Behind the Lines

And above and below and between them. The American pianist **Joseph Smith** investigates the ever- fascinating, rewarding and perplexing world of musical interpretation

What exactly is musical 'interpretation?' If the composer indicates through various markings how he wants a piece of music played, and the performer carries out all his instructions, why should performances differ so? One often encounters the mistaken presumption that it's possible to achieve a 'literal' reading of a musical text *without* interpretation, and that interpretation necessarily consists of imposing ideas on the text. The truth is, however, that interpretation is inescapable, and consists precisely in extrapolation from a text which will always, to some degree, be fluid and ambiguous.

Some artists do indeed make willful changes of a composer's stated notation. We needn't always condemn such choices, but they do not qualify as an 'interpretation'. Anton Rubinstein, for instance, used to begin the return of the funeral march in Chopin's B flat minor Sonata *fortissimo* rather than *pianissimo* as marked. However effective, *fortissimo* simply *cannot* be considered an 'interpretation' of *pianissimo*!

Let's consider, for a moment, just what information a musical score can offer. On the staff itself, pitches, and duration of the pitches

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and silences. Above the staff, indications for tempo, and modification of tempo. For dynamics and articulation, a whole vocabulary of symbols, words, and abbreviations scattered everywhere. It would seem that if the composer has dictated his intentions, and if the pianist observes all of these markings, the results should be more or less predictable. Let us, then, examine these various elements individually.

Pitches, for the pianist, are generally fixed and certain [even in John Cage's 'prepared' piano, see p18 and 20 Ed]. Even so, doubts over an intended note occur more often than a layman could imagine. Even a great composer can make an error in notation. Chopin's familiar C minor Prelude contains a note that remains controversial to this day. Sometimes, too, a problem arises due to some unfortunate loophole of notation. Is a note tied to its enharmonic equivalent to be repeated? Well ... is it?

In regard to the *duration* of notes, however, the piano poses a special problem. One of its most essential tools, the sustaining pedal, frequently causes notes to sound past the value notated on the staff. The degree to which composers determine the use of the pedal varies wildly, depending both on the era and the individual composer. Schumann, for instance, will indicate that pedal must be used in a certain movement, and leave it at that. Here is an excellent example of the inescapability of interpretation. Since the composer has marked it, literalism demands that we use the pedal, but we cannot use it without deciding where to change it, and these decisions, inevitably affect the length of notes. In many cases, then, use of the pedal results in an alteration of the rhythmic notation. Even when specific pedalings are marked by a composer, in practice, artistic pedalling must respond to many unpredictable factors, as all performing pianists can testify. (These factors include the response of the individual instrument, the dynamic level at every instant, the size of the hall and so on.) Even authorial pedalings must be constantly modified according to the player's ear.

Tempo, of course, is one of the most important elements of musical character. Composers generally convey tempo through certain conventional terms – *allegro*, *adagio*, etc. The inexactness of these is obvious. How *allegro* is *allegro*? The advantage of giving tempo and other indications in Italian is that the terms have become international. But this creates its own amusing problem. Often, non-Italian composers don't really know the meanings of the terms they bandy about. For the performer, therefore, deciding what is really intended sometimes requires not translation, but rather deduction. Take the melancholy C sharp minor Waltz of Brahms: although it is marked *più andante*, no one could imagine taking this piece faster than the playful C sharp major Waltz which precedes it.

When the composer himself provides metronomic indications, they must of course be consulted. But what if these seem irreconcilable with the composer's verbal directive? For instance, Chopin's Etude, Op 10, number 3 in E major is marked quaver = 100, which most musicians find much too fast to sound *Lento, ma non troppo*. Certainly, *ma non troppo*, warns us not to drag – still the metronome indication seems incompatible with *lento*. Is the metronome mark necessarily to be given precedence, simply because it is numerically quantified? Or does the verbal directive take precedence because it describes the intended effect, rather than the means to that effect?

The markings for dynamics are as ambiguous as those for tempo. Even if we observe every dynamic, we will have to make choices within the markings. In a single chord marked, say, *piano*, we will have to decide the relative softness of the individual notes. The melody of Brahms' Intermezzo Op 117 No 1, for instance, moves back and forth from the top of the texture to the middle, where it must be played louder than the surrounding notes for the piece to be intelligible. But this demand for relative loudness is nowhere formally expressed.

Then there are the many abbreviated words and special symbols that indicate localized nuances of dynamics, articulation, and tempo. Problems can arise with the use of a single word for a continuous action, as when we have the sequence *pp ... crescendo ... p* over a number of bars, does the *crescendo* bring us to *piano*, or to a louder dynamic, which is then suddenly reduced to *piano*?

It would seem evident that in the absence of tempo modifications – *ritardando*, *stringendo*, etc – one should play in time, and in the absence of dynamic markings, one should continue at the last level of dynamic marked. If these markings were adequate, however, we would not need those long curving lines over the text – the composer's indication of where phrases begin and end. These markings describe an intended result – the articulation of phrases – rather than the means of achieving it. Discussions of a musician's 'phrasing' would be meaningless if

one believed that these phrase marks did not require interpretation. Most musicians, even those professing 'literalism,' acknowledge that one does not play 'like a metronome.' In fact, playing with a metronome shows how far and how often we diverge from the tempo even when we imagine that we are playing 'in time.' When we accept these divergences from strict time as appropriate to the rhetoric of the music we are not likely even to be aware of them. Here, again, there is no escape from interpretation. To ignore phrase marks is to fail as a literalist, since the composer has set them down as part of the score, but to observe them necessitates bending the noted values.

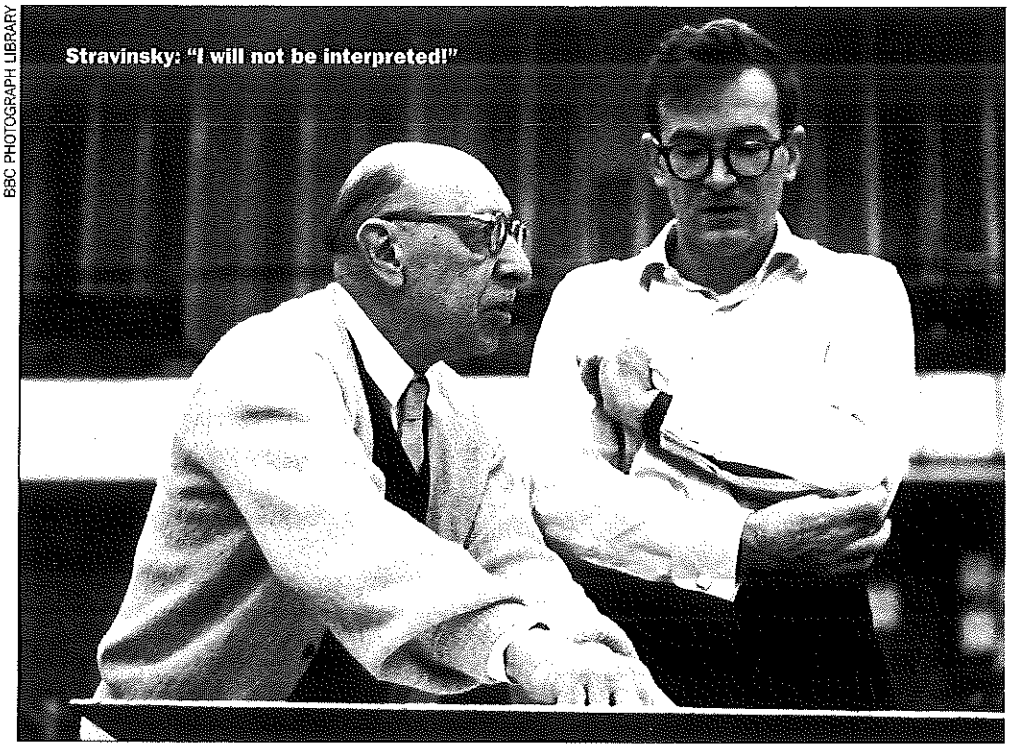
The incompleteness of musical notation, even in pieces with a plethora of specific markings and phrasing indications, is acknowledged by the presence of character markings. Directives like *dolce* (sweet) or *scherzando* (playful) would be redundant if the composer could absolutely determine these feelings by means of more specific markings. Such character markings require the player to make myriad adjustments of dynamics and rhythm. This helps to explain why some people can imagine (can insist!) that they are playing in time when in fact they are not. Then there are the markings that demand that we play out of time, without dictating precisely how – *rubato, ad libitum, capriccioso*. Liszt's Rhapsodies provide a virtual lexicon of directives for rhythmic willfulness: *quasi improvisato, lento a capriccio*, and the most open-ended of markings: 'to be played in the bold, deeply-felt Gypsy style'. In such cases, divergence from the notated rhythms and tempo is not just a pleasure, but a duty! And a guarantee, what's more, of highly diverse interpretations.

If the phrasing indications acknowledge the incompleteness of the material on the staff, and the character markings acknowledge the incompleteness of the phrasings, then the presence of a title may acknowledge the incompleteness of the character markings. For instance, if Griffes had composed a piece identical in every respect to his *Fountain of the Acqua Paola*, but had called it an etude, one might play the opening semiquavers in a more rhythmically defined manner, rather than aiming for a flowing and blending of notes that suggest the continuous movement of water. Even in cases where the title is purely generic, it can be essential to the performance. Certain dance titles tell us that the rhythm should be modified in respects that resist notation – the tightened semiquavers of the polonaise, the hesitations of the tango, for instance. If the composer entitles a piece 'improvisation' or 'fantasy,' he is almost certainly directing us to make more variations of tempo than those he has been able to mark.

When we come to the question of tone, we run into a great controversy - and one which I can neither avoid nor resolve. Some believe that there is no way to vary the tone of individual notes, except as a concomitant of loudness. According to this view, what we perceive as 'tone' results from a collection of other factors. The principle of these factors is dynamic shading – certainly the relative loudness of the members of a chord will vitally affect its perceived 'tone.' Simultaneity is another factor: a chord with all its member notes sounded at exactly the same time will sound different from one less crisply sounded, even if the latter is not perceptibly arpeggiated. Also, from player to player, the absolute level of sound will vary – one whose *fortissimo* is louder than that of another will, of course have a different 'tone' in *fortissimo*. Pedalling is a crucial factor. The sustaining pedal, of course, doesn't only sustain, but by lifting all the dampers produces more sympathetic vibration from the mass of strings, and therefore more overtones. The *una corda* pedal renders the tone not only softer, but also more veiled, and players who relish sound will have a different 'tone' from those who shun it. The middle pedal allows for the clear exposition of certain textures – but may sound anachronistic in pieces composed before the invention of this pedal. So, whether or not a single note played at the same level of loudness can or cannot vary in tone, there are a multitude of variables that create the subjective effect of 'tone.' What we perceive as tone is a prime factor in interpretation, however it is produced.

In exploring the reasons why performances may adhere to the score and still differ in an infinity of details, we have not yet considered the ways in which these details convey meaning. Here, I must resort to analogy. Consider how many different meanings can be imparted to a verbal phrase by tiny differences of inflection – differences so fleeting and subtle that they can only be described in terms of effect. Yet it is these tiny inflections that allow us to judge what a speaker actually means by his words – whether he is being sincere, joking, ironic, passionate, or whatever.

Comparisons between musical notation and written language are problematic. Is music more 'specific' because it fixes pitches and rhythms with numerical divisions, or is verbal text more 'specific' because the meaning of individual words have 'definitions' (whereas an individual chord can only take on meaning through context)? We are also at a disadvantage when we use words to explore musical meaning, since musical meaning is itself not verbal. But we must consider that the words of a written text do not utterly fix its meaning. Thus, when one reads a text aloud, one cannot avoid interpreting it, through an infinite number of inflections, each of which may be very small. Musical notation, despite its appearance of graphic precision, is also unfixed. Thus, even as we pianists try to render every marking faithfully, we necessarily inflect it according to our understanding of its rhetoric and formal relationships. This is why a performance can be faithful to the text, and still be enlightening, pedantic, passionate, cerebral, stupid, perverse, dull, or inspiring. And, on hearing it, we may still disagree among ourselves as to which it was!



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Stravinsky: "I will not be interpreted!"