

Sameness and Otherness of Views of the Composer and the Performer on Music Interpretation

On Controversy between I. Stravinsky and A. Cortot

Olga Yakoupova

Gnessin Russian Academy of Music
Moscow, Russia

Abstract—The article reviews the problems of interpretation in music, the role of performer and the extent of his autonomy in reading musical pieces.

Keywords—*musical composition; performer's interpretation; freedom of self-expression*

I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the evolution of the performance art, there have been various ideas of the role and position of its pivotal figure, the musician. As it is known, in late 18th century and in early 19th century, the functions of the composer and the performer began to differentiate progressively. The vivid development of concert life had increased the demand for more professional performers. At the same time, their mastery and virtuosity continued to noticeably progress.

External flamboyancy, showiness, a filigree garnished execution of music with, at the same time, no deep subject matter, being more entertaining, surprising or satisfying the ear, served the lowbrow needs of the new, so called, general audience. "Superbity compels the artist to parade his technique at all times and in all places, at any opportunity or inconvenient moments," wrote in late 19th century the Russian composer, critic and publicist Alexander Serov. "Hence, farewell the ambitious purposes and goals!" [1, p. 500].

The "virtuosity" in its real meaning started to devalue, whereas skills of quasi-artists and quite ordinate musicians were treated as "virtuosing". Naturally, such "art", as it also distorted the composer's intention, could not but outrage true musical adepts and especially composers.

In their effort to secure own music from such performing abuse, composers began more fully and thoroughly record in their musical notations the required performing details. As rightly been said by Grigory Kogan, "... the strained creative freedom of performers, the limitation of their rights in reference to music historically had been the result of abuse of such rights, of this freedom ..." [2, p. 360].

The growing variety of musical style directions in the 20th century made the problem of prioritized subjectivity or, otherwise, of the objectivity of music rendering more acute. The novelty of language and individuality of the composer's

style, not always properly read by musicians, compelled the former to amplify the reproduction of original texts, entering their remarks, literary annotations and such. For instance, in his musical text of "Mikrokosmos" Bela Bartok, within the accuracy of seconds, defines the time of playing particular pieces; George Enescu and Max Reger sought to define the necessary agogical changes in their compositions giving metronome instructions; musical texts of Skryabin, Schoenberg, Webern, Mahler and certain other composers of the first half of the 20th century are distinguished by high accuracy of their explication.

The invention of recording became the efficient mean of restraining excessive freedom in musicians' interpretation of music pieces. It helped to some extent to anchor particular sounding of music pieces and armed the persisting authors with a sort of legal document, ensuring their authenticity. However, the more the recording was applied in musical practice, the bitter became the controversy between the composers, protecting their music from deviations, and the musicians, prehending such restrictions as violation of their artistic rights.

Such controversy happened to be between Igor Stravinsky and Alfred Cortot, and to clarify the crux of their disagreement, we should cross-reference the masters' particular aesthetic views.

II. AESTHETIC VIEWS OF STRAVINSKY AND CORTOT

In the 1950s of the last century, Stravinsky was one of those, who demonstrated a very hardline response to the quite commonly applied at that moment free interpretations in music. It is no coincidence that such distinguished pianist as Edwin Fischer named Stravinsky among "the cleaners" who wanted "the playing to precisely match the composer's conception, clear of all sorts of supplements..." [3, p. 187].

Being a person, whose emotional principles had always served the mind and reason, Stravinsky strongly believed in "order that must be in any music" [4, p. 125]. Rejecting any "dangerous freedom, <...>, so widely spread nowadays and which prevents the listener forming a clear understanding of the author's intentions" [5, p.158], the composer claims "music must be 'read', 'played', but not interpreted" [6, p.246]. Moreover, it is his belief that any interpretation

presented “the perfect absurdity” and neither more nor less than “the radix of vanity”, and that the interpreter himself “in this respect turns into translator (traduttore–tradittore)” [5, p.75]. It is notable that Stravinsky saw in such statement the play of words translated from Italian: translator – traitor.

In his efforts to defend own works against performing deformations whatsoever, the composer, with a pinpoint accuracy and thoroughness, inserted into musical texts special instructions addressed to musicians. Yet, being mindful that “not every stylistic element of music can be depicted by musical text”, he also recorded his music, considering the recording as “an indispensable supplement to printed scores” [6, p.247]. More importantly, Stravinsky considered the recording of music played by *the author* as the standard for others. In one of his interviews, he outlines this downright: “Performers just have to follow the phonorecords, wherein I am conducting.” [7, p. 33]

He was watchfully controlling the recording of his music played by other musicians; and authorized only those records fully suiting his requirements. Interesting that the bigger part of Stravinsky’s monumental music works were played at the concert first time by the composer himself—though in his late life period he admitted: “I cannot succeed as the pianist because of, beside insufficient skills, the poor, as I call it, ‘performing memory’” [6, p. 89].

The forecited, quite strong, observations by the composer were bound to evoke the response of such original pianist as Alfred Cortot. In his article “Igor Stravinsky” published in the third volume of “French Piano Music”, the pianist disagrees with such ideas. In opposition to the categorical message of “selfish” author, Cortot writes: “... there is no art, which to a greater extent than musical interpretation, could suggest the delicate treatment, a highly sophisticated grasp of the gamut of feelings or impressions to be imparted to the listener through mysterious enchantment of sounds.” [8, p. 15]

Fairly assuming that “the music becomes a dead letter without interpretation” [8, p. 29] , Cortot understands differently the semantic of “interpretation” and “performance”, of “interpreter” and “performer”—“The performer maybe called excellent, mediocre, prodigy and such, but he cannot be the interpreter.” [7, p.23] To become as such, “it is paramount, he insisted, to give the reins to one’s imagination, *re-creating* the composition. That is interpretation” [9, p. 276; Italics added].

These comments may be illustrated by Cortot’s following assertions that music “always contains the exact start, defined by the composer, and the alterable start, entrusted to the performer” [8, p.29]. The “exact start”, according to Cortot, offers the immersion into the beginnings of the composer’s intention, including, beside the musical text analysis, the study of the period, national school, environment, composer’s individuality and many other matters, which constitute “the context of creating the music composition” (V. Yu. Grigorjev). It is Cortot’s strong belief that the interpreter, aspiring to “enliven the music”, must apply only reliable materials and facts. Whatsoever deviance from these arrangements, according to Cortot, explains why

“certain compositions <...> has begun their life burdened with a realm of make-beliefs that stuck to them like ivy about an oak” [8, pp. 18-19].

His assertion about the “alterable start” Cortot bases on the assumption that “traditional clichés of replicating masterpieces are giving way to the vivific impulse, which presents a bravely expressed sentiment” [Ibid]. Being convinced himself, he was carrying conviction to others that only possessing imaginative power, advanced thinking and the ability to refract the author’s conception through the lens of selfhood and individual perception, the performer is capable of attaining the aspired artistic results.

More importantly, the musician claims: “... even if there existed a historical document regarding this composition, which proved its undeniable emotional principles, while your sentiment of convinced interpreter was otherwise, I would not be afraid to establish that in such case you must hold to your own experiences» [8, p.20].

Cortot thinks of Stravinsky’s desire to approximate performance of his music to the composer’s presented ideal standards, tightening requirements and introducing different restraints as of utopia. “Such ideality of indifferent or, better to say, sterilized playing may be achieved only if to entrust mechanical musical instrument with the responsibility for stereotype reproduction of some of his compositions”, remarks Cortot not without certain irony [10, p. 624].

The discrepancy of attitudes of Stravinsky and Cortot to the gist of performer’s art can be explained by the difference in their aesthetic views on the nature of music. Stravinsky’s idea that “music is the thing-in-itself”, spoken out by him in the 1930s, sounded too controversially and was discarded by many of his contemporaries [5, p. 232]. Moreover, his idea about music being incapable of expressing anything provoked strong objections as well.

In response to Stravinsky’s manifest that “the expressivity has never been an attribute native to music...” [5, p. 99] Cortot retorts with especial romantic ardency: “Music, none can clip its wings! Or, using another figure of speech, squeeze its scarcely perceptible infinite essence into the chains of scholastic systems” [10, p. 655].

Years later, however, Stravinsky, regretting that he had expressed his judgment so inaccurately, tried to explicate its meaning: “This too much publicized obiter dictum concerning the expressivity (or its denegation) had been a mere way of asserting that music is transpersonal and surplus-real, and per se, lies outside verbal explanations and descriptions” [6, p. 215].

Contrary to many other musicians, Stravinsky assumed the art of music to be alien to everything pictorial, descriptive and slammed those, who “love music amid hopes to find in it such sentiments as joy, grieving, sorrow or pictures of nature, or fantasy, or, lastly, who wish, while listening to it, to forget ‘the prose of existence’” [5, p. 232]. Drawing on his belief that “music expresses itself”, the composer fervently resists the tendency of translating musical images into verbal forms. “Music would not cost

much if it was downgraded to such destiny!" insists Stravinsky [5, p.233].

Convinced that the music perception and appreciation "implies the presence of certain musical development and intellectual culture", the composer regrets not without reason that "the mentality of many is below the level of music" [5, p. 227]. According to him, this is the result of "vicious' methods of musical education, dwelling on dull "round about" statements, not facilitating any understanding of music, but rather making the "great obstacle to gaining an insight into it" [5, p. 233].

Cortot—a man of supreme intellect—was far from the intention to oversimplify the essence of music art as well. "Only by means of an extremely fine intellectual device the performer can and must bring to light in all its clarity the content of music" he wrote. Cortot's views on the nature and essence of music, however, had been in a marked contrast to Stravinsky's ideas. "The perfect opportunity for music, assumes the pianist, is <...> to enliven the hidden in it [music] human feelings, familiar sensations, glorified by the decoration of artistic veil [8, p. 16].

That is why, contrary to his opposer, the violent opponent of program music, Cortot assumes that this type of music affords "the opportunity to take a better hold of an expressive or delicate rendering of sentiments, the insight of figurative details, of the true ambience, intrinsic to a composition..." [Ibid].

Stravinsky and Cortot dispute the problem of nature of the pianoforte and its potential. Stravinsky's percussive treatment of the piano is strange to Cortot, brought up in traditions, permitting to retain in one's instrumental performance the idea of vocality, the expression pattern contained in human voice. The pianist, being convinced that "the phonation should be produced as if by 'molding', rather than by striking", saw in the new style of playing the limitation of the instrument's capacity and merits, "accumulated for centuries by patient diligence of virtuosi". "The piano itself, underlines the musician, bereft of pedals' artful charms, deprived of enchantment generated by hidden length of vibrations, here will be brought to its faraway basics and strictly under the hard-strike laws" [10, pp. 632-633].

Yet, Cortot is patiently trying to understand Stravinsky's musical language principles and to fathom the originality of his style, wherein "the image of piano has suddenly acquired the nature of severe beauty" [10, p. 694]. He recalls how once Stravinsky himself had offered the clue to the right interpretation of his music. It was on the day when the composer responded to Cortot's appreciation of a certain pianist's play of the transcription of "Petrushka" by saying: "He plays the piece dreadfully: he is pedaling! There is no need for any sound colors in my music. It is necessary to turn the lever and give two thousand volts or no less than two hundred" [8, p.121].

Regardless of own beliefs, Cortot was ready and willing to attain expressive means employed in the composer's experimental works: "There is no need for a bridge. It

behaves to chisel sound plans, striking the light and shadow!" [Ibid].

III. HINGE OF POLEMICS BETWEEN THE INTERPRETER CORTOT AND THE COMPOSER STRAVINSKY

Comparison of the mentioned opinions of two great musicians of the 20th century carries inference that any assessment proves to be one-sided whenever the dispute is viewed from the perspective of one of the artist – either the interpreter Cortot or the composer Stravinsky. It is, therefore, no surprise that Grigory Kogan in his contribution "Musical performance and its problem" [11], while going into the controversy between the composer and the pianist from the position that defended the performer's creative freedom, is giving preference to Cortot's views.

Nevertheless, it should be said that the article by Kogan, dated 1967, was written not without a clear adjustment for compliance with common ideological and aesthetical trends of that time, which is clearly evidenced by the author's words that "Stravinsky's point of view on the performance was closely related to his *formalistic* concept of artistry" [11, p. 22]. Today, such angle, understandably, cannot be taken as a basis of iconic composer's aesthetic review. Since many things appear more clearly today than in those far-off days, stands out the pioneer nature of Stravinsky's music, its historic importance as a unique phenomenon in the music art of the century. Besides that, the questioning stance on the composer's statements, as aptly marked by Mikhail Druskin, gives no good reason "to equate the master's judgments and heritage" [12, p.6].

Only an overt prepossession of the assessment of Stravinsky's social attitudes—who once left his native country—can shed light on such an inconsiderate judgment on his aesthetic convictions. Currently, Kogan's "demonstrative" conviction that "the Soviet reader and listener would hardly accept such 'interpretation' of the problem, and would hardly agree over the non-expressivity of music (including Stravinsky's own compositions), over the apologia of 'craft', rather than artistic and creative performance..." is beneath criticism [11, p.22].

Apropos the review of the opponents' positions in the polemics, it should be noted that the dispute involved both practitioners and analysts, who has developed a special domain of the aesthetic science – the Performing Arts Aesthetics (G.I. Gilburd, E.I. Gurenko, C. Kh. Rappoport, O.M. Saigushkina, A. Farbschtein and other). For instance, in his work "The Art of Performance: Methodological Problems" (1986), distinguishing the specifics of "subjective" and "objective" directions in the performing art, Yevgeny Gurenko convincingly elucidates the reasons of imposed "counter measures" against extremities of interpreters' initiative, and names Stravinsky among the most ardent advocates of the "objective" approach to the problem. At the same time, Gurenko proves that "the art of performance, after all, is *secondary*, its self-sufficiency is *relative*; and, therefore, the leading, defining role of the objective factors in the process of performance with regard to its subjective origin, seems logical here" [13, p. 73; Italics

added]. Though such assertion became conventional, it is still not clear to what extent it may justify whatsoever constraint of the performer's creativity.

Along with the tight restrictions, imposed by the named above "objectivist" composers, the history of performing art knows a lot of examples when composers, while playing their own music, sometimes drifted considerably off the musical notation and read it differently in various periods of their work. As S.I. Savshinsky, who heard the play of many composers, recalled later "there is no greater abuser of author's intention, imprinted in musical text, as the author himself. The piano players Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich are impertinently violating their performing instructions. And are doing so whenever they play differently" [14, p.36].

Comparison of the said points of view again demonstrates the importance of the perspective, from which this rather complicated problem at issue is being discussed. It seems clear that the dispute between Cortot and Stravinsky requires recognition of their positions' origin, so as to take a step closer to the understanding of their inner essence. We believe that the controversy of two eminent musicians belonging to one epoch was sparked by both the objectively reasonable causes, reflecting challenges in various trends and directions in the musical art development in early 20th century, and the subjective, personal factors of artistic credo.

The artist is free to choose his own creative path. For instance, Cortot, brought up in the best performing traditions of preceding epochs, amid the kaleidoscope of various styles in early 20th century, remained faithful to the Romantic trends. The carrier of Stravinsky, throughout his long life, was marked by considerable style metamorphoses – "Russian academism, aesthetic of 'Belyaev's circle', impressionist trends, fascination with jazz, neoclassic, constructionism, dodecaphony and serialism – such are his external development milestones" [5, p.7].

The romantic thinking of Cortot presents the world full of dreams, revery, yearning for harmony and beauty, a flash of a wide variety of sentiment. According to Karl Adolf Martinsen, "Rules, laws and conventionalities are easily broken where man's overflowing feeling perpetuates talent. This should be followed in evaluation of the real, prominent musicians <...> And we should be constantly thankful to them for always new life that they bring into their artistic performance" [15, p.113].

Stravinsky's aesthetic position is otherwise. According to V.M. Bogdanov-Berezovsky, the composer was "not a lyrist, <...> but, first and foremost, an architect setting for himself primarily the architectonic goals, whose emotional intensity is expressed by attained dynamic balance of finely and beautifully considered proportions between all elements of the entire sound pattern" [5, p. 17].

In the 1930s, insisting on "the triumph of norm over arbitrariness, of order over eventuality" [15, p. 156], Stravinsky was trying to explain his adherence to the "Apollonian" principle in art, in opposition to "the Dionysian", as he wrote: "The ultimate purpose of the latter

[the Dionysian] is ecstasy, namely, the loss of self-identity, whereas, in the first instance, the art exacts of the artist his mindfulness. My choice between these two principles is obvious. <...> I greatly appreciate classical ballet, <...> because I see in it the accomplished expression of the Apollonian principle" [5, p.156-157].

Cortot is the artist with opposite aesthetic values. "Show all the complexity of emotional movements, the entire world of human feelings!" [8, p.9] addresses he the musicians, summing up the heart of his playing credo.

It is impossible to appreciate art of one artist or another and estimate it outside the cultural context of the time he lived in. As Anton Rubinstein remarks: "There are some men, who came into this world with their frame of mind too early, and those who came too late... To see the light in due time—that is the ticket. Few manage to do so" [16, p. 180]. In a sense, these words may be referred to the both artists, and give the reason of their dispute.

Indeed, it was not easy for Cortot to defend the high principles well inherent to the Romantic period, whereas at the beginning of the century, audacious innovative ideas, stirring great interest, began to spread in the art music. It is no coincidence that Cortot's work was perceived by many as "the generalization of the method of *old* romantic pianism" [17]. Today the shortsightedness of such perceptions is evident; as time has shown, the artistic and aesthetic ideals of the romanticism stay live and gain new momentum in the beginning of the 21st century. From this perspective, Cortot definitely appears the guardian of the unquestionable humanist merits of the romantic style.

It would be unfair, however, to ignore certain extremities of his judgment, wherein he appears opposed to new trends, which he believes are eroding the old. "The 'pure music', which would turn into mere mathematics through time, cannot count on its continued existence" [8, p.23], he notes in reference to music of modern style trends of the 20th century. "The succeeding generation, assumes the master, will not leave special place for certain works of Stravinsky, forasmuch as they barely satisfy the dictates of fragile fashion" [10, p. 694]. However, at the same time, estimating the composer's genius, Cortot assumed that he "could be the musician of the whole epoch" [Ibid].

The biased subjectivism of Cortot's perceptions, pertaining to his assessment of Stravinsky's artistic style, turns out more lucid if to compare with how calmly and prudently the pianist responds to the statement spoken out by Ravel, which turned into the slogan of "objectivist" performers: "I don't wish my music to be interpreted, playing it is enough" [8, p. 150].

The undeniable liking of Ravel's music, its closeness to his own artistic ideals shed light on Cortot's quite muted reaction to Ravel's following statement: "A more adequate judgment is absolutely unthinkable, in spite of its paradoxical, and in a sense quizzical expression; there cannot be a more accurate definition of the thoroughness and submission, with which the text, wherein everything is envisaged, needs to be reproduced" [8, p.150].

IV. CONCLUSION

Today, looking back we can better evaluate ideas of the musicians and estimate the significance of their creative positions in the context of the contemporary art in its entirety. As it seems presently, the tangle of strong contradictions between them, which sharpened in the 1930s, can be possibly unraveled through the review of their opinions belonging to a later point in time.

The musicians' views on the concerning us problem of balanced principles of composing and playing music receive a new perspective. For instance, the position of Stravinsky, who advocated absolute accuracy in rendering the author's intention, later became more loyal. "I don't believe that notation can fully and ultimately import the concept of style," he used to say. "Certain details should be always given to the performer, God bless him." [14, p. 249] In turn, Cortot in his recommendations to performers also wrote, "nothing seems harder than to play the notated" [8, p. 204].

The truly outstanding artists, like these musicians, obviously had acknowledged that only setting of high artistic purposes could serve to translation of the image content of music. Evidently, these objectives can be achieved only in the context of the overall process, wherein equally important are the art of the composer and of the performer, whereas each of them possesses his own specific functions.

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