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The polyphonic touch : coarticulation and polyphonic expression in the performance of piano and organ music

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The Polyphonic Touch

Coarticulation and polyphonic expression in the
performance of piano and organ music

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Dit proefschrift is geschreven als een gedeeltelijke vervulling van de vereisten voor het doctoraatsprogramma docARTES. De overblijvende vereiste bestaat uit een demonstratie van de onderzoeksresultaten in de vorm van een artistieke presentatie.

Het docARTES programma is georganiseerd door het Orpheus Instituut te Gent.

In samenwerking met de Universiteit Leiden, de Hogeschool der Kunsten Den Haag, het Conservatorium van Amsterdam, de Katholieke Universiteit Leuven en het Lemmensinstituut.

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Preface

For a time during the period leading up to my second masters degree, I began to be quite simply bored with the solo recitals I was playing. Each successive concert seemed to have less meaning, and though I knew what was required to make the performance adequately expressive, my own inspiration was at a low point. In an effort to regain the spirit and liveliness in music making, I looked to the “system” of actor and director Konstantin Stanislavski (after a journey of thought stemming from the famous question of music theorist Edward Cone (1982: 1): “If music is a language, who is speaking?”) which helped to map the inner territory and processes by which inspiration could be regained. In Stanislavski’s “system” I found a pathway to a certain kind of authenticity which connected music making much more deeply and personally to my life experiences, not only through “emotional memory” (an idea appropriated and modified by American Method Acting, see Hull 1985) but also through his idea of “muscle memory.” The orientation of actors promoted by Stanislavsky towards engaging authentically and personally with the action onstage (which is overheard, as it were, by the audience) contrasted the traditional “ham-bone” acting where actors focus on a repertoire of pre-planned techniques to represent and communicate the emotions of the character to the audience. This choice of inner orientation and the “system” to achieve it seemed to be particularly applicable to performing music¹.

In *chamber music*, this focus on the immediacy of interaction is natural, though with predictable partners it can dissipate through excessive rehearsal or too many performances of the same piece. My goal was to find the “cast of characters” hiding within *solo music* and

¹ How can one summarise Stanislavski in one paragraph? His system in a sense is a moving target, since it evolved throughout the course of his work. His own books (*An Actor Prepares* (1989a) and *Building a*

orient myself as a performer towards the interaction between the voices of these characters. Such an orientation invites the audience onto the stage where they “overhear” this communication, a model of communication different from the projection of the music towards the audience by the performer.

Can these voices hold surprises for each other that might come out in the moment of performance, considering they are all played by one person? With the “authenticity-towards-self” inspired by Stanislavski, the fact that the embodiment of each voice is localised in a different combination of body movements is meaningful and has the potential to give each voice its own subjectivity. If we allow the embodiment to shape the music at the moment of performance, each voice speaks with unique subjectivity under its own “given conditions.”²

Developing expression and imagination through the body is thus a central topic in this effort, and the particular focus of this dissertation is on not only the expression resulting from divergence between voices, but also on the embodied experience of creating such textures. This embodied experience is itself a form of musical thinking, the theoretical foundation for which is far from self-evident. As I wrestled with the topic, it became apparent that this foundation (beginning with embodied cognition at the base, proceeding to establish the centrality of gesture in expression, and then characterising the structure of gesture through coarticulation) was a necessary prelude without which the central topic of embodied polyphonic expression could easily slither away.

Writing about this topic, because of its embodiment focus, requires the first person perspective of a performer, a feature in common with other artistic research projects. It is

² In Stanislavski’s “system,” “given conditions” represent the circumstances amidst which a character finds itself in a play. An actor acts always as him or herself, under the “given conditions” imposed by the character (Stanislavski 1989).

distinctly unnerving to be faced with the task of trying to verbalise the tacit³ knowledges that underlie the practice of making music, and it has to be recognised that in such a project as this dissertation, the process of verbalisation lags far behind the artistic work. A sympathetic reader is needed, both to read between the lines and to reflect following the direction towards which the ideas point. The full flowering of this artistic research project can best be heard when the written text is taken in combination with a live concert.

Who does artistic research serve? While I applaud cutting-edge projects that centre on specific works, composers or style periods on the one hand, and projects that seek to radically break with traditional practice on the other, the goal of this research is to describe and support the lifelong learning process with which musicians engage through the specific example of polyphonic expression. My own practice as a musician has become quite broad, with piano and organ playing and piano teaching forming the centre of my activities. As a church musician I interact continuously with musicians and singers of all levels, and my class of students spans an enormously wide spread of ability levels. Perhaps for this reason, I have consciously chosen a topic that can be useful for musicians of all levels, not just the top percentage. The groundwork leading up to the final specific chapter on polyphonic expression is built upon a inter-disciplinary raft of sources, many of which contain insights that can be used in any stage of development, from the first piano lesson onwards. The research can also be useful at a meta-level in exemplifying an approach to writing about embodiment and solutions to problems that such an endeavour calls forth.

³ See (Polanyi 1958)

