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Expressive gesture and non-verbal communication skills in popular music performance

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Keywords: communication, gesture, performance, popular music.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with popular music performance. It investigates the importance of *performance*, and explores why the *non*-musical elements are so important to the delivery of a musical presentation. Musicians who undertake formal training spend years of practice learning their craft, and much of the time they spend doing this involves honing technical ability; the importance of which should not be underestimated. Yet, the area of *how to perform* remains an area to be commonly neglected in favour of a focus on technical development of musical skills for performing musicians in a variety of musical genres – not just in popular music. Paradoxically, the importance of how to perform is rarely questioned; nonetheless very few (popular) musicians have received formal training on, or even an awareness of, the different elements that make a performance visually stimulating and engaging. I believe it is vital that our future musicians are given the pedagogical tools with which they can develop this area of their musicianship.

Identifying the ingredients of performance

Music belongs to a specific group of arts known as the *Performing Arts* – literally, art forms which require (live) performance to unleash the full capacity and potential of both the art form and its performer(s). By subsequent association, music is a *communicative* art form

which requires the performer to connect with their audience on a level beyond their physical presence and aesthetic. Schutz states that 'music will only be enhanced by appropriately embracing its communicative power' (Schutz 2008: 102). He also poses the question that if the visual, emotional and communication skills of the performer were not needed, then 'why do popular music concerts often include elaborate lighting and staging effects for what is ostensibly an auditory event?' (Schutz, 2008: 83). Perhaps a feasible answer to Schutz's question is because more popular music acts than ever before are relating the live music experience to the Wagnerian notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a concept which amalgamates a variety of art forms, such as dance, literature, music, and poetry, into one complete work. By broadening the visual experience, perhaps the appeal of live popular music performance is also extended to encompass spectators who prefer visual stimuli alongside, or above, the auditory experience. Whilst it may be easier to depict the breadth and the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the form of the music video, live performance is just as capable of capturing the various different elements, as noted in the oeuvre of artists such as Bjork, Lady GaGa, Kate Bush, and Paloma Faith. Whilst some acts may be overly extravagant in their depiction and representation of visual stimuli, it is reasonable to suggest that, as a *performing* art, music requires the use of the physical self and body in the communicative process, not least because, as stated by researchers on this topic, 'music is a means of emotional expression' (Juslin and Laukka, 2003: 774).

Jane Davidson states that 'the use of the body is vital in generating the technical and expressive qualities of a musical interpretation' (Davidson, 2002: 146). The opposing aspects of technique and expression need separate consideration, and it is important to acknowledge the significance of the performer's expressive qualities and their ramifications on the delivery of the given performance. Whilst it may be considered obvious that the delivery of music needs a focus on musical technique, the importance of the non-technical dimension needs equal consideration, and confirms that music performance should be

considered as 'multimodal' – the audible elements of the music are absorbed alongside the visual element of the physical performance; amalgamating different senses. A recent piece of research undertaken by Chia-Jung Tsay (2013) studied the perceptions of both novice and professional musicians who were asked to identify the winners of different prestigious, international, classical music competitions via the use of three contrasting formats; sound-only; visual-only; or sound and vision together. Prior to the experiments, when questioned, over 80% of the participants believed that *sound* would be the most important factor in determining the winner. The results, in fact, showed that both the novice and professional musicians given the *sound-only* extracts identified the winner at a rate *less* than chance (33%), whereas the participants who had the visual-only extracts all identified the winner at a rate significantly *above* chance. The participants who utilised both the audio *and* visual means identified the winner at a chance rate. This surprising result demonstrates the importance of the visual modality in music performance of all genres, not just in the popular music sphere. Tsay states that it is deemed not to be the audible delivery of the technical musical rudiments which equate to a prize-winning presentation but, instead, that 'motion, motivation, creativity and passion are perceived as hallmarks of great performance' (Tsay, 2013: 14583).

Understanding the nature of performance

For a musician, the definition of the term *performance* affords itself to a variety of answers; respondents in my study indicated, for example, that it was - 'an emotional connection with the audience through the music that you play'; or 'a communication, and an action as well, - trying to communicate, not just a message, but the whole *feel*, and everything, to someone else'. Art of any description is, by definition, subjective; and the stylistic nuances of different artists or performers may be responsible for altering an individual's perception of what that performance *means* to them. A problem I have frequently encountered as a working

professional musician is the difficulty in conveying – particularly, but not exclusively, to students – what the variance is between two (or more) performances which contain the same lyrical, notational, and rhythmical features. Whilst technically similar or identical, music can be delivered, and thus interpreted, in entirely different ways and I have often concluded that the difference in such cases may not be down to the rudimental content, but rather to the way that a song is physically presented and delivered. I believe that the physical presentation has repercussive effects on the impact of the performance; particularly in respect of its memorability, and its potential to evoke emotion in both a performer and the audience. When assessing the given physical performance of a musician, it is imperative to remember that these physical deliveries may be the exhibitions of individual, internal memories which are drawn from unique experiences, relationships or events. The same song, which may be stylistically, lyrically, and tonally identical, might be performed on separate occasions by different artists, and it is assumed that the visual representation *will* be different – largely because of the interpretation of the music by each individual artist. Individual experiences are considered to be key influences.

Capturing performance

My research on this topic is based on a series of filmed rehearsals, live performances, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with both amateur and professional popular musicians; including a separate, concentrated project with a group of pop performance students studying at the London College of Music. I worked with the group of six students over the period of three months, and filmed a series of rehearsals and the resulting live performance. These were then followed-up with a set of interviews with the participants, which reflected on various aspects of the process. Davidson states that ‘the work that takes place in rehearsal must anticipate the social context of the performance and the inevitable physiological and psychological arousal that the situation will bring’ (Davidson, 2002: 144); this informed my research approach which focused on the difference between rehearsal preparation and

concert performance, on how the approaches of the performers differed, and how the gestures and physical delivery of the performers changed in order to establish how the various elements affected the performance process.

The communication of live music performance is a key aspect of a professional musician's expertise, and this particular project provided students with the opportunity to explore and understand this imperative skill area, as well as utilising critical reflection in a more detailed way, without the potential pressures of a commercial project. In addition, by reflecting on the process in a structured manner, it provided them with a much clearer insight into the communicative, technical and artistic skills of their musicianship, all of which are required in live and recorded performance environments. The participating students stated how much the project has benefitted their understanding of the music performance process.

Categorising gesture and non-verbal communication

The term 'gesture' can undertake a variety of connotations, but my focus is on the delivery of a gesture which portrays *expressive* information and does not directly involve the technical, physical delivery of the performed piece, but its emotional, non-verbal elements of communication - 'the tone of voice, the facial expression, the significant pauses and the entire range of body language' (Dromgoole, 2007: 15). Those are believed to have important repercussions on both the meanings and perceptions involved in the process of music performance. Some have gone so far as to claim that 'non-verbal interaction is recognised nowadays as a musical skill, supporting social and artistic aspects in the act of becoming a musician and of playing music' (Marchetti and Jensen, 2010: 1). I have identified a number of components which generate repercussive gestural and physical deliveries; musically-related expressive gesture; and non-musically-related expressive gesture.

Musically-related expressive gestures

These include, firstly, the musical and compositional traits of the song – such as the accompaniment, dynamics, lyric, metre, phrase structures, pitch, and rhythm. Expressive gestures which arise from these traits can depict an emotive connection (consciously or unconsciously) to pre-experienced, external factors, or they can result from an embodied connection to particular aspects of the musical content of the performance. Unanimously, all of the singers interviewed stated that the lyrical content provided their greatest inspiration for an emotive delivery, followed by the pitch of the melodic line. Instrumentalists were generally less focused on the lyrical content, but more on the structure of the song, and rhythmical intricacies of their respective musical contributions. Previous academic studies have also established that ‘the movements of musicians are closely related to the piece being performed’ (Vines et al, 2004: 468) and that ‘there is a strong relationship between musical structure, its execution and gestures that suitably accompany it, either to generate, coincide with, or respond to the structure and its effects’ (Davidson, 2012: 618).

Secondly, musically-related expressive gestures also include those required for compulsory, functional, technical and musical functions – such as cueing, ensemble unity, and the structure of a given song. Whilst the outcome may be musically-led, the success of this involves the different communicative, and interpersonal relationships existing at the heart of (music) performance. Structure as a musical term is especially relevant to the popular and jazz genres. With this in mind, ‘non-verbal interaction can be then defined as a tool for group activity’ (Sawyer, 2006, in Marchetti and Jensen, 2010: 5) as it becomes vital that the performers are each aware of which part of the song they are performing at which time, which may alter due to a variety of factors such as indulgent and elongated improvisations, or real-time momentum; encouraged and motivated by a variety of external factors such as the audience reaction to the performance.

The creation of good music is the result of a group effort' (Marchetti and Jensen, 2010: 1) and 'communication through non-verbal cues is an important factor in securing a good performance, since it allows musicians to correct each other without interruptions' (Marchetti and Jensen, 2010: 1). The importance of social interaction between the performing musicians in the same ensemble is paramount – the success of creating a united, well-balanced sound, relies on successful social interaction and communication – both verbal and non-verbal.

Non-verbal behaviour as tacit knowledge

'Non-verbal interaction is described as a form of tacit knowledge' (Marchetti and Jensen, 2010: 2). Tacit knowledge refers to a theoretical notion which assumes that 'we can know more than we can tell' (Polanyi, 1967:.4). Essentially, tacit knowledge is 'knowledge that is difficult to share through verbal language, since practitioners themselves, in this case musicians, are not fully aware of it' (Marchetti and Jensen, 2010: 2). Tacit knowledge is acquired largely from interaction with other people and requires shared activities so that understanding can be passed from one person to another; '[it] is implicit, unconscious knowledge in people's minds that is embedded in a particular culture and is difficult to transmit to those who do not share a similar form of life' (Smilde, 2009: 68).

As previously mentioned, the interpersonal communication skills needed for performing musicians to communicate with their fellow performers covers an array of both musical and emotional necessity but, as with any group, the amalgamation of different personality types can have a repercussive effect on the dynamic of the group, as each individual member will have their own vision which may, or may not, concur with the vision held by others. In this

instance, Marchetti and Jensen (2010) believe that non-verbal communication between performers can be significantly affected by schismogenesis – a theory derived by anthropologist Gregory Bateson to describe ‘a progressive social differentiation within a group, according to individual aspirations and different way of dealing with them’ (Marchetti and Jensen, 2010: 6). Schismogenesis can be either complementary (involving scenarios where individuals in the same group have different objectives and behaviour practises) or symmetrical (where individuals have ‘the same aspirations and the same behavioural patterns’ (Bateson, 1972: 68)). Marchetti and Jensen discuss a study undertaken by Davidson and Good (2002) involving a classical string quartet, where dyadic dynamics emerged within the group – specifically between the second violin and the cello, and between the first violin and the viola – causing leadership clashes and conflicts of schismogenesis, with the second violin acting in symmetrical schismogenesis to the first violin – resulting in two members of the four competing for the leadership role, which is, ordinarily, tacitly expected to the first violin.

In the project I undertook with the LCM students, a natural complementary schismogenesis occurred – one member of the group took the lead in all the rehearsal processes. Therefore it was a significant surprise when a different member of the group took over the leadership role in the live performance. When questioned about that switch of roles in the interview processes, all members of the ensemble acknowledged that this had happened, and that it had not been pre-arranged, with the leader in the rehearsal acknowledging that he consciously took a less prominent role when it came to the performance – leaving the musician situated at the front of the stage to lead the proceedings. Placing your trust in both your team’s leader, and your fellow members, is a hugely important factor in ensuring the successful delivery of working as an ensemble.

Conclusion

It is often said that a picture paints a thousand words, and a topic that is so heavily based on the visual is best explained visually. As part of my research, I have designed an interactive, multimedia presentation and integrated throughout the writing are clear instructions on how to access the varying examples in the interactive program – which provide practical examples of the theoretical skills described; allowing the connection between theory and practice to be clearly demonstrated.

Providing musicians with the knowledge and tools to understand the implications of the art of performance through assimilated study, allows performers to develop their own unique style of artistic expression – creating well-rounded, empathetic, and employable musicians, who have a visceral understanding of their art form. Expressive gesture and non-verbal communication skills are areas of study which have the potential to be amalgamated into all stages of musical learning and development, in all musical instruments and genres – and early suggestions show that a structured approach to this would be a welcome inclusion with music educators. My intention is that both the theoretical underpinning, and respective practical evidence, are accessible to integrate this area successfully into a curriculum that places the art of performance alongside the equally crucial skill of secure technique and proficient instrumental handling.

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