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

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Conclusion

With this dissertation, I have examined use of polyphonic expression, defined through a specific divergence in gesture. This polyphonic expression is found to a greater or lesser degree in the artistic practice of pianists and organists, and it can be strengthened through building awareness and strengthening the embodied knowledge that is at its foundation. My conclusions have been interspersed throughout the chapters and embodied in the musical examples, so in closing I will reflect on the use of polyphonic expression in artistic practice and as a metaphor, and consider the reasons why a musician might want to develop such polyphonic expression.

In describing the artistic practice of being a musician, I contrasted interpretation (conscious decision making based on the weighing of evidence) and understanding (the pre-reflective embodied process of making sense of the music), and characterised the balance between these two parts of the musical practice as being variable during the phases of development of the musician and likewise during the phases of practice of an individual musical work. Throughout this dissertation, I have pointed to ways to become consciously aware of polyphonic expression as part of an artistic practice. It is my intention, however, to emphasise that this conscious attention must occur during particular phases in the development of a musician, or during phases in the practicing of a new piece, in support of building a sense of embodied understanding which will pre-reflectively find and voice the polyphonic affordances of a piece. The conscious attention necessary during these intermediate phases can later be discarded, while the embodied understanding of

polyphonic expression remains. In this way, polyphonic expression can permeate musical thinking at the instrument even when the concepts used to examine it fade from awareness. While the end-goal is a pre-reflective polyphonic apprehension of the music as situated in the embodied connection to the instrument, the phase of conscious examination and active development is of crucial importance. Because of the specific coordination involved in creating gestural divergence, and its connection to musical thinking in terms of polyphonic expression, it is my argument that without such conscious examination and development, this aspect of musical thinking can remain underdeveloped, representing a blind-spot in the realm of possibilities for expression in performance.

This phase of conscious examination of polyphonic voicing requires extra effort, and even when the underlying embodied knowledge is mastered, its employment in music making is cognitively more expensive than monophonic or homophonic voicing (§17, §18). Why should a musician go through this effort?

Polyphonic voicing is the performer's way of embodying polyphony, taking the idea of polyphony from the realm of thoughts and ideas, and translating it into gestures and sensory experience. Far from being a specialised intellectual domain (as, for example, the study of counterpoint is) this sensory experience directly connects with both expert and non-expert listeners at a gestural level, whether or not these listeners are able to articulate their experiences. In this way, polyphony is appreciated perceptually rather than as a concept. When highly polyphonic works are performed, their grabbiness (§17) *as polyphony* is determined by their degree of polyphonic expression. When homophonic works are performed, polyphonic voicing can bring out hidden lines. Either way, this kind of playing represents an advocacy for polyphony, which should be motivated primarily on aesthetic grounds. Such an advocacy, when verbal explication is necessary, can also be supported by examining the metaphorical meaning of polyphony in a wider cultural context.

In the beginning of this dissertation, I examined how polyphony has gained cultural resonance by its use as a metaphor in many other disciplines. In this metaphorical use, polyphony (the source domain) is fully conceptual, and its meaning depends on the user's grasp of polyphony from a conceptual viewpoint. This explains the vast difference between the use of polyphony as a metaphor between Kormarovich and Bakhtin (§1). After the preceding chapters, it should be clear how fundamentally different it is to see polyphony as a property of a score in which voices imitate each other, seen as a synchronic whole (as Kormarovich does), which is a view both disembodied and taken out-of-time, and by contrast to experience polyphony as an experience unfolding in time, where the subjective apprehension between voices is a continual site of both mutual attunement and divergence (as Bakhtin does).

Conceptual metaphor theory, famously presented by Johnson and Lakoff's book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), argues that because language is fundamentally metaphorical, metaphor shapes not only human communication but also thought and behaviour. Metaphor operates through a source domain (from where the metaphorical expression is drawn) and the target domain (which the metaphor seeks to understand or explain). According to conceptual metaphor theory, source domains tend to be more concrete and target domains tend to be more abstract. Cognitive linguist Joseph Grady (1997) contrasts high-level metaphors that use abstract concepts as both source and target domains, to what he calls "primary metaphors", which arise from our embodied experience. It follows that the shift of polyphony from a concept to a sensory experience, enabled by a turn from a score-based texture to a performance-based texture, represents an intensification of its potential as a source domain, since its gestural foundation, augmented with the grabbiness (§17) of polyphonic expression, can be felt without conceptual knowledge.

If we accept the hypothesis of conceptual metaphor theory that metaphor shapes thought and behaviour, this suggests that if the embodied experience of polyphony is truly felt, that it is more likely to sprout connections with other aspects of lived experience (both language and meaning) outside of the purely musical. In describing the participant in polyphonic music-making practices (in this case, in Russian cultures) Zemtsovsky (2002) uses the term *homo polyphonicus*. This *homo polyphonicus*, in the social practice of music making, must hear and adapt to the surrounding voices, and thus modulate his or her own sense of agency in attunement, responsiveness or empathy with others while still holding the part. Perhaps for this reason, polyphonic singing has been observed to be deeply connected with certain kinds of social cooperation (Knight 2012), and perhaps for this reason, polyphony is often used as a metaphor for democracy (Koenler 2015: 108, Gjerstad 2013, Schapiro 2009).

It is highly doubtful that any single audience member will become a *homo polyphonicus* just from listening to the polyphonic expression of pianists, since full absorption of it requires inculcation in the practice of doing it. However, polyphonic expression can be meaningful to such uninitiated audiences when it is pointed out to them, and it can also be meaningful to students, who at almost all levels can engage in the practice. In using polyphony as a metaphor, it should be noticed that the exchange of meaning goes both ways. What we hear in the music can be influenced by the metaphor.

The voices in polyphony use each other for expression, and thus each voice has traces of the other inscribed into its shape (§18.4.2). Bakhtin's ideas of the "sideways glance" and heteroglossia entail a similar inscription of the listener into each speaker's utterances (§1). Similarly, the *homo polyphonicus* has the other (or the many others) in his consciousness, creating an internal polyphonic dynamic. In all these cases, the individual must first allow such responsiveness, after which the individual's subjectivity itself

becomes a site of intersecting flows. In the case of single-player polyphony, these flows of subjectivity can come from the embodied sense of being one with the instrument whereby each voice - or each coarticulated gesture that embodies it - is allowed its own agency. Such a state is made possible by the development of the relevant body schemata and by the framing of interpretive choices. In this sense, the single player who emphasises polyphonic expression puts focus on the quality of being that allows unfinalisable and irreconcilable forces within the subjective sense of self, a quality of being which reflects the difference and unfinalisability of others. Precisely because this occurs in a single player, attention is shifted from the interaction between people to the internal dynamic that true responsiveness to difference entails, an aspect of experience that can be overlooked. If we read Said's quote from §1 again, after the intervening sections, it has a greater meaning. In Said's description of his inner world, we find the fluid state of the *homo polyphonicus*, responsive to the environment and not afraid of difference.

I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance. These currents, like the themes of one's life, flow along during the waking hours, and at their best, they require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are "off" and may be out of place, but at least they are always in motion, in time, in place, in the form of all kinds of strange combinations moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each other, contrapuntally yet without one central theme. A form of freedom, I'd like to think, even if I am far from being totally convinced that it is. [...] With so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place. (Quoted in Stevensen 2003: 65)

The *homo polyphonicus* through his musical practice also shows us a form of social interaction, described by Bakhtin as "the affirmation of someone else's 'I' not as an object but as another subject" (Bakhtin 1984: 14). This affirmation without objectification is the state towards which pianists should aim, whereby they can allow their own hands, each

under the “given conditions” of its own voices, to be heard as a self-revelation, each with their own unique subjectivity.