

Thinking Outside the Music Box

by Dr. Greg A. Grove, DSPE

This article is mainly for musicians, but others can follow along, as well. I assume the reader has more than a casual acquaintance with music notation and basic theory, because I move beyond those into the creative mist of musical interpretation.

After the aspiring musician learns the notes and how to find the pitches on his or her instrument—and can read music more or less effortlessly, like typing comfortably at 60 or 70 words per minute—the last challenge is to proceed to the interpretation of the music. I consider this the most interesting part, because all of the elements of music in the composition—along with the composer’s intent plus his or her personality and culture—must be considered, not only singly but also holistically. Thus, playing all the right notes is expected, and now the musician and the listener await a proper interpretation, or at least an interpretation that “makes sense” to the ear as well as to the eye.

When I studied piano performance at USC’s Clark House Mansion while in junior high school, my teacher was Dr. Edyth Wagner-Roop, who had graduated from that school with a doctor of musical arts degree in music education. She was a Juilliard-taught pianist who concertized in Europe before moving from New York City to southern California. She was a demanding teacher with lots of resources at her fingertips and could “solve” and “resolve” my finger faults and “shaky” interpretation efforts.

Unlike some of my later piano teachers at university, she encouraged me to listen to at least three performances of the music I was studying to get a wide-range perspective of interpretative possibilities. After discussing differences with me, she would invite me to express my own interpretative ideas. If my performance strayed too far from the “golden musical



Dr. Greg A. Grove, DSPE, at age 30

mean,” she would ask me to justify my aural conceptualization. Sometimes my interpretations met with her approval and sometimes not—like wrong notes drifting into harmony hell. Nevertheless, I loved the freedom to “tinker” with how the entire composition *could* sound rather than how it *should* sound.

During my training, I was taught to know, thoroughly, the life of the composer, the cultural milieu, and the general style period in which the music was birthed: Baroque, Classical, early and late Romantic, early and late 20th century. I was to imagine how the music sounded as the composer performed it (a rather daunting task, as so much of the music never had the benefit of a visual, much less an auditory, record of the composer’s own performance). Then I was to identify the form (e.g., binary, sonata-allegro), chord progressions, tonality, and general subjective “presence.” You can imagine that this appealed to the imaginative aspect of my musicianship.

That was then. Today, I am writing this essay as a professional pianist who has performed several hundred compositions over a period of about 63 years. Today, I sweep the older approach of music interpretation aside and think outside the music box of standardized performance. To achieve that end, I focus entirely on the composition itself as the essence, or source, and put relatively little importance on the surface personality and lifestyle of the composer. I draw out all the potential the piece has to offer. In other words, to think outside the music box, I must toss the past—with the most glorious performances on record—and proceed to make the music “my own.” I suppose a good analogy is someone studying to be a fashion designer who masters past-to-present styles and then is given the freedom to find his own “stitch in time.”

However, I am not suggesting that I seek to become “sensational” by shifting the focus off the music and onto me as performer-interpreter. The interpretation still must “make sense” as a fact of musicology. Bringing out a neglected counterpoint melody or unrealized tempo or rhythmic rubato (even harmonic rubato) to the credit of the composition is my point. The take-away? Obliterate the ambiguous assumption of superimposing or drawing out the composer’s personality; toss the assumption that there is only one “correct” interpretation; toss the fear of performance rejection while bringing to light a far greater revelation of the masterwork’s dimensionality.

Sometimes, when I practice, I will take a portion of the piece and tinker with it, making fearless interpretative adventures. After a few experimental tries, I usually fix my best-take interpretation in mind and memory. To get a different perspective, I might record the composition and listen appreciatively to the playback. At that time, I pick up on any aspects I had neglected to perform or had minimized,

and then I redo the recording with greater interpretative finality.

For example, the “First Prelude in C Major for Piano Solo” by Frederic Chopin is a 43- to 46-second composition that defies any “correct” interpretation. Consult YouTube to appreciate three or four performances by professional pianists, along with a few by amateurs. Note variance in tempo, phrasing, dynamic, and mood. Chopin wrote the piece with a possibility of at least three potential melodies. Also, there is the contributing factor of the published, edited version. The expressive term *agitato* is suggested by the composer? I continue to laugh. What exactly needs to be done to a piece that sounds agitated? How could you possibly make the composition sound more agitated? Faster tempo with a staccato touch, a few haphazard rubatos? Maybe the expression *agitato* is a prompt to look agitated throughout the performance?

I yielded to temptation during one of my experimental excursions with Chopin’s “Prelude.” I defied convention and performed a silky legato with full-voiced pedal at a slower tempo that was easier on the technical demand of my small hands. Yet, in another temptation—a tribute to anger-management therapy—I shifted dynamic emphasis to the spellbinding harmonic progressions. All of my tinkering may have kept Chopin from spinning in his grave, because he was known for his use of rubato. Sadly, we have no recording of his actual application of it. Unfortunately, it is all too easy to gravitate to an easier performance style that sounds as if the music were written for metronome accompaniment!

I invite practicing musicians to email me (drgregagrove@gmail.com) their personal adventures in musical interpretation, along with how they have brazenly performed outside the musical box of expected music interpretation. 