

INTERPRETATION

The Problem

Technical development occurs through two different areas of study: mechanical and musical. The mechanical area of study concerns developing the basic levels of skillful movement needed to approach the interpretive area. It is in the development of interpretive technique that the highest demands in skillful movement exist. The fine control of movements essential for performing the delicate rhythmic, tonal and dynamic nuances of interpretation cannot be developed from mechanical exercises and studies alone. However, for some considerable period of time, the most demanding and time-consuming aspect of classic guitar study is the development of the mechanical aspects of technique and then maintaining a balance between the study and integration of technique and music.

Common Approaches to Interpretation

No consensus exists about how interpretation, as an integral and essential part of studying and performing music, can best be approached. Should there be? Can there be a common sense approach to interpretation, based on the intuitive application of knowledge?

- Some instructors and acclaimed performers, apparently believing that adequate information about interpretation can be conveyed through notation, strongly advocate playing the music “exactly as written.”
- Others emphasize an almost exclusively intuitive approach to interpretation, in which a close examination of the score is intentionally avoided lest their personal feeling and expression be inhibited.
- Others stress a thorough structural analysis of the music harmonically, melodically, and rhythmically, without relating this knowledge to interpretation.
- All too often gifted young performers become adept at imitation and following directions, without developing the ability to confidently read music interpretively.

Our Role as Interpreters

We need to understand what areas of music we can have artistic control over (analysis), how we exercise that control (technique), and how we decide what to do (interpretation). What follows is an outline of certain interpretive ideas. They are not intended to be all inclusive, but rather, are intended as a foundation upon which one builds. These ideas may provide students with the tools to develop a personal approach to this enigmatic and esoteric subject. The desired result occurs when the student begins to make informed decisions about controlling the various elements of music in such a way that the musical substance of a piece is enhanced. The following ideas are drawn, in part, from the work of Dirian Alexanian, Roger Sessions, Aaron Shearer, and Ernest Toch, in addition to my own work as performer and teacher.

Phrasing

Webster's dictionary defines phrasing as "to cause to understand." Here we can find parallels with the other performing arts. By our performance of a work, we cause it to be more or less understandable. This definition may suffice for now but we need to discover the means whereby we create understanding in our audience.

I. What We Can And Can't Control

Certain elements of music are fixed (set by composer) while others are variable (they vary from performer to performer and even performance to performance). From a consideration of these fixed elements, we can learn how to control the variable elements to give a piece life, proportion, and movement.

A. Fixed Elements

1. Melody
2. Harmony
3. Rhythmic Framework
4. Form

B. Variable Elements

1. Dynamics
2. Tone and Color
3. Articulation (legato, staccato, portamento, glissando)
4. Rhythm

II. Grouping

Before discussing how we control these elements, we need to know how they will be shaped. Most musicians can identify phrases, but in order to give shape to phrases we must be able to look at the smaller groups and figures that make up the larger phrases. These figures are formed varying kinds of attraction.

A. Attraction

The tendency of certain tones to gravitate in the direction of adjacent successive tones. The way this gravitation is enhanced will be discussed later.

1. Metric and Rhythmic Attraction
2. Duration
3. Attraction of metric pulse

B. Melodic Attraction

1. Direction and change of direction

C. Harmonic Attraction

1. Activity and Rest

Certain tones or combinations of tones induce feelings of activity (tension) or repose (release) in the listener. In almost all of life, restlessness is directed toward the achievement of tranquility. Unstable harmonies are attracted by those offering relative stability.

- a) Rest tones are 1, 3, 5 (tonic triad)
- b) Active tones are 7, 4, 2, 6
- c) Harmonic activity can exist at different levels:
 - (1) Harmonic relationships to the tonic.
 - (2) Harmonic/intervallic relationships over a bass.
 - (3) Harmonic relationships between sections (formal tension)

Rubato.

Now we know what we can control (groups and figures) and how we determine the degree of control (activity and rest). What remains is the actual means by which we control these groups. Expression in phrasing is achieved through rubato. This means the performer, intentionally and for the purpose of expressive phrasing, slightly varies the durations of tones and silences from those indicated by written values of notes and rests. This shortening and lengthening of durations results in subtle accelerations and ritardandos in the formation of figures and phrases.

Music is an art in time. It must move. Dynamics, tone, color and articulation can enhance movement but they cannot cause it. To phrase effectively it is essential to proceed with a definite intention of rhythmic pace and movement, based on a knowledge of the above shaping forces of music. Without this intention and the technical ability to carry it out, performers are often heard to slacken the pace when movement is clearly called for and vice versa. At best, such performances are highly inconsistent in terms of expressiveness.

Consequently, although the most effective use of rubato involves the full use of feeling and intuition, it bears little, if any relationship to the arbitrary alteration of durations according to one's feelings without a clear understanding of why. Rubato is not a license to play *ad libitum* or at will. There must be a relationship between what we are doing and what we are doing it to.

Phrasing Revisited

Phrasing is the art of knowing the beginning and the end of something, expressing the rhythmic and dynamic shape between those two points, and expressing the relationship of one phrase to another.

Interpretive Analysis

The quickest way to achieve fluency with this information is to ask yourself questions regarding the music you are studying. This will help you first solve basic phrasing problems, which involves determining figures and phrases, and later, the application of expression to these phrases.

- I. Observe the composer's indications and directions

- A. Is the title programmatic? Based on a text? Or a formal designation.
- B. Tempo or character terms (Allegro, Danza, etc.). What do they mean?
- C. Dynamic, accent or coloristic directions. Are they editorial or original?

II. Texture

- A. Is the texture heavy or light?. Is it polyphonic, homophonic, monophonic, or a combination?
- B. Determine the degrees, levels, or extent of the:
 - 1. Harmonic complexity. Simple or complex? Number and spacing of voices? Is the harmony derived from chords, counterpoint, or is it implied? Is it modal, traditional, emotionally charged, highly dissonant or atonal?
 - 2. Melodic complexity. How small or large are the melodic intervals? How frequently do skips occur? Is it modal, tonal, chromatic, or atonal?

III. Determine type of composition.

- A. Is the piece through-composed or adhere to some concept of form or compositional procedure?
- B. Is it monothematic, polythematic? Is there transitional material between themes? Do musical ideas recur? Are they varied? How do the sections or important key areas relate to each other?

IV. Determine groups, phrases and sections.

- A. How are the groups formed?
- B. How do they relate to one another to create balance and contrast?
- C. How will you treat each group to reveal that balance and contrast?
- D. How do the groups fit together to form larger phrases?
- E. How do the phrases fit together to form larger sections?

V. Historical Perspectives

- A. Do you know the meaning of titles, terms and markings contemporaneous with the period in which the piece was written?
- B. Are you aware of the concepts of historically informed performance practice applicable to different stylistic periods?
- C. Can you imagine approaching the piece from below, i.e., the period just before? Can you imagine what would have been new and unusual for the time?
- D. Can you liberate your ear from your own preconceptions of what music is and should be? What does this mean?
- E. Can you imagine playing the music untainted by your own immersion in today's musical culture, however limited or catholic that immersion might be?

N.B. Much of this material will be augmented by my "Re-Imagination of Performance" series in *Soundboard*. See the January 2009 issue of *Soundboard* (Volume 35, No. 1) for part one and watch for future installments.