

Musical Style

Last month I played piano for my wife at the finals of the Pro-Mozart Competition in Atlanta, Georgia, where she won first place. I did not hear every one of the other contestants, mainly because I was trying to concentrate on how I wanted to sound. However, with some of the contestants, there were a couple of instances when the interpretation of the piece was extremely disconnected to the time period and performance history of the piece. Fortunately, the main comments I had from the judges about my piano playing were compliments on how appropriate the styles of the different arias were.



When I judged Chopin's Young Artist Competition, I also had a similar impression. It seems that some pianists are totally unaware that the piece they are performing has ever been played before. Big mistake! You can be creative, however, first you need to know what historic period, genre, style the piece has. Reinventing the wheel is not always a plus!

In many ways, it was easier for me, being from Moscow, to develop a sense of style. I went to Moscow Conservatory at least twice a week to listen to live music. My parents did so for most of their lives, starting from when they went to college. The collection of LP's that my mom collected was quite large, and I had different versions of the same pieces performed by different pianists, orchestras, choirs and such.

However, with the internet, it is so easy for everyone to listen to sound-bits and watch short video examples of many different performers. Most of the websites that sell CD's have free sound examples. Also, there is an enormous amount of musicological papers that students and teachers put on the internet for free to read and view. My wife put her papers from college on her website for years, and I encourage all of my students to do the same. One can learn a great deal from this, and most importantly, you become a part of community of musically educated people. I have read creativekeyboard.com for years

until I started writing for it, and I constantly use information from it in my teaching. The quotes from Mozart's letter to his dad about not understanding tempo rubato in Vienna, or from Chopin about using finger characteristics instead of trying to make all of the fingers play with the same power were priceless to me!

Every bit of information can explain how to perform a piece of music, and how to avoid or solve problems. Research of a musical piece, its history, composer's biography, famous performers who made it popular in the first place - all of this has to be done! To me, in order to perform a piece of music, I would need to read the composer's biography, research the time period during which it was composed, what was the reason for the piece to be written, when was it first performed, who were the composer's influences, teachers, friends, and perhaps enemies. Then I would go and listen to anything I can get, Internet, my own collection, library etc. That way you might know if perhaps your piano part originally played by a harp, therefore leading you to realize that getting emotional and using dynamics too freely might not be in your best interest.

In conclusion, researching and listening to other recordings of your piece is an absolute necessity. It is always preferred for musicians to be prepared as much as possible. And that preparedness includes historical accuracy and understanding of the musical style. Classical music requires that kind of attention, and it pays off to do these extra steps and develop an appropriate feel and taste to different musical styles.