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Metric Expressivity: An Introduction

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Abstract

This article discusses how meter and musical impulses can generate distinct character traits in music according to a performer's interpretation of the metric notation. It is part of an ongoing research project focused on interpretative elements and using analytical as well as auto-ethnographical methods. This article includes analysis and comparisons of historical recordings contiguous to performance-focused analysis. It is based on the study of metric components, organizational structures, and metric-structuring elements and concepts developed by Edward T. Cone (1968), David Epstein (1995a, 1995b), Roy Howat (1995), Mine Doğantan-Dack (2012, 2014), and Nicholas Cook (2001). These writers' thoughts are placed in juxtaposition to those of Tobias Matthay (1913), Pablo Casals and David Blum, (1977), Anner Bylsma (2001), János Starker (2004), Leon Fleisher (Fleisher and Midgette, 2010), Artur Schnabel (paraphrased in Fleisher and Midgette, 2010), and Mario Brunello (2016), aiming to provide tools and possibilities that might support interpretive decisions for future performers. The author proposes a new term, metric expressivity, to indicate a previously underestimated layer of expressive element in music performance.

Keywords: analysis for performance, interpretation, pulse, hypermeasure, metric expressivity

Introduction

The impact of witnessing an outstanding live performance or listening to a persuasive recording can lead us to a truly enriching musical experience. Even though this could be measured by the subjectivity of taste, it is actually a combination of musical and technical elements. However, eventually we ask ourselves what really creates such a convincing and impactful musical performance. Therefore, questions might arise such as how to achieve technical flow while keeping musical coherence and how possible it is to express oneself with sense of musical truth and integrity. With those aspects in mind, we have combined

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theoretical concepts by Edward T. Cone, David Epstein, Nicholas Cook, and Mine Doğantan-Dack, juxtaposed with interpretative thoughts of artists such as Artur Schnabel, Tobias Matthay, Pablo Casals, János Starker, Leon Fleisher, Anner Bylsma, Mario Brunello, and others, in order to propose what might be called Metric Expressivity Theory as another stratum of expressive element as far as interpretation is concerned, which demonstrates the importance of the performer's voice in this sort of music research. We are, thus, challenged to discover how meter—as one of the basic elements in music—might be of substantial importance in determining character in music according to the way it can be musically articulated.

As performers, we are urged to deliver convincing interpretations of anything we propose to present, trying to show technical fluidity, rhythmic control, balance and consistency, gradations of tone colors, and total control of technique, as well as control of the instrument we perform. It's something like assembling a big puzzle. For instance, with respect to timing, some players simply reach it through intuition, and some rely on specific musical parameters that we discuss in this article. In this sense, British pianist and pedagogue Tobias Matthay emphasizes that a solid sense of rhythm is one of the fundamental aspects of musical interpretation. According to him, when a performance shows a strong sense of rhythmic control, people in the audience have a feeling that the music is alive. On the other hand, "when the rhythm is lax, or time-continuity is broken up, they feel that it is 'as dead as a door nail.'" In both circumstances, audience members will probably be unaware of the cause of their comfort or discomfort. Matthay also claims that "Indeed, so strong is this rhythmical need of the public, that when rhythmical grip is lacking in a performer no other attractions offered by him can save the piece."¹ This means that a strong sense of timing is crucial to the success of any performance.

Having pointed this out, we should look for the basic concepts and definitions regarding musical parameters such as beat, pulse, meter, motive, and hypermeasure; we should understand how these concepts might help the performer to build up phrases, delineate larger sections, and also establish some interpretative parameters. We also consider some possible notational limitations and reflect on some of the parameters to which, as performers, we should pay attention during the process of structuring the interpretation of a musical work.

We should begin, first, by defining musical interpretation and discussing what musical interpretation is all about. Since music constitutes a temporal art, music notation can be succinctly described as a graphic system formed by a series of codes and symbols, which are decoded from rules, norms, and concepts that govern it. In this sense, the *Harvard*

1. Tobias Matthay, *Musical Interpretation: Its Laws and Principles, and Their Application in Teaching and Performing* (Boston: Boston Music Co., 1913), 33.

Dictionary of Music defines musical interpretation as “those aspects of the performance of a work that result from the performer’s particular realization of the composer’s instructions as set down in musical notation.”² Along the same lines, Robert Donington describes it as the aspect of music that results from the difference between notation, which preserves a written record of the music, and performance, which gives renewed life to the musical experience.³

Thus, music notation consists in determining, as closely as possible, something that is apparently abstract as sound, based on the four sound parameters, namely: pitch, duration, intensity, and timbre. According to that assumption, the notational system employed in Western classical music determines where the sound is located—in the sense of whether it is placed in a lower or higher register according to its position on the staff. It also determines the duration of each sound through the rhythmic indication of their values. Additionally, the score also specifies the intensity of the sound through the use of dynamic indications, which determines the volume of sound production. Finally, the score also establishes timbre, through the designation of its instrumentation—for example, the same note played by the cello or the piano presents distinct colors and qualities.

The Limits of Music Notation and the Role of The Performer

In performing arts such as theater, the text needs the actor to interpret and perform it in order to make the play fully come to life, despite the fact that the play’s script can still survive by itself in the form of a literary work. For instance, the text of a Shakespeare play still is a form of artistic expression even without its staging, being considered a work of art per se. On the other hand, in the same way that any written language has its limitations, giving place to multiple interpretations, musical notation also does not faithfully—or fully—express all the composer’s intentions. Even with the degree of musical notation development that we have reached so far, we all agree that there are several limitations on the music notation system that we have traditionally used. Despite the addition of numerous indications of expression marks, as well as signs of nuances and musical details, there is still a gap between composers’ musical thoughts and the ability to record absolutely all their intentions through musical notation. This is, in fact, an important aspect for our discussion since this supposed limitation of the graphic system leaves room for the importance of the performer’s role in the music-making process. Moreover, we must consider the protagonist-like role of the performer to give life to this form of artistic expression that is music. Consequently, we conclude that musical composition can be fully

2. Don M. Randel, ed., *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1986), 399.

3. Robert Donington, “Interpretation,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: MacMillan, 1980), 9:276.

configured as a work of art based on its performance. In other words, the music is fully understood by an audience only through the creative sensitivity of the performer. Therefore, the performer is co-responsible for the re-creation of the musical work, in order to give its complete meaning and (why not say it?) bring the musical work to life.⁴

Hence, we assume that music, as an art form, is mostly dependent on the interpreter's participation—and therefore, on the player's ability to communicate with the audience, since a musical composition notated in the printed score is absolutely an incomplete work of art without its realization, which means, its performance. Thus, music is a medium for artistic expression subordinated to the figure of the interpreter. In this regard, Leon Botstein assertively questions: "Does the music exist unplayed? And even if it did, how do we know it is great?" He concludes that "Music, in the final analysis, exists only in temporal space and performance. The inexhaustibility of performance, interpretation, and circumstances of communication through music is what privileges the performer."⁵ Without its performance, music could be reduced to mere notes printed on a sheet of paper, a work that is not only unfinished, but also without life or expression. Not by chance, pianist Carol Montparker describes the figure of the performer as a re-creative musician, someone whose activity finds plenty of possibilities to explore creativity.⁶ This means that, in developing our role with musical integrity, we place our artistic and creative aptitude toward giving shape to each work we perform. In this same sense, cellist János Starker emphasizes that artistic motivation should be committed to the search toward purity and interpretative simplicity, focusing on structural issues, in the act of recreating a masterpiece.⁷

The importance of the role of the interpreter is thus crucial to the renewal of any musical composition, while providing the necessary sense of freshness to a performance—an aspect that is reinforced by the changes in musical aesthetics that we have witnessed throughout the years.⁸ This is responsible for keeping a masterwork alive and invigorated

4. Felipe Avellar de Aquino, "A Partitura e Seus Limites: Reflexões Sobre Alguns dos Parâmetros Musicais e o Processo de Construção Interpretativa," in *Antimanual de Direito e Arte*, ed. Marcílio Franca Filho, Geílson Salomão Leite, and Rodolfo Pamplona Filho (São Paulo: Saraiva, 2016), 29–42.

5. Leon Botstein, "Notes from the Editor: Artur Schnabel and the Ideology of Interpretation," *Musical Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (December I, 2001): 587–94.

6. Carol Montparker, *A Pianist's Landscape* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1998), 89.

7. János Starker, *The World of Music According to Starker: A Memoir* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 273.

8. Mine Doğantan-Dack skillfully discusses how the relationship among composer, score, and musical performance has evolved throughout the last three centuries. In that sense, she remarks that "the issue of integrating the performer's discourse within the discipline—and recognizing the epistemological equality of the act of music-making in the generation of disciplinary knowledge—remains a challenge and an ongoing

over decades or centuries of being successively played, an aspect that can only be reached through implementing fresh ideas extracted from the same musical score. Hence, the fact that each interpreter has unique musical concepts results in interpretations of the same musical text that are so distinct and particular.

Making Interpretative Decisions

Throughout the process of interpretative construction, the performer is faced with numerous musical decisions in order to fill the gap between the limits of music notation and issues regarding faithfulness to the musical text. Major aspects of a composition can be listed, such as melody and dynamics; rhythm and articulation; harmony and form; tempo, pulse, and meter; and finally, style and character. All these elements should be analyzed and taken into consideration during the process of phrase construction, as well as when creating musical gestures. However, all these parameters are contextual, according to the period and style of each work and the particular composer we have in mind, getting more specifically into the evolution of musical aesthetics.⁹ According to Leon Fleisher and Anne Midgette, “the real point is to see the music in terms of the gestures that the composer intended. What you want is to figure out the intention of the music and how you’re going to get it across. . . . you just want to avoid being so hypercorrect that you lose the integrity of the gesture in what amounts to inessential details.”¹⁰ In this regard, Nicholas Cook asserts that “musical performance involves negotiating between the demands of physical gesture and sound (we can classify these under the heading of ‘playing’) and those of notation and its associated verbal traditions (‘writing’).”¹¹

Taking into consideration that the performer is responsible for delineating contours, shapes, and gestures through note grouping, as well as establishing clear melodic contours that are built on harmonic pillars, we assume that the musical interpreter can be viewed as an architect of the sound, one that is responsible for the construction of elaborated musical phrases and musical conceptions.¹² In that same direction, David Blum affirms that “Casals

quest.” See Mine Doğantan-Dack, “Phrasing – the Very Life of Music’: Performing the Music and Nineteenth-Century Performance Theory,” *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 9 (2012): 7–30.

9. Aquino, “A Partitura e Seus Limites,” 29–42.

10. Leon Fleisher and Anne Midgette, *My Nine Lives: A Memoir of Many Careers in Music* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010 [Kindle edition]), pos. 956.

11. Nicholas Cook, “Analysing Performance and Performing Analysis,” in *Rethinking Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 251.

12. Doğantan-Dack remarks that “the relationship between the expressive content of the music and the expressiveness of its performances remains one of the central issues waiting to be explored in expressive performance research.” See Mine Doğantan-Dack, “Philosophical Reflections on Expressive Music

described the interpretative challenge of rhythmic organization in all of its diverse aspects as ‘the sense of measuring time in space.’” By this he meant the ability of the performer to apprehend the relatedness between the small units of time . . . and the larger time spans—the groupings of phrases and major structural features—of which a work is composed.”¹³ Suitably, Starker emphasizes that while “Music consists of horizontal (melodic) and vertical (harmonic and rhythmic) elements in various combinations[,] artists are differentiated by their respective mixes of these elements.”¹⁴ Thus, considering that the melodic line is also part of a vertical structure—chords that form the harmonic structure of a certain work—we conclude that harmony reinforces the elements of tension and resolution, which might constitute an essential element of the musical phrase. Hence, only through the combination of all these components is it possible to elaborate, create, and emphasize musical inflections.

When thinking about musical phrases, we are basically talking about progressions: where the phrase goes or leads to. According to Matthay, the concept of progression in music embraces the best definition of form, shape, and structure, whether we are discussing phrase, sentence, section, or a complete musical work: “This idea of movement is the vitalizing spark which turns mere notes into living music, this sense of purpose—this sense of progressing somewhere.”¹⁵ Furthermore, regarding the aural sensation and meaning of the use of bar lines, Matthay notes that composers “do not seem to have realized the simple fact that the only possible real use of a bar-line is to indicate to the performer where the pulse-swing should be.”¹⁶ This aspect will prove to be crucial for determining phrase character in musical performance throughout this discussion. In explaining the interpretative concept of Artur Schnabel (Fleisher’s professor and mentor), Fleisher and Midgette emphasize the sense of forward motion in his performances, pointing that “His playing defied gravity in that way. It caught you up and didn’t let you down until the piece was over.” In that sense, the authors assert that “For many musicians, the beats in a measure can become aggressive, downward events. . . . One! Two! Three! Four! For Schnabel, they were an upward impetus, like springs, launching you forward to the next point.”¹⁷

Performance,” in *Expressiveness in Music Performance: Empirical Approaches across Styles and Cultures*, ed. Dorottya Fabian, Renee Timmers, and Emery Schubert (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3–21.

13. David Blum, *Casals and the Art of Interpretation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 88.

14. Starker, *The World of Music According to Starker*, 144.

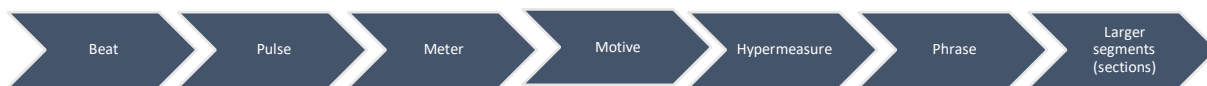
15. Matthay, *Musical Interpretation*, 34.

16. Matthay, *Musical Interpretation*, 38.

17. Fleisher and Midgette, *My Nine Lives*, pos. 461.

Tempo and Meter: Toward a Metric Expressivity Theory

One of the essential elements in the art of musical interpretation is how we determine tempo and meter. As stated above, music is a temporal art, and its character depends on how we establish what we call pulse. Regardless of time signature written by the composer, the interpreter is responsible for defining tempo and pulse in music, an aspect that will certainly affect the way music will respond to its final sound. In this connection, Aldwell and Schachter emphasize that “Music moves in time; musical rhythm organizes the flow of time. This organization involves many factors, the most important being duration, accent, and grouping.”¹⁸ Thus, we can even establish some hierarchic points, based on David Epstein’s model as well as on the short definitions that follow:¹⁹



Example I. Hierarchical Structures.

Beat can be defined as the smallest unit that establishes the meter/time signature: $\frac{2}{4}$, $\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{4}{4}$, $\frac{6}{8}$, and so forth.

Pulse might be understood as how we organize the musical impulses inside the measure; it is connected to whether we perform a measure in 1, 2, 3, or 4, according to the placement of musical impulses per measure. Thus, for our discussion, it’s important to differentiate the meaning of pulse from the definition of beat.

Meter—Stefan Kostka and Dorothy Payne underline that “Beats tend to be grouped into patterns that are consistent throughout a passage; the pattern of beats is called the *meter*.”²⁰ On the other hand, Joel Lester observes that “In virtually all tonal music, regularly recurring pulses mark off the passage of time. These pulses fall into recurring patterns of strong and weak, a phenomenon we call *meter*.”²¹

Motive—As defined by Douglass Green, a “motive is a short melodic fragment used as a constructional element. However, not every short melodic figure is a motive. In order to act as a constructional element and thus constitute a motive, a melodic fragment must appear at least twice.”²²

18. Edward Aldwell and Carl Schachter, *Harmony and Voice Leading* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1989), 36.

19. David Epstein, *Shaping Time: Music, the Brain, and Performance* (London: Schirmer Books, 1995), 23.

20. Stefan Kostka and Dorothy Payne, *Tonal Harmony* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), 29.

21. Joel Lester, *Analytic Approaches to Twentieth-Century Music* (New York: Norton, 1987), 16.

22. Douglas Green, *Form in Tonal Music: An Introduction to Analysis*. 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 31. Brent Auerbach formalized a method for the analysis of what he calls basic and

Hypermeasure consists of a combination of measures in such a way that the primary metric unit is the measure, not the beat. According to Edward T. Cone, “That’s why meter, as I have suggested, must yield to a more organic rhythmic principle.”²³ Thus, in hypermeasure reading, we are reorganizing the measures according to the phrase—or the other way around: reorganizing the measure reading in order to build up the musical phrase. In this way, “A movement in $\frac{4}{4}$ may, for various themes or developments, move at a basic rate of a quarter, a half, or even a whole note. It will feel no compulsion whatsoever to mark every important beat by an attack.” In this way, “the measure is being subject to different forms of subdivisions.”²⁴

Phrases—Douglass Green underlines the arch shape of the musical phrase and argues that “A phrase is the shortest passage of music which, having reached a point of relative repose, has expressed a more or less complete musical thought.”²⁵

Larger Segments or sections—for instance, some introductions might be perceived as a large-scale upbeat, which is something that is directly related to the feeling of phrase progression previously discussed. This is the case for the long introduction to the first movement of Beethoven’s G-minor Cello Sonata in G minor, op. 5, no. 2. A clear kind of introduction is one that avoids establishing the main key, as in Beethoven’s Symphony no. 1. Having this in mind, a slow introduction can be viewed as an organic musical gesture that moves toward the Allegro section. In this regard, we have to consider the fact that for Cone an introduction can be viewed, in several instances, as an expanded upbeat, in the sense that it will musically lead to the very next section, as a means of establishing phrase direction. Another important concept coined by him concerns the definition of what he calls the “structural downbeat.” According to Cone, “It is one of those important points of simultaneous harmonic and rhythmic arrival that I call a structural downbeat, for it is so powerful that retrospectively it turns what precedes it into its own upbeat.”²⁶

Cone goes even further, emphasizing that rhythm is the basic element in music. According to him, in a regular musical period, the antecedent phrase could be heard as an extended upbeat to the consequent. By the same token, in larger forms one entire section could be perceived as an upbeat to the next—certainly, aspects that give a sense of fluidity and cohesion to a given music performance. He further states that “just as there is a sense in

complex motives in *Musical Motives: A Theory and Method for Analyzing Shape in Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

23. Edward T. Cone, *Musical Form and Musical Performance* (New York: Norton, 1968), 40.

24. Cone, *Musical Form*, 72.

25. Green, *Form in Tonal Music*, 7. A more detailed theory of various phrase-types according to formal function has been developed in William E. Caplin, *Classical Form: A Theory of Formal Functions for the Instrumental Music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

26. Cone, *Musical Form*, 24–25.

which a phrase can be heard as an upbeat to its own cadence, larger and larger sections can also be apprehended. A completely unified composition could then constitute a single huge rhythmic impulse, completed at the final cadence.”²⁷

Pulse Transformation: Manipulating the Hierarchy of the Measure

Pulse, consequently, consists of the number of musical impulses contained in the time span or time frame defined by the measure. In my opinion, the way we establish pulse in music is somehow closely related to the resulting phrase character, to its expressive results, and to the ability of creating musical gestures. According to Matthay, “It is indeed solely through its direct appeal to our sense of Pulse-throb, sense of rhythmical growth and Progression, that music rouses us to a sense or feeling of something vital and alive.”²⁸ Parallel to the concept of thinking in larger pulses, the sense of timing should also be controlled by what Starker named as “hidden beat,” which is the motoric sense created by the inner pulse that is capable of driving musical lines during transitions, *rallentandos*, and *accelerandos*, governed by the smallest subdivisions of the beat.²⁹

Furthermore, Matthay stresses that musical art should always be employed to depict things felt and experienced, toward the purpose of expressing mood or feeling.³⁰ Thus, creating a responsive and adequate musical pulse might enable the performer to establish mood, feeling, and character in music, as it helps performer to give direction to the phrase, create gestures, build up momentum, and above all, delineate contour. Indeed, Cone relates that “the most important scientific discoveries have resulted from taking seriously questions that are usually assumed to be trivial.” In this sense, Cone recounts that “the complete answer to the question ‘Why does it get dark at night?’ leads to the theory of the expanding universe.”³¹ In other words, from the very basic music concepts, we can find tools that might be valuable to create depth in our phrase building and, consequently, to our musical interpretation. This assumption is ratified by Matthay, who states that “In the factor which all sane musicians hold and consider to be the most striking manifestation of Music, the very basis, the very life of it, we shall find a good foundation for the belief that Music is intimate with Nature herself. This factor is what we term Pulse, Time, Accent, that is—Rhythm.”³² This will certainly help us to build an organic interpretation, governed by the sense of timing, which will free the player to be in control of their performance and fully express their musical ideas. In that sense, John Rink remarks that “Time—or manipulation

27. Cone, *Musical Form*, 25–26.

28. Matthay, *Musical Interpretation*, 152.

29. Starker, *The World of Music According to Starker*, 76.

30. Matthay, *Musical Interpretation*, 163.

31. Cone, *Musical Form*, 11.

32. Matthay, *Musical Interpretation*, 151.

of time, timing—is the crucial ingredient, the *sine qua non*, of performance, and not just of nineteenth-century music (which is dogged by particular temporal problems—about how to relate sections, shape a line with rubato, or treat the notorious metronome markings in some composers’ scores).”³³

Nevertheless, besides being aware of all these concepts discussed so far; we must go back to the different possibilities of interpreting measure signatures. As a matter of fact, there are several possibilities of reading any given time signature, whether it’s a simple or compound meter. For instance, a simple binary meter signature ($\frac{2}{4}$ measure) is possible to be played in two or in one. The same is true to a $\frac{4}{4}$ measure signature, which can be played either in four, in two or even in one. In fact, through the concept of hypermeasure, it’s also possible to group each two of these $\frac{2}{4}$ measures, changing the relationship of strong and weak beats into strong and weak measures—thus creating what we may call an alternation of “strong-beat measure” and “weak-beat measure”—which will increase the sense of flow and enable the elaboration of longer musical sentences.

Besides, we are cognizant of the fact that, in terms of meter, there is a natural hierarchy within a measure. Hence, in a $\frac{4}{4}$ time signature, for example, the downbeat is considered the strongest beat of the measure—in other words, where the metrical accent is placed. By contrast, the third beat is perceived as the next-to-the-strongest beat in the measure. Consequently, beats two and four are considered weak beats. Moreover, when changing the way we read a meter signature, we are in fact altering the placement of the regular rhythmical impulses—whether thinking in hypermeasures or grouping measures as a strong-beat measure followed by a weak-beat measure—we are, in fact, changing the hierarchy of the measure and, therefore, shaping the expressive qualities of the phrase.³⁴ This is an experiment that anyone could easily try in their practice room, which will certainly expand the capacity of the player to manipulate the hierarchy of the measure.

On the other hand, the $\frac{3}{4}$ measure signature has even more variants, as it can be played either in three or in one with different possibilities of placement of impulses and stresses. Furthermore, when played in three, it also provides us the option of adding emphasis or impulses in different parts of the measure. Thus, we can have the impulse on the first beat of the measure, still beating it in three. Another option is to have the impulse on the third beat as in the minuet, for instance, which has a stress on the third part of the measure, followed by the strong downbeat.³⁵ This is what Bylsma calls “menuet-lilt,” which provides

33. John Rink, “Translating Musical Meaning: The Nineteenth-Century Performer as Narrator,” in *Rethinking Music*, 219.

34. For more, see William Rothstein, *Phrase Rhythm and Tonal Music* (Ann Arbor: Musicalia, 2007).

35. Anner Bylsma, *Bach, The Fencing Master: Reading Aloud from the First Three Cello Suites*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam: Bylsma Fencing Mail, 2001), 78.

character to the dance.³⁶ Note that it's not only in the minuet that this can happen. Moreover, the stress on the third beat might create a sense of interlinking measures. An emphasis on the third beat leading to the next measure can be heard in the second movement of Johannes Brahms's Cello Sonata in E minor, op. 38 (marked "Allegretto quasi Menuetto"). This aspect is clearly emphasized in the recording by cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and pianist Rudolf Serkin, as in the suggested link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEXRt63ayzo> (example 2, p. 12).

Besides, we can even have a stress on the second beat of the measure, as characteristic of the sarabande. This is very clear in the sarabande from Bach Cello Suite no. 5 performed by Anner Bylsma, from the 1979 recording, as suggested in the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpKzwdxVwyA> (example 3, p. 13) In this case, this sarabande is basically marked by the descending gestures, while the tension created by the rising half step generates the characteristic stress on the second beat of the measure.

Metrical Oxymorons in Beethoven's Scherzos

Interestingly, when we perform Beethoven scherzos, we realize that the composer himself groups measures together. Examples of grouping measures can be found in some of his symphonies, such as in the Scherzo of the Symphony no. 3 ("Eroica")—where he ingeniously groups every two measures, despite the fact that the metric signature is ternary (a very fast $\frac{3}{4}$, marked $\text{♩} = 116$), creating some sort of metrical oxymoron. More explicitly, in the Scherzo of the Symphony no. 9, Beethoven writes the indication of *ritmo di tre battute* (i.e., rhythm of three beats), starting in m. 177, which means to beat in larger measures in three, where each written measure is in fact one beat of this imaginary larger triple meter. Noticing that this conducting gesture includes a supposed downbeat at every three measures (hyperdownbeats). At some points in this movement the indication of *ritmo di tre battute* (m. 128) alternates with the indication of *ritmo di quattro battute* (m. 234), which emphasizes the metrical ambiguity intended by the composer.

36. Bylsma, *Bach, The Fencing Master*, 38. According to Eric McKee, the minuet's dance steps lead to a metric organization equivalent to a two-bar hypermeter; see McKee, *Decorum of the Minuet, Delirium of the Waltz: A Study of Dance-Music Relations in $\frac{3}{4}$ Time* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012). On the other hand, Bylsma (78) asserts that "dances do have their idiosyncrasies, a sarabande with its heavy first and second beats and the minuet with its one and three, but in all kinds of $\frac{3}{4}$ bars we should be aware of the changing 'pillars of support.' . . . As a matter of course, all first beats are heavy due to their function as head of the bar. The remainder of the support points are mostly determined by a new harmony." See also Steven Isserlis, *The Bach Cello Suites: A Companion* (London: Faber, 2021 [Kindle edition]), pos. 47.

Allegretto quasi Menuetto

The musical score is presented in four systems. Each system consists of three staves: a cello line in the bass clef and a piano accompaniment in the treble and bass clefs. The tempo is marked 'Allegretto quasi Menuetto'. The key signature is E minor. The time signature is 3/4. The score includes dynamic markings such as *p* (piano) and *dolce* (sweetly). The first system starts with a cello line in the bass clef and piano accompaniment in the treble and bass clefs. The second system begins at measure 8. The third system begins at measure 16. The fourth system begins at measure 23. The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of the fourth system.

Example 2. Johannes Brahms, Cello Sonata in E minor, op. 38, Allegretto quasi Menuetto.

4. Sarabande



Example 3. J. S. Bach, Cello Suite no. 5 in C minor, BWV 1011, Sarabande.

Beethoven's *Scherzo* from the “Eroica” Symphony can be heard at the suggested link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJDQMyHbSko>. Notice the ternary meter signature ($\frac{3}{4}$), while the measures are naturally grouped in 2 (example 4).

Example 4. Ludwig van Beethoven, Symphony no. 7 in E major, op. 55 (“Eroica”), Scherzo, mm. 1–7.

Example 5, below, shows the Scherzo from Beethoven's Symphony no. 9, with the indication of *Ritmo di tre battute*, in which the composer's intention is certainly to add a sense of flow to the musical progression, since beating it in three—one measure to a beat—sounds differently than marking each measure. In the latter case, we would lose any sense of phrase or direction. This can be heard in the suggested link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixpfgm_xxSE (at 15'16”).

Ritmo di tre battute.

1.

Ob. *p* *p* *sempre p*

Cl. *p* *p* *sempre p*

Fg. *p* *p* *sempre p*

Vln. I *pizz.* *p*

Vln. II *pizz.* *p*

Vla. *pizz.* *p*

Vc. Cb. *pizz.* *p*

Example 5. Ludwig van Beethoven, Symphony no. 9 in D minor, op. 125, Scherzo, mm. 177–85.

Questions of Agogics and Rubato

In his memoirs, Starker states how he learned that the consistent alternation of strong and weak beats could be performed as larger units and, consequently, eliminates recurring unnecessary accents that could break up the course of the musical phrase. According to him, this concept could help create a sense of virtuosity through musical flow, preventing the dullness derived from uniform accents within the phrase.³⁷ Indeed, hypermetric grouping can generate musical flow and, consequently, create a perception of virtuosity from the audience perspective. At the same time, Starker highlights the importance of the inner notes in supplying a needed motoric awareness to the phrase, which can be used toward the construction of a sense of organicity. In other words, the so-called hidden beats might help control the inflections in order to create organic musical phrases. By the same token, Cone stresses that “The classical phrase has often been analyzed as an alternation of strong and weak measures, on an analogy with strong and weak beats within a measure. In other words, the larger rhythmic structure is treated simply as metric structure on a higher level.”³⁸ According to András Schiff, Pablo Casals “once said that accents were the salt and pepper of music. By this he didn’t mean the absurdly mechanical emphasis on the first beat

37. Starker, *The World of Music According to Starker*, 76.

38. Cone, *Musical Form*, 26.

of the bar, but rather a vital pulsation and the courage to underline the irregularities of the musical prosody.”³⁹

Furthermore, Starker clarifies the distinction between rubato and agogics, describing the latter as a rubato within a bar. In this sense, Starker recounts that he had learned that “true rubato allows a freer emphasis on harmonic changes, melodic stresses, and emotional temperature within a phrase, yet never destroys the structure and balance of the phrase.” From this perspective, “Agogic is the same emphasis within a measure, yet never destroys the time-length of any measure.”⁴⁰ By the same token, Brunello asserts that, in music, since offbeats are placed at the weak part of the beat, this is in fact where freedom of interpretation occurs. According to him, it is freedom with rubato, which might happen both with sound as well as with silence.⁴¹

Following this line of thought, playing with the hypermeasure reading concept will provide us longer offbeats, which will therefore give us more room for musical freedom while maintaining a steady larger pulse, emphasizing the agogic gestures as underlined by Starker above. This confirms Gregor Piatigorsky’s idea of playing with freedom within exactness, as rhythmic freedom performed within the rigor of the pulse might help create musical coherence.⁴² Thus, playing with hypermeter provides us longer offbeats and, consequently, more room for musical freedom and agogics. Parallel to this, according to John Cloer, Starker would often stress the importance of the relationship between rhythmic counting and the manifestation of meter and pulse. In this sense, a $\frac{4}{4}$ time would be played in four, in two, or even in one, according to the musical context—while maintaining the same tempo, a perception that is connected to the use of proper breathing.⁴³

Certainly, the kind of pulse that we’ve been discussing is established by the proper placement of musical impulses. At several instances, those impulses are either anticipated or established by breathing, sometimes even during the silence that precedes our entrance or a musical attack. For instance, in the beginning of Shostakovich’s first cello concerto, the soloist starts without any orchestral introduction. In that case, the cello has a full measure, starting with a quarter-note rest. The musical impulse, in that case, is placed exactly in this quarter-note rest—with a breath of the very same value—in order to establish musical character and, moreover, to create a sense of upbeat with the famous DSCH motive.

39. Andrés Schiff, *Music Comes Out of Silence*, trans. Misha Donat (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2020 [Kindle edition]), pos. 307.

40. Starker, *The World of Music According to Starker*, 77.

41. Mario Brunello, *Silencio: Palabras a Contratiempo* (Barcelona: Comanegra, 2016), 11.

42. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Nn-pabWy8c> (at 15’04”).

43. John Cloer, “Janos Starker: An Organized Method of Cello Teaching” (EdD diss., Columbia University, 2009), 130.

The same principle can be applied to the beginning of Mendelssohn's Piano Trio in D minor, op. 49. In this case, the metric organization should be planned in a two-bar hypermeter as an alternation of strong beat measure followed by a weak beat measure, which is reinforced by the two-measure piano left-hand figuration. Thus, the quarter-note upbeat of the cello entrance should be preceded by a long breath that fills one entire weak beat measure. This simultaneously establishes musical character while anticipating the tempo for the other members of the ensemble. Interestingly, this generates a metrical conflict between the $\frac{3}{4}$ metric signature and the two-bar hypermeter, which demonstrates that, ultimately, music interpretation is more about what is not written on the score than what is simply in the printed music.

As players, it is important to have a clear understanding of all these concepts—furthermore, to be able to perceive that these choices might affect the phrase character and consequently the whole musical shape. In this direction, when a slow movement sounds dragging, Matthey suggests focusing on the longer phrases—referring to the larger pulses—instead of simply deciding to play it faster. Just as when a fast movement is sounding way too fast, Matthey recommends paying attention to the “in-between beats,” or subdivisions of the beats, instead of simply trying to play it at a slower tempo. Thus, when changing the pace of the phrase into a less flowing character—adding a sense of resistance—we should think about more beats or a sense of more impulses per measure.⁴⁴ The opposite is true when adding more flow to the phrase, thinking instead of the larger pulses, which eventually can lead to the use of the hypermeasure concept as defined by Cone.⁴⁵ In fact, it's not really a matter of right or wrong, it is indeed a matter of choices that, as performers and interpreters, we have to be capable of sorting out. This is part of the thinking process in constructing the interpretation of any work. After all, as part of the duties as performers, we are expected to make coherent musical choices in order to create a convincing interpretation.

Brief Recordings Comparisons

We can analyze the following musical examples, which basically show a comparison of choices that emphasizes musical vigor against the flowing-feeling sensation. In the case of the Vivaldi Concerto for Cello and Orchestra, RV 407, we can clearly hear that the first performance is in two, while the second one is in four: two valid interpretations of the same passage despite distinct choices of musical atmosphere. Thus, cellist Christoph Coin and the ensemble L'Onda Armonica emphasize two pulses per measure in their performance of the first movement of this work (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9deMQxvQRMYY>), despite

44. Matthey, *Musical Interpretation*, 26.

45. Cone, *Musical Form*, 40.

Concerto in Re minore RV 407

per Violoncello, Archi e Cembalo

Antonio Vivaldi

Allegro

Violoncello Obbligato

Violini I

Violini II

Viola

Basso Continuo

c.

Vln. I

Vln. II

a.

b.c.

c.

Vln. I

Vln. II

a.

b.c.

Example 6. Antonio Vivaldi, Cello Concerto in D minor, RV 407, mm. 1–12.

their choice of tempo, while cellist Davide Amadio and the ensemble Interpreti Veneziani emphasize four pulses per measure: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOCamhrA-H4> (see example 6).

The concept of measure grouping can be applied to music from different genres and periods to highlight specific musical aspects of the work. In this connection, we should compare two highly respected recordings with distinct musical choices in the fugue of J. S. Bach's fifth cello suite, where the second reading adds the element of hypermeasure—grouping two plus two measures—in order to emphasize the dance character of the section (see example 7).

Example 7. J. S. Bach, Cello Suite in C minor, BWV 1011, Prélude, mm. 27–51.

First, we can listen to the Prélude from the suite performed by Pierre Fournier. The sense of nobleness is clearly present through the feel of the $\frac{3}{8}$ measure performed in three (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iw-IpgKNymw>; fugue starts at 2'30"), while cellist Pieter Wispelway performs the Fugue not in one impulse per measure, but rather grouping every two measures, creating a sense of strong and weak measures that fits the steps of the passepied dance on which this fugue is based, as can be heard at 2'00" in the link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7I3oYyeJouu>.

In this last performance example, we have the feeling of strong and weak beats transposed to a two-measure grouping, creating patterns of strong and weak measures. Despite the fact that the Fugue is in $\frac{3}{8}$, we can hear that the motive of four sixteenth notes works as an upbeat leading to the next imaginary measure. How pulse is capable of affecting

the musical phrase is an aspect that performers from the historically-informed performance practice movement seem to be constantly playing with.

An example where hypermeasure is even more appropriate, as we are talking about the Romantic period, can be heard in Chopin's Cello Sonata in G minor, op. 65.⁴⁶ In this case, we can compare three different musical conceptions employed by Yo-Yo Ma and Emanuel Ax, Truls Mork and Kathryn Stott, and Gregor Piatigorsky and Rudolf Firkusny. I will discuss three distinct interpretations of the Scherzo (and trio) and then compare the Largo as well.

In the Scherzo (10'14"), Yo-Yo Ma and Emanuel Ax alternate a hypermeasure that groups every two measures and the feeling of playing in one pulse per measure (see example 8, p. 20). The hypermeasure grouping is also present throughout the Trio section of the Scherzo (12'15"; example 9, p. 21). In the Largo third movement (15'23", the flowing character is reached through the slow pulse in three that comes from the $\frac{3}{2}$ measure signature (example 10, p. 22): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAaGrczZ2ho>.

Meanwhile, Truls Mork and Kathryn Stott perform the Scherzo (15'07") with the sense of a binary hypermeasure—grouping every two measures—the same feeling that is applied to the Trio section at 17'00". The Largo, on the other hand, is played at a very slow pace, clearly in 6, as can be heard at 19'48": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2az8ch_EIU.

The duo formed by Gregor Piatigorsky and Rudolf Firkusny takes the concept of hypermeter even further as they perform the Scherzo in such a way that every two measures equal one impulse or one expanded hypermeasure. So, every two measures form one expanded hypermeasure, with only one impulse at every two $\frac{3}{2}$ measures—one hyperbeat at every two measures—as the piano part reinforces this aspect in the first four measures (at 8'30").⁴⁷ This sense is even clearer in the Trio section that starts at 10'15". If we would translate this into conducting gestures, it would create large conducting circular gestures. By the same token, the Largo has an imbued sense of fluidity being played in a fast 3, as can be heard at 12'50" of https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7D5YR8LN_g (example 10, p. 22).

46. For Cone, in Baroque music the primary metric unit is the beat, while in the Classical period it is the measure rather than the beat whereas in Romantic music Cone asserts that "one can find long stretches in which the measures combine into phrases that are themselves metrically conceived. . . . The desire of the measure to behave as a single beat, already noticeable in very fast Beethoven scherzos, is here intensified." See *Musical Form*, 72–79. Further research has shown that the concept of hypermeasure can be applied to the music of the Baroque music as well. See also Eric McKee, *Decorum of the Minuet, Delirium of the Waltz*.

47. It's interesting to point out that Firkusny was also a disciple of Schnabel.

Scherzo.
(Allegro con brio.)

The musical score consists of two systems, each with a cello line and a piano accompaniment. The piano part is characterized by a driving, rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, often in triplet groupings. The cello line provides a melodic counterpoint, featuring eighth-note runs and occasional rests. Dynamics are marked with *f*, *mf*, and *p*. The piano part includes numerous fingerings (e.g., 1 3 2 1, 2 4, 5 3 2 1) and articulation marks such as accents and slurs. The tempo is marked 'Allegro con brio'.

Example 8. Frédéric Chopin, Cello Sonata in G minor, op. 65, Scherzo, mm. 1–27.

L'istesso tempo.

p cantabile

L'istesso tempo.

p

Example 9. Frédéric Chopin, Cello Sonata in G minor, op. 65, Trio from the Scherzo, beginning.

Largo
p dolce e cantabile
pp

Largo
p dolce

*Lea * Lea * Lea **

A
 Ossia:

pp
p

pp

*Lea * Lea * Lea **

pp
p

*Lea * Lea * Lea **

Example 10. Frédéric Chopin, Cello Sonata in G minor, op. 65, Largo, mm. 1-12.

The same comparison can be made in another dance from Bach's cello suites: the Gigue from Suite no. 3 in C major, BWV 1009. Once again, we can listen to two valid interpretations that give us a chance to compare musical and interpretative choices. The first performance is by the French cellist Paul Tortelier, who performs the dance with the feeling pulse in one (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FQoiMBcAJY> at 17'36"), while Pieter Wispelway presents an interpretation that comprises every two measures as a larger measure in two, emphasizing the dance character of the Gigue (example 11, p. 24): (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wiAswyjqfCw>).

We can finally compare two distinct ways of interpreting the Allegro from Beethoven's Cello Sonata in G minor, op. 5, no. 2 (after the slow introduction). In the first example, Mischa Maisky and Martha Argerich group every two measures in a hypermeasure in two (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sI9SFXz9MY4>, 5'25"), while the duo formed by Antonio Meneses and Maria João Pires perform the same section in one—in other words, placing one impulse per measure (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_3dlyZuxHc at 6'00"). Certainly, both are knowledgeable and effective views of interpretation. However, it's all a matter of musical choices, controlled by the sense of timing, intending to create the desired musical atmosphere (see example 12, p. 25).

So, we are back to the basic question of this article: How can meter, pulse, and beat help us give direction to the musical phrase and, therefore, establish or create musical character? Pablo Casals constantly referred to the fundamental interpretive concepts, which he called the "laws of music" or "laws of nature"—concepts that he considered essential to all means of musical expression⁴⁸—a point that probably coincides with some of the ideas previously mentioned, since our activity consists of interpreting musical signs, rules, and concepts, whether established by music theorists or through performance practice. This is corroborated by Matthey when stressing that "Because it is the essential manifestation of that prime fact, because Pulse is Life, therefore it is that we feel Music to be alive when in its pursuit we do act in consonance and harmony with that Supreme Fact . . . and are therefore in harmony with Nature herself!"⁴⁹ In both assertions Casals and Matthey are referring to an organically based performance conception.

Following this same line of thought, Epstein highlights that "musical concepts are a synthesis of structure and intuition—of rational views on organization and construct; of felt

48. David Blum, *Casals and the Art of Interpretation*, x.

49. Matthey, *Musical Interpretation*, 153.

GIGUE (♩. = 96) (Vivace)

The musical score for the Gigue in C major, BWV 1009, is presented in 12 staves. The tempo is marked as Vivace with a quarter note equal to 96 beats per minute. The piece begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic and a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. It features a variety of dynamics including *pp*, *mf*, *p*, and *f*. The score includes numerous articulation marks such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings like *dim.* and *fz dim.*. Fingerings are indicated with numbers 1-4. The piece concludes with a *cresc.* (crescendo) leading to a final *f* dynamic.

Example 11. J. S. Bach, Cello Suite no. 3 in C major, BWV 1009, Gigue.

The musical score is presented in five systems, each with a cello staff and a piano grand staff. The key signature is G minor (two flats) and the time signature is 3/4. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings. The piano accompaniment features a prominent triplet of eighth notes in the right hand, which is repeated throughout the piece. The cello line consists of a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, often grouped with slurs. The piece ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Example 12. Ludwig van Beethoven, Cello Sonata in G minor, op. 5, no. 2, I (beginning of Allegro section).

entities; of an affective sense of the rightness of these perceptions.”⁵⁰ He also emphasizes that “Current knowledge indicates that structure and affect [emotion] may in fact be two sides of the same coin—in effect, different modes of knowledge by which we comprehend phenomena.”⁵¹

Conclusion

From what we have discussed, we can infer that the role of the interpreter is also related to the question of fidelity to the score, since we cannot distance ourselves from the information notated by the composer, under penalty of mischaracterizing and distorting the musical work. In this respect, the British pianist and scholar Roy Howat raises the question of whether we can, in fact, interpret music. According to him, as musicians we should actually interpret music notation, because simply to interpret music is to distort the text.⁵² Bearing that in mind, we question how to build up phrases and to deal with the basic music concepts. Finally, again, how does meter, pulse, and beat help us create sense of direction to the musical phrase and, therefore, establish or create musical character? How might the concepts presented above affect our performance when we try to think about longer phrases, longer lines, longer sequences and sections, as well as creating musical gestures? That’s why I propose another layer of expressivity in music-making and musical interpretation, established through metrical decisions as discussed above, which I call *metrical expressivity*.

In fact, those concepts could be viewed as important tools in the process of decision-making and, therefore, help players to be able to create convincing interpretations. On the other hand, Cone himself asserts that there is no such a thing as ideal interpretation. Thus, one should question how those concepts would help us on this matter, notably fitting those concepts to properly establish the character of each section. In this respect, he states that “Every valid interpretation thus represents, not an approximation of some ideal, but a choice,” so as performers, we are responsible to make these choices.⁵³ Furthermore, he argues that “valid performance depends primarily on the perception and communication of the rhythmic life of a composition.” According to him, “we must first discover the rhythmic shape of a piece—which is what is meant by its form—and then try to make it as clear as possible to our listeners.”⁵⁴ Additionally, he points out that a good performance drives the

50. David Epstein, “A Curious Moment in Schumann’s Fourth Symphony: Structure as the Fusion of Affect and Intuition,” in *The Practice of Performance: Studies in Musical Interpretation*, ed. John Rink (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 126.

51. Epstein, “A Curious Moment,” 128.

52. Roy Howat, “What Do We Perform?” in *The Practice of Performance*, 3.

53. Cone, *Musical Form*, 34.

54. Cone, *Musical Form*, 38–39.

listener through the music in such a clear way that the listener will know exactly where he is, even at an unfamiliar work.⁵⁵

Meanwhile Starker recounts that he learned that “Everything in an unforgettable performance can be defined in terms of time, sound, and dynamics.”⁵⁶ Indeed, a convincing performance comprises creating gestures, organizing sections, and delineating musical shape as the result of musical decisions, which produce a rich musical experience. In fact, all these concepts could be used as tools and criteria in building up phrases and shaping musical interpretation. Put simply, it’s all a matter of timing.

55. Cone, *Musical Form*, 45.

56. Starker, *The World of Music According to Starker*, 79.

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