

Exploring the role of the performer's emotional engagement with music during a solo performance.

Catherine Foxcroft,^{*1} Clorinda Panebianco-Warrens^{#2}

^{*}*Department of Music and Musicology, Rhodes University, South Africa*

[#]*Department of Music, Pretoria University, South Africa*

¹c.foxcroft@ru.ac.za, ²clorinda.panebianco-warrens@up.ac.za

ABSTRACT

A. Background

Research shows that performers' emotional engagement with the music they are performing may play a crucial role in the preparation of an expressive performance (Van Zijl and Sloboda, 2011). Yet optimal performance requires a relaxed concentration which is incompatible with experiencing certain emotions (Juslin, 2009). To what extent then do performers engage emotionally with the music they are performing during an emotionally expressive performance?

B. Aims

This research aimed to explore the extent to which pianists emotionally engage with the music they are performing during a solo recital. The research focused on the performers' perspectives of their experienced emotional engagement while performing.

C. Method

The research project was a qualitative study, using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Semi-structured, in-depth interviews allowed the researcher to interact closely with the participants, thereby gaining new insight into pianists' unique perspectives on their experienced emotions during a musically expressive performance. 10 concert pianists (5 students and 5 professionals) performed solo recitals lasting approximately 60 minutes. The pianists were interviewed immediately after their performances in order to facilitate insights with specific reference to a performance which they could remember with ease. The semi-structured interview questions were designed to maximize the participants' understanding of their emotional engagement during the performance. They explored the pianists' unique experiences, in part drawing on answers to a questionnaire completed by each pianist several weeks prior to their performances. The questionnaire posed questions relating to the pianists' general perspectives on musical emotion and emotionally expressive performance, while the interview questions posed questions relating to the pianists' specific performances. The data was collated at the 2011 National UNISA piano competition (student pianists), and from recitals performed in SA concert halls in 2011/12 (professional pianists).

D. Results

Preliminary results suggest that the pianists experienced varying degrees of emotional engagement with the music's emotional content during an emotionally expressive performance. Their experienced emotions were furthermore

divided into two broad categories, musical and non-musical (everyday) emotions. Musical emotions were frequently experienced indirectly, and related to the emotional content of the music e.g. feeling tender when the musical cues indicate tenderness. Non-musical emotions were experienced directly, and were not related to the emotional content of the music but rather to the performance circumstances e.g. frustration at performance imperfection. The pianists agreed that musical emotions could enhance the performance's expression to a degree. However, both kinds of emotions could impact negatively on a performance if the performer was unable to control the emotional engagement through emotional compartmentalisation. Uncontrolled emotions impeded the ability to critically listen to their performances leading to reduced concentration. This resulted in technical, musical and memory error. Error was considered one of the main factors preventing the performer from achieving the ideal mental state necessary for an emotionally expressive performance. The ideal mental state was characterised by highly focussed concentration, and resembles a state of Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, M. 1990). The performer feels relaxed, secure, removed from the physical experience of performing and its related concerns, and in control of the performance. This enables the performer to be creative and spontaneous in the performance, and is the optimal state of mind desired by the performer for an expressive performance.

E. Conclusions

Preliminary conclusions suggest that the performer's emotional engagement with the music during a solo recital is a complex process requiring careful management of interacting musical and non-musical emotions. Both student and professional pianists appear to be aware of the degree to which uncontrolled emotions can interfere with an expressive performance. While controlled emotional engagement is a desirable aspect of some performances, uncontrolled emotional engagement disrupts the focused concentration performers require for spontaneous, creative and expressive performances.

F. Keywords

Performer, musical and non-musical emotions, emotional engagement, expression, Flow.

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