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Edited by John Rink

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PART ONE

Fundamentals



CHAPTER ONE

What do we perform?

ROY HOWAT



What is the ‘music’ that we play or study? Other languages are more explicit than English, with words like *partition* and *Musiknoten*, in defining that musical scores are not music per se.¹ The relationship between notation and music is well illustrated by Stravinsky’s claim that he could play the ‘Danse sacrée’ from the *Rite of Spring* for some time before he was able to write it down (Stravinsky and Craft 1962: 141). Although this distinction may seem hairsplitting to performers, we can hear all around us the results of regarding music as the symbols on the page, which one must then ‘make interesting’. ‘Put some expression into it!’ is still a ubiquitous cry even at conservatories, notwithstanding the contradiction in terms.

Ravel’s request that pianists should ‘just play’ rather than ‘interpret my music’ (Long [1960] 1972: 21) focuses the question for performers: can we actually ‘interpret music’? Surely not, except by distorting it. What we can interpret – indeed, can only interpret – is its notation. Since notation, to quote the ever-literal French, ‘partitions’ music (that is, represents or encodes it in a welter of mostly binary symbols, involving variable conventions and shorthands), it cannot avoid distorting it, and our task is to ‘read back through’ the distortions on paper, employing aural and visual awareness, skill and sensitivity.

Although scores are the most fixed point of reference for our classical repertoire, far from being absolutes they rest on sand,² and what we scientifically trust least, our musical feeling, remains the strongest and final link to what the composer sensed and heard before subjecting it to notation. Debussy, one of the most technically meticulous of all notators, still considered it necessary to write in bar 1 of his Prelude ‘Des pas sur la neige’, ‘Ce rythme doit avoir la valeur sonore d’un fond de paysage triste et glacé’. This direct appeal to feeling, characteristic of his scores, reminds us that notation too can only follow in music’s footsteps, mapping where and how inspiration has passed.

¹ English is full of transferred epithets unthinkable in other languages, such as ‘the kettle is boiling’.

² The Russian-trained French pianist Brigitte Engerer commented: ‘you might ask a Russian pianist and a French pianist to play the same work *with an exact observation of the nuances*, and you would get two very different interpretations’ (Timbrell 1982: 184; my emphasis).

We should observe straight away the distinction between alert feeling, which is a state of awareness, and wilfulness, which is a state of deliberate ignorance. The performer who ignores or overrides a composer's indications simply because 'I feel it this way' is often no better than the obedient dullard who merely shelters behind the notation: neither is truly exploring the feeling of what the composer committed to notation. Musical feeling also demands that we explore what we read, question it and be prepared to amend what does not make sense after thorough investigation and acquaintance with that composer's idiom. Manuscript study quickly reveals how riddled printed scores are with inaccuracies (of which more below), although subjectivity is inevitable, even when original sources are available. To try to efface subjectivity, as we sometimes do, is only more subjective, and our one link with objectivity is to acknowledge and accept our subjectivity, and within that the variety of expression inherent in what the composer heard and notated.³

Since notation provides the main access to classical repertoire (unless we want to throw ourselves into the lion's den of received tradition), notation is the principal focus here – specifically, its definitions and limitations (in different eras and traditions), how composers use it and how we read and interpret it. One form of notation is composers' manuscripts, often the source of essential information hard to convey in print (among the *Urtext* editor's subtler tasks) which can also help one read between the lines in other printed scores where manuscripts are lost. Composers' own recorded performances are a second kind of notation, providing insights as well as questions (they can mislead, as we shall see). Analytical diagrams are yet another notational category, useful if we can distinguish between where they reveal the music and where they merely prop up their own theories. Like performance, analysis only follows music's footprints, and its focus on a particular set of features at a time – usually pitch relationships (or more rarely rhythmic ones), mostly to the exclusion of nuance and indications of feeling – can distract from one's perception of the whole. As with the painter, close work on the canvas necessitates a balancing view from afar, eyes half closed to avoid distraction by detail. Nevertheless, whatever the dangers of analysis, ignorance is worse: we need to analyse, consciously or otherwise, if we want to follow a composer's train of aural thought and feeling through basic motivic, rhythmic and tonal relationships.⁴ Analysis is equally vital for reliable memorising, the 'analytical memory' described by performers like Claudio Arrau (Elder 1982: 45–6). Above all, analysis needs to clarify our relationship to the music, not congest it with information which we cannot relate to our listening or playing.

³ This is well illustrated by the story of Brahms who, when asked why he had played a passage differently in separate performances, allegedly opened the score in front of his critic and challenged him to identify where it was written that the music always had to be the same.

⁴ This was presumably the sort of analysis that Chopin demanded of his piano pupils, addressing the music's 'formal structure, as well as . . . the feelings and psychological processes which it evokes'. (This phrase, originally from Mikuli's foreword to his 1879 collected edition of Chopin, is quoted in Eigeldinger 1986: 59.) It also doubtless involved Chopin's habit of relating musical performance to verbal declamation (: 42–4). See Eigeldinger 1986: 77 for Chopin's simple analysis of his Nocturne Op. 9 No. 2, as reported by Wilhelm von Lenz.

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[More information](#)

What do we perform?

5

Example 1.1a Mozart, Clarinet Trio K. 498, I, bars 1–4

Example 1.1b Mozart, Piano Concerto K. 488, III, bars 270–3 (piano part)

Analytical alertness also aids stylistic awareness. Style, like expression, is inherent in music (Mozart's music audibly has more style and expression than Salieri's), and though composers from one era and national background naturally share elements of style, to derive and impose retrospective rules risks wagging the dog by the tail. Even the treatises (of all eras) that deal with 'style' are both retrospective and themselves forms of notation: their usual *raison d'être* is to document past usage against contemporary change. While our era has benefited enormously from learning about upper-note trills and on-the-beat ornaments in eighteenth-century music, we must use our ears to judge whether a stylistically approved practice is or is not working. In bar 4 of Mozart's Clarinet Trio K. 498 (see Example 1.1a), elementary analysis tells us that to start the grace notes on the beat (as is now done more often than not) causes parallel octaves and a doubled leading note, all the uglier for being strongly accented on the main beat. Similarly, a crotchet grace note in the finale of the Piano Concerto in A major K. 488 (Example 1.1b), if treated as a full appoggiatura, only undermines the larger appoggiatura under it, weakening the dissonant G to a consonant A. The passage makes sense if we understand the A as an acciaccatura emphasising the appoggiatura G, and the fact that it is notated as a crotchet (in all sources of the work) is simply a quirk of Mozart's notation.

Trills in eighteenth-century music also have a happier life if, instead of imposing rules about trill starts, we hear them more basically as a reiterated appoggiatura and

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[More information](#)

6

ROY HOWAT

Example 1.2 Mozart, Piano Concerto K. 503, II, bars 100–2 (piano part)

Example 1.3 Chopin, Ballade Op. 47, bars 134–6

resolution – hence the upper-note beginning and variable tempo. Example 1.2, from Mozart’s Piano Concerto K. 503, puts this in a more complex context. To start a trill from A here before resolving the chromatic descent to G sounds like a false step, robbing the A♭ of its passing-note function and frustrating the downward melodic impetus to the G of the dominant chord. If we allow the melody to resolve first to G and *then* begin a trill from the upper note, a more sensitive ornament results, as well as a more convincing melodic shape.

Nowadays, when performing traditions of different eras live side by side, we need to be especially circumspect. One of the more ridiculous side-effects of over-generalised stylistic rules is that performances of César Franck’s Violin Sonata can now be heard, as often as not, with the third-movement trills (bars 4 and 25) starting from the upper note. Doubtless this is a semiconscious reaction to the passage’s antique recitative setting, but it ignores the piece’s wider context, a late-nineteenth-century tradition which played older music with main-note trill starts (as well as thickened accompaniments). An upper-note start here falls grotesquely between two stools, sounding absurdly precious against the piano’s solid texture and Wagnerian chromaticism, and losing the strong fanfare-like repetition of the main note.

On the other hand, we have only begun to awaken to Chopin’s baroque usage of ornamentation (as documented in Eigeldinger 1986), according to which the trills of Example 1.3 (from the Ballade Op. 47) should begin on the auxiliary note – a practice almost never observed by modern performers. I say ‘auxiliary’ rather than ‘upper’ because the fourth trill has a catch in its notation, requiring a little analytical thinking (or simple aural awareness): in harmonic terms it is really a lower-note trill from F, necessitating a start on the more dissonant E to maintain the appoggiatura effect of the three preceding upper-note starts. This also makes stronger sequential sense, with a rising third after each *Nachschlag*.

Chopin's notation here reminds us that, like a cookbook, a musical score has two basic ways of indicating the recipe for a performance: either by the method 'add fifty grams of flour' or by the method 'add enough flour to achieve a smooth consistency'. The former is prescriptive, like instrumental tablature, the latter descriptive, like pure staff notation. With most composers a natural preponderance of one or the other can usually be observed, although the two are often freely mixed (and this very mixture attests to the subjectivity inherent in our musical notation). Elsewhere (Howat, in press) I have described in detail Debussy's combinations of prescriptive rhythmic writing (where indicated contrasts of rhythm and tempo are often written into the note values) and descriptive performing indications (which capture the musical feeling and, in the case of tempo, sometimes simply confirm what is already written into the notation). In his music for piano we also find some purely descriptive open-score part-writing. Examples include the three-stave opening of the *Image* 'Cloches à travers les feuilles', which in effect must be arranged for two hands, and the last system of 'Feux d'artifice', where the bass continuity has to be 'faked' (one assumes) with pedal. The latter case supports an 'orchestral' or descriptive reading of other passages barely manageable as written, such as the opening of 'Poissons d'or' at or even near the composer's indicated tempo. Debussy's mania over the visual presentation of his editions as they appeared during his lifetime (later reprints rapidly degenerated) is part of this 'descriptive' setting of the scene, as is his extravagant use of three-stave notation in passages which technically do not require it, for example in the second series of *Images* or second book of Preludes.⁵

Understanding this balance in Debussy is important when performing a piece like the Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp, whose contrasted sections in the first movement are linked by a virtually constant quaver pulse, with the contrasts written into the note values themselves. Widespread unawareness of this (which reflects a lapse of analytical awareness) results in performances that shred the movement's architecture, ironically by trying to obey Debussy's instructions. I have seen ensembles sigh with relief at this discovery in rehearsal, as the opening harp arpeggio becomes redolent of a graceful baroque flourish, not a dirge. We also learn literally to 'observe' Debussy's indicated nuances without adding uninvited ones. Memoirs such as Marguerite Long's (1960) confirm Debussy's detestation of parasitic tempo fluctuations, and his audio recordings⁶ with Mary Garden reveal an identical 'unimpressionistic' strictness – one quite at variance with the surrounding romantic pianism. Passages of indicated rubato then stand in subtle relief, often intensifying the rhythmic surge rather than vice versa.

⁵ The autograph of the second book of Preludes (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Music MS 1006) brackets four staves to a system throughout the first four Preludes, though the music never occupies more than three at a time.

Ravel is more thoroughly prescriptive than Debussy: the hushed climax of 'Le gibet' is laconically marked 'un peu en dehors, mais sans expression', to prevent performers from botching the effect by emoting; and the score of 'Scarbo' – whose virtuosity demands every practical help – carefully indicates the most practical layout for the pianist's hands, often letting polyphonic lines emerge of their own accord.

⁶ Reissued on EMI Références CHS 7 61038 2. Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger (1986: 49) documents the same strictness relative to Chopin, and Claire Croiza recalled that Fauré, when accompanying singers, 'was a metronome incarnate' (Nectoux [1990] 1991: 294).

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[More information](#)

8

ROY HOWAT

Example 1.4a Debussy, 'Hommage à Rameau', bar 14

Example 1.4b Debussy, 'Mouvement', bars 30–1

This French habit of an underlying strict tempo preserves, via Chopin, a dance-inspired Mozartian tradition which was lost in much subsequent Germanic music. It is ironic that Beethoven is typically taught in strict tempo, and Chopin and French music in a haze of rubato, when first-hand memoirs tend to indicate the very opposite. What caused the reversal? A probable answer is laziness. The relative rhythmic uniformity and motoric drive of much older music facilitates and encourages uniform tempos (even when variation is desirable to avoid monotony). By contrast, the highly varied rhythmic surface of both Chopin and later French music (regarded by some as 'frivolous') makes a steady underlying tempo much harder to maintain, even if more necessary for architectural coherence. Ravel was reportedly strictest about this in pieces like 'Une barque sur l'océan', whose beat is all but submerged in the rolling piano figurations, and the similarly fluid 'Ondine', both of which he later indicated $\text{♩} = 58$.⁷

The classical nature of Debussy's notation is evident from the minim tempo shared between two consecutive *Images* for piano, the slow sarabande 'Hommage à Rameau' (headed 'Lent et grave') and the fast saltarello 'Mouvement' (headed 'Animé'), as shown in Example 1.4. The huge tempo contrast sensed between them is effected almost uniquely through the latter's running triplet semiquavers. Debussy is not alone in following the ear rather than the eye in this way: a similar identity of notated pulse links the finales of Brahms's Cello Sonata Op. 99 and Violin Sonata Op. 100, both in 2/2 but contrastingly headed 'Allegro molto' and 'Allegretto grazioso (quasi Andante)'.

⁷ Verbal information from Vlado Perlemuter in the late 1970s. The metronomic tempo for 'Une barque' appears in Ravel's orchestral transcription, and for 'Ondine' was indicated by Ravel to Vlado Perlemuter (printed in Ravel 1991: 7). The relation of firm tempos to the dance forms endemic to Debussy's music is discussed in Howat (in press).

Unawareness of how the difference is already written into the textures and harmonic rhythm causes many rushed performances of the Cello Sonata's finale, unbalancing the whole work to a tadpole shape – though the fault is rarer from German cellists who know the finale's main melody as a folksong. This descriptive usage of tempo markings contrasts with Mozart's 'Allegro' heading to his Piano Concerto K. 503 – a purely prescriptive 4/4 crotchet instruction for the performer, since the effect to the listener is of a Largo introduction, until the true Allegro modulates into the notation with the upbeat quavers to bar 19. (Mozart's appended 'maestoso' is the descriptive part of the indication.)

Pedalling is another highly subjective aspect of Western notation. Surprisingly, no major composer of the last 150 years has indicated this as thoroughly, or as prescriptively, as Chopin did (for the damper pedal), and even his indications leave questions. For example, Saint-Saëns stated categorically that the pedal was not to be used where Chopin had left no pedal marking (Saint-Saëns 1910: 387). This seems highly implausible, and it was probably that statement with which Debussy took issue in a letter recounting what he had learnt of Chopin pedalling from his childhood teacher Mme Mauté, an ostensible pupil of Chopin's (Durand 1927: 150). Nor do pianists generally pay much attention, anyway: Chopin's very interesting off-beat pedal releases in the F major episode of the Ballade Op. 47, yielding a beautiful 'Forlane'-like lilt if treated gently, are still largely ignored.

Debussy's pedalling is much more implicitly – or descriptively – incorporated into his notation of bass note values, ties and suchlike, including many rarely observed pedal lifts implied by phrase ends and staccatos (see Howat, in press). Debussy's explanation to Maurice Dumesnil was that 'Pedalling cannot be written down: it varies from one instrument to another, from one room, or one hall, to another' (Nichols 1992: 163). Source study also teaches us to read between the lines: for example, the printed indication 'Ped.' at bar 1 of 'Pagodes' (from the *Estampes*) changes sense upon discovering that Debussy wrote this indication in brackets (see Debussy 1991: 2 and 155), which the engraver presumably considered inessential.

A similar qualification suggests itself with Schubert, whose frequent staccato bass notes in piano music often call for a pizzicato-like treatment under higher legato lines. When this notation appears in conjunction with the indication 'col pedale', as at the beginning of the Andante sostenuto of the Sonata in B \flat major D. 960, the implication seems to be not to pedal through (as Paul Badura-Skoda reluctantly assumes – see Elder 1982: 121), but rather to use the pedal discriminatingly to avoid dryness (the texture is pure string quintet). Probably Schubert's most problematic printed pedal marking is in the fourth *Moment musical* D. 780 (Example 1.5): the indication seems banal if applied only to the half bar, or causes an unpleasant clash if carried over the barline. Various explanations for this have been proposed by editors (the different resonance of old pianos, etc.), but none refers to the autograph fair copy of the Sonata in A major D. 959, in which Schubert's 'pedale' indication nine bars from the end of the first movement is written towards the middle of the bar (his semibreves are often similarly positioned), though it is obviously intended (and always printed) from the

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[More information](#)

10

ROY HOWAT

Example 1.5 Schubert, *Moment musical* No. 4, bars 21–5

first beat.⁸ This is surely also the case in the *Moment musical* (whose autograph is long lost): the pedal is implied for that whole bar and similar bars. The confusion doubtless arose because (ironically) the only surviving source of the *Moment musical*, the notoriously sloppy first edition, for once probably followed the autograph exactly, unlike the more intelligently prepared posthumous first edition of the Sonata. The problem here is further masked by the fact that virtually all modern editions tacitly adjust the reprise (bar 135) to read as in Example 1.5, although the first edition there revealingly prints ‘Ped.’ from the fourth, not the fifth, semiquaver.

Modern technology has provided another form of notation: recordings by composers or their close associates. These show that our age of ‘period performance’ must still catch up with Elgar and Gershwin, among others, who adopted some much livelier tempos than are now prevalent. A major problem is the change over just a few decades in tone projection, vibrato and phrasing, often in response to larger halls. Few classical brass players can now float a line like the semi-jazz musicians on the 1924 Gershwin–Whiteman recording of *Rhapsody in Blue* (Ross Gorman’s amazing clarinet antics are also noteworthy), or string sections judge portamentos as in the recordings conducted by Elgar.⁹ As a result, modern imitations – like Georg Solti’s recordings of Elgar’s symphonies with tempos based on the latter’s own, or Michael Tilson Thomas’s orchestral accompaniments to Gershwin’s Duo–Art piano roll of *Rhapsody in Blue* – tend to sound breathless in comparison with the flexibility of the originals.¹⁰ Gershwin’s piano-roll tempo through the tuttis is only marginally faster than the 1924 audio recording; however, that marginal difference – probably attributable to the fact that the piano’s tone speaks faster than an orchestra’s and then decays – is enough to cramp the phrasing of Tilson Thomas’s band in trying to keep up with it. The faster attack and decay of piano tone may also account for Fauré consistently playing his *Pavane* on the piano ‘at crotchet 100 or even faster’ (Boult 1976: 490), as against his indication $\text{♩} = 84$ in the orchestral score.

⁸ For complete source details see Schubert 1979: 122. Access to the fair copy is not straightforward; a microfilm copy exists in the Library of Congress, Washington, and print copies are held by the Pendlebury Library, Cambridge.

⁹ The 1924 Gershwin–Whiteman recording of the *Rhapsody* was reissued on RCA Victrola LP AVM1-1740; Elgar’s recordings are reissued on CD by EMI (CDS 7 54560 2 and 54568 2). In the booklet accompanying the Elgar CDs, Robert Philip discusses the treatment of notation like overdotting, and Jerrold Northrop Moore argues that Elgar’s fast tempos were not a result of limitations in recording time.

¹⁰ The Solti recordings, with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, are reissued on CD (Decca 421 387-2 and 421 386-2); the Tilson Thomas recording is an LP issue by CBS (76509). On the latter’s sleeve note Andrew Kazdin explains that for the recording the piano-roll perforations corresponding to the tuttis were covered over, so the orchestra had to maintain the same tempo.

In many such examples, tradition has slowed the music over even a few decades as a result of losing touch with an original dance idiom.¹¹ In one respect the process recalls Japanese *gagaku*, originally a repertoire of medieval Chinese popular tunes which over centuries grew progressively slower and overlaid with counterpoint until it became a new art form and an object of tradition worship when its original context was forgotten. Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* suffered especially through Ferde Grofé's rescoring for a much larger orchestra after the composer's death (he also changed Gershwin's *alla breve* through most of the work to 4/4) in response to the piece's enormous popularity – a fate parallel to that of Handel's *Messiah*, again reflecting a *gagaku*-like iconisation. Other relatively recent works which have experienced a similar history include Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (perhaps because of Nijinsky's laborious choreography): Debussy's own printed copy of the score contains metronomic tempos which he added around 1908–13, much nimbler than habitually heard, including ♩ = 44 at the opening and ♩ = 84 for the recapitulation at figure 8 (as printed in Debussy 1970). (The difference between these indications confirms that the indicated 'Mouv^t du début' at figure 8 is in effect written into the note values rather than externally imposed.) César Franck's *Symphonic Variations* are another case of an imposed, excessively slow tradition, probably through overassociation with Wagner rather than Saint-Saëns, from whose lively concertante tradition this work really springs.

On the other hand, a faulty metronome has probably caused Chabrier's magnificent piano music, virtually unplayable at many of his indicated tempos, to suffer neglect. In the *Bourrée fantasque* not only does the central section (indicated both 'Istesso tempo' and 'molto espressivo') become quite 'inexpressible' at the composer's ♩ = 152, but also Chabrier's unfinished orchestration of the piece has articulation quite implausible – especially from such a master orchestrator – at that speed.¹² (The 'bourrée d'Auvergne', from Chabrier's native region, is a clog dance, which suggests how to pace the opening repeated semiquavers in both the *Bourrée fantasque* and the similar central section of 'Paysage', from the *Pièces pittoresques*.) Wider study of Chabrier's piano music shows that much of it makes technical and musical sense two to five metronome notches slower than marked, and this is confirmed by comparison with those few pieces that do work at his metronomic indications, notably *España* and 'Mélancolie', 'Sous bois' and 'Idylle' from the *Pièces pittoresques*.¹³

A ludicrously fast printed metronome marking (♩ = 104), probably the result of a misunderstanding, has also caused the undeserved neglect of Debussy's *Masques*, a piece which rhythmically is best understood in relation to the tempo defined at bar 7 of its companion piece *L'isle joyeuse* ('Modéré et très souple' – see Debussy 1991: xvii–xviii). Debussy's recorded piano roll of *Children's Corner*, sometimes cited for its very fast tempos, is another suspect source: closer study reveals a possible error in the

¹¹ See Nectoux [1990] 1991: 108 concerning the dance setting of Fauré's *Pavane*, arranged by Fauré and Robert de Montesquiou.

¹² Chabrier's unfinished orchestration is in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Music MS 19201.

¹³ Possibly he used a different metronome on occasion, for example while away from home.