

INTERPRETING MUSIC AND ENGLISH

by

MAX SCHREIER

Music is nothing more than a specific interpretation of a set group of symbols. When we as musicians look at a staff, we know exactly what music must be done to realize the notation. We take into account the specifics of the information given, so that we can properly interpret the symbols. At the most fundamental level we see a five-bar staff, then we see the clef, the key, the time signature, and tempo. Using this basic information we are able to make sense out of the notes that follow. With a conventional system of notation, the same piece of music can be read by thousands of people, and the same sounds are produced. Of course, musicianship and creativity are factors, but if played properly, the pitches and rhythms are played the same way by all of the players.

Reading a language is fundamentally the same thing. Letters are another group of symbols which have a preconceived interpretation. Each letter has a sound, and when these sounds are put together they create words. These words all have meanings, which are understood by anyone who knows how to read. However, some students find it difficult grasp the thought that the letter “A” has a specific sound. They wonder why the symbol for the letter “A” must have that sound, and not sound like the letter “B.” It is very difficult to explain this concept using more letters. It is not a sufficient answer to say, “A sounds like ‘A’ because that is how English works; it was decided a long time ago that ‘A’ would be ‘A’ and ‘B’ would be ‘B.’” Yet there is no real explanation as to why ‘A’ does not sound like ‘B.’

In music there is a much clearer line defining pitches and their names. It is not necessary to explain to a student that A is 440 hertz per second, but it can be made clear that “A” is a very specific sound in the world. And it exists in more than one octave. “A” is “A” in eight places on a piano, which all have similar qualities. Still there is no reason why 440 is “A” per se, but now the teacher has established another form of symbols where “A” has a specific meaning. Now the letter “A” is no longer confined to the study of language. Now the letter “A” does have more than one sound.

What we as teachers tend to forget is that all reading, whether of words or of notes, is a form of interpretation. Whether the subject is music or English, there is a fundamental level at which the interpretation is universal. In music, rhythm and pitch are always constant, but there is a level beyond that which we, as musicians, incorporate into our everyday lives. The idea of bringing out the meaning of a piece of music can very easily be transferred to English and reading. What we must first do is to allow the actual meanings of letters to become intuitive. Once a child understands the rules of language, we must teach them to break them—just as we do in music. For example, teachers tell their students that they can hold a note a fraction longer, or play a decibel louder, even if the written music does not say to do so explicitly. The reason why we allow for these transgressions from the score is twofold. It is expected that once students are disciplined to the point that they can take some interpretive freedoms, they are excellent readers of music. It is thus the teacher’s job, at the very beginning of study, to teach the rules of reading so that they provide a strong foundation to the player’s artistry. A firm grasp on the standard and accepted notation and reading is a prerequisite for taking interpretive liberties. On the other hand, music must be interpreted. The liberties the performer takes are necessary for the proper understanding of the music. A musician must bring out what notes on a page cannot.

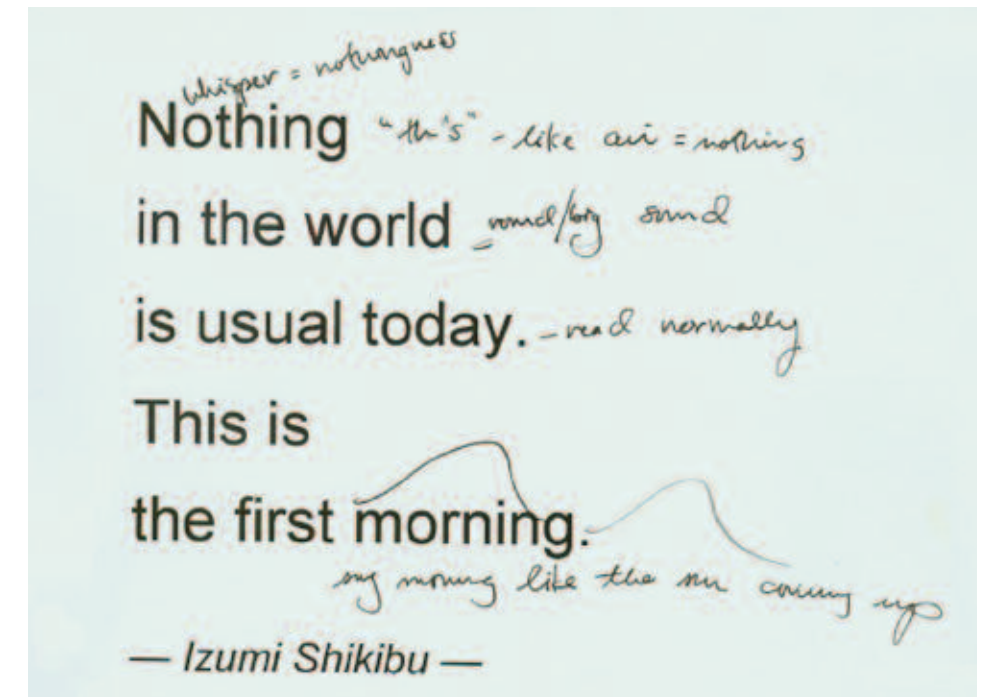
WHILE A COMPOSITION MAJOR AT NEW ENGLAND CONSERVATORY, MAX SCHREIER PARTICIPATED IN THE FROM THE TOP RADIO SHOW CURRICULUM WRITING INTERNSHIP FOR THE “MAKE YOUR OWN RADIO SHOW” IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS GUIDED BY ANN GREGG AND ANDREEA PAUTA.

The question becomes, What is the proper way to teach interpretation? Unlike teaching a student how to read the actual notes, teaching them which liberties are acceptable is not tangible. One way that is extremely effective is teaching beyond the expected level of interpretation, to the level of *ridiculousness*. The tendency, especially among classical musicians, is to fear “ruining” the written music. As a result the students hold back and don’t allow their true feelings to come through the piece. It is very difficult to get students to free themselves to the point where they are able to express the piece. It is at this juncture that we can use the shared fundamental concepts of Music and English to bring out not only the best performance, but a more conscious reader of music as well as words.

One interesting way to illustrate this process is to present a piece of writing which invites alternative interpretation. For example, one’s first reading of the poem by E.E. Cummings, which is simply the words:

f l
a e
l a
l v
e e
n s

is obviously “fallen leaves.” But technically we are then reading something that is not there. According to the rules as to how to read English, the poem should be read, “fl ae



As a result of MIE Guided Intern Max Schreier’s lesson on Interpretation, students in the MIE class experimented further with lesson plans focused on the exploration of the parameters of poetry reading.

la lv ee ns.” So we see that in order to make the poem make sense we must interpret it differently from the strict rules we were taught. This concept can now be taken one step further, and we can bring back the concept of *ridiculous interpretation*. Just because the poem appears that it should be read “fallen leaves,” there is nothing that says it must. Using common sense along with our knowledge of the motion of leaves

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falling from a tree, we create an interpretation that makes the most sense. Technically, reading the poem in rows from left to right as “fl ae la lv ee ns” is even more correct grammatically. All the poem could be saying is, “Forget what you have been taught, you can read however you want.” Now the students can deliberately disregard all of the rules of reading and allow their personalities to affect the reading of the poem. They can read from right to left, up to down, any way they see fit. And when such *ridiculousness* is reached, students are more comfortable with the idea of making nonsense out of something that is relatively straightforward.

Now we can take the above exercise and transfer it to the interpretation of music. First, it is our job as teachers to teach the rules of music. Before we can apply any of the methods of interpretation, students must have close to the same fluidity with musical notes as they do with letters. Once they do reach that level, it is imperative that we allow students to understand that music is a form of interpretation. Let us use *Twinkle twinkle*, a simple piece, as an example of possible ridiculous interpre-

BY UTILIZING THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN READING MUSIC AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE, WE CAN CREATE A NEW TYPE OF TEACHING, AS WELL AS A NEW TYPE OF LEARNING. THERE IS NO NEED TO CONTINUE TO ISOLATE EACH INDIVIDUAL SUBJECT TO A FORTY-MINUTE BLOCK IN A DAY. NOW WE CAN APPROACH THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SUBJECTS AND TEACH TO THOSE CONNECTIONS.

tation. Take the piece and remove all rhythmic values. By making this change, one makes the music slightly more accessible for students to make the piece *ridiculous*. Then, just as we did with *fallen leaves*, allow the students to play the piece however they want. We must encourage students to really go to the point of *ridiculousness* because they will inevitably be less comfortable with reading music than with reading English. Provide more examples of how the music can be interpreted. Show the students examples ignoring or embellishing dynamics and playing or disregarding notes. After we have made the student comfortable with taking music to the extremes to which they took *fallen leaves*, let the student make the piece their own. Emphasize the running concept of *ridiculousness*. Let them play the notes out of order, or reverse all of the rhythmic values. What is crucial, though, is that the students understand what they are doing. This exercise is not an attempt to play as many notes as possible, or randomly jab at the strings. Rather, this is an *experimental interpretation*. As we did with *fallen leaves*, our musical *ridiculousness* has a very clear structure that was derived from a creative thought process. It is this realization on the part of the students that we are striving for. Each student must comprehend how he or she can make sense of the dots on a page. There is one final step. Now that we can make music incredibly individual, we also must learn how to make it communal. The community that is formed by an orchestra or a class

ensemble is incredibly strong. And to create that strength, we must agree on a single way to interpret the dots on the page. So after all of the *experimenting* and *ridiculousness*, a certain level of uniformity must be creatively established.

Now we start to see how the two exercises are related. In order to accurately convey a literary or musical message to our community, we must follow the most basic and simple rules of reading English or music. We are much more free to interpret when people understand the context of our message. We can go up in front of an auditorium and read a book in a *ridiculous* fashion. We can also take that same stage and use the same *experimental interpretation* on a sonata. But what emotional message are we then conveying when no one in the auditorium can understand the gibberish that we spoke or played? Music and reading open themselves up to interpretation and are completely dry without our emotional input; however, it is crucial to acknowledge that the interpretation is constrained ever so slightly by the fundamental rules that are established through knowledge of conventions of music and language literacy. While the conventional rules give music and English its universality, the art of interpretation gives these symbol systems universal appeal.

When students interpret any sort of information and turn it into something that is their own, they can flourish. They know that no other student is going to

have the same idea, and that no two ideas will turn out alike. Thus, their performances will be unique and have no possibility of being “wrong.”

By utilizing the connections between reading music and written language, we can create a new type of teaching, as well as a new type of learning. There is no need to continue to isolate each individual subject to a forty-minute block in a day. Now we can approach the connections between subjects and teach to those connections. Instead of students saying that they have to do their math homework or English paper, they will simply have “work,” which requires thinking and interpretation in multiple fields. When we encourage students to interpret their work, they can no longer put themselves in boxes and argue that they are no good at reading or no good at music, because everything they do is now intensely personal and ultimately cannot be “wrong” or “bad.”

When we explore the transfer between music and English through *ridiculous* interpretation, whatever students see as their weaknesses will also call directly upon their strengths. With this method, students cannot be discouraged by fear of failure, because there is an almost guaranteed success. It is in this type of environment that children will learn the most, develop a sense of individuality and become more open thinkers. ♪

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TEACHING CHILDREN TO WRITE AND CONDUCT ORIGINAL WORKS OF MUSIC

by

SARA LEIB

As I transferred to New England Conservatory to study jazz voice with a specific teacher, I came upon the Music-in-Education program by accident. I hadn't had experience with conventional music education programs, but I knew that teaching was something I would love to do, and that if a musician loves to teach, she should. Because I wanted to finish my degree in two years, I was pleased that NEC offered the MIE classes for no credit. I was also intrigued by the program's central concept that all musicians, not just music education majors, are at once artists, teachers, and scholars.

Two years later, the NEC Music-in-Education program had literally changed my life. The program not only encouraged me to participate in useful discussions about pedagogy and provided me with invaluable hands-on teaching experience, it ultimately changed my whole outlook on education and the learning process. As a result, I feel it has even brought me closer to a better understanding of the world at large.

The MIE program at NEC teaches students how to teach, how to think, and how to better observe the student mind, a focus which is sadly lacking in a world where more and more students are feeling alienated and left behind by the tunnel vision teaching methods in overcrowded public schools. In a conventional music education program, students learn different instruments for about a semester each. However, since in a conservatory environment it is safely assumed that it is unnecessary to teach fundamentals like how to play one's instrument, music theory and ear training, the MIE teachers at NEC are free to help their students learn much more creative approaches to teaching. For example, MIE interns at NEC learn how to make useful musical instruments from easy-to-find items; how to recognize cognitive patterns in children; how to incorporate other subjects into a music lesson; and how to get young students to self-assess and find patterns.

I experienced an extremely fulfilling example of this approach to teaching and learning during my first internship at the Beethoven School in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, an elementary school in which each child is required to play an instrument. My MIE Improvisation In Music professor, Warren Senders, had received a grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Council to bring members of a group he's involved with, the Jazz Composers Alliance, into the Beethoven School for a semester-long residency. Warren said he needed an intern, and since I needed two semesters of internships for the MIE concentration, and since it sounded like interesting work besides, I jumped at the chance.

Each week, Warren and I and a group of musicians from the Alliance came into the fourth grade class at Beethoven with the ultimate goal of getting the students to write their own pieces of music, and then to play and conduct those pieces with the professional musicians. At the start of each lesson, the fourth graders filed into the room, put their instruments under the seats (the school gave an instrument to each student), and took their seats in a semi-circle in front of us. The Alliance members always began by giving a short performance playing free music with Warren as conductor, and afterwards Warren would talk about ideas like form, dynamics (louds and softs), rhythm, tempo, and frequency (highs and lows) in a way that allowed the students to discover the concepts for



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