

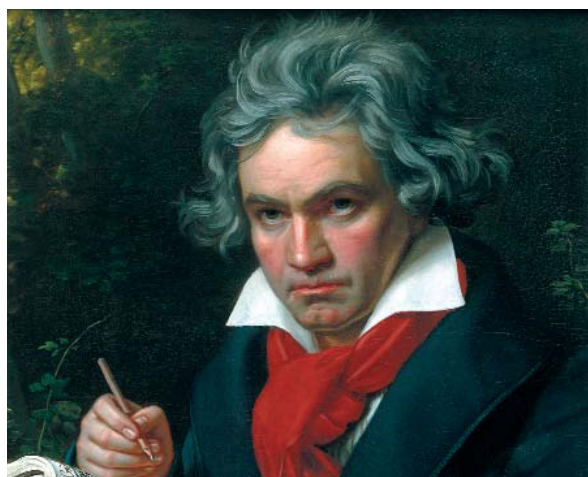
Interpreting Beethoven's sonatas

It is only recently that scientific research has turned its attention to interpretation, a relatively poorly understood subject. Through an analysis of old and modern recordings of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Pathétique*, the Conservatorio della Svizzera italiana (CSI) wants to explore the notion of interpretation as related to musical performance. The study seeks to identify the main interpretative ideas revolving around this work, and to analyse how pianists performed them. Funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), the study brings together students from piano classes and is conducted in association with the Swiss National Sound Archives, and Professor Hans Günther of the University of Freiburg im Breisgau.

Nowadays, 'classical music' tends to mean practising and performing a repertoire largely made up of composers such as Ludwig van Beethoven, Robert Schumann, and Frédéric Chopin. These works are brought back to life under the fingers of the interpreter, the pianist, who turns into musical sounds what would otherwise be a purely graphic object, a text of musical notation. Achieving an interpretation is far more than merely reproducing sounds encoded in a score. Interpreting a musical passage means breathing life into the symbols of musical notation arranged on a sheet of paper, and giving them the best possible meaning. In other words, the interpreter makes a series of choices on aspects of musical performance that do not derive from the notation per se, and challenge the concepts of form, style, and expressiveness.

The project of the Conservatorio della Svizzera italiana aims to look into musical performance as interpretation, or as artistic (rather than purely mechanical) gesture, with a view to recreating the piece by applying the filter of the interpreter's sensibility.

Dr Hubert Eiholzer, director of the Research Department at the Conservatorio and project leader, explains: "We want to find out what the art of interpretation consists in. In other words, we are wondering whether there exist universal features and common strategies underlying all



Ludwig van Beethoven (© Beethoven-Haus Bonn, www.beethoven-haus-bonn.de).

the various artistically interesting interpretations currently available". A listener who is only imperfectly acquainted with a given musical piece will indeed find it hard to grasp the aesthetically significant aspects of the composition that may lead to an ever new interpretation. Hence, the question arises as to how to identify those shifts in tempo and dynamics through which the interpreter's choice becomes audible.

The study concentrates in particular on Beethoven's piano sonata no. 8, op. 13, known as *Pathétique*. It analyses past recordings (of the 1920s and 1930s) as well as contemporary ones (of the 1980s and 1990s), its scores and historical texts.

Three piano students of the Conservatorio are involved in the project, which is funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) in the framework of the DORE programme. Research is conducted in collaboration with the Swiss National Sound Archives (see box), which supplies its archival collection of recordings, and with Professor Hans Günther of the University of Freiburg im Breisgau (Germany). Early results of the survey were presented at a seminar that was held this October.

Swiss National Sound Archives

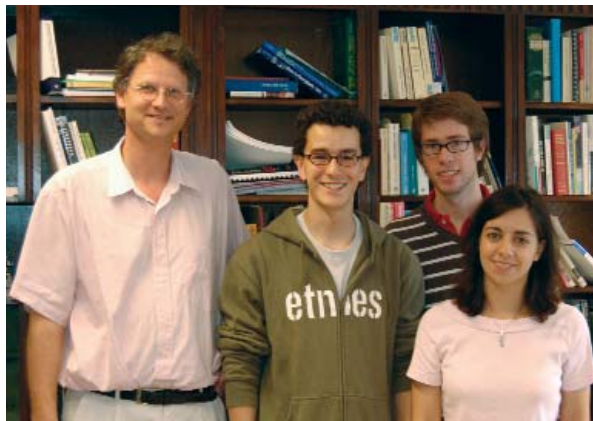
The Swiss National Sound Archives (www.fonoteca.ch), under the directorship of Dr Pio Pellizzari, is responsible for collecting, cataloguing, and making available to the public all sound carriers that, for their content, are demonstrably connected with the history and culture of Switzerland. Since its creation in 1987, the Institution has attracted substantial resources, belonging to outstanding figures of the music world, institutions, communities and collectors. All the material assembled (largely sound carriers) has been donated to the Sound Archives by its owners or their heirs. The collections include products of the record industry, historical radio broadcasts, sound documents of scientific research, deposits of the SUISA Foundation for music, and fonds of the Swiss National Library.

Revisiting interpretation

An initial finding has already emerged from the inquiry; it has to do with *tempo*, defined as speed and pace. The notion of ‘tempo’ is crucial in assessing the degree of consistency of the interpretation of the sonata, articulated in three movements: *Grave - Allegro di molto e con brio, Adagio, Rondò-allegro*. Tempo variations, in fact, can alter the character of the music and its expressive quality. *“Having analysed a few recordings of the first movement of the sonata and measured the duration of the various parts of this movement, we can draw some conclusions. Pianists who grew up in the cultural context of the late Romantic period of the 19th century were noticeably more free in handling tempo, while pianists who reached maturity in the Inter-War period had a more steady approach to tempo”*, explains Dr Eiholzer.

■ Involving the experts

Major contributions to the analysis have been made by Dr Pio Pellizzari, director of the Swiss National Sound Archives, and by Hans Günther, professor of philology at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau. Reading a musical text is not a straightforward process, since musical notation – compared to the complexity of the artistic phenomenon that is music – represents a rather inadequate graphic convention. Add the fact that what we hear not always reflects the conscious choice of the pianist but is rather more the product of technological manipulations that have little to do with the musician’s work. The recorded material we have was produced in recording studios; it is the result of a collaborative process involv-



The research team, left to right: Hubert Eiholzer, Hernando Florez, Matteo Schürch, and Elena Alessandri.

ing sound technicians and sound engineers. The contribution of Dr Pellizzari, director of the Sound Archives and an authority in the history of music recordings, will be instrumental in shedding light on these problems and re-contextualising the most significant steps in the record’s production process.

The project is especially interesting for other reasons, too: on the one hand, it will enable students to realise that interpretation is an open concept lending itself to a variety of readings; on the other hand, an in-depth analysis of some interpretations from a historical point of view may generate new interpretative ideas. *“One might reasonably claim that a sonata has more than one interpretation; if so, one could legitimately wonder whether a great musical work may not be precisely that which lends itself to a range of aesthetically pleasing interpretations”*, concludes Eiholzer.

Conservatorio della Svizzera italiana

Affiliated with the University of Applied Sciences of Southern Switzerland since 2005, the Conservatorio della Svizzera italiana (CSI) provides professional training in Italian in the areas of performance, composition, and music pedagogy. Special emphasis is placed on the study of ‘new music’, its performance and interpretation. CSI has built important partnerships with academic and scientific institutions nationally (Swiss National Sound Archives and the University of Lugano) and internationally (Royal College of Music, London). Its research objectives include a survey on learning strategies, the exploration of the psychological and physiological aspects of musical practice, with their implications for music teaching, the historical and systematic study of the interpretation and reception of music.

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