

Strategies for Improving Musical Expression in Piano Performance

Tianhao Wu

Frost School of Music, University of Miami, Florida Miami 33146

ABSTRACT

Musical expression is fundamental to piano performance, which directly influences the emotional expression of a piece and the audience's ability to resonate with it on a deeper level. Improving the musical expression of piano performance fosters a stronger connection among performers, audiences, and the compositions themselves, evoking the audience's emotional resonance, and infusing new vitality into piano performance. This paper analyzes the reasons for the lack of musical expression and proposes targeted strategies for improving musical expression in piano performance. By focusing on the fundamental elements of musical expression, the aim is to significantly increase the appeal of performances and create a stronger emotional connection with the audience, ultimately providing a better sensory experience.

KEYWORDS

Musical expression; piano performance; fundamental elements

1 Analysis of Elements of Musical Expression in Piano Performance

1.1 Solid Technical Skills

Solid Technical skills are the basis of musical expression in piano performance. Piano playing skills include finger flexibility, rhythm accuracy, control of dynamics, and effective use of the pedal. With a strong foundation in these skills, the pianist can accurately express the various details of the musical work, such as the flow of the melody, the stability of the rhythm, and the nuances of timbre. In the process of playing, the pianist must effectively manage the flexibility, speed, and strength of the fingers to control the piano's sound. At the same time, with exceptional skills, musicians can freely control the piano, allowing them to convey their personal interpretation and emotions without the limitation of technique, and pay more attention to the emotional expression and the artistic creation of music. For example, when playing Chopin's Revolutionary Etude in C Minor, the left hand needs to accurately and quickly play the rapid sixteenth notes with directions. It is essential to achieve a uniform and rich timbre by controlling the strength of the fingers, which helps to create the sound effect of rolling train wheels and convey a sense of tension. Meanwhile, it can reflect the composer's intense and complex emotions. When playing Chopin's Nocturnes, the timbre can be controlled by gently touching the keys to create a softly melodic line that resembles a song, and effectively expresses the composer's artistic intention.

1.2 Accurate Musical Perception

First, the pianist needs to have a deep understanding of the structure of a musical work, including the overall framework of the piece, the relationships among the various parts, and the development and transformation of musical emotions. The pianists should clearly identify the musical forms of the work from a broad perspective, such as fugue, binary form, and sonata-allegro form. Additionally, they should analyze the structural elements of each part of different musical forms to identify the key musical elements. This understanding will help the pianist accurately grasp the overall structure, and deliver a performance that is layered and clear, effectively conveying the composer's intention. In addition to understanding the overall structure, it is important to grasp the detailed structure of the musical forms. The pianist should be able to accurately perceive the length of each phrase, and the beginning and end of the passage. The transition between the passages should be processed delicately to ensure the music flows naturally and smoothly. This approach will help subtly reveal the internal logic and emotional nuances of the work.

Secondly, it is necessary to accurately understand the stylistic characteristics of the works. Piano compositions from different periods exhibit distinct styles, and pianists need to distinguish these styles accurately. For example, when playing the works of the classical period, it is necessary to follow the rules of the classical style such as clear and uniform touching, maintaining a steady rhythm with moderate dynamics, and conveying an elegant and bright temperament. When playing the works from the Romantic period, it is important to emphasize the richness and personal expression of emotions. The passion and poetry of Romanticism should be fully showcased through strong contrasts in dynamics, rich timbre levels, and extended melody lines.

Only when a pianist has a comprehensive understanding of the cultural connotation, creative background, spiritual emotion and creative concept of the performance work, and uses appropriate playing skills, can he correctly grasp the

style characteristics of the performance work, create a high-level performance effect, and promote the musical expression of piano performance to be fully brought into play.^[1]

1.3 Rich Emotional Expression

In piano performance, pianists need to convey their understanding of music works to the audience through rich emotional expression. This approach allows the audience to appreciate the charm and emotion of the pieces being performed. Emotional expression includes both the ability to experience emotions and the ability to resonate with those emotions. The ability to convey emotional experience in music requires the pianist to conduct thorough analysis and research on the work. It is essential to pay close attention to every musical term in the score, such as dynamic and mood, to accurately capture the emotional essence of the piece. The ability to evoke emotional resonance requires the pianist to infuse their unique interpretation and feelings into the performance. This deep understanding, combined with wonderful skills and rich expression, allows them to communicate these emotions effectively to the audience. For example, in the Brahms Op. 118 No. 2, the composer indicates *Andante teneramente*, requiring the pianist to convey the deep emotion of the work through the nuanced shaping of the main melody lines.

2 The Role and Value of Musical Expression in Piano Performance

2.1 Contribute to Improving the Artistic Realm of Piano Performance

The musical expression enhances piano performance, making it more captivating and significantly improving its artistic quality. Musical expression brings together various elements including the pianist's technical skills, their emotional conveyance, the fluctuations in rhythm, and the changing emotions of the audience. This creates a rich musical experience that unites the audience, the pianist, and the musical work together. In a high-level performance, musical expression emphasizes the artistic depth of piano playing, contributing to the cultural richness of this art form.

2.2 Contribute to Enhancing the Comprehensive Quality of the Pianist

A performance that focuses solely on technical skills, while lacking musical expression, will be incomplete and fail to showcase the pianist's artistic charm. This can lead to similar playing effects among different performers. Enhancing musical expression will help players to better understand the internal relationship between technical skills and performance pieces. It encourages a deep understanding of cultural connections and spiritual emotions of the performance works and grasps the essence and soul of the performance works. As a result, they can present these pieces more vividly. While continuously improving the performance quality, it can effectively improve the pianist's humanistic cultivation and musical accomplishment, stimulate his innovative consciousness and expression, enhance his love for piano performance, and comprehensively improve his artistic aesthetic and comprehensive quality^[2].

3 Analysis of the Causes of Insufficient Musical Expression in Piano Performance

3.1 Too Much Emphasis on Skill Training and the Non-naturalistic Performance Style

Many pianists focus excessively on technical skills while neglecting the essence and core of piano playing during their performances. This narrow view turns playing the piano into a purely technical activity, resulting in piano playing seeming boring. Additionally, overemphasis on skill training is likely to cause pianists to become tired and bored, ultimately diminishing a pianist's enthusiasm for performing.

As a result, it is challenging for performers to understand the overall emotional tone of the piece while playing, leading them to merely "replicate" the performance from others. This can create rigid and stylized interpretations that lack flexibility and adaptability, resulting in poor performance and insufficient emotional expression. Therefore, the piano performance lost its soul, making it difficult for the beauty of sound to shine through and diminishing its emotional impact and resonance.

3.2 Inability to Understand and Comprehend Music Works

The pianist's inability to understand the performance work has become the main factor affecting the overall quality of their playing. Some pianists have trouble fully understanding the cultural context and emotional spirit of the music works. They may ignore the background and concept of the creation of the works and do not fully analyze the details of the score of the works, which results in them finding it challenging to express their emotions and power in the performance,

which often leads to subpar execution and inappropriate stylistic interpretation. Therefore, the performance lacks musical expression, making it difficult to express the emotion intended by the composer accurately. As a result, it fails to evoke emotional resonance in the audience and lacks vibrancy.

3.3 Lack of Practical Training and Stage Experience

Practical training is essential for enhancing a pianist's overall skills. However, many pianists lack practical training opportunities and performance experience, resulting in a weak perception of the stage and difficulty adapting on the spot. As a result, they may experience nervousness and emotional fluctuations during performances, which can lead to mistakes and negatively impact the overall effect and musical expression on stage.

4 Strategies to Improve Musical Performance in Piano Performance

4.1 Consolidate the Theoretical Basis and Strengthen Piano Playing Skills

Piano playing skills are an effective way to improve the musical performance of pianists. On the one hand, pianists need to have excellent theoretical knowledge and be able to form their own characteristic playing styles by learning theoretical knowledge and summarizing playing experience^[3]. For example, they should be able to accurately read the score to distinguish between and perform staccato and legato techniques in melody lines. They should also be skilled in using various pedal markings, and understand the relationships between different tonalities. On the other hand, pianists should constantly strengthen their playing skills. First of all, it is essential to strengthen basic skills training by mastering scales, chords, arpeggios, and fundamental techniques. Additionally, enhancing finger strength, control, and accuracy can be achieved through finger independence training, strength control exercises, and speed control training. This will ensure that each tone is clear and full, and improve the skill application level in the process of piano playing. Secondly, it is necessary to exercise the ability to utilize performance metrics and rhythm effectively. One should delve into the key points of piano performance works, learn different styles of musical expression through the performance training of Chinese and foreign works, and constantly improve the understanding of the emotional tone and rhythm of the works. This ongoing training will enhance the understanding of the emotional tone and rhythm within these pieces, allowing for a more skillful execution that showcases diverse and vibrant performances. For example, when practicing Chopin's Nocturne in E-Flat Major, the pianist must understand the *rubato* rhythm in Chopin's works, manage the rhythm delicately, and convey the romantic emotions inherent in the piece. When practicing *Colorful Clouds Chasing the Moon* by Jianzhong Wang, the pianist needs to capture the rhythm characteristics of folk music and show enthusiasm and lightness of the rhythmic pattern. Through comparative training with these two compositions, pianists can enhance their ability to interpret emotion and rhythm across different musical styles.

4.2 Deepen the Understanding of Works and Enhance the Emotional Conveyance from Pianists

In order to improve the performance of piano music, it is necessary to deeply analyze the music itself. This requires pianists not only to have a thorough understanding of the musical form structure, melody trend and harmonic application, but also to deeply explore the creation background of the musical work and the composer's creation intention^[4]. Every piano work contains distinct cultural meanings and emotions. A deeper understanding of the piece enables the pianist to accurately interpret its musical style and performance technique. For example, Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 8 in C minor, *Pathétique*, was composed during a time when he was starting to lose his hearing in both ears and facing personal difficulties. In this work, Beethoven channels his inner pain and struggle against fate into the music. The music conveys rich emotional changes, and deeply expresses the composer's dissatisfaction and anger at the current situation, a hopeful outlook for the future, and the desire to escape the current predicament. To truly understand the connotation and ideas of the work, pianists should connect with its internal message during their performance. This connection allows them to convey the emotional highs and lows more effectively, ultimately enhancing the allure and impact of their piano playing. Therefore, pianists should have a deep understanding of the humanistic connotations, background of the composition, core themes, creation concept, and spiritual essence of the work. This knowledge is essential for accurately conveying the emotional depth of the work to the audience, thereby enhancing the vitality and energy of the piano performance.

4.3 Enhance Artistic Accomplishment and Strengthen Stage Experience

The presentation of musical expression in piano performance requires a higher artistic quality from pianists. Therefore, pianists need to focus on enhancing their artistic taste. In addition to having solid basic theoretical knowledge and piano

playing skills, they should also broaden relevant fields, such as painting, drama, dance, and other fields. This interdisciplinary approach helps broaden the artistic vision, and deepens their understanding of the pieces they perform. As a result, they can vividly express the rich cultural connotations and delicate emotions found in the works. In addition, in order to improve the musical expression of piano performance, practice is also indispensable. Pianists can test theoretical learning in practice, and effectively improve musical expression and the self-confidence of live performance on stage by summarizing and reflecting^[5]. Pianists can find out the shortcomings of their playing in mock performances. This ongoing process fosters a mutually beneficial relationship between learning and practice, allowing them to continually refine and improve their skills. On the other hand, pianists should actively participate in charity performances, concerts, art festivals, and other activities to understand the aesthetic needs of their audience. By participating in these events, they can learn from the performance experiences of other artists, identify their shortcomings, and enhance their communication and cooperation abilities in the performance. Also, pianists can take the initiative to participate in various piano performance competitions to enhance their learning. By exploring a diverse range of musical works in these competitions, they can address their weaknesses, focus on weakness training, and continually enrich their stage performance experience. This process ultimately leads to improvements in safety and enhances performance, showcasing excellent artistic taste.

5 Conclusion

In piano performance, it is essential for pianists to effectively showcase their skills and achievements while conveying the emotions and spirit of the pieces to the audience. To achieve this, they must focus on improving their musical expression, solidifying their theoretical understanding, and deepening their cultural knowledge. This preparation enables them to deliver an exquisite performance characterized by both exceptional technique and rich emotional depth.

About the Author

Tianhao Wu, DMA Candidate Enrolled in 2023, Research Field: Piano Performance.

References

- [1] Zhuo Yue. Discussion on the Dialectical Relationship between Piano Performance Skills and Musical Expression [J]. Home Drama, 2023 (31) : 67-69.
- [2] Yu Lu. On the Relationship between Piano Performance Skills and Musical Expression [J]. Modern Music, 2023 (10) : 15-17.
- [3] Xia Lulu. Analysis of the Relationship between Musical Expression and Performance Skills in Piano Performance [J]. Mingri Fengshang, 2022 (23) : 42-45.
- [4] Ke Lan. Ways to Improve Musical Expression in Piano Performance [N]. Henan Daily Countryside Section, 2024-06-02 (003) DOI: 10.28368 / n. cnki. nhnnc. 2024.000728.
- [5] Deng Yiqiao. Research on the Integration of Piano Performance Skills and Musical Expression [J]. Da Guan, 2023, (06): 39-41.