



ISSN 2658-4824

UDC 78.1

DOI: 10.33779/2658-4824.2019.1.116-124

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*o.perepl@gmail.com***The Performance Gesture  
as a Theatrical Reflection  
of New Contexts of Genre  
and Style in Contemporary  
Piano Music\***

The article deals with the expressive role of gestures in the art of piano performance in relation to both classical and contemporary music. According to theoretical analysis, it is demonstrated that the issue of the performance gesture in contemporary music, in connection with the theatricalization of performance, as well as due to the fact that performance in many cases acquires the features of visual play-acting, stands out from the overall issue of artistry.

The general provisions of the artistic gesture in contemporary piano music are complemented by multiple positions related to the art of playing the clusters, strings, pedals, using sound gestures, as well as theatricalization of the performed musical material.

The article provides a detailed description of the categories of gestures adopted in the practice of modern music. They are: gestures related to performance of clusters; interspersed with verbal sounds in the process of playing

**Исполнительский жест как  
театрализованное отражение  
новых жанрово-стилевых  
контекстов в современной  
фортепианной музыке\*\***

В статье рассматривается выразительная роль жестов в искусстве фортепианного исполнительства в отношении как классической, так и современной музыки. На основании теоретического анализа показано, что проблема исполнительского жеста в связи с театрализацией исполнения, приобретением им черт перформанса, выделилась из общей проблемы артистизма. Общие положения искусства жеста в современной фортепианной музыке дополняются ещё множеством позиций, связанных с искусством извлечения кластеров, игрой на струнах, педалях, со звуковыми жестами, с театрализацией исполняемого.

Даётся подробное описание категорий жестов, принятых в современной музыкальной практике: относящиеся к извлечению кластеров, связанные с вкраплением словесных звуков в процесс фортепианного исполнительства (так называемые вербально-звуковые

\* The present article is the translation of an article originally published in Ukrainian: Olsksandr Perepelitsya. *Zhestikulyatsiya pianista yak zasib vykonas'koy vyrazovosti* [The Pianist's Gesture as a Means of Contemporary Expression] // *Lvivs'ko-Ryashivs'ki naukovi zoshyty* [Lviv-Ryashiv Scholarly Works]. 1st Issue. Lvov-Ryashiv. Lviv National Ivan Franko University, 2013. pp. 170–181. Translated by Anton Rovner.

\*\* Данная публикация — перевод статьи, вышедшей на украинском языке: Олександр Перепелиця. *Жестикуляція піаніста як засіб виконавської виразовості* // *Львівсько-Ряшівські наукові зошити*. 1-й номер. Львів-Ряшів, Львівській національний університет ім. Івана Франка, 2013. С. 170–181.

the piano, the so-called verbal and sound gestures; related with playing on the strings by using fingers, sticks or other items; associated with playing pedals; theatricalized gestures.

In conclusion: the expansion of the boundaries of musical language, and the emergence of performances and theatricalized compositions in performance practice has led to the expansion of the thesaurus of performance gestures' and of its informative functions. In contemporary music gesture has become a bearer of meaning and forms one of the strata providing meaning to composition.

Keywords:

the pianist's gesticulation; the conductor's gesticulation; sound (cluster, voice, percussive effects in the strings) and non-sound (theatricalized) gestures; new music; the art of performance.

жесты), с игрой на педалях, на струнах с помощью пальцев, палочек или других предметов, а также театрализованные жесты.

Делается вывод о том, что расширение границ музыкального языка, появление в практике исполнения перформансов, театрализованных произведений привело к расширению тезауруса исполнительских жестов и его содержательных функций. В современной музыке жест становится носителем смысла и составляет один из смыслообразующих слоёв произведения.

Ключевые слова:

пианистический жест, дирижерский жест, звуковые (кластер, голос, ударные эффекты на струнах) и не звуковые (театральные) жесты; новая музыка; исполнительское искусство.

*For citation/Для цитирования:*

Perepelytsia O.O. The Performance Gesture as a Theatrical Reflection of New Genre and Style Contexts in Contemporary Piano Music. ICONI. 2019. No. 1, pp. 116–124.  
DOI: 10.33779/2658-4824.2019.1.116-124.

**T**he subject of performance gesture in piano performance has not been sufficiently studied. In the practice and pedagogy of piano performance the problem of performance gesture remains concealed in the overall issue of artistry. At the same time, we must acknowledge that in contemporary music the issue of performance gesture disaffiliates from the overall category, in connection with endowing performance with theatrical elements, and requires special study.

Usually, the power of the pianist's impact on the audience is ascribed to the presence of certain special "forces", certain traits of the psyche the possession of which is not granted to every single musician. There exists the widespread conviction that the pianist creates an impact on the audience by the force of infusion, a "magnetic force", certain fluids, etc. While not refuting the possibility of the performer's psychic influence on the audience, it must be acknowledged that

there also exists the additional art of gesture, poses, mimicry, willful message, etc. without which it is not possible to perform in public.

It must be said that pianists are in a privileged position in comparison with all the other instruments. The piano essentially imitates the orchestra.

Performance on the piano requires the mastery of an extensive circle of patterns of motion which are generalized under the general appellation of technique. One of the most important preconditions of acquisition and development of technique is a free possession of one's body. Heinrich Neuhaus said: "in piano playing there exist the same elements as in any game, and that a good ping-pong or tennis player may teach a pianist a thing or two by his dexterity" [9, p. 148].

Nonetheless, the majority of piano methodologies do not pay a sufficient amount of attention to the art of gesture, with the exception of the winged words of

the great virtuosi, for example, the utterance of Franz Liszt: “The hands must hover over the keyboard more than crawl on it” [9, p. 148]. It is considered that the gesture is the expression of the inner content of the music, and that it would manifest itself in full measure on the condition of the freedom of the pianist’s full control over his body and freedom of expression. In all likelihood, to a certain degree this is how it is, but it is hard to imagine that the performer would not think about gestures and would not especially prepare them during his practice.

The art of gesture plays a very important role in piano performance. The principal rule for gesture is that the entire body, as well as the hands must be free, the pianist must make use of the natural heaviness of his or her hand to achieve the necessary tactile contact upon the requisite to use the weight of the entire body. The movements of the body, legs and hands may be of the most diverse kind — and must arise in the gradation from almost an immobile pose to an almost extreme exaltation — the main thing is that everything would be artistically justified and the motions would arise from out of the content of the performed music. However, all of this still turns out to be insufficient in performance of contemporary music.

The general conditions of the art of gesture in contemporary music are also supplemented by a multitude of positions connected with the art of performance of clusters, playing on the strings, pedals, sound gestures and theatricalization of the performed music [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 11, 12, 13, 14].

Gertrud Meyer-Dankmann’s book [14] examines a number of gestures used in contemporary music. Gestures in contemporary music are structured landmarks.

Thus, Gertrud Meyer-Dankmann begins her study of gestures accepted in contemporary piano music with performance of clusters. She distinguishes six types of clusters.

I. The fixed cluster:

– clusters of diverse breadth and intervallic structure

– the finger cluster of major and minor seconds:



– the cluster with the palm of the hand: performed on the hand on white or black keys or simultaneously on white and black keys:



– the faustcluster (a cluster with a fist):  
– the elbow cluster — performed by the entire arm from the tips of the fingers to the elbow:

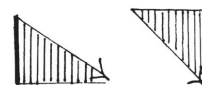


The cluster may be either short or long in duration of sound in gradations from pianissimo to fortissimo.

II. The reduced (abridged) cluster:

1. a) the cluster is pressed by the entire hand — all the tones are pressed from the highest to the lowest, and gradually the notes are gradually released from the highest note to the lowest, or vice versa;

b) the clusters are pressed with two hands from the middle to the top, or from the highest note to the middle, or, on the other hand, the gradual pressure of the keys with two hands grows into a cluster:



2. The cluster-glissando. The cluster shifts along the keyboard as the result of the gliding motion of the hands, one of which glides along the white keys, and the other — along the black keys:

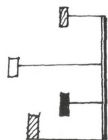


III. Superposition of a large quantity of short clusters.

Several small clusters are assembled into one large one, moreover, they are sustained

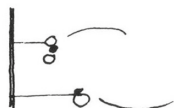


by pedals, and the difference in the sound must be evened out between the deep and the high clusters, possibly, through a hierarchy and/or various loudness:



IV. Filtration from the cluster:

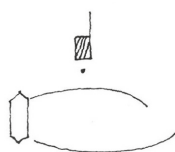
From the strike of a large cluster, the pianist must make it possible for only certain small sections to continue sounding, for example, the finger cluster — certain particular intervals, a separate sound, or even a chord:



V. The harmonic-cluster:

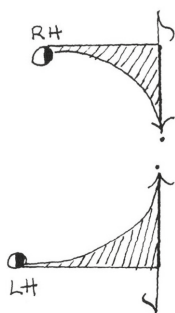
The hand presses on the cluster (or interval, a separate sound) mainly in the low position SILENTLY, while the other hand presses a separate sound, chord, etc. swiftly for a short duration.

The same strike may be on the upper part of the keyboard, only the silent cluster shortens, and only several sounds remain in its reverberation:



VI. The unfolded cluster.

A strike with clasped hands or elbow, and in such a position to unfold the motion in different sides:



Endowing Cluster Forms with Musical Features

The following graphical examples emphasize the motion of the strike or thrust. Beating with slaps of arms, fists, the sharp of the hand or elbow. All of this is not hooliganism, but differentiation of endowing cluster forms with musical features (Example 1).

Example 1  
Gertrud Meyer-Dankmann:  
"Vorsicht! Hacker und Schläger!"

VORSICHT! HACKER UND SCHLÄGER!

„PARDON ME - GET AWAY FROM MY PIANO!“

Sound gestures. Frequently composers insert sonar phrases or separate exclamations into the musical texture. Undoubtedly, these impregnations of conversation must be relegated to the category of gestures, particularly sound gestures. Their performance demands from the pianist almost an actor’s artistry, in such a way it is necessary to control the voice and endow it with one or another intonation, force, capaciousness, etc. (Example 2).

The following form of gestures used by contemporary music is playing on the strings with the help of fingers, mallets or other objects. They may be indicated, following Gertrud Meyer-Dankmann, as gestures of tactile contact. Such gestures are used upon playing on the strings of a grand piano. In this sense several positions are used:

- playing on the strings upon a pressed right pedal, when with the edges of his fingers the pianist reaches the strings, deriving gentle, rustling sounds;

*Example 2*  
 Karmella Tsepkolenko “Strashilka”  
 [“Spook Story”] from the cycle “Tonokol’ory”:

Andante misterioso ♩ = 63

– playing on the strings with the use of the echo effect. The right pedal is pressed several times sharply — the sound of the overtones remains from the touch of the dampers. Then with the pressed right pedal it is possible to knock on the body of the piano or throw objects on the strings, etc.;

– playing on the strings with the use of mallets, threads, plucked nails, etc. On the Tenth International Contemporary Music Festival “Two Days and Two Nights of New Music” (Odessa, April, 2006), Kiev composer Maksim Shorenkov demonstrated a very original composition called “Skvoz' sfery” [“Through the Spheres”] for piano and threads, in which he made use of threads of various lengths interspersed through the strings of the piano. Several threads were freely dangling, having been tied from one side to strings of an open grand piano, and from the other side to a string stretched over the stage. By pulling the strings, Maksim brought to light wondrously beautiful sounds, and periodically pressed his hands over the piano keys. The musician performed in the dark, illuminating himself and the construction made from a classical

instrument and adjunct materials by means of luminescent lamps radiating a thickly blue light (Photo 1);

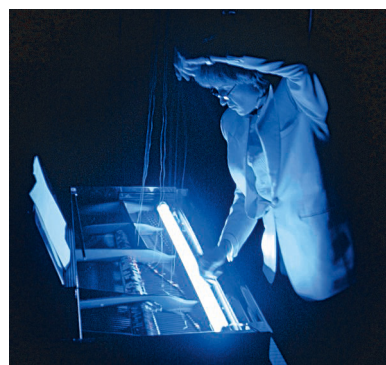


Photo 1. Maksim Shorenkov.  
 Composition “Skvoz' sfery” [“Through the Spheres”] for piano and threads

– playing on the pedals. Traditionally the three pedals of the piano are used as auxiliary means of color: the right hand lifts up the dampers and lets the string overtones sound, while the left pedal shifts the keyboard, so that the hammer strikes only one string, the middle pedal leaves only one sound to continue. But there do

*Example 3*

Karmella Tsepkolenko “Vecherniy pasyans”  
[“Evening Solitaire”]:



occur examples when the pedals are used as specific percussive complexes: strikes by the right pedal create a din of the entire string section of the piano; moreover, the strikes on the pedals themselves create a specific effect resembling percussion instruments (Example 3).

– *theatricalized gestures*. These must include gestures used by the performer preparing a particular performance. At first, the term performance, which denote a form of *contemporary art* in which the composition is comprised by actions of an artist or a group in a particular venue and time pertained only to the visual arts.

A performance may include any situation which includes four basic elements: *time*, place, the artist’s *body* and the attitude of the artist and the *audience members*. Subsequently, such traditional forms of artistic activity, such as *theater*, *dance*, music, circus performances, etc., began to be labelled as performance. However, in the context of contemporary art the term “performance” usually pertains to various forms of *avant-garde* or *conceptual art*, the heir to the tradition of the visual arts.

In music the word “performance” was first used in application to a musical composition by composer John Cage in 1952, when he performed his 4'33" (4 minutes and

33 seconds of silence) on stage. The poster and program of the concert bore the word “performance” on it.

In summary, it may be asserted that contemporary music broadly expanded the boundaries of performance gesture, forcing the performer to play literally with all the parts of the body. Performance gesture became a reflection of the new contexts incorporated into contemporary music. Strikes, shouts, harsh sounds, deafening noise, swift changes of feelings — all of these are expressions of living contexts contained in contemporary musical compositions.

According to composer Alexei Shmurak, in contemporary music the integration with the natural sound environment is expressed much less than, for instance, in classical music [13]. Rather contemporary music forms its own sound environment, ciphered by the contexts of contemporaneity, and withdraws into imaginary art, into pure art. The reverse process — that of the return to the context of the real world (Reich’s “Clapping music,” Lachenmann’s incorporation of radio sounds, noises, etc.) does not as much bring music closer to reality, as it endows the reality reflected in music with fantastic attributes, similarly to the “rational ocean”, described by Stanislav Lemm in “Solaris”, which evoked images of

reality, relying on reason, the noosphere, and the contexts surrounding the human being. These images, with all their impressions of being objective reality, were also projections of the mind.

It may be considered a firmly established fact that contemporary music avoids established genre-related and stylistic constants and departs from stable elements of compositional form to the direction of mobile and mutable genres and forms. The contemporary composer of the new musical trends creates with each new musical composition a new genre, as well as a new form and a new style. Such diversity of genre and style brought to life a new musical language which appeals not only to traditional means of extraction of sound, but also to other musical effects. In the scores of virtually every contemporary composer it is possible to find a list of symbolic indications of performance instructions which the score abounds in.

These symbolic indications of performance instructions, basing themselves on the general principles of newspeak (use of sound clusters, non-traditional uses of the musical instruments — playing on the other side of the bridge on string instruments, on mouthpieces on wind instruments, etc.) display no less diversity in their particularities.

It may be said that, when writing a new musical work, the composer supplements the existent musical language. Thereby, the language of music transforms itself from an unfaltering, stable sphere into a stably altering sphere, fluctuating in dependence of various artistic contexts of the musical composition.

In its turn, the extension of the boundaries of the language of music, the desire to acquire new, unexpected meanings and effects leads to an expansion of the thesaurus of performance gestures. The gesture becomes not only the expression of the content, but a symbol of new content. From hence arises the deliberateness and theatricalization of the performance gesture. In some compositions the gesture becomes the bearer of meaning,

and the absence of performance gesture removes one of the sense-making strata of the musical composition, which leads to a loss of the compositions content-based structure.

Nothing of the sort exists in traditional, classical music. In the latter the performance gesture brings in the colorfulness of perception, but does not bear any sense-making significance. As such, herein lies the main distinction of the performance gesture in contemporary and classical music. Having taken on the sense-making role, the performance gesture has acquired traits of theatricality, prominence, signification.

The contemporary composer forms a particular gestural scenario for each concrete composition. The performance gesture is elaborated and rehearsed the same way the musical text of a composition is. In this regard the contemporary performer becomes akin to a conductor, who also works on a system of gestures in each concrete composition.

It must be remembered, as has been indicated above, in classical music the performance gesture forms the prerogative of impulsive, subconscious emotional energy, and the performer does not prepare a musical score of his or her gestures; these may change depending on his or her mood, and almost always are the manifestation of his or her artistry, and not of an especially thought-out program.

When speaking of performance gesture, we must also consider the fact that contemporary music has obtained another dimension, which previously had been inaccessible for classical music, — namely, the internet. Music becomes disseminated through social media, and often the listener may come into contact with the music one on one, without attending concerts. Thereby, frequently the perception of contemporary music becomes bereft of that collective intelligence which elevates each concrete listener in a “concert”, which develops the sense of taste and inculcates aesthetic ideals, but, on the other hand, the inquisitive listener may play back numerous



times the musical composition of his or her liking (either in entirety or in part) and, ultimately, shape the working stereotypes of perception of contemporary art. In

this sense performance gesture, being an inherent part of the performance, becomes the means for attraction, a peculiar “appeal” for the listener.

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