

MUSICAL INTERPRETATION SIMPLIFIED
(compiled in 2021 from presentations between 1984 and 2017)
Dr. George Fee and Dr. Susan Dersnah Fee, www.dersnah-fee.com

The older one gets the more one realizes that many things in life are simple. The problem is that they frequently are not easy. Playing music is no exception. Playing a musical instrument truly beautifully is one of the most difficult activities one can ever undertake. What is written below is intended to simplify, as much as possible, the process of creating meaningful performances at the piano.

Music is organized sound and no great music making can occur without a beautiful tone. Everyone can create a warm and beautiful tone if he/she forms the habit of listening for it in practice. A teacher should ask for it from the first lesson, and students should then perpetually ask themselves for it. Playing music is the act of realizing on an instrument an aural image we have pre-heard in our inner ear. If we internally hear harshness, we will produce harshness. If we internally feel and hear love and warmth, we will produce warmth on the instrument. As has been said, "What the ear wills, the fingers will produce." Therefore, all that is needed is for the player to have an aural image of what he/she wishes to hear and not be satisfied until it is achieved.

When we play, we must always be listening intently to the sound which is actually being produced. Is the tone which is coming out what we really desire, or are adjustments needed? We make the adjustments by putting the keys down a little slower or a little faster as is discussed in the companion essay, "Physical Aspects of Playing the Piano." [Essays & Educational Resources \(dersnah-fee.com\)](http://www.dersnah-fee.com)

After a player acquires the ability to create a beautiful tone on a single note, the creative artistry can begin. Musical interpretation, put simply, is built on differing degrees of tension and release. If one plays two notes of a melody in a row, it needs to be decided which note will be louder and which will be softer. If one plays three notes in a row to form a melody, which will be the loudest and which will be the softest? If one plays ten notes in a row, which will be the loudest and which will be the softest? After determining this, the player can contemplate imagining a different tone for each of the remaining eight notes. Doing this will result in having created an expressive shape. The same process should be used in playing a series of chords.

Only in unusual cases will the loudest point be the first or the last of the ten notes. Most groups of notes lend themselves to a shape like that of an airplane flight – a takeoff from ground level, an eventual rise to the maximum altitude for the trip, and an eventual descent to ground level. What is most crucial is that the takeoff be smooth, and the landing be gentle. A crash at the takeoff or landing is catastrophic to the air traveler just as a crash at the take-off or landing of a group of musical notes is disastrous.

In playing music, the player controls the nature of the journey between the takeoff and landing of the phrases. We determine what seems to us as the emotional high point, and then determine where the points of greater and lesser tension are beneath the highest point. The player makes these decisions based on an analysis of the music (for more on this process, see the companion essay on this site, "Carrying Music Theory to Performance" [Essays & Educational Resources \(dersnah-fee.com\)](http://www.dersnah-fee.com)) Singing the

phrases out loud or to oneself will help reveal the emotional high points to the player. They are frequently the longer notes, higher notes, dissonances, and syncopations. Often these are played louder and held longer than other notes. However, the emotional high points are not always best played as the loudest since there are other ways to highlight their importance. Once one has determined the places of most significance, one organizes and groups the notes before these significant notes so that the preceding notes are played as if they have a sense of direction toward the significant notes. This may be merely a mental grouping for the player, or it may actually be an actual slight pushing ahead of the notes to the destination point. On some occasions, rather than pushing ahead to the important destinations, it is more fitting to pull back in order to set up and call extra attention to the arrival point.

The sense of direction toward goals is a crucial aspect of expressive playing. In fact, the great English pedagogue, Tobias Matthay, considered the concept of movement progressing toward a destination to be “perhaps the most important of all concepts in musical interpretation, since movement is the basis of all music.” Indeed, the English word ‘rhythm’ derives from the Greek word “Rhythmos,” which means “measured motion.” Rhythmos is not unique to music as it is perceived to exist in poetry, speech, painting, sculpture, architecture, dance as well. Music is very obviously built on rhythmos, since it exists on a horizontal plane progressing through time.

As Matthay wrote, “the principle of towardness is the basis of all music shape” and should be “the basis of all music teaching.” We concur and that is why so many of these essays stress our belief that direction is indispensable for expressive performance.

Rhythm far transcends merely counting equal beats. Rhythm exists on more than one level--beats comprising a measure, subdivisions which comprise a beat, and measures which comprise a phrase. At all levels one should normally perceive forward direction. The downbeat is usually the weighty beat in a measure and is the default arrival point. However, an upbeat inherently contains enormous energy since it catapults the music across the bar line to the downbeat. The downbeat for its stability, and the last beat for its energy in leading forward, are the most significant beats in any measure. Utilization of this knowledge in performance provides a swing, a lilt, and a lift to our playing. However, long notes, high notes, dissonances, and syncopations can alter the usual rhythmic prioritization.

Within a measure, it is important to feel the subdivisions of a beat leading to the next beat. For example, grouping four 16th notes into a pattern of 2341, and grouping triplets into a pattern of 231. The goal is to lead the music ACROSS the beat or the bar line, to the first note of the next beat. It usually adds expressivity to linger longer on the arrival note, before resuming the next group in the sequence or whatever music comes next. In fact, lingering longer on the main beats and first parts of beats was a practice which 18th century musicians pleaded with players to do! (See the essay “Relevant Advice From the 18th Century On Playing 18th Century Music, [Microsoft Word - Dissertation Summary.docx \(dersnah-fee.com\)](http://dersnah-fee.com)). In slower pieces, the grouping becomes audible to the listener, and the sense of flow provided by the grouping can be a large part of the success of a performance. In faster pieces, it is frequently more of an internal mental grouping for the player.

We urge feeling a sense of direction ahead to the next beat in smaller units, ahead to the next downbeat in larger units, and ahead to the next measure when one is feeling the pulse measure by measure.

The following contain examples and discussion of examples from advanced piano literature, as well as early intermediate literature. [Mozart The Ambiguous.pdf \(dersnah-fee.com\)](#) , pages 20-22, (574) [Schubert: Playing His Piano Music " George Fee, pianist, February 15,2016 - YouTube](#) , [Playing Chopin.pdf \(dersnah-fee.com\)](#) , (578) [Bringing Music Alive with Earlier Level Students through Music Theory - YouTube](#) See also the companion essay, "Carrying Music Theory to Performance" i [Essays & Educational Resources \(dersnah-fee.com\)](#))

The question of the relative importance of notes also applies if we play two notes at the same time – which will be the louder and which will be the softer? If we play four notes at the same time, which will we make the loudest and which will we make the softest? If we play eight notes at the same time, which will be the loudest which the softest, and what will be the degrees of loudness of the other six? This is what musicians refer to as balance.

The sculptor Michelangelo said that his method of working was to see the image in the marble and then sculpt everything else away. We musicians need to sculpt away the lesser priority notes. Wonderfully expressive playing can occur if a player simply matches what is left of a decaying long note when playing the note after the long note, and by playing extremely softly the note which emerges out of the silence of a rest. Failure to do these interrupts and destroys the all- important musical line.

It is essential to let most musical phrases taper and relax at their culminations, and to breathe afterwards. A plane rests before it takes off again, and the instrumental role model, the singer, must breathe before beginning a new phrase. The duration of rest at the end of a phrase depends upon the degree of finality at the close of the phrase. If players consistently observe only what is recommended in these last two paragraphs, they will be perceived by listeners as very expressive players. Musical interpretation is in large part, line, and shape.

The above concepts pertain mostly to expressivity at a relatively small-scale level and are very important. However, it is essential that players feel the unity of the entire piece of music which they play, and never lose the long line which holds a piece together. Details are crucial, and the old saying that "The Devil is in the details" is absolutely true. However, details of expressivity must always be felt in the context of the longer line.

There used to be signs along highways which read "speed kills." This can also be true when playing music .If one plays a piece too fast, one cannot reflect and convey the swing and hypnotic lilt of the music. As the famous Duke Ellington song said, "It don't mean a thing, if it ain't got that swing." The sturdy, robust, strong character needed in some music cannot be shown, the spaciousness which many works demand is compromised, the playfulness and humor are lessened, and the phrasing suffers. Many of the works from the 17th and 18th centuries which are dashed through today were never intended to be played at a breakneck tempo.

I remember once hearing in a master class the admonition that 98% of the time when we are struggling with a piece or passage, we are actually trying to play faster than it needs to be played, or we are accidentally rushing. I have, on occasion, realized that I myself have wasted many hundreds of hours attempting to play some pieces faster than they are best played. It is frequently not necessary to play so fast, and there is much to be lost and little to be gained when playing a piece faster than one can be expressive. Just as only a small amount of excess speed on a highway can be fatal, even a tiny amount of speed beyond a musician's comfort level can be fatal in performance.

It is also unwise to play too slowly. Doing so inhibits the natural flow and direction of the music. It can result in a flat, square, shapeless performance which makes the music die of suffocation. As Robert Schumann said: "Dragging and hurrying are equally great faults."

The practical approach is to ascertain what the fastest appropriate speed is for the fastest notes of a piece, and the slowest appropriate speed is for the slowest notes of a piece. Music should always sound natural. Extremes of tempi expanded and became widespread in the 19th century but should not be superimposed on earlier music. 18th century music was in large part based upon the concept of the music speaking and conversing with the listener in a tasteful, inflected manner, which excessive speed does not permit. We need to take very seriously and literally the tempo words which the composers provided for their pieces. Allegro does not mean Presto and Andante does not mean Adagio. Many of the great composers are clearly and emphatically on record as believing that the adoption of an appropriate tempo is a primary responsibility of a player. For example, Schindler reported that "When a work by Beethoven had been performed, Beethoven's first question was always 'How were the tempi?' Every other consideration seemed to be of secondary importance to him."

It is unfortunate that very few pianists have ever studied the important treatises from the 18th century, or even the current books which discuss the issues of performance of 18th century music. I recall that a modern-day harpsichordist once listed CPE Bach, Quantz, Leopold Mozart, and Türk as his teachers. We should all make those 18th century sources our teachers. For those who do not choose to undertake such study, I have prepared a relatively short essay, "Relevant Advice from the 18th Century on Playing 18th Century Music," [Microsoft Word - Dissertation Summary.docx \(dersnah-fee.com\)](https://www.dersnah-fee.com)) which summarizes the most valuable information in those critically important sources. While I do not believe that scholarly research is a prerequisite for performing much 19th and 20th century music, it is indispensable if one is to perform 18th century music with understanding. 18th century music in many respects is a very different language from music of the 19th century.

This essay, at first glance, may have seemed complex and cerebral. However, these processes are what allow each of us to produce our own unique, personal, individual interpretations. These tools result in the deepest expression because we are immersing ourselves in the actual construction and inner workings of the music we are playing. These concepts are what the greatest musicians in the world are using so that their inspired and sublime performances will rest upon a solid foundation. If readers study and apply the above suggestions they too will have a firm foundation on which to add their own spontaneity, spirit and vitality in order to create an inspired and memorable performance.

The reader is urged to consult the discussions regarding the performance of the piano music of Haydn, Mozart , Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, and Debussy found in the texts of the “Exploring the Great Piano Composers “ lecture-concert series [Exploring the Great Piano Composers Lecture Concerts \(dersnah-fee.com\)](https://www.dersnah-fee.com) The 28 pages dealing with performing the music of these composers contain not only thoughts specific to the music of these composers, but also many practical insights regarding musical interpretation in general.