

Performing practice¹ - comparative analysis and conclusions

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Abstract: Musical notation and its relationship with the concept of performance is very complex, depending on the context. Our paper discusses some important ideas about performance, referring to aspects specific to great conductors such as S. Celibidache and W. Furtwängler. We begin by outlining the basic concepts behind their interpretations before going into more detail with specific examples.

Keywords: performance, analysis, conducting.

1. Introduction

Musical notation is defined as *a set of instructions which show the interpreter the way the composer intended the work to be performed*². Interpreters have always enjoyed a certain degree of freedom in performing a musical piece. In time the degree of precision of the composer's notation increased as well as the interpreter's requirement to carry out every detail³. In deciphering a musical score, one must look for the precise meaning of each musical symbol and sign, depending on the period of musical history to which it belongs.....

When a certain work is being studied, the following aspects must be taken into consideration:

- the exact tempo (which depends on the size of the ensemble, of the room, on the interpreters' state of mind at that time)
- possible modifications of the tempo, if allowed
- the sonority (for example, reproducing Baroque sonorities if playing period instruments⁴)
- the phrasing
- the types of ornamentation permitted (for example, during late Renaissance or in the case of Baroque arias)

¹ In German AUFFÜHRUNGSPRAXIS.

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² *New Grove's Dictionary for Music and Musicians*, electronic edition, Performing practice.

³ In Ancient Greece or in medieval neumatic writing, the notations were mere approximations in rendering the details of the musical score.

⁴ Fortepiano, harpsichord.

- possible improvisational passages, if allowed (for example, the music of minstrels and trouveres, and the continuous bass of the Baroque in the 17th and 18th centuries)

However, it is not possible to write down every detail of the interpretation as a musical score. Even the successive interpretations of the same work, performed by the same interpreter⁵, may display variations in tempo, phrasing or tone⁶.

In the 15th century, the interpreter had the freedom to choose several aspects of the interpretation: the size and composition of the ensemble, the alterations (*musica ficta*⁷), the correspondence between the text and the musical accompaniment. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the notation was descriptive or approximate. Starting with the 19th century, the precision of the notation and of the interpretation increased (from Beethoven): the tempo (including metronomic notations), the phrasing, the bow features, the dynamics. The 20th century saw the first electronic recordings of differing versions of various pieces. Although there has been a movement towards deferring to the composer's vision, in the 20th century extremes of musical notation were recorded: From the precise details in G. Enescu's scores, to John Cage's free hand.

In order to understand all aspects surrounding interpretation, the following elements must be investigated:

- the music and the society of that period
- organology (musical instruments, their specific features)
- interpretation treaties, theoretical writings (ex: the writings of Leopold Mozart⁸ or J. Mattheson)
- the size of the ensemble
- the acoustics of the room
- the nature of the occasion of the interpretation.

2. Comparative analysis and conclusions

Sergiu Celibidache (1912-1996) was a Romanian conductor and composer, honorary member of the Romanian Academy. From 1979, he was the general musical director of the city of Munich and permanent conductor of the philharmonic orchestra and under his direction; it became one of the best symphonic orchestras in the world. He was a great interpreter of post-Romantic

⁵ Depending on the mood.

⁶ Ex Glenn Gould, *Arta fugii* [The art of the fugue] (versions 1956, 1981-82).

⁷ They add accidentals, sharps and flats to the written notes, following the rules of *musica ficta*. New Grove's Dictionary for Music and Musicians, electronic edition, *Musica ficta*.

⁸ Eisen, C., *New Grove's Dictionary for Music and Musicians*, electronic edition, *Leopold Mozart* (1719-1787): composer, violinist, pedagogue and theorist, author of a definitive theoretical work for violin, *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule* (1756).

music (Bruckner) and of French Impressionists. His conducting style was very original (the variety of tempos) however unfortunately he refused to have his music recorded on disc. He also composed and wrote a Requiem and four symphonies.

Sergiu Celibidache adopted an original approach to conducting, matched by his atypical career as the conductor of some of the most important German orchestras. After he graduated, after World War II, for seven years, Celibidache was the conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, until its conductor – none other than Wilhelm Furtwängler – was reinstated following obligatory denazification. Having conducted several big European orchestras, the Munich Philharmonic, he felt, owed him nothing short of perfection.

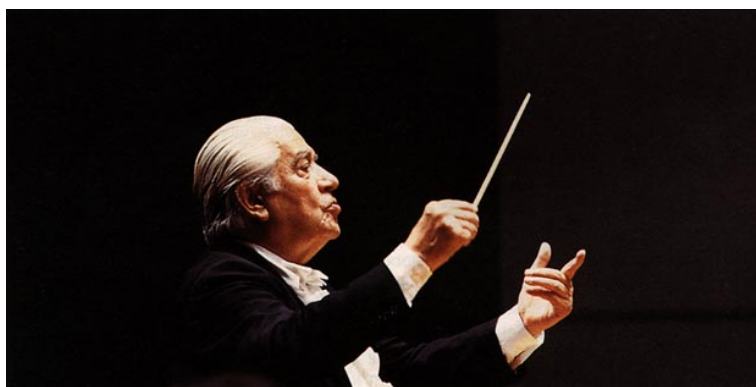


Fig. 1 Sergiu Celibidache

Celibidache's interpretation brought a fresh original approach to the musical sound and its musical culmination. The inner logic is built on his unique notions of sensitivity and expressiveness, made many of his collaborators uncomfortable.

His ideas can be related to the concept of otherness, which refers to “the search for a new content through music, (...) as a result of his desire to eliminate tradition, either wholly or in part, and to accept new meanings for the music of the past, present or future; he challenges the nature of musical references and releases it from ideological, racist or nationalist constraints” (Rădulescu, 2003, p. 4).

Celibidache's theories of music take it not as a singular sound, but as the relationship between at least two sounds. He takes into account especially the way time is shaped (chronologically and artistically) within the sound: “music is temporal architecture, whose norms, patterns, and needs can be extrapolated to any field in time; music is the most powerful proof of the human capacity to infer, imagine, feel, represent and create time, and this is undoubtedly why it

generates the feeling of abstraction experienced in life” (Iorgulescu, 1988, pp. 302-305).

The musical style of the great Romanian conductor was built especially on the idea of deviation rather than conformity: “the deviation from a style cannot be defined exactly and objectively: (...) it represents the distance from the school tradition or the archive, the divergence from the norms of the period in question” (Sandu-Dediu, 2010, p.18) but it becomes harder to delineate.

According to Sergiu Celibidache, music has a powerful and extensive effect on the human personality (both at the conscious and the subconscious level). Music is seen as a living, changing organism unravelling time, not from a static perspective. Celibidache often noted the precarious, ephemeral nature of musical sound, and its creation (which disappears as it unravels in time), yet this evanescence does not prevent it from revealing its beauty.

Celibidache revolutionized the way musical phenomena was considered, removing it from the academic world and connecting it more to emotional interpretation and making this the main standard for the conductor and audience to interpret the piece. He believed musical experiences had to be beyond the power of language and directly related to the lived experience. And this was a combination of sound and expressiveness.

As a world class interpreter of post-Romantic music (Anton Bruckner) and Impressionism (Maurice Ravel, Claude Debussy), Celibidache thought of each musical performance as a living act, which could not withstand repetition or recording. He had the courage to promote slower tempos than was customary, believing it gave full weight to the sound and thus, the complete emotional range.

2.1. Sergiu Celibidache’s principles of interpretation

We have synthesized some of his main ideas on musical performance. Celibidache stated that he had a “heroic and incorrigible attitude: I want to try to do things which reason excludes. I asked myself: could a short hour be more than a long quarter of an hour?” (Celibidache, 2012, p. 12)

“Music is not anything, but notes can become, in unique conditions, music. The sound is not music, the sound can become music.” (Celibidache, 2012, p. 13) “The sound has an unequivocal influence on the human spirit” (Celibidache, 2012, p. 14): musical sound – loaded with semantic meaning – can induce certain states of mind, feelings and ideas. It shapes the whole human condition starting with its values.

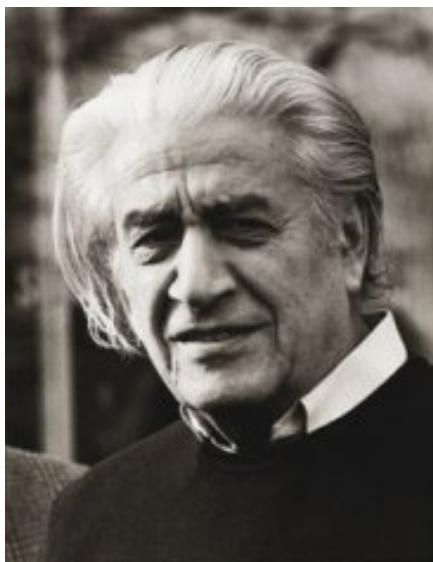


Fig. 2 Sergiu Celibidache

“The sound (music tone) is movement, it is created by constant and equal vibrations and only by humans” (Celibidache, p. 14-15): the sound is not a simple static finite element of music, it is only the starting point, made up of an infinite number of superior harmonies which stir up its interior. The sound of music is a living world.

“The musical tone is ephemeral” (Celibidache, p. 16): any sound has a limited duration, but music in itself, as a form of art, is ephemeral, because it is consumed in time (it is temporal art), it cannot be stopped or preserved in stone.

“The musical tone (which vibrates constantly) never vibrates alone. A long string of sounds vibrate together and meet in a completely new and resonant multitude.” (Celibidache, p. 16) Music starts from the relationship between two sounds, from the way they relate to each other.

“Is music only the consequence of the sound? The essence of music is the relationship between the musical tone and the human being, in the search for correspondences between sound structure and the structure of the human **emotional** universe (emotions and feelings from the emotional world)” (Celibidache, pp. 18-19)

“The tone is born at man’s initiative and belongs to the universe at the same time. One tone cannot become music; (...) it materializes only through the birth of the following tone.” (Celibidache, p. 22)

“The human spirit is an indivisible unit, closed in itself, which always takes a multitude of forms. It can only relate to another ONE.” (Celibidache, p. 28). “These things cannot be explained in words, they can only be lived!” (Celibidache, p. 32)

“One tone cannot become music. When after the first tone comes another, the first link is created, which sets the first connection between what is being heard and what has already been heard. This is not enough to fascinate the listener with the movement of sound. What is the connection between two consecutive sounds? The second tone is equal to the first. The first tone is followed by something different.” (Celibidache, pp. 32-33) “The longer the distance between the two tones, the greater the tension.” (Celibidache, p. 37)

“There is no repetition in music.” (Celibidache, p. 33)

“Frescobaldi said: expressive passages must be performed softer than others.” (Celibidache, p. 40) “Bach said: the one who cannot recognize the tempo of the tone should give up music.” (Celibidache, p. 40) “Haydn said: the harmonies of a final part must be simple (tonic, dominant, subdominant). The slow parts can also contain chromatic harmonies (the relationship between sound and tempo).” (Celibidache, p. 41)

2.2. Wilhelm Furtwängler’s principles of interpretation

Wilhelm Furtwängler (1886-1954) was a German composer and conductor who had a varied career conducting in Mannheim and Vienna. By 1933 he had become the director of the Berlin State Opera.

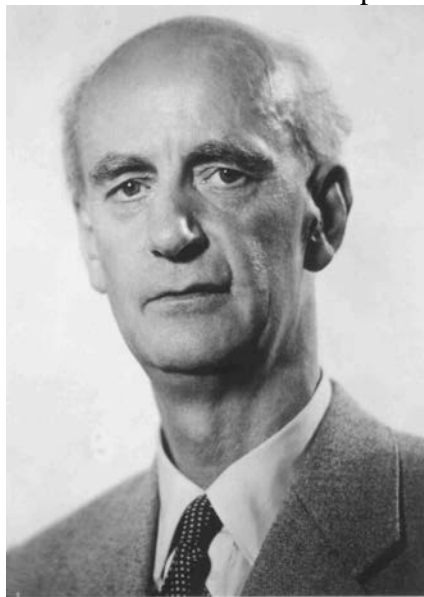


Fig.3 Wilhelm Furtwängler

We note some of his important ideas about the art of performing: “In the case of modern works (Strauss, Tchaikovsky) you can give something of yourself, but in the case of classical works, above all, you have to perform with style.” (Furtwängler, 2005, p. 32) “I think nothing of a so-called interpreter of Beethoven who fails to perform a waltz by Chopin or an opera by Puccini.”

(Furtwängler, p. 32). His references about subtle stylistic elements are varied and they contribute to the quality of his performance.

Like S. Celibidache, Furtwängler considered the microstructure as important as the macrostructure of musical discourse (both being useful in understanding the work of art): “Focusing on the detail, musicians became less and less able to identify ample bowing and to take into consideration the natural relationship between the whole and the part” (Furtwängler, p. 35).

“There are moments in which the spiritual expression has a direct influence, for example, the approach of the so-called rubato (a free fluctuation of the rhythm): depending on the spiritual resources of each of us, we can read it as a barometer if the said impulses are in agreement with the true meaning of the work, whether they are real or not.” (Furtwängler, p. 64)



Fig. 4 Wilhelm Furtwängler

Furtwängler is one of the great conductors who talks about the quality of the reception of music by the audience giving value to the piece. “The public cannot discern between what is authentic and necessary and what is fake. The public has lost its sense of differentiating between the expressive gesture (which derives from the work itself), and the conductor’s empty gesture, meant only to impress the public.” (Furtwängler, p. 64) “An interpretation which is permanently aimed at virtuosity, at external effects and changes will cause and

develop some similar features in the public. In such conditions, the music loses its significance, its capacity to answer an inner need.” (Furtwängler, p. 65)

The spiritual depth of a performance is thought of as a clash of values: “the interpreters’ spiritual mark is visible in their work methods” (Furtwängler, p. 65). “In the absence of the understanding of the authentic form we begin to search for substitutes, for crutches to support the wobbling construction.” (Furtwängler, p. 62) “The technical side must not become a purpose in itself: this means you lose sight of the fact that the soul must be form and the form, soul, you lose the sense of the need for and authenticity of the artistic creation.” (Furtwängler, p. 63)

3. Case study

In order to support the above ideas, we would like to perform a comparative analysis of the interpretation by the two directors of the first part of Beethoven’s 5th symphony.

In the case of maestro Sergiu Celibidache, we chose to focus on a disk produced by the record label EMI Classics in February 1998 (Münchener Philharmoniker). The conductor’s opinion concerning the deep understanding of a musical creation’s meaning is reflected from the first notes of Beethoven’s score. “The musical material is, in a sense, like a landscape, it has mountains, valleys, rivers. It has its own topography. What can we do to become aware of this landscape and its different natural variances? We cannot change them, we cannot alter them, but we can ignore them. If we do not want to ignore these features, we must integrate all the information about the landscape into a single unity. Musically speaking, one cannot change the music to make it more expressive.” (Celibidache 1993, p. 29)

His interpretation as director avoids the exaggerated anger and drama in favour of a mature climax, and the chosen controlled tempo suggests the importance of internalizing the musical moments, but does not deny the connection between each sound and the whole. With his specific musical wisdom, Celibidache offers space and time to musical themes, without segmenting the musical discourse, not even during the customary pauses at the beginning of the symphony, but managing to connect the elements of the musical texture in order to accumulate expressive tension at the climax. The silence which separates the incipient Beethovenian motifs is, under the conductor’s stick, an inaudible music connecting the whole.

The development of the first part of the symphony in A minor emphasizes the lack of resistance to the tragic, but it does not suggest resignation due to the lack of courage. The reconciliation we are discussing stems from the fusion of these two themes in the first movement, Celibidache masterfully manages to create unity between the dramatic tension and the feeling of bliss.

The conductor proposes for each timbre a well-defined place in the orchestra. No matter how rich Beethoven's musical texture is, the voices which make up the whole can be easily followed. The words that characterize Sergiu Celibidache's interpretation as conductor refer to the way the musical elements are connected to the whole, and the sonorous results recorded on CD confirm the fact that music represents an evolution.

In opposition to the idea of dilated time specific for Celibidache's interpretation, in the recording of Beethoven's Symphony no. 5 conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler we notice musical intuition subject to authentic expression, a storm which reflects a sensual perspective on art. We refer to the 1954 recording made by the Berlin Philharmonic.

Characterized by an inner flame that generates a sonorous vortex into which the listener is drawn without being aware, maestro Furtwängler's interpretation is much more dynamic and accentuated than the first recording, with a more alert tempo, and contrasts which highlight the conductor's preferences for Schenkerian analysis (Cook 2007). Following the harmonic pillars, Furtwängler manages to construct a colourful and dramatic sonorous universe.

The motif of destiny is, in the musician's opinion, the heart and is represented by the long sound, and the three eights which precede it do not require rhythmic rigor, but function as an elastic trampoline for the harmonic pillar. This is in opposition to Celibidache's idea about this famous motif, as shown by the previously mentioned interpretation. If in Celibidache's case, the equilibrium generates a motif in the beginning with stable equal and agogic rhythm, for Furtwängler, the initial measures present a greater freedom of movement showing the conductor's impulses. A pertinent example is the way the two maestros understand the motif of destiny, the first sounds that can be heard represent a synthesis of the entire conducting experience. Volcanic and passionate, Furtwängler's conducting style bewitches us through powerful feelings, in contrast with Celibidache's balanced interpretation.

4. Conclusions

We presented some essential ideas about musical performance, ideas that belong to two great conductors of the twentieth century. Between the two titans, a post-war conflict developed in the history of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (Lang, 2015), a dispute presented by Klaus Lang exhaustively, through the conductors' correspondence.



Fig. 5 The eternal conflict

Their concepts show two different attitudes to musical performance, one more revolutionary, the other more traditional. But both lead to the same result: a brilliant musical act.

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