

Julian Hellaby, Reading Musical Interpretation: Case Studies in Solo Piano Performance

Julian Hellaby, *Reading Musical Interpretation: Case Studies in Solo Piano Performance* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), ISBN 978-0-7546-6667-7, xiv+199pp (with CD), \$99.95

In his 2002 essay, 'Listening to Performance', Eric Clarke asks the thought-provoking question, 'do people ever listen to performance (as opposed to music), and if so what do they hear?'¹ Equally, we can ask performers, 'what music do they perform?' All of this assumes that there is an ontological difference between the performance and the 'music'. Julian Hellaby, in his book *Reading Musical Interpretation: Case Studies in Solo Piano Performance*, develops a theoretical framework with which to investigate empirically recorded performances in the western art-music tradition, performances which he regards as sovereign texts in themselves.² The following extract foregrounds his main aim:

[my method] treats the performance as a free-standing artistic statement, apart from the intentions of the composer or the performing artist other than as perceived by the analyst, thereby avoiding entrapment by the Intentional Fallacy ...

He bases this viewpoint on the influential work of Monroe Beardsley and William Wimsatt on 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1946), which largely claims that the intentions of the author are not necessarily an appropriate standard by which to judge the interpretation of a work. This is a crucial move for Hellaby as it enables him to evade the issue of value judgements about an actual performance with respect to notions of historical authenticity or *Texttreue*, for example.

¹ Eric Clarke, 'Listening to Performance', in John Rink (ed.), *Musical Performance: A Guide to Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 185.

² Hellaby, an associate senior lecturer at Coventry University, completed his PhD in performance studies at the Birmingham Conservatoire. While there is no doubt that this volume is closely based on his doctoral dissertation, *Musical Performance: A Framework for Analysis* (Birmingham City University, 2006), this fact is not alluded to in the text, nor does the dissertation feature in the lengthy bibliography. It is worth noting that, where monographs stem from a doctoral dissertation, Ashgate's editorial policy prohibits authors from alluding to this fact.

Nevertheless, his method does take account of the score and historical knowledge about the era in which it was produced:

In my analysis I am concerned primarily with issues regarding the artists' interpretative outcomes in relation to the apparent 'givenness' of the score and how I, in turn, can read and interpret these outcomes.

While the first two chapters (Part I) are theoretical in nature, outlining his 'interpretative framework', the subsequent three chapters (Part II) present three case studies which test the validity and reliability of his theory. It is not, however, a tool to judge the merits or demerits of a performance and will not necessarily enable a listener to distinguish a 'good' performance from a 'bad' one.

Hellaby chooses to represent his framework graphically, thus constructing a 'tower' which is hierarchically conceived. There are four levels which together contain nine categories or 'informants' (see Figure 1, below). In essence, Level 4 refers to the surface elements of the music: 'Duration Manipulator' includes elements such as deviations from a strict tempo, and 'Sonic Moderator' refers to dynamics, articulation, pedalling, etc. Level 3 consists of the 'Topical Mode' which is indicated by terms such as *con brio* or *cantabile*, while 'Characterizer' refers to devices such as hemiola or chromatic progressions that define a particular passage. Level 2 refers to such terms as *sonata* or *polonaise* as generic designations which lead to performance expectations, while 'Topic' suggests the presence of specific types such as the pastoral style or a march. Level 1 is our knowledge of the era in which the work was composed, and by whom it was composed, two categories that inform our expectations of performance. Level 4 is further designated as the 'Executive' level while Level 1 is the 'Ideal'.

Figure 1: Hellaby’s ‘interpretative tower framework’ (47)

Tempo level four	Duration manipulator	Sonic moderator	Executive ↑
Topical mode level three	Characterizer		
Genre level two	Topic		
Era (style) level one	Authorship (score)		↓ Ideal

Analysis of a recorded performance will be conducted on the premise that a performer will emphasize or de-emphasize the relationship between the informants within each level and between levels. For example, those performances that adhere to the composer’s intentions as indicated by the score will generate a different graph from those that take a more idiomatic approach to questions of tempo or dynamics. These relationships are shown by drawing straight lines, of various thickness, from one category to another: for example heavy bold lines indicate close relationships while light dotted lines show weak relationships between informants. Thus if a performer follows closely all the expression markings in the score then one could draw a thick line from Authorship to all the categories in the top level (with an arrow head indicating the direction of the flow). Contrast this with the performer who decides to exaggerate a hemiola in a waltz by playing accents not marked in the score; then a thick line would originate in Genre going to Characterizer and then to Sonic Moderator, thereby showing that the performer is responding more to the Genre (waltz) rather than following the score. In essence the analyst is attempting to show the origins of the higher-level informants in the lower levels. Therein lies the hierarchical nature of the tower. There is a great degree of

flexibility allowed for here as not all informants need to be engaged. Hellaby's initial demonstration of the workings of the tower is a contrastive analysis of Denis Matthews's recording of the first movement of Beethoven's sonata in E major, Op. 109, which is faithful to the score, and Glenn Gould's performance of the first movement of Mozart's sonata in A major, K331, which famously pays little attention to the score apart from playing the actual pitches and rhythms.

I think that performers and performance scholars especially will respond positively to the ideas in this volume. Hellaby's theoretical model is holistic in its inclusion of many discrete categories which can be applied flexibly to diverse musical styles, and indeed he suggests how other subcategories might be introduced for other repertoires (163). Perhaps most importantly, it enables a consistent and evidence-based analysis of performances in the context of the scores which engender them. While he is at pains to point out that his tower does not provide a blueprint for good interpretation, the ideal reader for this book is the analytically-minded performer such as Hellaby himself. Those unfamiliar with the repertoire under discussion will miss the absence of extensive musical examples and recordings of the performances: J. S. Bach's Toccata in D major, BWV 912, performed by Sviatoslav Richter, Gould, Angela Hewitt and Hellaby; Brahms's Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24, performed by Claudio Arrau, Stephen Kovacevich, Benno Moiseiwitsch, Jorge Federico Osorio, Egon Petri and Hellaby; and Messiaen's *Première communion de la Vierge* performed by Pierre-Laurent Aimard, Peter Hill, Yvonne Loriod and Hellaby. The CD that accompanies this volume contains only Hellaby's performances of those works.³ If there were copyright restrictions that prevented the inclusion of those other recordings, then this might have been acknowledged (the discography does give full details, however). Given that

³ This CD was also submitted as part of his doctoral dissertation.

this volume is a boot camp for informed ‘musicological’ listening, such resources would have been of great value to scholars of performance.

Returning to Hellaby’s theoretical framework, it is important to distinguish between the ‘tower’ as a diagram (a visual object), and the ‘interpretative framework’ which is essentially a verbal construct. Indeed, the tower itself makes very few appearances throughout the volume. This is a pity, given its usefulness. Instead the framework is extrapolated in prose where its terms inform the extensive analyses and discussions, while the tower appears in privileged instances only (i.e., to show the most contrasting performances). The visual impact of the tower is quite striking and more instances would have been instructive. Excluding the demonstration examples in Part I, there are just eight pages where the tower itself appears (78, 86, 115, 131, 136, 143, 149 and 155); on most of these pages it appears twice, but its usage is explicitly comparative in each instance. The framework is also manifested in schematic summaries which Hellaby terms *précis* (55–6), and these are presented mostly in conjunction with the tower (85–6, 113–14, 129–30, 142, 147–8 and 153–4). These schemes present the same information as the towers but in bullet-points using boldface to highlight the informant words. Rather oddly, these schemes invert the hierarchy of the tower, a practical thing to do as Helleby explains (55–6), but it is a presentation that undermines the visual hierarchy of the tower, in my opinion. If one examines pages 129–31 where the schemes and towers are presented for three performances, it will be readily appreciated how the tower is better at presenting this information (I’m sure Tony Buzan would agree!).⁴ I would argue that these *précis* could have been adjusted so that we can compare and contrast all the correlative levels at a glance, thus avoiding the need to jump from one table to another (sometimes over the page).

⁴ Tony Buzan is the originator of ‘Mind Maps’: see <http://www.tonybuzan.edu.sg/index.php/who-istony-buzan/> (accessed 10 June 2011).

The interpretative framework sometimes loses its gravitational pull while Hellaby is busy harvesting raw data (for example: 80–4). While he is meticulous in presenting this type of information, at times it is particularized towards the performers and performances rather than ‘performance’ as an artistic statement. He is most convincing when he bears down on the informants; the following extract from chapter 5, which is devoted to an analysis of Brahms’s Variations, demonstrates the sophistication of his method:

Projecting back from the performance to score, it may be deduced that the strongly marked surface-level features of Arrau’s recording bespeak a level-three topical mode of *gravitas* and a characterizer that broadens the score’s indicated phrase structure. This is supported at the level beneath [i.e., Level 2] by a sense of the variation’s significance in the overall scheme of the work (genre) and the interpretative edifice as a whole seems to be underpinned by an equal allegiance to era (style) and authorship (score). Kovacevich’s perception of the variation appears to have much in common with Arrau’s, although this commonality is conveyed to the listener by more restrained top-level informants. (147)

I found the fifth chapter to be the most interesting, and I suggest that Hellaby might have included just one case study in Part II of the book (i.e., the one that appears in this chapter), thereby leaving more room to discuss other issues that he alludes to from time to time. Even in a volume of this size (167 pages of text, not including appendices and bibliography), Hellaby could have developed some of the more interesting areas which he introduced in the first part of the book and which reemerge in the final pages of the second part; what happens in between might be described as dutiful and well executed but not sufficiently rewarding. While it is true that there are three case studies, there is the impression that we have witnessed the framework being employed in the same way three times. I would have preferred to see how he might have explored other avenues. Let us consider Hellaby’s welcome inclusion and adaptation of semiotics in his tower framework. Most topic theory has concerned itself with topics as they appear in the score with little attention paid to their sonic manifestations.⁵ Hellaby’s book makes a concerted start along that road, especially in chapter

⁵ Robert S. Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Robert Samuels, *Mahler’s Sixth Symphony: A Study in Musical Semiotics*

5 (137–9), but, as he acknowledges (166), this is a carefully circumscribed investigation that is nevertheless highly suggestive of future research. For example, one could investigate how a performer creates a sense of narrativity by foregrounding certain topics which can in turn be related to the narrative in the score. This would build on the solid foundations of Byron Almén's *A Theory of Musical Narrative* which sets out a comprehensive investigation of the role of topics in musical narratives.⁶ Elsewhere Hellaby adverts to the potency of topicality when he takes issue with Jim Samson's claim that 'virtuosity presents rather than represents. It encourages us to wonder at the act rather than to commune with the work and its referents by way of the act'.⁷ Hellaby immediately counters:

But in this case, it can lead us directly to the work and its referents. The *esprit de joie* may be heard to inhere in the virtuosity itself. As Rosen writes [*Piano Notes: The World of the Pianist* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 5]: 'it would be a mistake to deny the dramatic interest of ... displays of physical prowess both in piano music and ballet, which have an artistic importance at the very least equivalent to the high altitude arabesque of the mad Lucia' (111).

Indeed, virtuosity can be a topic itself, and for this to happen the music doesn't have to be particularly 'virtuosic', it just needs to be virtuosic-like, to contain within it the gestures of virtuosity. Recent semiotic studies have explored the role of gesture in musical meaning: for instance, Patrick McCreless's essay 'Anatomy of a Gesture: From Davidovsky to Chopin and Back' discusses how a single gesture (a high to low plunge with rebound) is highly suggestive for performance analysis.⁸ Even more recently, Robert Hatten has submitted another magisterial discussion of topics, this time concentrating on 'gesture' which he

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Raymond Monelle, *The Sense of Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Esti Sheinburg, *Irony, Satire, Parody, and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich: A Theory of Musical Incongruities* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); Michael L. Klein, *Intertextuality in Western Art Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

⁶ Byron Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

⁷ Jim Samson, *Virtuosity and the Musical Work: The Transcendental Studies of Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 84.

⁸ Patrick McCreless, 'Anatomy of a Gesture: From Davidovsky to Chopin and Back', in Byron Almén and Edward Pearsall (eds), *Approaches to Meaning in Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 11–40.

discusses in forensic detail.⁹ Such studies provide rich soil for future work in performance studies à la Hellaby.

Finally, another fascinating issue which might have been explored much further is the semiotic interpretation of the performance itself. Hellaby suggests that, by treating the performance-text as a sign, we can investigate its semiotic relationship with the score (116). Following Charles Peirce's well-known typology, a performance may be regarded as an icon of the score or, less literally, its index. This speculative turn is in many ways in stark contrast to much of the preceding empirical approach to performance, but it is also a logical development of that very process, and one which Hellaby alludes to very briefly in Part I (23). However, instead of pursuing this issue, he cuts it short after a few sentences, quoting Charles Peirce:¹⁰

... it is hard to take the Bach performances of Chapter 3 further than the category of '*indications*, or indices; which show something about things on account of their being physically connected with them' (116).

This is a stump of a much larger narrative, an index in itself one might say. I wonder what he would have said about Gould's 1965/1970 recording of Mozart's K331 which he had previously mentioned (50). It is certainly not iconic (i.e., mimetic of the score), and hardly stands as an index. For sure it is a symbolic performance, one of transcendence: it is a subversive act, subversive not only of Mozart's authority but also of the idea of performance as interpretation. It is a transgression that brilliantly validates performance as an act of musical creation (in direct opposition to the recreation of the score) wherein Gould pieces together the musical atoms in a narrative that inexorably gains coherence with each variation,

⁹ Robert S. Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Charles Peirce, 'What Is a Sign?', in Peirce Edition Project (ed.), *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, volume 2 (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 5.

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the performer-as-creator's authority underpinned by Gould's audible singing. I wonder in which one of Hellaby's categories would Gould's *ad libitum* vocalise find its context?

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