

Making Music: the work of a concert violinist

Great music is like a lover who demands everything and gives everything. Performing it requires a huge range of skills – physical, intellectual, emotional – yet the final result, the moment of truth on the concert platform, must exude an ease as natural as breathing. All the years of preparation are aimed at knowing and loving the music so well that we can virtually become it as we play. To offer it in performance to the public opens the possibility of their also being drawn into its orbit. Our reward is in the doing: living great music in the presence of others is a profound joy, such that we are willing, even eager, to face the obstacles that stand in our way.

The physical challenge

The most visible obstacle is the physical: the act of drawing sound from a wooden box by means of a length of horse-hair. It seems miraculous that any novice has the perseverance to persist past the out-of-tune, scratchy-tone stage. The violin has no frets to mark the notes, so the left-hand fingers must learn their spacing to the accuracy of a millimetre in order to create the pitches themselves. It usually takes many years before any fairly reliable accuracy is developed, and it requires constant vigilance to retain it. Precise spatial memory must be coupled with strength, suppleness, speed and stamina, the muscles being trained as carefully and rigorously as an athlete's.

Meanwhile the right arm and hand must learn a completely different style of movement, a butter-smooth fluidity to set the strings vibrating evenly. The bow not only coaxes the sound from the instrument, but also conjures the colours and emotions in the sound and traces the contours of the phrases, giving voice to the music itself. The right hand must develop an acute sensitivity to the action of the bow on the strings, constantly adjusting its speed and weight and keeping its path absolutely true. And of course, both hands must be perfectly co-ordinated, the smart actions of the left-hand fingers timed exactly with the fluid motions of the right hand.

All this is further complicated by having to hold the violin itself, a constant that causes many a neck and shoulder injury. In fact, the universal nightmare of violinists is of dropping the violin!

Even when a serviceable technique is in place, each piece of music demands technical attention, the hands first learning to negotiate its unique order of notes, with its particular leaps and stretches and

switch-backs; and then consigning this knowledge, through assiduous practice, to kinetic memory.

The perpetual riddle: notation

Being able to sound the notes physically prepares the ground for the fundamental work of transforming the musical text back into sound. It is no simple matter. Most of the music that we play was written by composers who are long gone, and who lived in different eras and cultures. Their compositions are preserved and handed down by means of a written text. At first, when music was almost always played or conducted by the composers themselves, the written text served as an aide-mémoire, only the main notes being necessary. Later, as music scores were disseminated and musicians other than the composers themselves began to play them, the need for a fuller notation became apparent. So markings were devised to provide more detail: signs for 'loud', 'moderately loud', 'fast', 'getting gradually slower', 'sweetly', 'big accent', and many others. These are certainly helpful, but obviously not at all definitive. Despite some recent composers specifying a torrent of playing instructions, the sound in a composer's head has resolutely refused to be pinned down and penned.

The simple truth is that music notation is inadequate: sound cannot be translated into any other medium, neither words nor marks on paper. This realisation is of fundamental significance for the performing musician, in that it forces the need for interpretation.

Interpretation is therefore not an indulgence - something added to the written text; the very instant the bow touches the string, it comes into play, whether we are conscious of it or not. Despite the surprisingly widespread belief that all a player need do is to 'play the notes', this very concept is nonsensical, for as soon as notes are sounded, they have a full complement of attributes: intensity, attack, dynamic level (loudness), warmth, character, direction, length, speed and so on. So if we assert that we are merely 'letting the music play itself', it can only mean that we are forfeiting a conscious choice of attributes, allowing habitual, automatic ways of playing to overlay and strangle the voice of the composer.

The expressiveness of music is another issue that is widely misunderstood. All students have at some point been told, "Now play with expression", implying that it is possible to play without expression. They may indeed be playing in a way that sounds bland, uninflected, monochromatic, mechanical, strait-laced, joyless, but this does actually convey an emotional message, and one that is powerful. Juliet would be quite alarmed to hear Romeo confess his love for her in

a monochromatic tone of voice! The challenge for a musician, as for an actor, is to match the expression with the deeper meaning of the text, to be in tune with its underlying essence. And since music can be heard only through the mediation of a performer, we musicians bear the responsibility of presenting a fair and true interpretation. How do we go about this?

Collecting information

Like good historians, we need to recognise the evolution of ideas and customs, and to collect as much information as possible. Preliminary spadework involves reading contemporary accounts of music-making in the particular time and place of the chosen composition. These include the writings of the composers themselves, teaching manuals, newspaper reviews – anything that may shed light on how a composer may have wanted his music to be played. Recent composers may have made recordings of their works, but these cannot necessarily be regarded as gospel: composers are not always the best interpreters of their own music and, like the rest of us, will play differently from one night to the next.

It is also crucial to know how the instruments of the time sounded, and how that sound would have been affected by the acoustics of the performing spaces. For instance, the practice of playing short notes with clear separation in certain eras is inextricably linked to the ample resonance of their halls. To achieve the same effect in a dry hall necessitates a longer touch than advocated then.

Since the violin has traditionally been the dance-master's instrument, much of the music we play is based on dances. It is virtually impossible to capture the feel of a waltz or a tango without having seen it, or better still, having danced it oneself! So going off to the dance, or at least the dance studio, is all part of the day's work.

And of course the total oeuvre of a composer is enormously revealing. To understand a composition entails entering a composer's sound-world, and this needs total immersion. Burying oneself in his other compositions can foster a deep understanding and empathy, as well as providing days – months – years - of delight.

Confronting the score

When confronting a specific score of music, we proceed (like good scientists) by drawing on all our powers of observation. These can be stimulated by asking questions, one of the first being: whose notation is this?

For instance, a note written by Bach usually indicates a shorter sound than one written by Brahms. Two quavers (eighths) written by Gershwin indicate a completely different rhythm from two written by Beethoven. If we have done the spadework, we will know that music is similar to language in that its pronunciation differs by region and by period. Until about forty years ago, musicians played all music in the current fashion, reading the notation as if it were contemporary. These days, more and more performers look at the score with a historical eye, learning the language of each composer.

Joining up the notes

Just as in verbal language, musical sounds gravitate together, forming words and phrases. But music notation rarely indicates this. Imagine if English were written without any spaces between words, and without punctuation: it would be incredibly tedious to decipher it, though it could be done. In music notation, this omission allows much more room for misreadings because it is less specific and more fluid than language. With experience, a musician learns to read the signs contained in the harmony and rhythm and melodic lines to be able to join up the notes.

Once the words and phrases are in place, the search expands to finding sentences and paragraphs. Each grouping relates to the ones preceding and following, whether leading or receding, building, reiterating, preparing, or separating. And as each unit is heard in relationship to each other, an underlying structure begins to emerge. Particular notes or chords or groupings act like the pillars of a building and their presence must be marked as strong and intentional. In contrast, the remaining notes, by far the majority, serve as explanatory or ornamental additions and need to be played as such, adorning, modifying and expanding on the bare structure.

Placing the stresses

How notes are grouped together affects how they are to be stressed. As with words in English, notes in music need a variety of stresses to show how they belong together. For example, all the historical evidence suggests that two notes joined into a couplet should have the first note more stressed than the second (like a trochee). Playing couplets in this way corresponds to the correct pronunciation of words: a mispronunciation causes confusion. A performance containing a monotonous stream of notes is incomprehensible, and betrays a lack of understanding, like a speaker reading in a language he does not understand. Similarly, a string of couplets will not make sense if they are played with an equal stress on each first note; each couplet will relate to the next as words in a sentence, inspiring stresses of varying intensity and shape.

Violinists spend hours – years – practising to achieve a perfectly even sound, ironing out all the lumps and seams; but this basic technical skill is fatal if actually applied in performance. Classical music, like English pronunciation, lives by its inflections.

Musical groupings might not always be clearly delineated: great composers often blur the edges, writing phrases that seem to emerge from nowhere, and endings that do not feel final, that already contain the seeds of new beginnings. This is where the deeper excitement begins, with ambiguity and double meanings and false trails.

And this points to an important way in which music can reflect our experience of life and of ourselves; as a continuous flowing, without discrete beginnings and endings, like a river that changes direction and intensity only imperceptibly.

Rhythm

Understanding how the notes belong together allows the performer to ask further questions. Is this piece a fantasy, with a free and fluid rhythm? or a march with a strict regular beat? or a dance with its individual lilt? Playing in strict rhythm is appropriate only for march-like music, and even then the quality of rhythm can be subtly varied to sound solemn or pompous, funereal or resolute or bouncy. Most other music requires some flexibility to a greater or lesser degree. Because music notation is not capable of indicating rhythmic subtleties, and because composers know better than to try to 'prescribe' rhythmic freedom, performers need to be alert to this issue.

Many listeners, especially non-performers, fall into the trap of assuming that performers are "taking liberties with the music", when in fact they are following the underlying spirit perfectly. On the contrary, it is those performers who play a waltz without a lilt, or a fantasy without caprice, who are taking the liberties.

Narrative, accompaniment, pacing

Almost all music contains narrative: a progression of motifs (phrases), themes (melodies) and intensities that correspond to the plot of a story. The most complex narratives can involve a number of themes that interact, affecting each other like protagonists in a novel, developing new characteristics, and visiting exotic places as they ride on the seas of changing harmonies.

Though music is usually thought of as mainly melodic, it is interesting that some composers place more value on the narrative than on the melodies themselves. Beethoven often chooses themes that can hardly

be called melodic or even attractive, but his focus lies in their manipulation and development. Rather than painting a static picture, his music depicts a journey.

Accompaniment – the sounds in which a theme is clothed – is also important in conveying narrative, and we need to get to know it just as intimately. What is it adding? Is it active or passive? Is it threatening in its harmonies or rhythm? Is it in conflict with the melody? Does it lead in unexpected directions? Is it echoing the melody, or making fun of it?

As the general character and the order of events become clear, so does the rise and fall in tension, and we can begin to understand how the work is paced. Some pieces contain only one big climax, some two or three, and others eschew climaxes altogether. All assumptions (and desires) regarding contrasts and drama and excitement must be laid aside. After all, a composer may choose to write a movement that fluctuates only mildly in character, like an Impressionist painting with a restricted palette of pastels. Whether the music is mesmerisingly tender or unrelentingly angry, the performer must place his trust in the composer's skill by putting all his eggs in one basket.

Observation is the key

In all these issues, observation is the key to understanding and the score must be mercilessly questioned. This means taking note of the big picture and the small picture, asking what is occurring at each moment. Most of us walk through life with only one eye open: those with both eyes open are normally called saints or enlightened ones. At least a musician has the opportunity to investigate the music time and again, to re-run the score, go back to the beginning, put it aside and dust it off as often as our time and patience permit. And patience we must have in abundance. A great work of art brims over with layers of ideas and emotions, unexpected twists and turns, ambiguities and subtleties. And as we live on, developing greater capacities of observation, we notice more and more.

The heart of the matter

In making music, observation is useless on its own. Its indispensable twin is emotional responsiveness, the ability to connect emotionally with all that we observe. Only when emotional responsiveness is added to the cauldron together with historical awareness and meticulous observation, can the written score begin to be transformed back into music.

For every feature that is noticed in the score, we need to ask, how does this make us feel? What is the emotional import? For instance, if

a harmonic modulation is unexpected, is it a welcome guest or an unwelcome intruder? Is it a mild surprise or an earth-shattering event? The answers lie always in the score itself; but we need to be emotionally open to be able to find them.

Being emotionally open is an attitude most of us seek throughout our lives, but it is an essential quest for musicians if we are to relate to everything that happens in a piece of music. If a composer has drawn on a large emotional store, a performer must also have such a store to draw on. Playing the work of several composers demands an even greater capacity for empathy. But there are few of us who do not shy away from certain emotions; not everyone feels comfortable expressing intimacy, rage, anguish. Some of the strangest emotions to express on stage involve vulnerability or fragility. It takes enormous confidence to play in a tentative way...

Perhaps we place too great a burden on ourselves by expecting to be able to play a wide variety of music; it would be wiser to recognise our emotional boundaries. If we do not have the key to unlock the emotional secrets of a particular piece of music, it should be seen as a mark of respect that we refrain from playing it.

To be emotionally open also means to be free from the shackles of our instinct. Our automatic pilot must be switched off. For instance, it is tempting to play music in an intense style, especially if it is labelled 'great' music. In fact, we are living at a time when intensity in performance is considered obligatory. But great art does not shout all the time; it knows that there is enormous power in gentleness.

Similarly, great music is not always earnest and serious. A mature work of art often reflects an integrated view of life, and like a wise person, will contain the wonderful sense of humour that seems to be a part of wisdom. It is well to remember that all the great composers wrote with a delightful wit, and our storehouse of emotions must have it polished and ready.

If we truly listen to our own responses to the music, we may find our interpretations flying off in unusual directions. It takes courage to stay the path of innovation, but we must not look back. We must shake free of the clutches of both stultifying tradition and current fashion. We must banish all thoughts of the critics' wrath or the audience's incomprehension. In short, we need to be absolutely fearless in our search for the heart of the music.

The moment of truth

The final demand made of a performing musician is that all the work that goes into the understanding and preparation of a piece of music must be embodied in one single moment at the appointed time and place of the performance. There can be no false starts, no second tries. Our muscles and co-ordination must be on top form, our concentration unwavering, and our emotions laid bare like a surgeon's instruments, available for the work ahead.

No matter how many times the music is played, we need to be able to capture the spontaneity of the moment. It can be tempting to relax into the relative security of playing as we did last night, or last week, but a re-heated performance will never come alive.

For our task is to breathe life into the music, to re-create it with all the excitement and commitment of the composer himself at the white-hot moment of composition. It is an immense privilege, one that renders us both humble and powerful. The paradox is that it is only by being intensely alive as ourselves that we can be entirely at the service of the music - be totally in its thrall.

In this way, both performer and listener are lifted out of the everyday, into an enchanted space where countless shades of emotion are brought into play, where a kaleidoscope of sound dances in our ears, and we finally connect and reconnect to our innermost being.

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