

Experiencing Debussy: deliberate practice and authenticity

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Introduction

Such as in language, music went through the process of expanding itself from purely oral traditions to printed notation. As this unfolds, composers have been increasingly more detailed on how their music should be played. More than just pitches and rhythms, the score can be seen as a set of structural and emotional potentials that serves as guidance for the performer (Swinkin, 2016). Even considering these potentials, however, the composer's original intentions might still remain elusive. We devised a new experimental design for *deliberate practice* that focuses on acquiring *authenticity* (Lopes, 2010) by attempting to imitate the composer's own recording. *Performance Cues* (Chaffin et al, 2009) offers a reliable approach to describing analyses of musical intentions, as demonstrated with another piece by Debussy (Chaffin, 2007). Following the argument in favor of *authenticity* (Lopes, 2010), which we sought through applying two key concepts for approaching the original meaning (Nattiez, 1990), namely *inductive poietics*, which indicates the cognitive process of imagining how those structural and emotional potentials may reflect the composer's original musical narrative; and *external esthetics*, which refers to the use of available information on the context of the musical work, such as his own recording, in order to influence how meaning is conferred beyond the score. Annotations on the results of musical practice are probably the most useful means of documentation for advising future performances (Redgate, 2015). Moreover, the research sought *ecological validity* for it devised a realistic research design (Clarke, 2005), which also includes a form of deliberate practice that can be fundamental for the performer's skill acquisition process (Burgoyne et al., 2019). Finally, Lisboa et al. (2005) applied a similar imitative practice procedure with results suggesting that the performer's knowledge of the piece was furthered, with a strong short-term impact on the musician's interpretation.

Objective

We propose an experimental design to approach Debussy's own performance and his written music. The research sought *ecological validity* for the deliberate practice precedes its annotation phase in each step: (1) analysis of the music score, (2) intuitive performance, (3) listening to

the composer's own performance, and (4) subsequent performances that attempt to converge towards the composer's own.

Methodology

The method is based on comparing *performance cues*. After recording a practice session, the performer should listen and annotate each rendition. The experiment shall begin with (1) a preliminary analysis of the score (*inductive poietics*) and shall be followed by (2) a recording of one or more renditions of the piece. (3) Now, the performer shall annotate his/her impressions of the composer's recording (*external esthetics*). Both annotations should then be compared, and (4) eventual differences shall be minimized in subsequent performances. This practice should be repeated, several times, in order to approach the composer's own recording. Thus, this whole, *deliberate practice* enables the documentation and evaluation of the convergence progress step by step, in a non-obtrusive manner. We chose a less known piano piece by Claude Debussy, *La Plus que Lente*, as the focus of analysis. There are few recordings of this piece compared to more canonical works. Therefore, it is possible that the performer would not have prior, crystalized expectations on how the piece ought to be presented. Luckily, one of the available recordings is a piano roll of the composer himself, made shortly after the piece was published.

Results

As a generalist approach, the proposed schematics does not specify how many iterations would be the most relevant for convergence. This is intentionally left open for promoting *ecological validity*. During the occurrence of the research, the performer reported that with every iteration, the stronger the feeling of comprehension of the composer's intention became. By applying this sequence of steps, we think that the performer acquired a more direct way of impersonating the character of the piece and, by doing so, possibly acquired a better understanding of Debussy's way of notation.

Considerations

Following research employing computational analysis of the recordings would be beneficial in order to model performances as previously demonstrated (Yamaguchi & Gualda, 2013).

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