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Jonathan Dunsby

# The Idea and Value of "Book": A Comparative Review of *Sound in Motion: A Performer's Guide to Greater Musical Expression* by David McGill and *Deepening Musical Performance through Movement: The Theory and Practice of Embodied Interpretation* by Alexandra Pierce

Jonathan Dunsby

I would like to begin with a short, personal story. As a music major, I spotted a German book called *Das Meisterwerk in der Musik*, the enticing title of which translates as "The Musical Masterpiece."[1] Intrigued, I showed this library book to my tutor, who advised me to leave it alone. "Schenker is toxic" were his precise words. To a youngster of the post 1968 era, a forbidden idea just made it all the more alluring, and so I discovered what few of my generation seemed to be being taught. Admittedly, piano studies involved a venerable lineage through Heinrich Neuhaus of Moscow, who had taught many of the great teachers teaching my generation, back through such as Liszt and Czerny, all the way to Ludwig van Beethoven himself, who seemed to have more or less invented everything that mattered in piano virtuosity. Into the conceptual void strode Dr. Schenker, opining in his evocative Gothic script about how music fits together, so that you could think about it and know what it was you were thinking about. I sensed, at that moment, that I had been allowed at last to read, and not only hear, some of the secret knowledge of classical music that otherwise could be garnered only somehow intuitively, and for me only half-understood, in the studio.

[1] I have noted elsewhere that Cambridge University Press's English title *The Masterwork in Music* has been a regrettable contribution to Schenker translation (Cambridge: CUP, 1994; Heinrich Schenker's original publication *Das Meisterwerk in der Musik: Ein Jahrbuch*, Drei Masken Verlag, Munich, 1925, 26 and 30, was re-published by Georg Olms, New York, 1974; for many years it was best known in English through the selections in Sylvan Kalib, *Thirteen Essays from the Three Yearbooks "Das Meisterwerk in der Musik":* An Annotated Translation, Ann Arbor, University Microfilms 974).

If the message that music, or at least most Western art music, is *Sound in Motion* can hardly be overstated, McGill's subtitle, *A Performer's Guide to Greater Music Expression*, is less stable, inviting us to ask what kind of performer that might be (for performers do range, after all, from beginners to virtuosi). "Musicians of every stripe," as McGill says (:ix). Reading his engaging pages leaves one in no doubt that the college-level performance major is the author's intended audience, which is not to underestimate the value that others will find in McGill's work, from more junior students to experienced teachers. Yet the question of level is not only about aims and intended learning outcomes, but also the pedagogical philosophy behind his enterprise.

That is where McGill's inspiration is important to note, the work of Marcel Tabuteau. Tabuteau was long-time oboist of the Philadelphia Orchestra, 1915 to 1954, and an influential pedagogue, as is not quite conveyed in the short if eloquent biography by Laila Storch, "Tabuteau, Marcel," *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*, 07 June, 2009.[2] McGill's guidance to us is reverently based on Tabuteau's teaching. Tabuteau had a particular take on phrasing, which he translated into effective pedagogical practice for instance by the simple expedient of getting students to count numbers that (in my words) provide mental grouping to reflect contrapuntally-harmonically underpinned melodic goal-direction. Very simply, for example, if you were playing groups of five even notes, quintuplets one after the other, and "thinking" anything, then "thinking" /12345/12345/12345... (where the oblique, '/', precedes a downbeat) does not produce the kind of dynamic, animated phrasing that will usually be achieved by "thinking" x1234/51234/51234..., if anything. Obviously, there is a lot more to it than that, in practice, but we have a fundamental idea of mental configuration here, especially in the section on "note grouping" (:29-81) that no theorist is entitled to brush aside. This is where we get to the pedagogical issues raised above, in that case whether you have to be, say, a vicariously Beethoven-trained pianist in order to appreciate Schenker. For apparently Tabuteau believed that his number system for note grouping was a pedagogical device, something designed "for *stupid* people," and "for lesser days" (:78; emphasis original). McGill is aware of the dilemma that neither he nor others can resolve: whereas on the one hand techniques

[2] http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/27348).

for getting beyond inexperienced mistakes in the studio may be of interest only pedagogically, on the other hand those techniques may reflect important musical truths and be potentially of much wider significance.

This larger issue raises all sorts of pedagogical questions of which I shall try to address, briefly, the one that may seem most significant in the mind of any music theory pedagogue: where can we inject basically anecdotal, rudimentary knowledge of execution and interpretation, of the kind that in fact both these books seek to offer, into the music student's learning experience? What our textbooks suggest is that the community of teachers of Western art music believes music to be best taught through theory, not through guides to performance. Mainstream undergraduate theory textbooks do not, by and large, address issues of actual musical execution and interpretation directly, and there is no presumption that they should. Were there a silver bullet that enabled us to teach how actual performance is conceived and achieved it might be called something like "The Art of Performance,"[3] yet the nearest we have to that seems to be, for example, two multi-authored repositories of miscellaneous advice and critique that could hardly be used as textbooks in theory courses or in performance studies either.[4] Contrast to that perhaps the most conspicuous contribution in recent decades to enlarging our vision of teaching music theory, by Nicholas Cook:[5] and note that despite that author's extraordinary work elsewhere in the development of performance studies pedagogically and historically,[6] still it is the traditional craft

[3] I am referring obliquely of course to Heinrich Schenker's "recent," very posthumous publication *The Art of Performance,* ed. Heribert Esser, trans. Irene Schreier Scott (New York: OUP, 2000), a volume creatively edited from scattered, and even at that, slim notes, utterly fascinating to the Schenker expert perhaps, but hardly of use to music students.

[4] John Rink, ed., *The Practice of Performance: Studies in Musical Interpretation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), reviewed by me in *Musicae Scientiae*, 1/1 (1997), 129-32, and *Music Performance: A Guide to Understanding* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), to which, stated here for the record, I contributed the chapter "Performers on Performance," 225-36.

[5] *Analysis Through Composition: Principles of the Classical Style* (New York: OUP, 1996).

[6] Possibly Cook's most widely cited work has been the article "Between Process and Product: Music and/as Performance," *Music*

of writing music, in the broadest sense including improvising it, that he offers as a portal to music-analytical education, certainly enabling but not specifically addressing musical "execution and interpretation" as it was called above.[7]

In the context of that larger issue, it is frustrating that the hundreds of music examples in McGill's volume, 393 if the book's own count is accurate, are mostly just a few bars long. Extensive but short, they can never get below the musical surface in the sense that music theory explores; though there is indeed a chapter on "the larger picture" (about "skeletal structure," "phrasing," "line" and similar). And in the context of such a doggedly detailed approach, it is all the more remarkable that McGill says in this book nothing of importance about music with which Schenker would, in my opinion, disagree. We might even choose to view McGill's work, somewhat idealistically, in the light of Matthew Brown's interesting statement that what Brown calls the "model" of Schenker is a model "of how people learn to master functional monotonal compositions. Since this model has extraordinary implications both for music psychology and music pedagogy, it clearly needs to be *tested in*

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*Theory Online*, 7/2 (April 2001), in which he adumbrated the seemingly very attractive idea of regarding a piece of notated Western art music as a "script."

[7] Again for the record, largely, I note that my own *Performing Music: Shared Concerns* (New York: OUP, 1995) is more about the work of the performer than about learning how to perform. The professionalization of performance does seem to be extreme, as expressed in the *Revised New Grove Dictionary*:

> Professional performers are somewhat rare among the population. They also tend to be specialized; a case such as Mozart, considered by his father Leopold to have the potential to become as great a violinist as he was a pianist, is wholly exceptional. Amateur musical performance, on the other hand, is a huge human phenomenon, from Caribbean steel bands to Welsh choirs, from the Inuit throat games of the western north Atlantic coast and the northern Pacific Rim to the didgeridoo players of native Australia.

"Performance," *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, 31 May, 2009: http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/43819.

*a systematic manner*."[8] It is not stretching a point to see *Sound in Motion* as just such a test, written by a connoisseur practitioner, that is "systematic" in the sense of being sharply focused on the issue of foreground phrasing in tonal music.

The compromise it makes, though, in addressing itself to the performance student, is that the result would be difficult to use with students who are beyond typical sophomore theory level. True, there is plenty here by way of professional advice, especially for wind players in Part 5, and also in general discussion of controversial matters such as vibrato (:211-18) and portato (:257-63). They would find the book, however, altogether too musically unsophisticated, unscholarly, unmethodical, compared with their theory textbooks. So we have an uneasy fit here. McGill's mentor's "*stupid* people" may be partly a very harsh reference to performance students who in fact do not even read music books, or want to do so; whereas students who have kept up with their core theory would be asking rightful questions:

- how does the McGill perspective pan out into playing longer stretches of music;
- is he implying that I don't need to learn to analyze the underlying harmonic prolongations; and
- to which repertory can I apply his ideas (or not), and how am I to know the difference?

The challenging truth may well be that what goes on in the studio does not translate into print usefully, unless it is in the form of a serious treatise. Even major treatise writers and musical meditators such as Hermann Scherchen, Erwin Stein and Alfred Brendel[9] have not reached into the actual curriculum that forges the musicians of tomorrow. Persuasive and committed though McGill's work certainly is, it will probably see the dark of print along with the likes of work just mentioned largely as ancillary material, read if at all by teachers—and some theorists—rather than by students.

[8] *Explaining Tonality: Schenkerian Theory and Beyond*, Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2005, 237; my emphasis.

[9] Hermann Scherchen, *Handbook of Conducting*, trans. M. D. Calvocoressi (Oxford: OUP, 1933); Erwin Stein, *Form and Performance,* with forward by Benjamin Britten (London: Faber, 1962); Alfred Brendel, most recently *Alfred Brendel on Music: Collected Essays* (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 2001), although his most influential collection may be said to be *Musical Thoughts and Afterthoughts* (London: Robson Books, 1976).

McGill has at least tried to encapsulate some of the central issues of "Baroque" interpretation—not that such an obviously unsound generalization is to be recommended—and is indeed rather amusing in his section headed "How to Become a Baroque Expert in Less than Five Minutes" (:243-6). With tongue in cheek, he lists the hopelessly misguided "rules" that will tend to evince this for the ordinary listener:

- A space should occur before the last note of each movement.
- All unslurred eighth and quarter notes should be well separated…
- All trills should start on the upper note…
- The last note of a slur should be clipped…
- A hairpin…should occur on long notes.
- No vibrato should be used…
- Use the open strings frequently…

With admirable restraint he is unpicking the question heading this section of Part 6, "Was There a Baroque Style of Playing?" (:237-50), and he is leading the student to conclude that probably there wasn't, since "style" should refer to the "mood of the moment in music, not to an entire era" (:250). This advice would have been more convincing if McGill had shown in some crisp musical illustrations what it might mean: inappropriate initial upper notes that obscure the underlying melody, for example; or for instance cases where it is meaningless not to phrase a passage with optional, non-notated legatos articulating surface phrases.

That last reflection on McGill and earlier music points up one strong contrast with Alexandra Pierce's book, preoccupied as *Deepening Musical Performance* is with "common practice" period music and the aesthetics of Classical and Romantic interpretation. One realizes that McGill's work is more anchored in the realities of professional life. Pierce hardly ever dips her toes into pre-1750 waters, and when she does it can be with surprising insouciance (such as exploring the idea of "character-motif" through Mark Morris's dance production of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, 160-1; a long step away from the concerns of music theory pedagogy of course, much as the broad view is to be encouraged).

The Pierce is curious not only in failing even to address the older repertory that is one staple of the music student's diet, but also because of its orientation towards embodiment, which, as will be discussed, one may tend to assume is modern and valuable.

Some readers will know that Pierce is a major scholar, at least in the sense that her dissertation, which was disseminated through the UMI system, must count as one of the most insightful and original contributions to theory research of those times, and a document of unsurpassed originality in Schenker studies.[10] She has penned more general work on embodiment.[11] Four decades on from her dissertation, she continues to surprise. Consider only some of her chapter headings: "Mobilizing Balance," "Melody Awakened: Seven Stages for Embodying Its Contour," "Resilience of Meter and Rhythm," "The Integration of Structural Levels," and "Shaping Phrase with Span and Climax." She is also a savvy author who begins by addressing her supposed constituent groups directly, for instance "movement professionals" and "music therapists." "To Music Theorists" offers five introductory paragraphs, explaining that her "goal has been to make theory as relevant, intriguing, and useful to practicing musicians—and to theory researchers—as it can be," though "perceiving a piece through movement can be a slower process than conceiving it through an already highly developed system of hearing," and also for performers "the topics of music theory are likely to appeal (if at all) less as ideas than as focal points of playing or singing technique." She invites us "not to be too quick to dismiss the work as lacking in intellectual rigor because it violates the implicit stylistic canons of theoretical literature or might seem at first glance to be 'mere pedagogy'" (:xiv-xv).

That last petition is probably not in fact quite the issue, once the reader has measured up to the task of figuring out what this book is really about. On the face of it, it is highly contemporary since the notion of embodiment is a key theme in the early twenty-first

[10] "The Analysis of Rhythm in Tonal Music," Brandeis University, 1968.

[11] See for example Alexandra Pierce and Roger Pierce, *Expressive Movement: Posture and Action in Daily Life, Sports, and the Performing Arts* (New York: Plenum Press, 1989). "Embodiment" may also be expressed as the "physicality of musical experience," which has been neglected in traditional theory, according to Andrew Dell'Antonio, ed., *Beyond Structural Listening?: Postmodern Modes of Hearing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004): he remarks, reasonably, that in *Beyond Structural Listening?* at least five chapters concern the general topic of "reclaiming the body," 8. See also the review of that volume by Judy Lochead, *Women and Music*, 11 (2007), 111-24, who observes how it is "not surprising that the one essay of the collection most clearly focused on embodiment is also one that directs attention to gender," 122, although Pierce's own work does not seem to me to be particularly gender-oriented.

century history of ideas. "Embodiment theory" is probably "toxic" too, like Schenker as was mentioned above. While embodiment may seem alarmingly similar to the idea of the "unconscious" launched more than a century ago—the latest and enduring excuse, for academics eager to make some kind of tenure-friendly noise in the world, to stumble through answers to rather insignificant questions—nevertheless proprioception is a stable and essential component of scientific understanding of the human species, as the physician Oliver Sacks illustrated to non-specialists.[12] Yet contemporaneity is no guarantor of relevance. The book seems to be really an account of what Pierce herself feels about music, and recommends as a way of feeling. She happens to feel music very physically, and undoubtedly enjoys introspecting about that. She has been an inspiring teacher, surely, and she enthusiastically takes on the task of providing a comprehensive picture of how her physical approach to feeling music maps in to her intellectual picture of it, which is Schenker-inspired. She also certainly goes so far as to indicate that if you do not feel music in the explicit physical way that she does, then you should.

In the end, however, that is as far as the book progresses. To be convincing, it would have needed to consider, for example, why this kind of embodiment has not been obvious since day one, why such as Mozart seem never to have mentioned it in the age of explicit, artistic self-reflection that is one of the main characteristics of the Enlightenment, or, a couple of generations later at the dawn of the virtuoso cult, Liszt and Paganini for that matter.[13] Admittedly, her title's reference to "deepening musical performance" is telling us about what might be rather than what has been. Yet we know from so many areas of music history that this subject is anything but new. Think only of the iconic evidence on how one stood or sat at the harpsichord in 18th-century France, not only as to bodily stance but also facial gesture (no frowning!).[14] And to be convincing pedagogically she would have had to address some perplexing

[12] *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* (London: Duckworth, 1985).

[13] Lydia Goehr states baldly that "Romanticism was to replace the principle of imitation with a combined principle of expression and *embodiment*," *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 142, my emphasis.

[14] A good starting point for investigating this topic is Edward Kottick, *A History of the Harpsichord* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

epistemological questions that would in all likelihood bore and probably demotivate music students as course material, yet fascinate them in moments of contemplation and personal self-assessment.[15]

Pierce's book is also curious, just as a piece of writing, in that much of its evidence is presented in what, ideally, might have been case histories in some recognized sense, but they are in fact stories, of a kind, about her students' experiences. In our brave new world, we can say exactly what these stories are: they are blogs. It would be surprising if readers cared to buy an expensive hardback book, even from a press such as Indiana, bursting with little more than blogs. There are instances of a lot of other questions, aside from presentation, that this book raises but simply does not answer: whether it is true or not that "a distinct kinetic quality . . . can be vitalized by movement" (:3), assuming we can grasp what that means; whether musicians share a "paradoxical impulse to focus attention not *on* oneself but *through* oneself," and why anybody would call that a paradox if true. So we have the studio problem here also (matters that may fail to "translate into print usefully" as I put it above). It may seem to be more acute in Pierce's case than McGill's, since aside from the blogging Pierce offers a cogent academic study compared with McGill's more informal approach. Readers of Pierce's book would probably have loved to study with her, but lucid, permanent guidance to teachers and their students on how to transfer her ideas of embodiment into pedagogical practice would have required a rather different approach: in short, some kind of textbook.

Therein lies a tale, perhaps. A "book" in the recent, hybrid sense may be somewhat research-oriented, yet also somewhat usable in the classroom: it may bear the marks of the blog age; or may be trying to replicate in print the living language of the studio; it may reflect a lifetime's devotion to music and scholarship, as in the case of Pierce; or it may subscribe to estimable musical values, even without quite knowing what to make of them, as with the McGill. Possibly, because of the pressure to publish that is now endemic in the university system, people are writing books that make an uneasy compromise. While offering the semblance of research, the scholarly apparatus of these books may in fact be suspect, and their arguments anything but sophisticated. Because they do carry

[15] Here is a potentially perplexing fact for the embodimentistas: one of the most inspiring music teachers in this writer's experience was a paraplegic.

a certain research cachet, with references to relevant secondary literature, some discussion of predecessors' ideas, a certain amount of rhetorical consideration of counterarguments, and so on, they have the further downside that they are of little pedagogical use either. What students need from a textbook, whether or not it is cloaked as research-informed, is guidance on ways to do things, not ways to worry about philosophical or indeed pedagogical issues. Also, the student's concept of "music" cannot be reflected in hundreds of disjointed little excerpts, but on the contrary—in my experience at least—students of all stripes have a vision of music as a holistic experience. There's nothing they like better, and need more, than to assimilate a long piece, to listen to it and, if possible, to perform it with some feeling that they understand it. Finally, from a professional perspective, one must suspect (and certainly one hears) that nowadays publishers' supposed referees are in fact unwilling to write down their true, negative responses to a proposed book. To express such a response may, after all, amount to professional damage. But I am more sympathetic than that when wondering what the real motivations are if referees encourage publishers to get away with an economy based essentially on this: library sales of books on which nobody is very keen, yet generating a modest profit that can be multiplied by high volume output from a publisher carrying a large specialist list in this or that discipline. In an age when it is not so apparent as it used to be what the idea of "book" really is, it becomes ever harder to say what the value of a book may be.