

# Something to tell: musical work interpretations of the performer as narrator

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## Abstract

The relationship between music and narrative has been extensively discussed since Nattiez (1990) onwards, establishing similarities between music and literary discourse, and its adaption to narratology. Beyond its literary form, narration is present in everyday life and is considered as a way of thinking, interpreting and creating a sense of the world and life, within the framework of one's own culture (Bruner, 1986). Narration and music are linked in inter-subjective communication from early childhood, being together in time without the need for a grammatical discourse (Malloch & Trevarthen, 1999). However, little has been written about the performer musician as a teller or narrator, and, as a consequence little is known about the ways a musical piece expresses the narrator's point of view. In this research, semi-structured interviews with performers were conducted to obtain musicians first person perspective on their performances. Results show that although grammatical content is not altered, the performer produces a new personal interpretation, a new way to make sense of the musical work. From a constructivist perspective, the performance of the work can be understood as the performer's construction of a version or transformation of a preceding version. Since narrative is expressed by the narrator's point of view or perspective (Bruner, 2002), we can understand the narration of a musical work from the performer's point of view.

## Background

Talking about music is an intricate task that theorists and analysts face when giving linguistic descriptions to non-linguistic sound phenomena. The use of analogies is a frequently used resource to describe different aspects of music. Based on simple relations of similarity, analogies can be used to apply terms and categories of a known domain to music in the form of linguistic statements to explain a phenomenon. Although analogical thinking contributes to knowledge, it is limited since it is unable to compare phenomena from different disciplines..

Many theorists have referred to music as a narrative, addressing musical texts through the implementation of Narratology categories (Maus, 1991; Newcomb, 1987). The main criticisms of these approaches focus on the impossibility of music to organize itself and to signify in the way that language does (Abbate, 1991; Nattiez, 1990). While all agree that narrative facilitates discussion about music in terms of a temporal unfolding, some authors argued that this analogy is made with the purpose of considering tonal music as a language in its own terms (Klein, 2013; McClary, 2000.).

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grammatical discourse (Español, 2014; Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009).

For decades the musical narrative focused on the creation of a musical discourse, understanding that composers create a linguistic syntax associated to the narrator's function. A possible alternative is to turn towards musical performance and the performer's role, (Abbate, 1991; Meelberg, 2006; Rink, 1994, 1999) to think of a narration that does not end in the score, but rather takes place between the musician and the audience (Shifres, 2007). However, there is little evidence in the literature about the performer musician as a teller or narrator, and as a result little is known about how a musical piece expresses the narrator's point of view.

## Aims

The current study aims to investigate performers' descriptions of their own musical performances, from a narrator's point of view.

## Method

A semi-structured interview was designed and conducted with 11 performers (9 pianists, 2 guitarists). The musicians were asked about (i) the interpretation of musical works previously performed, (ii) the musical scores, (iii) the process of rehearsal, and (iv) the performance in a concert situation. To develop categories, an analytical guide for coding and create nodes to organize and visualize the information, all interviews were transcribed and analyzed with NVivo 11 software.

## Results

The most frequent categories identified in coding analysis were "to narrate", "personal", and "emotions", while another relevant, although less frequent category, "dynamic", describes the performance by integrating the previous categories.

"To narrate" involves the use of linguistic analogies (to speak, to tell something) when the musician expresses him or herself through music; it also involves communication with the audience in the form of narrator-narratee relations; finally it involves descriptions of the performance as a creative activity. The activities of the performer understood as a narrative action involves the use of actions and gestures, which can also be described in terms of energy, or as an acting that exhibits them to others. The creative action of the performer has also been described as "to give life", "to form", "to project", "to build", "transform", "modify", "re-create", "invent", "play" or "to mould".

"Personal" emphasizes the role of the performer in deciding how to interpret the score, compared to the original

intention of the composer. This often implies that what is done during the performance is something of their "own" creation, and implies "choosing", "deciding", or "determining" the actions that are carried out. The expression of "personality", "imprint", "authenticity", and auto-perceived "presence" determine the sense of the "self" that performers intend to communicate through the musical work.

"Emotions" bring together feelings, sensations, and moods that are experienced by performers. In interviews, performers say that emotions are what make communication with the audience possible, they also emphasize their physical perception and the role of the body in the experience of these types of sensations.

"Dynamic" includes processes that occur over time in relation to the transformation or change of state of the work in terms of its interpretation. The dynamic aspect also implies that the performance of the work during performance is intimately linked to the emotional state that the performer presents at each moment.

### Conclusion

The evidence provided by the results of this study shows the musicians first person perspective on their performance as a creative or re-creative action. Although grammatical content is not altered, the musician provides a new way to interpret the music in a personal manner, making sense of the musical work.

The narrative that can emerge in a musical performance has more to do with human activity rather than being a resource of linguistic or literary organization. Since only sentient creatures can have or experience emotions (Davies, 2011), the performer's role is required to endow the work with intentionality, so the audience can attribute or share emotions related to music. In this sense, the social context of the performance gives meaning to the piece beyond its pure form (Gomila, 2013).

Unlike the grammatical content of the work, the interpretation is constantly updated and re-narrated in a dynamic manner. This renewal may occur due to repeated performances during the rehearsal or could be the result of emotions that the performer experiences in relation to the audience. From a constructivist perspective, the performance of the work can be understood as the performer's construction or transformation of a preceding version (Bruner, 1986).

The performer's activity understood as a narrative allows us to think about his or her actions in relation to the intentionality of telling something that goes beyond the content of the score, or that arises from it when they are guided toward a communicative intention in relation to the audience. Narrative could also be considered as the rethinking of time and context, to the extent that the music being performed allows the emergence of changes in the performer's self-perception, and also accompanies the musician's self-knowledge processes while interpreting the work.

Since narrative expresses the narrator's point of view or perspective (Bruner, 2002), in the same way we can understand the narration of a musical work from the performer's point of view.

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