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The Lack of Philosophy in Interpreting a Musical Score and Integrating It to a Creative Performance within Overall Indonesia's Piano Education

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Abstract

Although piano education in Indonesia has grown significantly for the past 15 years, however, many students seem struggle with integrating philosophy as a mean of interpretation that causes lack of originality in their playing. Fundamentally, there are two problems: the focus on perfection of notes and the technical standards; and the mindset that a performance somewhat has an absolute truth, therefore, students are afraid of creatively surpassing or going beyond the vision of the composer. As a result, it is rare to see individual voices today in a performance; many good playing unfortunately become one-dimensional. Based on my 14-year university teaching, the cause to this uncreative performance is the lack of profound philosophical teaching that underlines the originality and authenticity of the students. The purpose of this writing is to describe the philosophical foundations that I summarize during my music studying and teaching career that are necessary to interpret a musical score; hence, the process of interpretation is different and the meaning we derive from the music will vary. The research methods include descriptions of the teaching from my previous professors regarding interpretation and performance; and discussion of my teaching experience with my selected students of various ages and backgrounds, whom I have worked closely for at least three years.

Keywords: interpretation, originality, performance, philosophy, technique

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Kurangnya Filosofi dalam Menginterpretasi Partitur Musik dan Mengintegrasikannya ke dalam Pertunjukan Kreatif dalam Pendidikan Piano di Indonesia Secara Keseluruhan

Abstrak

Walaupun pendidikan piano di Indonesia telah berkembang pesat dalam 15 tahun terakhir, tetapi masih banyak murid yang masih belum sepenuhnya mengintegrasikan filosofi untuk menghasilkan interpretasi individual mereka, sehingga menyebabkan kurangnya orisinalitas dalam permainan mereka. Pada dasarnya terdapat dua masalah akan fenomena ini: fokus mereka pada kesempurnaan not dan teknik; dan pola pikir bahwa suatu pertunjukan hanya memiliki satu kebenaran mutlak; oleh karena itu, murid takut secara kreatif melampaui atau melampaui visi sang komposer. Akibatnya, jarang terlihat dan terdengar suara individu sang murid dalam sebuah pertunjukan; banyak permainan bagus sayangnya menjadi menjadi satu dimensi saja. Berdasarkan pengalaman mengajar penulis selama 14 tahun di level universitas, akar dari masalah ini adalah kurangnya filosofi berpikir dan mengajar yang mengutamakan interpretasi yang orisinal dan otentik dari seorang murid. Tujuan dari penulisan ini adalah untuk memberikan fondasi filosofis yang penulis pelajari selama karir studinya di Amerika untuk dapat menginterpretasi sebuah partitur musik; proses interpretasi dan pengertian bermusik dari setiap murid pasti berbeda. Metode penelitian meliputi deskripsi pengajaran dari profesor saya sebelumnya mengenai interpretasi dan pertunjukan musik; dan diskusi tentang pengalaman mengajar saya dengan murid pilihan saya dari berbagai usia dan latar belakang, yang telah bekerja sama dengan saya selama setidaknya tiga tahun.

Kata Kunci: interpretasi, originalitas, pertunjukan, filosofi, teknik

Introduction

Piano education in Indonesia has been increasingly encouraging since I left in 2000 for advancing my professional study in the United States. At that time, there were only a few numbers of advanced piano teachers to study with in the entire country; I was blessed to have studied with one of them, Mrs. Iravati M. Sudiarso, a graduate of Peabody Conservatory of Music in 1964, whom I wrote and dedicated my DMA research document to. The overall music atmosphere was also not encouraging since there were no convincing conservatories and/or universities that offered formal academic music education focusing on piano performance; there was no professionally organized piano competition for me to learn and grow to be a better musician.

Not until 2004 when Universitas Pelita Harapan held the first national piano competition that would have changed the whole landscape of piano education in the country. As a result, there were at least three implications: First, there were great amount of increasing number of students who pursued formal piano education abroad and/or in Indonesia, which was not the case previously. Second, more universities started to be more serious in initiating and developing their music programs. Third, much more professional piano competitions were organized to increase the standard barometer of students' performances and to enhance further development for younger generations.

With all this significance and growth, however, I observe that pianistic playing has become one-dimensional since then, in which students are afraid of being creative in surpassing or going beyond the vision of the composer. Most of them focus only on technical perspective that causes the performance lacking of inspiration since there is no philosophy that underlines their interpretations; as a result, it is rare to see individual voices today and hence the celebration of one's creative ideas become stagnantly narrow. Many young pianists try to grow instantly by listening to recordings and then imitating them without clear understanding the reasoning behind the artists' decision in doing so; they do not realize that those artists learn from their previous failures rather than their triumphs. What they immediately need the most is the ability to interpret and perform a musical work with such independence in judgment, self-criticism, and creativity.

The motivation to write this journal begins with my experience during my doctoral study at West Virginia University. During three arguably most important years in understanding music, I studied with Dr. Peter Amstutz, who worked closely with the legendary Leon Fleisher for significant years at Peabody Conservatory. In summary, his teaching style gives students an opportunity to be self-independent in criticizing their own playing, which results in security feeling during a performance by trusting their judgments with strong philosophical arguments underneath the decisions. Below are five (of many) philosophies that I learned tremendously during those years that not only change the way I interpret music but also impact my students' playing greatly, which should be applied to many students at any level to achieve such creative performance.

First Philosophy: The Independence of One's Creative Ability

One may have heard about "the golden age of piano playing," which spanned around 1830s-1960s. There are at least four reasons why it was called accordingly and suitably: first, there was a significant development especially in the piano's mechanism that enabled unprecedented

expressions in sound and tone color. Second, there were a great number of new pieces for the instrument, especially the character piece, a new genre associated almost exclusively with the piano that explored the character of a particular emotion. Third, there was the emergence of virtuosic players; as a result, the gap between amateur and professional musicians expanded in the nineteenth century, starting from Beethoven's piano sonatas that were criticized for their technical difficulty. And lastly, the understanding from every performer that music was a spontaneously and improvisatorially living performance, hence they were so creative in re-creating the soul and essence of music seen from their life perspectives.

Many claim that the death of legendary pianist Vladimir Horowitz in 1989 basically marked the end of this so-called golden age since creative, inspiring, and magical piano performances were almost nowhere to be found afterward. Martin Kettle (born 1949), a British music journalist and writer, stated:

> "What is more striking, I think, is that the age of the intellectual pianist, the priestly interpreter of the classic works, is disappearing too. This tradition, stretching from Bulow and Busoni to Schnabel and Arrau now lives on largely in Alfred Brendel . . . . Evgeny Kissin is regularly hailed as the greatest of the modern age. But his reviews were terrible. The fans had cheered him, yet the critics hated his technically flawless playing. . . .But in my view, modern concert pianists have become boring. Very few of them have anything very interesting to say, at least to me. . . .Pianists, and the audiences who listen to them, can no longer be sure that they represent a living and constantly regenerating art form." (Kettle, 2002).

In order to search for one's creative ability in playing piano, the first step is to be aware that he is a musician, not just a pianist, and then fully understand the capability of the instrument he is playing. A true musician plays music using an instrument as the medium to do so. Victor Wooten, a guitarist, during his conversation with his teacher, recalled:

> "A true writer can write using a typewriter, a pen, a pencil, or anything else that he chooses. You would not call him a pencil writer, would you? Your understanding that the writing utensil is just a tool allows you to see past it and into the truth of what he is – a writer. The story is in the writer, is it not? Or is it in the pencil? Your problem is this: you have been trying to tell your story *with* a bass guitar instead of *through* it." (Wooten, 2006).

The next step to discuss after the point above is another fundamental that should be asked from the earliest year of study: "how do you make music from this instrument?" And "do you need any creativity in order to really make music?" To play piano solely as a percussion instrument is not too difficult; however, to change the piano from being percussive to living and singing instrument is terribly difficult since it takes fantasy, will, and creativity to learn singing the instrument. A student must be well-trained from the beginning to gain the independence of

judgment, of self-criticism, and of his creative ability to listen to and make the instrument sing, otherwise, the sound would be harsh and unmusical.

One of the more important concerns about piano mechanism that student needs to be well-taught is the pedal, which, when mastered artistically, is the most crucial resource for exquisite tone color. So often that wonderful teacher do not put highest attention to it and therefore neglect the possibilities of full artistry; pedal is usually yet mistakenly thought in these two theoretical ways: firstly, when there is harmonic change, he is to change pedal for "clean" sound; and secondly, no two simultaneous chords can be done within one same pedal. Nevertheless, one might wonder what the best pedaling in the opening bars of Chopin's Barcarolle would be; it contains four bars with such complex chords sustained by the dominant pedal point. Students must explore this wonderful tool for the most beautiful effect, as Alfred Brendel, an acclaimed Austrian pianist put it wonderfully:

> "The piano is a much richer instrument than we had ever dreamed of, even in our most ambitious dreams. As an instrument, the piano is a sort of magic device which can communicate everything from a singing voice to orchestra sound. Of course it has its own sound. Some will say that the piano should sound like everything but a piano! I don't go along with that. There are real piano sounds. Masters like Chopin and Debussy gave us examples of sound which only the piano can produce because of this magical device called the pedal." (Mach, 1991).

I was blessed to have a wonderful teacher who addressed these fundamental questions during my study at West Virginia University. At the first time I came to Amstutz's studio, I played Chopin Barcarolle, and after I finished playing, he commented and asked me:

"Bravo! Do you have any questions? Concerns? Doubts?" He asked.

"I guess so far so good; I think I handle it pretty well," I answered

"That's what I thought! You certainly have the idea what to do with the music. Do you have anything else to play?"

My previous piano professor was the internationally-recognized Arnaldo Cohen at Indiana University, who was by far the greatest pianist and pedagogue during my music career. He would see every weakness of his students and provided the best solutions as immediate as possible. His playing was so great that he promptly became my biggest inspiration; and his teaching was so intensely stimulating that I hardly could miss my attention to him. But I realized that I missed one most defining moment after I graduated, which was the intense direction; I was waiting and searching for instructions how to shape the music. After finishing my master's degree in 2006, I came back home searching for this answer for four years before going to West Virginia University.

An inspiring piano teacher should give all his knowledge within the shortest time and provide the student a sense of artistic independence as quickly as possible. Often times during masterclass sessions, either as an active participant or passive audience, I find that students cannot answer such question like "what is the meaning of this passage for you?" or "what does this part convey to you personally?" the inability to answer these questions is because of the lack of independence of one's creative ability. Students are not stimulated enough for the sense of hearing that explore many different ideas in a score.

This teaching style definitely is not found so often in the modern piano teaching in Indonesia. Teachers at times unconsciously instill their ideas to students so much that they are not trained to be independent in listening to the music. Some even require students to listen to recordings just to imitate them with no understanding of the reasoning why the artists in the recordings do it that way. As a result, imitating becomes the instant way of learning for most students. This is exactly the essence that distinguishes the golden age of piano playing with modern time; the playing of previous great masters is fascinating for its honesty and freedom of expression that results in creating fantasy that is attached to our lives and emotional history.

To conclude the first philosophy, I would like to quote Maria João Pires (born 1944), an internationally-acclaimed Portuguese pianist, who stated:

> "In art you don't teach, you just guide people giving them advice. As you are older and more experienced you teach them how to know themselves and how to do the work alone. I don't say "you should play like this and that" because it doesn't work. It's important if the person in front of you have certain independence and capacity to face consciousness. I think consciousness is what you have to face, which is very difficult in certain periods of life." (Libeer, 2013).

Second Philosophy: The Understanding of Singing and Speaking the Instrument

During a masterclass led by a German pianist Hans-Jürgen Schnoor (born 1946) in 2016 at Universitas Pelita Harapan, one student performed Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier in G minor from book I; after she finished playing, Mr. Schnoor asked her:

"Do you speak German?" He asked.

"I don't," she replied.

And then he said, "How could you play this music but you don't know any German? To understand music that you play, you need to understand the language and its characteristics; therefore music is a language."

That conversation strikes me since I hear the old cliché many times but I just understand the whole point at that moment; even the whole accentuation of Western language is so different with Indonesian language that makes our "pronunciation" harder. I realize that music is a form of language higher than words since music can convey things that words are insufficient or incapable. To be fluent in speaking the music language is by doing it repeatedly until it gets natural; and to speak naturally, one must hear it every day.

There are two important aspects when perform piano music: to sing and to speak. These two words, perhaps identical in meanings, differ greatly. Singing is more as a common sense, in which people from any background and culture will have this commonality in identifying a phrase and its shape of a melody; speaking, is more subjective since it requires the right accentuation and grammar. In an interview conducted by Elijah Ho in September 2014, Fleisher states clearly:

> "It is not too difficult to find a player who really sings on his instrument; but it's very rare to find a player who speaks on his instrument. That's a profound distinction. Speaking involves inflection and an understanding of the language. Many young pianists play their instruments most wonderfully, but it's as though they're speaking a foreign language, phonetically." (Ho, 2014).

Horowitz also states:

> "So the most important thing is to make a percussive instrument a singing instrument. Teachers should stress this aspect in the instruction, but it seems that very few of them actually do. The few who do aren't always understood by the students." (Mach, 1991).

Amstutz suggested me to practice not on the piano key; he often asked me to close the piano keyboard and practice on the top of its wood.

"Why do I have to practice this way?" I asked.

And he replied, "So you will focus totally on the articulation and the shape. By doing it, you can clearly hear if you speak just enough to convey the emotion."

At first, I found it pretty confusing since I was not sure if I could achieve the goal. It took me sometime to understand, but when I did, I found it very useful that I applied it to my students as well. When I keep practicing on the keyboard, the beauty of the pitches will close my ear not to listen to how well and clear I speak the music. This practicing will help my ear to listen to the clarity of my articulation, dynamic, phrase, and pulse.

To achieve the most wonderful singing and speaking tone, student must understand very well about using his body to achieve the desired sound. Amstutz advised that the arms must move fluently, combined with loose wrists to get the desired sound with no interruption of the flow of the movement. It is really fascinating that even the most advanced student most likely has problem with executing two-note slur; no matter how precise and well a student can control his fingers dynamically, but if it is not produced from the whole arm function, the sound would not be musical. To produce a full and rounded tone, student needs to be aware of the alignment of hand, arm, shoulder, and body.

Third Philosophy: The Real Understanding of Technique and Its Use

For me, there are two ways of explaining the term "technique" to my students: in terms of physical and artistic understanding. Technique in physical term is the ability to play the key with such speed, agility, and strength; however, it is the lowest form of what technique really constitutes. The highest ideal of technique is essentially how we use our body and synchronize them to achieve the desired sound. There is a good quote from Victor Seroff (1902-1979), a Georgian pianist, about technique:

> "The usual meaning of the word 'technique' when applied to piano playing, is merely skill in using the fingers, wrists, and arms. But actually it does go much than purely physical skill; for under the heading of technique comes perfect control of the instrument as well. In short, technique means the accumulation of musical knowledge combined with physical skill, for the purpose of achieving any interpretation the performer desires." (Seroff, 1970).

When the technique does not serve the life of the music, it is meaningless. The purpose of technique is to produce a beautiful tone, in which a student must spend such dedicated time in developing and listening to the right touch and attack in playing. Student is also to be fully aware in slow practice to develop the desired touch. Many Indonesian students do not really like to practice slow, and as a result, their playing are full of holes, musically speaking. They do not realize that music making is born because of slow practice that is done carefully in a certain period of time, which helps to solidify articulation, phrasing, and memorization.

Another purpose of appropriate technique is in line to the second philosophy, which is to sing the instrument, fundamentally the most important in music. A good pianist should be able to think and apply the piano key in orchestral terms, which is the key in creating tone color; this quality of playing is rarely found in the modern time. John Browning (1855-1926) stated that

students are not able to use their imaginations awakened to sound like Horowitz, for example, who can produce ten voices just like ten different instruments. Vladimir Ashkenazy (born 1937), a Russian pianist, interestingly states:

> "I tend to think that Russia creates good musical sportsmen rather than great artists. They play well, but I don't think they say very much. I can't remember hearing any young pianist who impressed me with something on the spiritual level. Their technique was proficient, but there was nothing more than that. . . .The pianist is disciplined to be first, but I can't say that he brings any fresh life to the music he plays." (Mach, 1991).

In order to produce natural and beautiful singing tone, student needs to fully incorporate the whole body to function properly. The main attention is fully pointed at moving the arm and the wrist with the correct use of strong weight to minimalize percussive sound. In general, technique in the mechanical sense is just the basic, but it will not produce musical sound; it should be natural with no force whatsoever, and it all comes from the musical conception, as Fleisher always emphasizes to hear before you play! Whatever comes without previous listening is just an accident.

Fourth Philosophy: The Real Meaning of Originality/Authenticity – The Necessity to Have Individuality of Style

One of the most common discussions of modern playing is regarding authenticity – into what degree do we have to be faithful to the composer? We cannot possibly compare this time to the previous eras since things are different, including their cultures, backgrounds, technologies, and many other things; as a result, the process of interpretation in order to create a creative performance is also continuously changing.

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) once stated, "If it sounds better, you not only can, but you have to." Being faithful certainly means that we convey what the composer meant seen from our perspectives – the depth of the whole person is necessary for interpreting a musical work. Student needs to re-create, not create! The music has been created by a certain composer, and since we live in two different eras, therefore, it will not be possible to do exactly what the composer intended initially. This is the great challenge of being an artist, in which we have to let the student's talent merge with the composer. Being faithful means being in touch with the composer's original emotional message by fully understand what is behind the notes, not just playing the notes as written.

As mentioned previously that a teacher must grow a sense of independence in student's artistic development as fast as possible, it is crucial to instill the idea that an artist must have individuality of style to successfully convey something meaningful. Student's job is not simply to play the notes, regardless how beautiful he plays; it is all about sharing his experience so that the audience have new perspectives and spontaneous listening experience to the music. Whatever the result is, it will be worthwhile and satisfying to every party because of the fresh approach of the work.

Amstutz often stressed the understanding that there was no such thing as the correct way to play a piece since each performer is responsible for the decision of tempo, timings, pedaling, style, and other elements as long as it is argumentative, unpredictable, and exciting. In a performance, students are afraid to take risks that the performance becomes "standard." One of my university students, Elaine Christlee, said,

> "The tendency of performers focusing only on the accuracy of the notes is still plenteous. It is indeed crucial, but the most significant thing in a performance is all about the originality from the performer. Every person has different stories to share in their music. Each written note represents a certain thought and idea of a composer and it is the job for the performer to share the music with his own interpretation. A true performer should have the independence to judge himself." (Interview on June 24, 2018).

And Jennifer, an UPH alumnus (graduated in 2010) of my studio, added:

> "Students focus so much on executing the notes until the point that playing well means perfect notes and rhythms. This mindset makes us as a performer become stiff in terms of the tone, the music, and the message – a failure to play music as if you're re-telling a story from the composer with your own way and style. Students should spend more time to understand the concept and then present in a number of different ways." (Interview on June 24, 2018).

Although the term "authenticity" may vary among pianists, but the only goal of understanding it is in term of authenticity of feelings. It is not what is written, but to be connected with the message behind the score. Students should not play a work twice the same way; it must be changing; it must always be new and fresh. Therefore, students should be well-aware the purpose of listening to any recordings is just as references, but not to imitate, which is the most dangerous form of an art. Many do not project the spirit of the music because the focus is too much on the notes. Students should not search for perfection because there will be no final interpretation.

Marissa Pratiwi, an UPH alumnus (graduated in 2016) and has been studying with me since then, stated:

> "One of the most important things to convey in music is to be honest to yourself. If the passage is ugly, I want an ugly sound, and vice versa. I want the sound as I want and not to just be beautiful. I am trying to speak the truest authenticity of feelings rather than just to produce beautiful music." (Interview on June 24, 2018).

My other two private students, Kania Wijayanti and Harverstianto Gilbert, added the same idea that they were often times too busy focusing on notes, dynamics, and articulations to be perfect; however, that thought decreased their joy of producing coherent and natural music. Harvest also said that practicing simplicity by playing melody and fundamental bass helped him to truthfully shape the music as he felt.

To summarize this section, the quote from Lili Kraus (1903-1986) ends perfectly:

> "The emphasis, therefore, sees to be on playing every note in its proper place, but without making a personal statement, showing no passionate involvement and taking no risks. Sometimes, when I listen to them, I fail to detect any joy of sadness. It all sounds the same: slow, fast, soft, loud. But I want to hear concepts, not just notes. The emotional content of what is played must be in head and heart, not just in the fingers or on the sleeve." (Mach, 1991).

Fifth Philosophy: The Importance of Slight Delay in the Voice

The last philosophy is perhaps the most important one, which is the understanding of the slight delay in the voice. The principal is that no other instruments (except percussion) can produce direct sound; it needs slight delay to sound nicely. During my study in the States, I only heard this concept from Fleisher, which was "to begin sound as late as possible but not too late," the term he called "in-time-ness." This natural timing will produce more expression on something, not just expressing music. Piano is a rich instrument that can communicate everything from human's voice to any orchestral instruments, plus its own sound using the tool called pedal. Horowitz also stressed about the delay not only in playing but also in pedaling, so that the sound will be so rich in resonance.

Some students may be worried about delaying the sound because of their concept of metronome, which role is basically to check tempo. It is just a machine, and therefore it has nothing to do with breathing of the music. Another role of metronome is to function as a barometer of progress. Amstutz stressed to me about the importance of dance feeling – one per bar in general. He then asked me to practice just the main melody with the simplest bass line, with one-per-bar

counting, and then to phrase the music as no group of notes can be played without some phrasing; if I could do it easily, it meant that I knew the direction of the music.

Another aspect to master, still about delaying sound is how we treat silence, which theoretically means something between the notes in connection with the time value; it is important to express it at the right moment, to know how long or how much sustain, or how much delay to the next one. Since silence is already indicated by the composer on the score, it is about how we perceive that and how the quality of the silence can elevate the drama. Many students mistakenly think of it as a blank – a pause; it is part of the music, or even more important that the sound as Debussy indicated.

Conclusion

There are definitely many music talents in Indonesia, who statistically have won many local to international competitions. The level of discipline is also good that produce many good pianists for the past 10 years; however, there is a very important missing element to complete their understanding about music, which is unfortunately not being thought and conveyed in details – the philosophies in making decision with the music itself; to have common sense and genuine feeling toward the music, which is not just what is written but the emotional message behind the notes – as shared by my student Belinda Etenia.

I believe it is very crucial that a teacher develops the love and passion of music, piano, and sound to the students as early as possible; to show them the full capabilities of the instrument! And then he works "technically" with the students how to produce the music they desire: the tone, the shape, the phrase, the delay, the singing quality, the speaking quality, the message behind the notes, etc. It is his job that students gain sense of independence at the earliest time so that they will be able to do self-evaluation, which is lacking in modern time, at least in Indonesia.

Based on my study at West Virginia University, I realize that practicing is a mental work after all, not just physical exercise. The best memory for me is when my teacher asked me to practice on the keyboard cover so I would not have been bothered by the beautiful pitch. Often times, if not most of the times, I failed to even detect the notes, which indicated that I knew the notes but not the music. When students only concentrate on the notes or any technical issues, they are wasting their times.

It also fascinates me that students are not keen to see voice recital and learn from them – how they breathe, how they hit high/low register, know the capacity and capability of voice – which is very crucial to develop such tone that change the nature of piano from being percussive into singing. In Indonesia, the teaching emphasis on listening is still very rare; often times an exceeding number of piano competitions make it even worse since they tend to compare and conclude who is better. Students rather like to keep on practicing difficult music, and they would spend so much time on that.

It is my hope to see the piano education will grow significantly, in which students become more aware of reproducing singing tone quality for musical playing, along with understanding philosophies for a better creativity and originality in their playing. To conclude, I would like to quote Stephen Hough (born 1961) during his visit to Jakarta in 2016 while giving masterclass, "Music doesn't exist until a performer recreates the sounds."

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