

# Performing Interpretation as a Phenomenon of History and Culture

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**Abstract**—The article deals with various ways of rendering the concept of interpretation. The meaning of the term varies from science to humanities. The authors consider the interpretation phenomenon in the context of music art history where interpretation is an integral part of musical performance.

**Keywords**—*interpretation; a piece of music; means of expression; performing art; performer's version*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The problem of interpreting an art work by a musician is one of burning questions under discussion in theory and history of performing arts. Considering the problem we have to analyze interpretation as a term, and to trace how it has been used in different periods and aspects.

The Latin word *interpretation* means clarification. Now the notion under consideration is used in different spheres of science and arts, yet the term has its own meaningful characteristic in each of them.

Interpretation is a method of scientific knowledge in mathematics, logic or science methodology, so it is possible to determine the set of meanings attached to the elements, expressions, formulas or symbols of a theory. The above-mentioned sciences reduce interpretation is to the only possible value and meaning of an element, expression, formula or symbol. In this case, the main characteristics of interpretation are strict adherence to the method and the only objective truth; therefore, subjectivity is minimized.

The principal method of natural sciences is description, which is in fact interpretation of sensory perception expressed by means of everyday and scientific languages. However, one and the same situation can be described in different ways depending on the terms used by a scientist; but in any case, natural science interpretations are universally recognized.

Humanities (especially social sciences) use the method of description, too, but, unlike natural sciences method, the

primary interpretation (i.e. using scientific terms to express sensory perception) is necessarily followed by the secondary one - interpreting the intentions of acting subjects. It is the secondary interpretation that is a very important element of such sciences as history, social studies etc. However, secondary interpretation of historical, social or political events can differ significantly not only in scholars' research but also in eyewitness accounts.

There cannot be an unambiguous definition of the objectives which caused a certain historic event. It is impossible to objectively describe the motivation which leads a political figure to some kind of actions. Social sciences do not universally accept the secondary interpretation; it always depends on the interpreter. Thus, in social sciences and in humanities in general, an important property of interpretation is its subjective character.

Historical development of humanities as a complex with their meaningful diversity resulted in intensive development of interpretation methods. Originally the art of interpreting poetic texts appeared in ancient Greece, which later resulted in establishment of hermeneutics and its broadening the subject field as far as philosophy and methodology. At the same time, the character of interpretation as a method was changing and expanding not only regarding to texts, but also to fundamental ways of human being.

We can define the following historical stages of interpretation evolution in humanities:

- The period of classical antiquity: interpretation was treated as a method of explaining the meaning of philosophic, legal and literary texts;
- The Middle Ages: interpretation was developing for commenting the Holy Scripture texts;
- Modern history (the New Age period): interpretation is presented as a method of understanding the meanings intended by the author of the text. Such a method is used in literary studies and philosophy. On

the other hand, interpretation is perceived as a method of deciphering the text code to explain and define the meanings of sign systems. Such a method is the key one in semiotics.

- The modernist approach in contemporary history does not make interpretation a method of explaining texts; it is not intended to reveal the content implied by the author, but it shifts the focus to the subject (reader) who fills the text with meaning in the process of reading.

Modern researchers are free to decide which interpretation method to choose and they often combine them [1].

## II. INTERPRETATION IN MUSICOLOGY: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Musicology is one of humanities using various interpretation methods. Understanding of the meaning has become the main problem of musicology since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, that is, since the moment when musical hermeneutics appeared in 1902 after the German musical theoretician Hermann Kretzschmar wrote his article, "Suggestion for the promotion of musical hermeneutics" [2]. The dissertation by S. Filippov devoted to musical and aesthetic views of H. Kretzschmar explains the essence of that musicological area as follows: "Hermeneutics, according to Kretzschmar, is the act of interpretation. Its objective is to explain and interpret the whole on the basis of clear understanding of the singular using all the supporting means provided with general and specialized education as well as with personal talent" [3].

Musicology understands interpretation more restrictively, referring to the performer, in particular, in the works on performing arts history and theory. There is the performer's role in the creative rendering of a piece of music. For example, let us consider the definitions of the term given in musical dictionaries, encyclopedias, research works by musicians, philosophers, etc.

Musical encyclopedia explains the *interpretation* term as "the musical idea and imagery artistically explained and revealed with expressive and technical means of performing arts, in the process of performing a piece by a singer, musician, conductor, or chamber ensemble" [4].

British Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians defines interpretation as "an aspect of musical practice deriving from distinctions between the musical score fixed once and for all and the live performance which always includes an element of unpredictable" [5].

G. Gilburd (a violin player, professor at Glinka Novosibirsk conservatoire) characterizes performing interpretation as "a secondary relatively independent artistic activity revealing the primary art within the product and updating the rightful variant of the art idea" [6].

Ye. Gurenko, PhD, a pianist and musicologist, offers the following definition of interpretation: "a performer's (or author's) concept regarding such expressive performing

means as tempo, dynamics, articulation, phrasing, agogics and accentuation" [7].

Each definition shows the relations of performing interpretation with various elements (the composer's idea, deciphering of the musical score, using expressive means, etc.). The term's polysemy leads to formation of different approaches to studying the problem of performing interpretation. In her dissertation work, "Performing interpretation of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's music: the problems of theory and practice" [8], N. A. Myatieva divides the approaches into the following groups:

- research works of *philosophic* character, which "consider interpretation as a component of performing art and identify the structure of interpreting and its philosophic basis" [9];
- *musicological* works, which study the relation of the composer's text to the performer's interpretation, "objective and subjective elements of interpretation, and the nature of multiple interpretation solutions" [10];
- journalistic works and correspondence, which reflect their attitude towards performing interpretation regarding peculiar understanding of the author's text ("*composers' works*" after N. A. Myatieva). N. A. Myatieva mentions the composers whose views on interpreting their works have been recorded: Arthur Honegger "The Spell of Fossils" [11], Igor Stravinsky "Chronicle of My Life" [12], letters by Sergei Rachmaninoff [13] etc.;
- the works presenting a performance analysis by musicians (the works of "*performing character*" after N. A. Myatieva). We can note that this group is the most representative one;
- research of *educational* character, where "the attention is focused on developing the taste and style of aspiring interpreters, on the problem of forming interpretative concepts, on the search of better technique solutions contributing to convincing interpretations" [14];
- the works of *historical* nature, which describe the peculiarities of performing interpretation by particular musicians within this or that historical period;
- the works that are based on comparative analysis of different performers' interpretations of the same piece;
- *critical* works which consider performing interpretation of certain pieces by a certain musician, and the performer's work is evaluated;
- research of *style* revealing the performing peculiarities characteristic of the historical period when the piece was composed (decoding and performing the melismata, technique, accentuation and articulation features, etc.).

As a rule, the works on theory and history of musical performing combine the features of several groups defined

by N. A. Myatieva. These works put up the problem of the essence and purpose of performing interpretation. The problem has also become an object of independent research. In general, the problem of performing interpretation can be expressed with a number of questions. When did the phenomenon of performing interpretation appear? Is a performer free in their interpretation? Does the performer have the right to interpretation? Is a performance of a musical piece an a priori interpretation?

### III. INTERPRETATION IN PERFORMING ART

Some sources ("Music: A great encyclopedic dictionary" [15], the article by S. Savenko "Musical text as a subject of interpretation: between silence and eloquent word" [16]) connect the interpretation phenomenon with separation of the composer and performer's jobs, which happened at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Analyzing the conditions of existence and functioning of performing interpretation, N. A. Myatieva comes to the conclusion that "it is possible to mention the legitimate use of "interpretation" term not only with regard to performing classical and romantic pieces, but also for music of the previous and following epochs" [17]. In her dissertation research, she points out that the performing traditions of baroque, classicism, and etc. have their peculiar features due to specific distribution of expressive means over the zones of composers and performers' competence. To signify different variants of such distribution, N. A. Myatieva proposes to introduce the notion of "textual strategy", which is defined as a "historically determined method of coding musical information by a composer and further decoding of the composed written text by a performer" [18]. The dissertation author singles out three main textual strategies:

The first is old textual strategy (from Gregorian chant to baroque) which is characterized with a literal method of text decoding. Performing art is based on artistic improvisation within the stylistic rules and perceived as an obligation by composers and performers. The performer's competence zone includes such musical parameters as beat, tempo, dynamics, agogics, cadenzas in instrumental concertos, decoding of thorough bass, melismata and so on.

The second is classical and romantic textual strategy (from the epoch of First Viennese School to the present time). This strategy is characterized by expanded zone of composer's competence due to transition of musical elements from the performer's competence zone. N. A. Myatieva divides that type of textual strategy into classical and romantic ones.

- Classical textual variant is explained as follows: within the works of First Viennese School composers, there is a considerable change of notation concept, in which such musical parameters as harmony, facture, agogical remarks, dynamics, technical features etc. had to be strictly fixed in the notes. The performer's competence zone also included composing cadenzas in instrumental concertos, but the composers could introduce their own variants.

- Romantic textual variant is characterized with further growth of the composer's competence zone. In particular, the performer's cadenza in instrumental concertos is not allowed (for example, in concertos by F. Chopin, F. Liszt, P. Tchaikovsky). The performer's competence zone was rather strictly limited. Still some performers afforded adding non-existent musical elements to the author's text (pitch and rhythmical alterations, adding passages etc.). The result was "the crisis of composer-performer relations" in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when composers claimed that the performer did not have the right to deviate from the author's text at all.

For example, I. Stravinsky was extremely opinionated: "Music should be performed, but not interpreted... Any interpretation primarily reveals the interpreter's individuality, but not the author's. Who can guarantee that the interpreter will reflect the author's image without distorting his features?" [19]. Many composers (P. Tchaikovsky, S. Taneyev and others) thought that the performer's goal was to render the composer's idea that is quite clearly expressed in the notes, as opposed to the performer's own idea.

Therefore, that period highlighted a topical issue of the sphere and essence of performing interpretation. For example, A. Rubinstein wondered about that and his point of view was different from the above mentioned ones: "It is absolutely past my understanding what exactly impersonal performance is. Any performance, if it is not mechanical, but personal, is subjective by itself. To render the idea of the object (the piece) is a duty and law for a performer, but any of them does it in their own way, i.e. subjectively, and can it be otherwise?.. If rendering a piece should be objective, only *one* manner could be correct, and all the performers would have to copy it; what could performers become then? Copycats?.." [20].

The third is modern textual strategy (from about 1950 to present). It is characterized with growing performer's freedom, which allows some researchers to parallel it with baroque music. On the one hand, in the music of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century-early 21<sup>st</sup> century, musical parameters within composer and interpreter's competence zones are not fixed once and for all. On the other hand, the number of musical parameters which had been peculiar of other arts (painting, theatre, choreography, cinema, literature, architecture) has considerably grown.

Having considered three textual strategies singled out by N. A. Myatieva, we followed how the degree of the performer's freedom has been changing from old to modern music, which determines opportunities and specific features of performing interpretation within a certain period. The musical parameters mentioned by the dissertation author can be combined with a concept of "a performing musician's expressive means". They reveal the artistic value of performing interpretation.

M. I. Benyumov's monograph, "A performing musician's expressive means: paradox of the concept, origin, structure and functions", defines the expressive means as follows, "Expressive means are objectively fixed forms of

perceived and organized musical activity. Otherwise, they are fragments of activity that are “halted” and “frozen” in the semiotic sphere of the musical language. An artistic expressive device, like a symbol, is a semiotic subject. <...> Studying the devices we thus study the activity and go deep into its very essence” [21]. In his opinion, it is not enough for a performer to follow the author’s text only to create a mature performing interpretation.

M. I. Benyumov calls a performing musician a Creator taking part in composing a music piece. Such understanding of performing art specific character does not contradict N. A. Myatieva’s principles of textual strategy within the view that expressive means (= musical parameters) can move from the performer’s competence zone to the composer’s one and vice versa, while the interpretation (as it is) is mostly the performer’s sphere of activity.

Expressive means do not exist by themselves, their significance and essence are revealed within the performance act and depend directly on the performing musician and on their level of instrument mastery. Instrument mastery is understood here as a combination of technical fluency and understanding of expressive meaning of each applied performer’s device (techniques, timbre, vibrato, sound dynamics etc.). As a rule, low level of instrument mastery does not allow to go beyond reproduction of the note text and proceed to the level of “interpreting”. At the same time, a performing musician should possess such qualities as profound erudition and emotional flexibility, which make it possible to focus on the sense and meaning of musical nuances, analyze the expressive meaning of performer’s devices, i.e. to decode the idea of the piece and use the necessary expressive means for revealing it while playing.

In his dissertation research, “Multicomponent system of performing technique as the foundation of a violinist’s interpretation art”, A. V. Gvozdev writes about the role of a performing musician in the art process and about interpretation as a superior goal for developing *performing technique* with reference to violin performance practice, but many rules and regulations of his work can be referred to performing practice in general.

A. V. Gvozdev points out that a piece of music comes before a performer as a system of notation. The performer’s objective is “to reflect on the signs of the system creatively, to hear behind them the emotions, images, and ideas in their variety and inconsistency, which were worrying the author while composing, as well as to build up a complete, artistically convincing composition” [22]. So the dissertation author proposes such course of action:

“*Intellectual* detailed preparation”, i.e. studying the author, the epoch, and the piece origin, which will allow to understand the new material for transition to the artistically conscious activity;

“*Practical* detailed preparation”, a performer’s implementation of the established concept;

The final stage, developing of a complete version, “crystallization of the dramaturgic idea and the degree of understanding the art substance become complete; active

creative intuition and inspiration are the most perceptible and effective” [23].

A performer’s understanding of the note text presupposes that he/she selects expressive means to reveal the content and logic of the musical idea. One of the ways to do that can be a performer’s version. Many works on performing arts theory and history, as well as on methodology, include considering different performers’ versions. The object of study can be both the published note material and sound recordings, too.

Actually, in the process of studying the note text any performer can produce their own version changing some elements of the note text (as a rule, those related to the zone of performer’s competence). For example, there are several performers’ versions of Six Cello Suites by J. S. Bach, those by A. Vlasov, A. Stogorsky, J. Klengel, H. Becker, F. Grützmacher and others. There are versions with cadenzas for J. Heydn’s C-dur Cello Concerto, played by G. Goltermann, F.-A. Gevaert, H. Becker, J. Klengel, M. Gendron. With sound and video recording, it is possible to analyze the versions by leading musicians, which are not fixed in the note text.

It is notable that even in the 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when composers tended to record any single expressive element, the performers’ versions did not vanish, but they used to appear as a result of close cooperation of composers with outstanding performers. Examples of such co-creation are: J. Brahms’ Violin Concerto (the version by J. Joachim), P. Tchaikovsky’s Variations on a Rococo Theme (the version by W. Fitzenhagen), S. Prokofiev’s Symphony-Concerto (the version by M. Rostropovich), D. Shostakovich’s Violin Concerto No.1 (the version by D. Oistrakh).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Music is the temporal art revealing itself in the process of being played. Academic music does not exist beyond the limits of the communication triad, “composer-performer-listener”, which was explained by B. Asafiev [24]. Within the triad, the performer’s activity is like that of a translator’s: they have to perceive, understand and render the information (including the art information). A musical piece performance process is always interpretation in the broad sense of the term. And since artistic interpretation is subjective, the problem will always arise both of its validity and the principles of work with the note text.

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