

The art of performance music essay



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Performance to an audience is a complex art, with many multiple characteristics and attributes required to be of a high standard to convince the audience and to make the performance believable. In this essay, I shall be evaluating existing research into the area of performance and different conclusions it is possible to draw from this using research into Classically trained musicians, the difference between these musicians and jazz musicians and further, the impact that improvisation and playing from memory can have on an audience.

The art of performance is one that is complex. It is generally thought to have four concepts relating to the performer, with separate aspects that will relate to the listener. Initially, there is a planning stage, based around the practice of the piece which will store the aspects of the piece for reference during the latter stages of performance preparation. Secondly, the execution throughout the performance is key to any performance and is at the forefront of a performers mind. Thirdly communication through the music and causing a connection with the music separates a good performance from an excellent performance and added to that are the interpretative values a performer adds to the performance. Finally, the placing of the performance in context with the other performances and other similar pieces and the comparisons this would undoubtedly bring about, is also to be thought of during playing.

Although the list may be slightly reduced for an audience member than that for a performer, there are still many key thought processes which cause a linking between performer and audience. Initially, it is the concept of

emotion, and how the four points made above, may bring about a sense of emotional worth with an audience member.

Studies are often focused on Western Art Music and the style of performance that has dominated this genre over the last centuries. A key study, completed by Davidson (1993), found that vision is much more important to music perception than originally thought and aids the sound perception too, rather than distracting from it as often perceived in previous years. In his first experiment, four violinists played music using three different exaggerated expressions, whilst an audience watched in three different settings, either audio and visual, or either audio or visual alone. It was during this experiment Davidson (1993) found that the visual aspect is much more important than originally it was perceived to be and also that musicians are generally more adept at retaining expression than exaggerating expressions.

In a similar, follow on experiment, Davidson (1993) found that a magnitude of movement can also have an effect on the perception of the performance, further emphasising his belief that the visual aspect of a performance is just as important as the audio aspect.

There are many both positive and negative evaluative points in association with this study. Davidson (1993), have revealed a new area of research that will further the psychological understanding of the way the mind perceives performances for generations to come, and it enables a whole generation of performers to develop a style that will enhance performances for audiences for many years to come. However, there are some negative aspects with regards to this study. Firstly, there was only a very small audience sample

size in comparison to normal sample size experienced in a concert hall where a performance like this may usually take place. This means, that when an audience of this size is viewing the performance, the intimacy of the small audience is lost, and therefore could mean a change in perception of the performance. Also, a very limited range of expressions was used by Davidson (2003), and many more could be used to get a true analysis of audio perception over visual perception. It also only used the violin as the principal instrument in the experiment. This therefore means there are many other orchestral instruments for which this experiment could be used with and with different playing techniques and tonal qualities could mean that a different interpretation of the performance could be viewed. Finally, as I mentioned in the introductory sentences to this experiment, many experiments in this field are based upon the Western Art Music genre, and there is a lack of research into performance techniques of other genres such as Popular styles or World music styles, and this again might highlight further different perceptions on visual versus audio perceptions within a performance.

So, this study established a key new idea in that music is as much a visual art as it is an audio art. So would placing a music stand in front of a musician inhibit the visual art and lessen the connection with the audience? Or would it improve the connection based on the reliability of having the music in front of the performer and the orchestral layout being historically accurate. In a study into the performing of pieces without music, Williamson (1999) found some very interesting results.

Williamon (1999) asked 50 musicians and 36 non-musicians to evaluate performances of JS Bach's 'cello suites, by soloists with a minimum of 15 years experience of playing in multiple musical settings. The 'cellists were asked to perform in five varying conditions ranging from just learning the piece (not necessarily from memory) and being recorded, through memorising the piece and having the performance recorded on video and ending on playing with the music, though these performances were recorded. The differences between the memorised settings is that one included a music stand with no music whilst the other did not. In the final setting with the music, the position of the camera was changed from being in front of the audience to a view that meant the music stand was not on the score (Williamon, 1999).

It was found that the audience perceived a memorised performance as more skilled, but the inclusion of a music stand had a negative effect (particularly on the musicians in the audience) on the audience in a similar way that lack of thorough preparation also did (Williamon, 1999).

Therefore, this further adds to the findings of Davidson (1993) in that the visual aspect of a performance can aid or hinder the perception an audience may have not only of the performer but of the whole performance in general. However, there is a contrast between this study completed by Williamon (1999) and Davidson (1993) in that in Williamon's (1999) findings, musicians found increased visual aspects improved the performance given, unlike the findings of Davidson (1993) who found the direct opposite in that non-musicians were most impressed by the visual aspects.

To evaluate though, there was again a small sample size used with only a limited range of instruments, musical styles and other visual aspects can be explored. A whole orchestra of instruments could be used as soloists and a wind instrument may cause a different result over a stringed instrument. Also, would the gender of the musician mean that different expressions may be perceived by the audience member. Also lighting plays a large part in the orchestral mood, so this could also cause a change in expressive interpretation from performer to orchestra.

As far as emotion in music is researched in the field of psychology, there are many other factors and developments within this subject area which could mean vast improvements in years to come based on the understanding of the psychology of performance.

It is widely known that popular music and jazz have vastly different performing styles to those widely adopted by Western Art Music performers. Apart from studies completed by Madison (1992) and Honing and de Haas (2008), there has been limited research into this field. This would surely give very different views on performance due to the more relaxed nature of performance exhibited in these genres.

The experiments featured in this essay, despite causing a contradiction in terms of the results produced, open up new ideas in reference to possible changes in performing practices, with possible changes to the uses of music stands and the amount of movement a performer is allowed to exhibit during a performance. However, with small sample sizes, limitations in the use of

only stringed instruments and only one genre of music used, it would require a lot more research into the field before drastic changes could be made.

These experiments are extremely valuable to the area of musical psychology in the fact that they have given both listeners and performers of music a whole new insight into what was once a hidden art and have shown how slight changes in performance technique can influence an audience member greatly and change the whole interpretation and perception of a piece.

Therefore, the value of these initial experiments is high, but it is vital to remember that these are just the beginning and much more experimentation into the psychology of performance is required before the changes can be made to performance practices as a whole.