outside of the Western classical traditions that have been so dominated by the audio recording for the last century. How does the performer's behaviour affect the rich performer-audience interaction

during Hindustani music as discussed in Chapter 10? Or facial movements affect the expressive parameters of Ethiopian text setting in Chapter 11? How, even, might visual cues help audiences perceive expressive content in the unfamiliar contemporary repertoire of the Western tradition discussed in Chapter 6?

Of course, these concerns do not apply to those chapters examining expression within historical contexts from which no visual records exist (Chapters 4 and 5) or critics' evaluations of sound recordings (Chapter 2). And visual cues are very occasionally addressed through the other chapters: in the very first, Dogantan-Dack invokes the image of Charles Rosen ambling on stage, walking stick in hand (p. 4) and questions whether such behaviour would not colour the perceptions of the performance itself. Recent research into audience's perceptions of stage behaviour has followed that line of thought (Platz & Kopeiz 2013), although work remains to be done in establishing the effect it may have on judgements of the performance itself.

This volume also alludes to, but does not directly address, expression's role in music performance quality evaluations. Chapter 16 presents data in which musicians were asked to rate expressiveness or expressive content directly, considering it separately from a 'performance quality' rating. It must be remembered, though, that in academic and professional contexts (i.e. auditions, competitions, examinations, etc.) expressivity is often a critical component of the rating of performance quality; in their review of the assessment literature, McPherson and Schubert (2004) determined "expression" and "communication" to be two of four critical components of music performance assessments, along with "technique" and "interpretation." Understanding how one might quantify musical expression and how it might interact with related performance features, then, becomes of primary importance to any musician, teacher, administrator, or researcher who finds themselves needing to determine a performance's quality. An additional chapter on this aspect would not have been out of place and could have helped bridge the gap from theory to application for practitioners.

In their "Afterthought" the editors acknowledge the difficulties in approaching such a nebulous topic and hope they have succeeded in breaking down barriers and promoting dialogue. They have certainly achieved this. Readers of this volume should not expect an exhaustive discussion of the full variety of contexts in which musical expressivity has been studied or the approaches by which it has been unravelled. Rather, they will benefit from the editors' efforts to provide the widest possible sampling of knowledge from a very diverse set of researchers. This serves to highlight the true scope of the field, the breadth of the gaps in our knowledge, and how interdisciplinary efforts, novel methods, and cross-cultural studies continue to provide steady progress towards understanding musical expression. Thus, this is an essential read for all those interested in unravelling this most elusive concept.

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