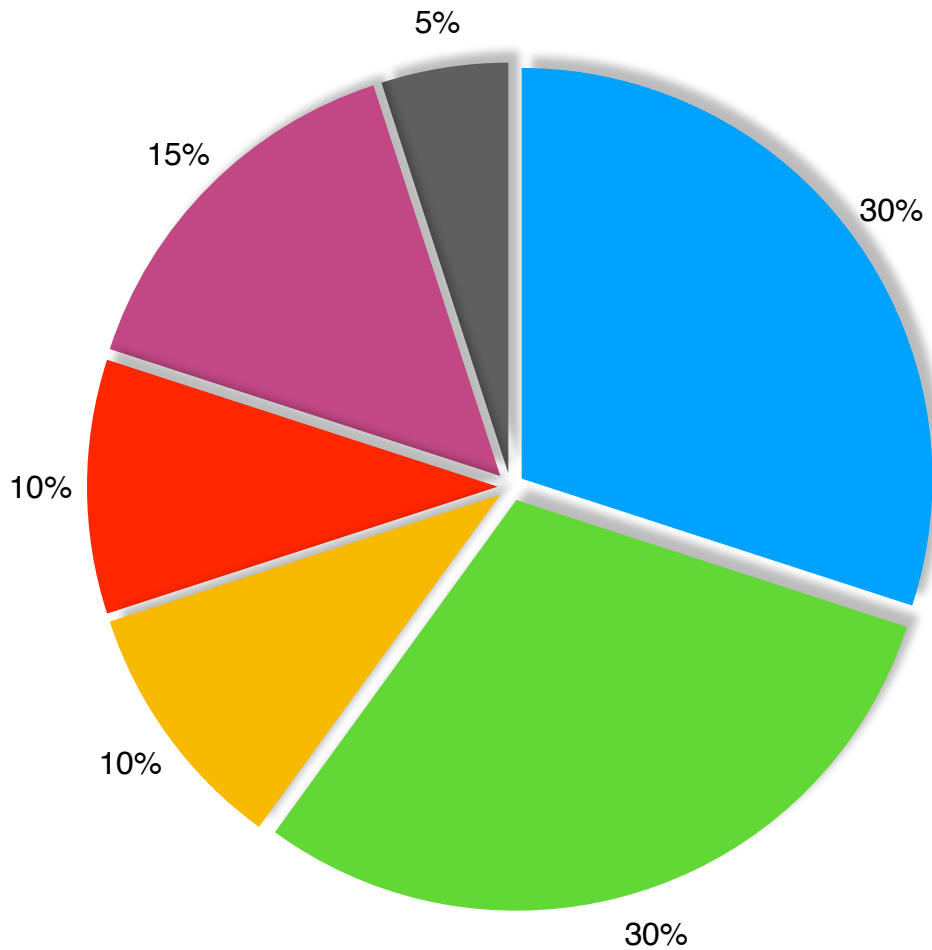


Narrative Musicianship

Interpretation

Components of what constitutes a complete music narrative:

- Composer's intent
- Accurate understanding of the composer's intent
- "character creation"
- what happens to the character before the music begins, while it's being played and what will happen afterwards
- your personal experiences must have commonality with what your invented character is going through
- unknown: risk factor of the live performance and associated anxiety



1. Reasonably identify what you think composer wanted to say with the music
2. Research supporting circumstances outside of the music itself and determine what you think might have influenced the substance of the music
3. Invent your character (doesn't have to be anyone in particular - just inspired by your discovery)
4. Where are you coming from, what do you want, where are you going to?
5. What in your own experience comes close to what is happening to the character? If nothing - what are you most afraid of? Wishing for? Fantasize about?
6. Use your fear as fuel for your character.

Steps-by-step guide to practice of *Narrative Musicianship*

- Analyze the music both theoretically and contextually. Determine the form (such as A-B-A, sonata, rondo, through-composed etc.) and then discover the extra-musical context of the composition.
Example: Tchaikovsky's "Are you my guardian angel" from letter scene in *Onegin* and second movement of Tchaikovsky's 1st piano concerto; Rachmaninoff's correspondence with clergy; Beethoven's depression due to deafness
- Identify what character trait would be dominant in the given music based on the form+context ratio.
Example: Passage of time Brahms Intermezzo - repetitive form therefore evolution over time for my character is appropriate.
- Create a fictional character or event that would possess the qualities identified within form+context step.
Example: Loss of enthusiasm and general fatigue is a frequent byproduct of a passage of time in a long life and it fits with a cyclical nature of the piece. Therefore my character is an old man with major regrets at the end of his life. (Brahms 118 #2)
- Look within your own life experience, outside of music for a person or an event most closely associated with your character's narrative. This is important and very personal: you must at times think about and address very unhappy/unpleasant moments of your own life - this has to be done with care, in solitude and with total emotional honesty with yourself. Think of it as self-therapy.
Example: Find something specific such as loss, immigration, divorce, religious feelings and try to feel the emotion that you instinctively want to feel when you think

about it. If you are looking for a sense of happiness and bliss - embrace it fully.

- begin *emotional recall* practice by drawing on our own feelings and thoughts with regard to your personal experience and then applying them to your chosen character's narrative.

Example: Literally, when playing the music try and feel those feelings and aim to have your performance express it. Experiment with emotional improvisation. Try and express opposite emotions and let the music match them.

- Dedicate time to experimenting with the application of your own feelings/thoughts to your character and make sure they take form of *musical choices*. There will be some fun challenges: how do you portray 'age'? Naïveté? Jealousy? Fear? Strong, active emotions are easier to depict with abstraction of music, namely Love, Hate, Rage, Peace. It's the subtler ones such as indecisiveness, fear, loneliness, passage of time from youth to being older that require specific attention and calibration. Each time and each musical composition will find different realizations and each individual performer will interpret them differently based on their own experiences and *emotional recall*.
- Once you master the emotional recall for your narrative's character you can explore *multiple characters and narratives* within one piece of music. This is most advanced and endlessly engaging part - the possibilities are infinite and it is all up to your imagination. You can pivot from different narratives to create an emotional depth of the entire world populated with different people or highlight the juxtaposition of people vs. god (Beethoven, Wagner) or people vs. nature (often in Russian music) etc.

Narrative Musicianship is **not** a creation of *program music*. It's purpose is not to provide a listening guide à la romantic programmatic music (Symphony Fantastique, Isle of the Dead, Also Sprach Zarathustra) which is then shared with the audience in order for them to follow the story.

The point of *Narrative Musicianship* is to equip a performer with the rich and three-dimensional world of the character that is determined by his/her imagination and lift the music off the page with true conviction and sincerity of a method actor.

The key to success is for it to remain **secret**. Once you create your narrative and characterization it is imperative to keep it alive only within your imagination. Should you divulge details of your narrative it will create expectations on the part of the audience and will diminish results.

Memory Aid aspect

Once *Narrative Musicianship* becomes your modus operandi it opens the door to a new level of memorization security, where the music is perceived as a 3D environment in which “the character” exists. As is it a natural habitat for our character, therefore he/she doesn’t have to worry about remembering where to go and what to do - they simply **live** through it. Like reaching for the door handle - we don’t calculate the distance from the floor in order to reach for it - we just ‘know it’ and the space in which it exists. Likewise, once you believe in your character and their narrative, music becomes the environment in which they live and to which they are accustomed. Naturally you still have to commit music to memory. As your work goes further, assign keys to moods and actions (for example: f#-minor for sadness, a-major for happiness, g-major for running etc.) and practice cognitive connection between them. It adds tremendous security to the performance where you can recall an emotion and you know exactly where in the music you should be (keys, modulations, motivic elements)

Once you really master this, simply playing ‘despair’ will instantly make your whole body be aware of the melody, exact key and harmonic progression associated with it without having to think about them individually. And, needless to say, it is more effective to be playing ‘death’ or ‘love’ than thinking “what is the base here and what is the first note in the right hand?”

Risk Factor and Performance Anxiety

It is fair to say that we all experience some form of stage fright, performance anxiety or sense of extra pressure when performing, whichever you prefer to call it. It would be inhuman to assume otherwise. We all know that the best remedy against stage fright is being super-ready/over-prepared. If you truly are - know it, own it and be grateful that you have managed your time well to be adequately ready. This should give you peace of mind and eliminate most of the anxiety.

The very idea of performing in front of people has physical effect on our body: our heartbeat gets faster, our breathing patterns change etc. All that also happens when we experience stressful, dramatic or ecstatic moments in our lives. And guess what? We can channel the power of those physical changes into feeling real emotions of our characters. Another words - instead of fighting it and suppressing it - redirect it towards the betterment of the performance by *feeling* it on *behalf* of your character in *their* *circumstance*.

So... that little grey wedge in the interpretation pie on the first page is an important element of all live performances - it gives us ability to connect to real human emotion we feel strongly and then, if we redirect it towards our character - they come alive and becomes relatable to our audience.

When we are dealing with wordless non-programatic music (most if instrumental music) the power of energy that we put out through our performance is what touches the audience, pulls at the 'strings of their souls' and makes for an emotional journey they will not soon forget. *Narrative Musicianship* is a tool that enables you to create these narratives and become ever more powerful musical communicator.

Happy practicing!

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