

# A Study in Music Interpretation and Nuances

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The purpose of this study is to address the importance of interpreting music and to explore the possibility of transferring ideas from the score to the audience. The study will consist of a brief description of the meaning of interpretation, various methods by professionals to help students interpret music, and activities to help students understand concepts and convey musical ideas. The activities were carried out and tried during lessons according to the problems and difficulties faced by the students, and the result of the experiments proved to be useful and effective. At least 3 students are needed and the result for this study is determined by how the students understood the concepts.

## 1. Introduction

Teaching piano has not only taught me to be more prepared to answer a student's question or solve their problem, it also makes me realize how I need to take it to the next level: the emotions. Students in the advanced level are capable to analyze and understand the music, for example, to attack and accent, to slow down and *ritardando*, to make the melody sing in a *cantabile* style. However, is their performance convincing? Throughout the years, I have been facing the exact same problem. I was doing everything right, but I was just not 'feeling' the music. In this study, I would like to compile some of the ideas that were presented to me through musicologists, professional performers, instructors, and some impromptu activities I did with my students. In this study, I would also like to share the results of the activities I compiled from this research. As a teacher my goal is to help students go beyond scales, dynamics, and theory in order to make music their own.

## 2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

Several points should be discussed, concerning the topic of interpretation, from the basic technical demands of the music. According to Marienne Uszler's "The Well-Tempered Keyboard Teacher", the independence of the fingers, dynamics, voicing, touch, and intensity, contributes to the interpretation of the music. The musician understands that the independence and agility of the fingers not only serve

as an asset to overcome challenging passages, but they also help one understand that music is not a vertical collection of sounds but a horizontal collaboration between the melody and the harmony, voicing. A horizontal progress of energy transfer, also known as dynamics, is greatly dependent on the way it is transferred (touch) and the amount of energy used (intensity). Artistic judgment and command of the music also donate to the result of a successful interpretation of the piece.

There are several interesting concepts to explore in Barry Green's "The Inner Game of Music". Each idea lets the student experience a different side of music and targets the student's mental block to play dramatically:

1. Role playing a performer
2. Becoming the music
3. Doing something familiar
4. Letting the body take over
5. Letting go to the environment
6. Letting go to directions
7. Letting go to the ridiculous
8. Letting go to the impossible

First, role-playing lets the students be creative in imitating their favorite pianist, composer, or actor without the pressure of being penalized or critiqued. It loosens up the atmosphere of the lesson and gets the creative juices going.

Secondly, letting the students become the music and asking them to write down the scenario will help students understand the nuances of the music. After that, ask them to play relating it back to their scenario.

Next, relating the music to other familiar activities such as speech and breathing can help students to understand the musical concepts in a more relatable way. Like speech, music has long and short rhythms and different notes that are stressed more compared to other notes.

Letting the body take over can also assist the students to think more creatively. Using more *rubato*, dynamics, and pedal in the piece as the students see fit and later discussing with the students if the choices they made were beneficial or not is a great way for them to express their own interpretation of the music. This activity connects the creativity and the critical thinking of the students and will guide their development of musical judgment.

Putting a meaning and story to the piece greatly helps the students to explore the different nuances of the piece, and to analyze how the music goes from one theme or concept to the next. Students are free to make up their own story or to relate it to their favorite movie. This activity gives the students a picture that is more tangible for them to notice the progression of the music, as well as increasing their interest and perspective of music.

Next, letting go to directions or to write down a list of things to pay attention to is a very analytical process and it trains the students to be observant to the music. Students are to point out what they see on the page and observe the details of the piece before play the music. After that, ask them to evaluate their own playing and comment if they had followed in what they had talked about. A video recording of the students' previous playing would be helpful to allow the students to play back their performance and evaluate their playing. Writing down areas that have technical difficulties will also be beneficial so that the students know what to practice and where to focus their attention.

Then, there's letting go to the ridiculous and activities that are not practical. This activity is very interesting and students will greatly enjoy this in lessons as well as in their own practices. Ask students to lie down with their back on the piano bench and try playing a short passage of their piece with their hands crossed. It is very confusing because the hands are crossed and the brain has to think about the passage in a different way; however, it is a very effective way to give the students a different perspective of the music. Changing the style of the piece may also seem ridiculous but it is useful in giving the ears a different taste of the music.

Finally, Barry Green mentioned that letting go to the impossible and using extreme ranges of tempi would be useful. Ask students to play in an extremely slow tempo so that they will be more comfortable with the notes. In addition, ask them to play each note, especially passages with running notes, in staccatos. This activity makes the students focus on every single note and not just to glance through them and be too dependent on their tactile memory. Using an extremely fast tempo is suggested, if and only if, it is not used too often. Students are usually impatient with their progress and are eager to listen to the sound of the finished product. This activity fulfills that eagerness; however, if the practices were mainly focused in a fast tempo, students would not be able to control their fingers in the long run.

### 3. Conclusions

Interpreting music is a popular topic among music teachers and countless research has been written to help the teacher and performer. These activities have been helpful to train students to be more expressive in their playing. Students should practice performing as they work on their pieces. It is never too early to put some emotion to the music. Rather than just playing the piece, let's feel it!

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