Teaching and learning of musical interpretation in Western art music within higher music education

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Music has always been a performing art. However, it was first during the 19th century that the standard procedure within Western art music was formalised to the interpreter performing an interpretation—an artwork in its own, based on and related to the notated musical work. As such the interpretation can be analysed and valued, and the interpreter is thereby an artist.

Musical interpretation is starting to become a rather well-researched phenomenon from the performing artist’s perspective, but hitherto little attention has been given to how musical interpretation is described, developed, and communicated within higher music education.

Research shows that interpretation and the expressive aspects of music tend to be stepmotherly treated at the lower levels of education, e.g., in municipal music schools. Even in one-to-one teaching within higher education in Western art music, less attention is usually given to interpretation compared to technique, and the students’ practical playing is often emphasised. The discrepancy, found by teachers during lessons, between students’ practical playing and capacity for independent interpretation has been analysed as indicating that the students had not internalised the necessary skills.

The aim of this compilation thesis—consisting of four articles and the ‘kappa’—is to describe teaching and learning of musical interpretation from both a teacher and student perspective within higher music education in Western art music. Contexts studied were delimited to one-to-one, master class, and prepared student-centred musical interpretational response seminar (henceforth abbreviated to PSCMIRS) teaching in Sweden. The following research questions were formulated to fulfil the aim:

1. How do teachers and students describe and define musical interpretation? (Part study 1: qualitative semi-structured interviews [6 students and 4 teachers]; autoethnography. Part study 2: see below.)
2. How do teachers and students see and describe their interaction while developing the student’s musical interpretation during lessons? (Part study 2: video documentation and stimulated recall [2 students, 1 master class teacher, and the students’ regular teacher (1)]; follow-up interviews [2 students and their regular teacher (1)]; field notes; scores annotated by the master class teacher. Part study 3 [planned participatory action research on PSCMIRS teaching].)
3. What do these descriptions, definitions, and the interaction between teachers and students imply with regards to pedagogical, aesthetical, and philosophical values of higher music education?

The theoretical framework consists of selections from the hermeneutical philosophy of Gadamer and Ricoeur including the concepts of pre-understanding, the interpreter’s horizon, and the fusion of
horizons. Currently, poetry is used both as one of the methods for analysis and forms of (re)presentation. In addition, Jungian archetypes might be used as an analytical lens to further the understanding of the relationship(s) between student, teacher, musical work, and composer.

Results—as presented in article 1 (in press) and 2 (in review)—indicate that both the student’s and the teacher’s definition of musical interpretation are of importance. They defined it as the process that results in a musical interpretation (mainly viewed as a practical performance) that should be positioned in the continuum between a non-interpretation and an over-interpretation. Conditions for learning of musical interpretation within the one-to-one context seemed to centre on the student’s achievement of a high level of autonomy. Three aspects appeared to affect this condition: (1) the student’s and the teacher’s view of what musical interpretation (as an activity) is, (2) experienced respectively acknowledged freedom of interpretation, and (3) (expectations on) the student’s explorative approach. Overall, honest and real dialogues where both the student and the teacher are open and feel secure enough to put something at risk seem to be a prerequisite for learning to take place.

The expected outcome for the finished thesis is a multi-dimensional description and deepened understanding of the teaching, learning, and communication of musical interpretation within higher music education in Western art music, which hopefully will be beneficial in the future development of one-to-one, master class, and different forms of group teaching.

At the conference, preliminary results including the interaction between teacher and student while developing the student’s musical interpretation during master class lessons (part study 2) and the research design of the planned participatory action research on PSCMI RS teaching (part study 3) will be presented.