

# Embodying sound: The role of movement in performance and interpretation.

In the last lecture, I suggested in rather abstract terms how a theory of musical gesture might be framed. Now I wish to approach the subject more pragmatically, from the standpoint of actual embodiment by a performer. Alexandra Pierce, Professor of Music and Movement at the University of Redlands in California, is a composer and pianist who has devoted her career to exploring gesture in very practical ways, not only in her own composing and performing, but in collaboration with her husband, Roger Pierce, on expressive and "generous" movement in everyday life, and in her pedagogy of movement for performers. I had the opportunity to study with her for five days in March, 1995, and we have collaborated on demonstrations for the Society for Music Theory and the Semiotic Society of America. Her definitive article to date is the assigned reading for this lecture, "Developing Schenkerian Hearing and Performing" (1994).

For the non-musician, one may describe the early twentieth-century Viennese theorist Heinrich Schenker's approach to music analysis as hierarchical, based on the basic contrapuntal and harmonic patterns of movement implied by the pitch organization of tonal works. Mapping the best gestural realization of these hierarchical pitch structures is enriched by (and made more difficult due to) the metrical and durational hierarchies in which pitch structures are embedded.

In a general sense, one may speak of two levels of expressivity in a tonal work of music. One arises from the regular periodicities of meter, phrase rhythm, and harmonic progression, when stylistic expectations are fulfilled in

timely fashion. The other arises from the inevitable freedom with which the composer plays with regular (stylistic) expectations, by deferring their realization (Meyer, 1973) and/or by creating various irregularities and asymmetries. These striking events challenge a simplistic interpretation and thereby expand the expressive potential of the work.

What we call music theory is primarily concerned with regular features and expectations; music analysis deals with the irregular and unexpected as these relate to a horizon of expectations. The background may be conceived as comprised of stylistic "types" or patterns of structures and processes which exemplify stylistic "principles" of organization. The foreground of a musical work is involved in strategies of innovation—creating marked events that imply "new" meanings by their coherent departure from previous, familiar structures and processes, and by their evasion or deferral of immediate expectations. This model suggests the dramatic scheme in which conflicts are introduced, developed, and ultimately resolved at a later point in the work. Indeed, many tonal pieces (especially from the Classical period) present this strategy as a means of engaging the listener.

What Pierce offers her students is a nuanced pedagogy that accounts for the expressivity of both regular and irregular processes in music works—both those that issue straightforwardly from the style, and those that strategically deflect the interpreter from such a straightforward reading. Accounting for these stylistic and strategic meanings involves analysis not only in the theoretical or intellectual sense, but insights that emerge from the heuristic of physical embodiment, at the instrument and away from it. A series of exercises enables the performer to explore, gesturally, the background coherence and foreground configuration of a work and to sense kinesthetically the pulls and releases implied by organic phrases in their unique combinations of tonal and rhythmic forces. Ultimately, the performer

learns to translate gestural character into sound, through the medium of the body's corresponding (intermodal) gestural realizations. Learning how to perform is thus inseparable from learning how the piece is structured, how it has expressive meaning, how one can physically manifest that meaning in one's body, and how one can then transfer that bodily gestural meaning to the instrument. The goal is to achieve in sound the expressivity and implied meaning one has previously explored and experienced through the embodied analytical exercises.

Whereas the *Intégral* article is primarily concerned with the rhythms of pieces as they work elastically within and beyond the regular frameworks of meter and four-bar phrases (hypermetric units), one of the techniques Pierce teaches involves experiencing the regularity of beat, or pulse, through pendular, swinging motions ("arm swings") away from the instrument (1994: 102-3). The point of this exercise is to embody the full motion required to produce what in overly abstract terms might be called an "attack point" for an event that occurs "on the beat." One begins to shape the upswing and the after swing (as the next beat's upswing) with as much attention as one calculates the precise arrival of the arms at the bottom of the arc, which signifies the beat as an ictus. Thus, what happens between beats is as crucial to the experience as the arrival, and the expressive vitality of even an undifferentiated steady pulse becomes a part of one's kinesthetic awareness. One can then transfer this awareness of energized timing to a "straight" metric performance of a passage (or a regular metric reduction of the passage), with the result that one can generate a wealth of gestural (hence, musical) expressivity even before one has fully explored the passage's unique rhythms and contours.

Another "preliminary" exercise, "contouring" (1994:103-9), focuses on the melodic line, which is easier to follow than the subtleties of structural harmonies in aural analysis. Here, one draws with the hand, using

sustained arm weight, an analogue to the shape of the melody, transferring pitch and rhythm into tracings of space that correspond in their highs and lows, their sudden and sustained movements, to what one hears as a continuous line connecting the successive pitches of a sequence. Clearly, it is natural to hear melody as though it were a single force or line traversing a space, rather than literally a sequence of distinct sound events. Indeed, one might argue that this perception of musical motion is crucial to our experiencing of successive sounds as music, rather than as mere acoustic phenomena. In any case, our evolutionary training has biased our perceptual systems to link sounds with objects and agencies in our environment — a necessary survival skill for detecting predators or hunting prey.

Pierce's contouring has an interesting precedent in the work of Eduard Sievers (1924), Gustav Becking (1928), and Alexander Truslit (1938) in Germany, as described by Patrick Shove and Bruno H. Repp (1995: 65-72). Truslit's *Gestaltung und Bewegung in der Musik* (1938: 144) presents a "kinematic interpretation" of the opening theme of Brahms's Op. 79, no. 2 (reproduced in Shove and Repp, 1995: 70) that comes closest to the kind of dynamic mapping that Pierce proposes with her "contouring." As Shove and Repp describe it:

*[The] height in space [of Truslit's curves] tends to follow the pitch contour of the melody ... with the speed of movement and the consequent relative tension being governed mainly by the curvature of the motion path. That is, a slowing-down and commensurate increase in tension in the music is portrayed by a tight loop, whereas faster, more relaxed stretches correspond to relatively straight movements. (1995: 71) As opposed to the abstracted individual composer's pulses of Becking (and his spiritual heir,*

*Manfred Clynes), Truslit's curves are "work-specific" and give a primary role to the smooth flow of the pitch sequence in the melody (1995: 71).*

Just as one must negotiate the gestural projection of regularly occurring events with the aperiodicities that constitute the unique dynamic shape of a work, one must in performing physically negotiate the complementary claims of, for example, a chord's vital presence and its subsumed role as part of a temporal sequence. Whereas the arm swings introduce something of this duality or co-presence, Pierce addresses this complementarity for more complex musical passages in her concepts of "coalescence" and "middleground rhythmic vitality":

*Coalescence in physical movement refers to the weight of the body as it settles into an integral stage of action or gesture. Middleground rhythmic vitality refers to the manner in which weight passes continuously throughout an action, its energy intensifying and diminishing, setting up a pattern in time. (1994: 73)*

The physical means of embodying these complementary dynamics is called "stepping," not coincidentally a play on Schenker's concept of *Stufen*, or scale steps, which refer to the structural harmonies of a passage. Reducing a musical passage to its essential harmonies may produce a rhythm that is out of synch with the regular divisions of time suggested by meter and four-bar phrases (hypermetric groupings), and thus physically stepping the structural bass line will challenge a performer far more than will regular arm swings. As the performer shifts weight from foot to foot, she must also gauge a number of different-sized temporal spans, as well as map the approximate pitch intervals between bass notes by the size and direction of her steps. Once she is able to embody the unique

"structural rhythm" of the passage, then she can return to the instrument and move more confidently in her performance, with better preparation and follow-through. As a consequence, there will be a marked aural difference in the gestural persuasiveness of the passage.

At this point, the student has advanced to a level of performance analogous to a proper declamation of the accents in a poem (as opposed to a sing-songy rendition of an iambic pentameter). The final stages of preparation involve, to pursue the analogy, internalizing the intonational curves and climaxes that shape the sense of the poem, and embodying the peculiar character or tone that carries the poem's implied emotional affect(s).

These two essential expressive attributes may be practiced separately as "spanning" and "tone of voice" (1994: 87-101). Spanning may be embodied in two ways, first, by stretching the hand from a loose fist outward to the full extent timed to the perceived climax and gradually releasing the tension in the hand after the climax (97-91). What one discovers is that a "performance phrase" for a musical passage (at least by a master composer) will typically go against the grain of the regular hypermetric structures (four-bar, eight-bar, sixteen-bar units). The exercise is also useful in determining whether one is dealing with the proper sized musical unit for a performance phrase. If one cannot find a "convincing climax," then "the phrase level chosen may be too small to have developed compelling harmonic motivation, or too long to sustain the elasticity of a single harmonic-structural purpose" (85). In this sense, Pierce shares fellow Schenkerian William Rothstein's understanding of a phrase as "a directed motion in time from one tonal entity to another; these entities may be harmonies, melodic tones (in any voice or voices), or some combination of the two" (1989: 16). In other words, if the first four measures of the Blue Danube Waltz (Rothstein's example) merely prolong a single harmony, they

cannot constitute a phrase; indeed, in Rothstein's analysis only the first 32 measures qualify as a "complete tonal motion," or span, in Pierce's terminology.

Pierce's second exercise for determining climax and performance phrase is "arcing," which involves a stretch of the whole body directed by the full arm functioning in a large, sweeping motion along an imaginary giant clockface. The climax in this case is the point of maximum extension of the arm diagonally from the body, peaking around 1:00 or 2:00 on the clockface if the right arm is arcing in a clockwise direction. As Pierce describes the exercise:

*Just enough momentum is spun forth to match the kinetic energy heard from the musical phrase as it continues, intensifies, subsides, and finally releases into completion. Effort washes out into stillness, without there necessarily being any lapse of time before the next phrase begins. (92)*  
*Such practice away from the instrument (but nevertheless mapped onto a recording or another student's playing of the passage) can help one realize the "elastic play of foreground against deeper levels," and thus spanning is "perhaps the most purely 'Schenkerian' of the movement processes" (95)*

Alexandra Pierce's final exercise may well be the most difficult (speaking from my own personal experience), since it is also the most intimate or personal. "Tone of voice" is her term for "the wash of affect in a piece of music" which "suffuses the sound with hue and the player with expressiveness visible through the entire body" (96). In previous lectures I noted that there are two useful (intermodal) sources for our understanding of musical gesture — the physical movements of the body and the intonation curves of language. Tone of voice draws on the latter for its

inspiration, but an intonation cannot be achieved without an intention, a semantic and pragmatic context as represented in the exercise by a word, with all its symbolic richness of denotative and connotative meaning. One might begin by choosing an adverb (e.g., "boldly"), saying it with a characteristic tone of voice, making a comparable bodily gesture, freezing it into a momentary stance, then taking that gestural pose to the instrument and saying, "If I were speaking, it would sound like this — ," and performing the passage (100). The student should thereby transfer not merely kinetic energy but a particular quality of energy to his performance.

But the difficulty pedagogically is in helping the student overcome a natural reticence to express character in a word, and to express it full-feelingly, in an intimate setting. In listening to my microcassette recording of this session when Alexandra introduced me to tone of voice, I became aware of how my voice dropped considerably in dynamic power when I intoned my chosen word, perhaps reflecting my uncertainty or lack of confidence in the exercise. A commitment to the meaning of a single word may also have been in conflict with my prior (wordless) expressive sense of the passage, and thus I may have been fighting against the limitations of my own word choice. Ironically, despite having written a book on musical expressive meaning, I was unable at first to connect with this most semantically loaded of exercises, as much as I could appreciate its usefulness from a theoretical standpoint. Later, in our staged demonstrations for music theory and semiotic conferences, we were able to illustrate tone of voice as it affected my tone in the melodic line from a Chopin Prélude, but the word I had chosen was "sinking," which already encompasses a fluid intermodality between feeling and motion, as well as invoking its typical usage in teaching piano technique ("sink into the keys").

In concluding this lecture with a strong endorsement of Alexandra's approach, I must acknowledge the limits of my medium of



communication (words in cyberspace) for conveying the subtle nuances of gesture she can help students achieve. I can only report to the reader the remarkable transformations in expressive performance that ensue from these exercises, both as I have experienced them in my own playing, and as I have taught them to students in an integrative seminar on gesture and performance last spring at Penn State. Those who have had some experience with the music and movement pedagogy of **Emile Jaques-Dalcroze** (one of Alexandra's inspirations in her own movement research) will perhaps appreciate the kinds of insights that can emerge from such efforts to embody the dynamic meanings of music. What Pierce offers the sophisticated performer is a heuristic for exploring expressive dynamics in conjunction with a detailed analysis of complex musical materials. By choreographing to the score, as it were (rather than in counterpoint to it, as one finds in most ballet choreography), one can realize just those dynamic movements and gestural meanings implied by a musical work's own organization, and translate them into moving performances.

In the next lecture, I will consider particular gestures that may be isolated as thematic to a work and argue that their implied meanings, as projected in performance, can reveal a level of structure often neglected even by the best pianists — with consequences for a proper understanding of, in this case, Schubert's compositional style.

## **Footnotes**

*Expressive Movement: Posture and Action in Daily Life, Sports, and the Performing Arts* (New York: Plenum Press, 1989), and *Generous Movement: A Practical Guide to Balance in Action* (Redlands, CA: Center of Balance Press, 1991).

Back to where you left off.

"From Gesture to Interpretation: A Demonstration and Dialogue," with Alexandra Pierce, for a session I organized, "Gesture and Music: Theoretical and Practical Considerations," Semiotic Society of America, San Antonio, October 20-22, 1995; and "Movement as a Model of Performance," with Alexandra Pierce, for a special session organized by David Lidov, "Musical Microstructure in Expressive Performance," Society for Music Theory, New York City, November 2-5, 1995.

**Back to where you left off.**

The interested reader may wish to consult the work of one of Alexandra Pierce's colleagues at the University of Redlands, Stephen Moore: *The Writings of Emile Jaques-Dalcroze: Toward a Theory for the Performance of Musical Rhythm* (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1992). Another movement theorist whose influence is acknowledged by Pierce (92, footnote 27) is Rudolf Laban. Cf. *The Mastery of Movement*, rev. and enl. by Lisa Ullmann, ed. (London: Macdonald and Evans, 1971). References Becking, Gustav. *Der musikalische Rhythmus als Erkenntnisquelle*. Augsburg: Benno Filser, 1928. Meyer, Leonard B. *Explaining Music*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973). Pierce, Alexandra. "Developing Schenkerian Hearing and Performing." *Intégral* 8 (1994), 51-123. Rink, John, ed. *The Practice of Performance: Studies in Musical Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Rothstein, William. *Phrase Rhythm in Tonal Music*. New York: Schirmer Books (Macmillan), 1989. Shove, Patrick, and Bruno H. Repp. "Musical Motion and Performance: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives," in *The Practice of Performance: Studies in Musical Interpretation*, John Rink, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 55-83. Sievers, Eduard. *Ziele und Wege der Schallanalyse*. Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1924. Truslit, Alexander. *Gestaltung und Bewegung in der Musik*. Berlin-Lichterfelde: Chr. Friedrich Vieweg, 1938.

