

Partners in Expression: Instrumental Music and Interpretative Reading

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Every academic discipline, no matter what its size or sphere of concern, seems to internalize certain key controversies which serve to delineate the field in general and to categorize and differentiate the various practitioners of it. This is especially true of oral interpretation where the intra-disciplinary battlelines are most often drawn in attempting to equate, or striving to separate, 'acting' and 'reading'. Many words, sometimes angry, have been expended in the skirmish and many students, caught between teachers of opposing theories, have been confused by it. Indeed, some authorities become so pre-occupied with defining acting in terms of reading and reading in terms of acting that they minimize or ignore altogether the artistic modes which encompass both.

One man who did not lose his perspective in this matter was the late E. Ray Skinner. Dr. Skinner realized that reading/acting characteristics could neither be taught nor justified through a simple pitting of one against the other. Instead, he sought to explain the two speech forms by comparing them to other means of artistic expression, thereby illuminating for his students new inter-disciplinary as well as intra-disciplinary relationships.

One of the key tools which Dr. Skinner used in furthering this endeavor was his 'Expression Continuum'¹ which arranges the various art forms according to the ratio of representative to suggestive expression exhibited by each:

REPRESENTATIVE		SUGGESTIVE		
architecture	ACTING	general speech	READING	instrumental music

In essence then, Skinner held that the interpretative reader can be considered the rhetorical counterpart of the instrumental musician. While the work of the architect and the actor must assume a concrete manifestation, that of the reader and the instrumentalist owes its very nature to a continual diversity. Though using a form 'in which the meaning and the language have been determined in advance,'² the reader or conductor takes the ink-rendered components of another's artistry, reshuffles them, and deals out a new hand from an old deck. Perhaps the Eb in the First Bassoon should dominate a bit more; perhaps the word 'fog' should be savored a bit longer. Perhaps this viola or that verb should be handled a new way to better convey the initial intent. And by a tone or a word, by this or that embroidery upon the artistic fabric, the initial intent can be more clearly woven, more meaningfully stiched, without the necessity for complete 're-blocking' or 're-casting;' 're-molding' or 're-designing'.

It is not surprising then, that upon exploration, one finds instrumental music and interpretative reading to share the same concern with and regard for the potent

pause and the phrasing-tempo relationship. Writing on this latter subject, C. P. E. Bach put the matter this way:

In general, the briskness of allegros is expressed by detached notes, and the tenderness of adagios by broad, slurred notes. The performer must keep in mind that these characteristic features of allegros and adagios are to be given consideration even when a composition is not so marked, as well as when the performer has not yet gained an adequate understanding of the emotional content of the work. I use the expression, "in general," advisedly, for I am well aware that all kinds of execution may appear in any tempo.

There are many who play stickily, as if they had glue between their fingers. Their touch is lethargic; they hold their notes too long. Others, in an attempt to correct this, release the keys too soon, as if they had burned them. Both are wrong. Midway between these extremes is best. Here again I speak in general, for every kind of touch has its use.³

The implications for the interpretative reader in the above passage are bountiful. Their direct application to oral reading is strikingly illustrated in this statement by Andrew T. Weaver who writes:

In music we have the terms: *largo*, *adagio*, *andante*, *moderato*, *allegro*, *presto*, etc. We should cultivate the same pleasing variety in the utterance of language, so that out of this variety we can select appropriately for every type of situation and material with which we may be dealing. In this matter of tempo, the besetting weakness of speakers is a uniform deliberateness which makes everything seem the same, everything seem just as important, as everything else. The characteristic drawl of certain people deprives them of any possibility of using vocal movement to stir up specific and differentiated responses in their auditors. Contrasted with these are the people who commit the offense of always being brisk, staccato, and lively, and who by their monotony of liveliness succeed in doing for themselves very much what the drawlers do for themselves, viz., obscuring all distinctions in meaning . . . Let us be on the lookout for opportunities to use with telling effect the slowest possible tempo, the most rapid possible tempo, and all the degrees of rate in between these two.⁴

The understanding of pause in the interpretative reading process is also aided by knowing what insights a musician like Ferruccio Busoni can provide on the subject: 'That which most nearly approaches the essential nature of the art,' says Busoni, 'is the rest and the hold. Consummate players, improvisers, know how to employ these means of expression in loftier and ampler measure. The tense silence between two movements—in itself music, in this environment—leaves wider scope for divination than the more determinate, but therefore less elastic, sound.'⁴

Armstrong and Brandes indicate proper pausing to have just as great an impact on the interpretative reading process when they state: 'The silence allows the preceding thought to ring out and the subsequent thought to enter a rested mind. When the last church bell rings and silence follows, it seems as if the quality of that last bell is sweeter than any of the others. If the bells begin to sound again, we take up their message with renewed enthusiasm and appreciation.'⁶

Even in the area of gesture, the articulate musician can provide the interpretative reader with some valuable clues toward achieving the most vibrant artistic integrity in both their respective media. One of the best of these 'clues' is the fol-

lowing passage from the writings of composer-pianist-violinist Alexander Sergeivitch Dargomijsky. His insights on the problems of gesture faced by the reader and the instrumentalist alike, are the natural by-product of an artist whose operas exhibit a perfect marriage, a truly inseparable unity of text and music. In a letter to a friend, Dargomijsky articulates his ideas about gesture in a suggestive art this way:

Perhaps it is suitable that a performing talent think about external effects from time to time. Charlatanism works on the masses. The creative talent, on the contrary, must never sub-ordinate inspiration to external effect. I admit that the ability to produce effect proves the existence of the gift of observation, understanding, a certain degree of fantasy and perhaps even talent. Yet forced effects dazzle at the start, only to appear the more dull later. On the other hand, the artist's genuine inspiration minus extraneous means not only makes a strong impression . . . but also stimulates . . . a crescendo of lofty and noble sentiment.⁷

How similar to Dargomijsky's position are the following observations about gesture as expressed by Charlotte Lee:

A good gesture conforms to no rules except the rule of effectiveness. It is effective when it helps to communicate, is unobtrusive, and does not result in distracting mannerisms. It depends upon and grows out of the reader's total response to the material. Like every other aspect of technique, gesturing must be the result of the interpreter's mental and emotional response to what is on the printed page. As such, it will be a powerful force in engendering the desired response in the listeners.⁸

Thus, although the musical or interpretative reading selection is carefully prepared, it should not appear premediated. As the melodic line should seem to flow spontaneously from the keyboard or orchestra, so too should the life situation seem to flow with all the vigor of originating experience from the lips of the interpretative reader. Lowery and Johnson describe this process as 'the perfection of form coordinated with sincere, spontaneous response.'⁹ Others call it re-thinking your material. Whatever its label, this quality, this illusion of the first time, must be an intrinsically felt part of any artistic process which seeks to transform dormant symbols into animate emotions. The well-read selection, like the well-performed composition, should be presented, as Copland maintains, 'in a continual state of becoming.'¹⁰

To avoid growing stale and to promote this illusion of the first time, Skinner suggests that the reader 'always inject something new; some new approach into each reading.'¹¹ This something new is accomplished best through a continual replenishing of the situation's *imagery*. Simply stated, imagery is 'mental reproduction . . . what we recall of our sensory experiences.'¹² One need not look long to find examples of such imagery for it is so pervasive as to be 'inherent in any word or groups of words which affects the senses and thus creates a sensory response.'¹³

As we acquire experience,, the imagery that exists for us in any given object or stimulus is enlarged and deepened. Musical authority Hugh M. Miller appropriately points out that 'some experiences have been agreeable, others unpleasant; some have been profound, others have left little imprint; some have been valuable while others have contributed no enrichment. Human experience is, of course, infinitely diversified, and no two people have exactly the same experience. Yet there are many kinds of experience which people have in common.'¹⁴

The word 'pretzel' for one person might evoke pleasant memories of the gang's weekly get-togethers where pretzels were invariably served. To someone else, however, the word might recall the agony that resulted when a pretzel became lodged in his throat. Not an intrinsic or universal attribute of the pretzel itself, 'the image exists only as the reader or listener is able to recall some experience or combination of experiences, either personal or secondhand. Therefore, the images which come to your mind will be different from those of someone else.'¹⁵ It becomes vital then, that the interpretative reader 'see' the author's scene so well as he reads that his listeners will be able to not only recognize the primary image but will recognize it in terms of *the author's* and thence, the reader's perception of it. This can be accomplished in spite of diverse experiential backgrounds because *all* images of the word pretzel 'will have enough elements in common so that all persons to whom the word . . . mean(s) anything at all can respond in similar fashion. The author will supply whatever qualifying elements are needed to direct the universal response to his individual purpose.'¹⁶

In order for the reader to 'see' his scene well enough to direct as well as be part of this 'universal response' he must develop his ability to secure *abandon* for himself initially and his audience ultimately. One must remember however, that interpretative reading, like instrumental music, is a suggestive rather than a representational art. Just as the instrumentalist does not dance his notes but plays them, the reader does not participate in the scene but reacts to it. He is an observer who must be free enough from inhibition to *react with* the author and the audience but not so unrestrained that he *acts for* them. Smith and Linn stress the need for at least a modicum of abandon when they write: 'If we insist upon crouching within our everyday personality we will give little to—and get less from—an audience. At best our listeners will consider us distant and forbidding; at worst they will suspect we are the whispering dead.'¹⁷

Still, abandon is not really an end but a means to an end; a stimulant to animation which is then tempered to produce restraint. 'And restraint, is just as important a phase of "feeling" . . . as abandon or incitement.'¹⁸ It is this restraint, which orchestral conductor Krueger has praised, that the interpretative reader too must covet above all else. Through its suggestive emotion, 'the feeling appears to be stronger than the expression'¹⁹ and audience-involving empathy (or feeling *with*) is the potently kinetic though physically subdued result. Through empathy the audience savors the author's experience instead of 'smelling' the reader's technique.

Such suggestive, emphatic artistry is the goal toward which each reader must work. For the interpretative reader, like that other suggestive artist, the instrumental musician,

cannot move others unless he too is moved. He must feel all the emotions that he hopes to arouse in his audience, for the revealing of his own humor will stimulate a like mood in the listener. In languishing, sad passages, the performer must languish and grow sad. Thus will the expression of the piece be more clearly perceived by the audience. Here, however, the error of a sluggish, dragging performance, caused by an excess of emotion and melancholy must be avoided. Similarly, in lively, joyous passages, the executant must again put himself into the appropriate mood. Constantly varying the passions, he will barely quiet one before he rouses another. Above all, he must discharge this office in a piece which is highly expressive by nature, whether it be by him or someone else. In the latter case, he must make certain that he assumes the emotion which the composer intended upon writing it.²⁰

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