"The arbitrariness of so many virtuosos is partly responsible for the excess of expression marks to be found in the works of composers who thus hoped to forestall distortion and misinterpretation. Yet, complete control over the performer is not only impossible but also undesirable. The only remedy is to improve the education of performers in matters of musical style and taste. The most common fault is the application of a Romantic, i.e. highly expressive, treatment of non-Romantic music, such as the works of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven. The deplorable result is an overdoing of all nuances: the use of prestissimo instead of allegro, of larghissimo instead of adagio, of fff and ppp instead of f and p, of frequent crescendi and decrescendi instead of an even level of sonority, of numerous rubatos, ritardandos, and accelerandos instead of strictly kept tempo, etc. In view of all these tendencies nothing seems to be more important for the student than to learn to play without expression. Only the pianist who has learned to play Bach's Chromatic Fantasia or Beethoven's Apassionata in the most rigid way will be able to add that amount of nuances and shades which these works properly require" (Apel 1966:252).

Prelude

How does the performer communicate the emotional expressiveness imparted by the composer to his music? The response to this question will depend on one's view of performance. For Western works specified notationally (to which I will restrict the following discussion), a plausible position regards musical performance as analogous to quotation. The
performer's task and intention is, by following the composer's score, to repeat or re-create an "utterance" made originally by the composer, and, thereby, to convey what he meant by it. The response will depend also on one's theory as regards the manner in which music is expressive of emotion.

Expressive performance as feeling or simulation

One such account, known as the expression theory, has it that music is expressive of an emotion just in case the composer experienced that emotion and gave vent to it through the act of composition; the work, his "utterance," betrays what he felt. In that case, the performer's task is to quote the composer's utterance in a manner that betrays the same emotion. Rather than merely mouthing what he says, she will invest it with the passion that would be typical of someone's giving direct expression to their experience of the relevant emotion. She might adopt either of two approaches to this end. Like the "method" actor, she might induce an equivalent emotion in herself and affirm what she quotes as an expression of her own feeling, this being one she shares with the composer. Or she might simulate the expression of the appropriate emotion. She articulates the composer's utterance as if she felt what he did.

According to the arousal theory, music is expressive of a given emotion just in case the audience is aroused to an experience of that emotion as a consequence of listening to and following the music. In that case, the performer's goal is to move the auditor to an appropriate emotional response by "quoting" the composer. One of the most compelling ways of doing so would be by eliciting an empathetic reaction. Provided the performer demonstrates the appropriate feeling with sufficient ardor, she can rely on the natural human sympathy of the audience to kindle in them a reaction echoing her own emotion. Accordingly, she should proceed as already described, either by inciting herself to the appropriate emotion and showing it in her manner of playing, or, at least, by acting if she is in the grip of that emotion, even if she is not.

There are grounds for rejecting both the emotivist and the arousal theories of musical expressiveness (Davies 1994), but independently of those reasons, it should be apparent that what these accounts imply about the manner of performing music expressively is unconvincing. Musical performance, if it is to be successful and compelling, very often demands of the player such a high degree of concentration and clarity of mind that she has neither the time
nor the inclination to indulge in emotional extremes or sophisticated simulations of them. If she were gripped by powerful emotions, these would be liable to get in the way of her performing; at best, they would be ancillary, not integral, to her main goal, which is to play through the work correctly, from beginning to end. The same goes for the suggestion that the performer engages in an elaborate game of emotional pretense. Performance calls for concentration on the business of sounding the work. The player needs to focus, not to emote and not to simulate experiences she does not have. In other words, the story told above is psychologically implausible, given what we know already about the physical demands on and state of mind of performers in general.

And it fails in another way. Notice how inconspicuous it makes the music. The emphasis falls on the state of mind of the composer, of the listeners, and of the performer, as if the actual notes and their sequence are of small concern. To return to the analogy introduced earlier, it implies that musical expressiveness resides entirely in or results exclusively from the manner of utterance or quotation, not at all in or from the content of what is uttered or quoted. The leading alternative theories of musical expressiveness avoid this last complaint because they connect music's expressiveness to concrete details of its structure and content, thereby implying that the performer communicates the music's expressiveness by delivering an accurate performance, not by betraying emotions she feels or pretends to feel.

Expressive performance as playing the notes

The theory I favor holds that emotions are literally presented by music (Davies 1994). The emotions expressed by music are not psychologically experienced states; instead, they are expressive appearances. Just as basset hounds are sad-looking, so music is sad-sounding. Music is sad-sounding not because it mimics sounds like those that might be wrung from someone who feels sad (though it may do so sometimes); rather, this is so because it presents a sad demeanor via the manner of its progress. Sad music is slow, dragging, dark, downcast. (If these once were metaphors, they have long since died and become literal, I maintain. These terms are no less literal, when applied to music, than "high" and "low," "tense" and "relaxed," "hesitant" and "confident," "clear" and "cloudy" and so on.) As I put it, music is expressive by presenting emotion-characteristics in its aural appearance.
Other theories tie music's expressiveness to properties literally possessed by the music, even if they are less inclined than the last to locate music's expressiveness squarely within it. Again, the key properties are dynamic ones. Through a process of imaginative engagement with these, the listener hears expressiveness in the music. Just what is to be make-believed varies from theory to theory. According to one view, the listener is to make-believe of what she hears that it is an awareness of an emotion she feels (see Walton 1988), while another version maintains that the auditor is to entertain the existence of an imagined persona and to hear the music as an expression (in a fashion that is distinctively musical) of that persona's emotions and psychological states (Levinson 1996).

Fortunately, we need not adjudicate between these competing theories because their entailments as regards the performer's role in communicating music's expressiveness are similar. To the extent that the music's expressiveness either is an objective property of the music, or supervenes on (other) objective musical properties, the performance will be appropriately expressive so long as it realizes the relevant properties. To do so, the performer must follow the score accurately. What, if anything, she feels, or seems to feel, is beside the point. For the audience, what then is needed is perception, not arousal. This perception must be cognitively informed. As with other complex cultural artifacts, music will be fully grasped and understood only by the listener who is able to locate the work against the background of its socio-musical context, and who is thereby aware of the traditions, conventions, practices, canons, paradigms, and the rest of what it presupposes.

If their emotions are irrelevant, why is it so commonly said that a musician will not be able to play a piece well until she can feel it, and why do we assume that the true music lover will be deeply moved by what she hears? As regards the performer, I think the "feeling" referred to is not emotion but, rather, the kind of practical knowledge that makes sensitive playing possible. This knowledge is not of propositions, but is of applied skills. The musician does not need to know that one or the other thing is true of the music; instead, she needs to know how to sound the notes so that they form a compelling, unified whole, and so on. We talk of feeling here not because emotion is involved but rather because the knowledge required is frequently non-propositional and thereby inarticulable. As for the music lover, nothing I have said so far denies the propriety of her emotional reactions. Indeed, she has much to respond to: the music's beauty, majesty, and the rest, along with
the power and interest of the performer's interpretation. As well, she is liable to find the music's expressive mood contagious. What I have denied is only that her ability to perceive what the music expresses depends on her being aroused to feel the same.

The performer's contribution to the performance's expressiveness

The present analysis is not yet satisfactory, however. It under-values the performer's contribution to the performance's expressiveness by implying that she need only copy or re-create was has been achieved already by the composer. Yet we know that many performances of a piece might all be faithful to the composer's work while differing in important, though often subtle, ways in their expressiveness. These variations, which sometimes are all that distinguish great from mediocre performances, are attributable to the performer's interpretation, not solely to the work. (It begins to look as if a better analogy is with translation than with quotation.) So far, the creative contribution of the performer, qua interpreter of the work, has not been acknowledged.

Composers of Western classical works write scores. These should be understood not just as descriptions of the work's contents but also as prescriptions. In effect, the composer says: make this so! Though a score fully specifies the work it is of—or it should do, though a few are deficient in being incomplete, ambiguous, or indefinite in crucial respects—it underdetermines many of the concrete details of a performance. For example, convention may dictate that a melody should be decorated in a stylistically appropriate manner, but no directions in the notation show what is to be done. In that case, the work contains decorations, but no particular set. A faithful performance will decorate the melody but, subject to the appropriate stylistic limitations, it is for the performer to choose what she will play. Many of the fine details of performances are left to the performer's discretion, and the ways she handles them comprise her interpretation of the piece. (For more on these matters, see Davies 2001.)

The general point just made applies also to the specific case of musical expressiveness. Work-determinative features specified in the score usually settle the broad emotional tone of the work (because they also settle the dynamic shape and progression of the work). But this is susceptible to many shades of articulation that depend on interpretative decisions taken by the performer. These can arise at all levels; at the microcosmic—as regards
nuances of attack, phrasing, and volume for motives, figures, and melodies—and at the macrocosmic—as regards balance, emphasis, and patterning for chunks, sections, and movements. The performer might work to highlight and make more precise a given expressive tone; equally though, she might exploit possibilities for ambiguity and equivocity for their interpretative effect. In any case, she provides a creative input by adding a dimension of fine-grainedness in expressive detail that goes beyond the work's expressive character. The expressive disposition of her accurate performance interpretation will transmit the work's expressiveness, but, inevitably, will also comment and elaborate on that expressiveness in doing so.

Can the performer give the performance an expressive character that is entirely absent from the work itself? I doubt that she can usually do so—assuming that the performance is faithful, integrated, and plausible as a rendition of the work. But there are these possibilities: A powerfully expressive work might receive a performance that is so quiet and detached that it distances itself from the work it is of, with the result that it parodies or ironizes what is expressive in the work. And a work that is playfully witty or deliberately coarse for the sake of humor could be played in a deliberately dull, straight fashion that makes the piece seem clumsy and inept in its expressiveness and character. Such performances, even if they are faithful at the most basic level, traduce the works they are of, however.

A pedagogical moral

There is a pedagogical moral to be drawn from the above. As I have observed, performers are often urged by their teachers (or conductors) to play "once more, this time with feeling." It would be easy to be misled by such phrases. They should not be understood as exhorting the performer to emote about the music. Performers who do emote about the music are liable to lose control of the their performance, while performers who look as if they are in the grip of intense emotions are likely to distract the listener's attention from the music. Rather, when she is instructed to play with feeling, the musician is being called upon to use sensitivity in her interpretative judgments. And that is, indeed, something she will need if she is to play very well. It is the practical skill underpinning this sensitivity that the teacher should cultivate in the pupil. The education of musicians should focus more on technique, nuances of interpretation, and "authentic" modes of playing than on self-expression or on sharing the music's expressive moods.
References


