

Renee Timmers

Expressive gesture and style in Schubert song performance: Discussion of the role of empirical and psychological methods for the analysis and interpretation of music performance

Studies of performances often take an empirical and cognitively oriented approach. The interest is to examine in detail what performers do and to come up with an explanation of the strategies that performers use while performing music. Additionally, it is of interest to examine to what extent performers influence listeners' understanding and interpretation of music.

The importance of empirical approaches for performance research is that notation does not suffice to unambiguously capture and describe what performers do. Moreover, subtleties of performance are hard to capture just by listening. This is not only because performance variations are variations at a micro-level, but also because listeners are not very sensitive to variations that are highly expected. Certain variations in timing are consistently made, but are very hard to notice (Repp, 1998). This might be because the variations compensate for perceptual biases due to rhythmic structure (bottom-up explanation), but it might also be because the variations are expected based on that same rhythmic structure (top-down explanation). Examples include the tendency for the final note of groups to be longer as well as the middle note of a group of fast notes.

The cognitively oriented explanations of performances are partly a result of the increased interest of psychologists in music performance. Music perception and performance are examined as examples of complex human behaviour that share processes with other human behaviour, but are also to some extent unique in cognitive mechanisms.

Musicologists may share the view of psychologists and interpret music from the viewpoint of a subject: music is a human and cultural product that people use for their benefit and pleasure. How this is possible and how music is shaped might be as much a matter of human psychology (in a social and cognitive sense) as a matter of human history. The interest is to see how historical context factors interact with biological and cognitive predispositions.

Empirical and psychological approaches can bring a necessary level of objectivity to musicology. When combined with computational methods, music research can be based on larger sets of data and music theory can be built on and tested with regard to empirically verified results. This does not mean that musicology has to become psychology, since musicologists will address different questions and will be much more interested in musical diversity and musical historical developments. Moreover, musicologists will add a clear sense of cultural and anthropological context. It does mean, however, that musicology moves towards a comparative and systematic approach that is preferably hypothesis driven and includes in its theories knowledge concerning the musical mind.

Reference

Repp, B. H. (1998). Obligatory 'expectations' of expressive timing induced by perception of musical structure. *Psychological Research*, 61 (1), 33-43.