

ASSISTING ADVANCED MUSICIANS TO ENHANCE THEIR EXPRESSIVITY – AN INTERVENTION STUDY

John Sloboda¹, Caroline Minassian², Christopher Gayford²

¹Keele University, UK

²Trinity College of Music, Cambridge, UK

Background

1. Different performances of the same piece by the same individuals often have markedly different expressive impact, despite apparently constant intentions on the part of the performers. Why do so many well-rehearsed performances fail to “come alive”? The “Feeling Sound” Project is an attempt to improve reliability and control over expressive performance by (a) pragmatic theory building, (b) instantiation of the theory in an advanced curriculum, (c) empirical testing of the outcomes of the curriculum. This paper concentrates on the latter two elements. (b) involved the instantiation of this theory in a curriculum offered by a music conservatoire to volunteer pianists during the academic year 2002-3. It centred around the acquisition of five linked attentional/perceptual techniques for focusing on increasingly large-scale expressive parameters, starting with single notes and ending with phrases, sections and whole pieces. This curriculum and its development will be briefly outlined. (c) involves the empirical investigation and evaluation of the nature and effectiveness of the psychological changes that different elements of the “Feeling Sound” programme are designed to bring about.

Aims

Data gathered during the intervention at Trinity College of Music (TCM) during the academic year 2002-3 will be presented. This data takes the form of: 1. Qualitative data collected via questionnaires and interviews with students and teachers at TCM. This will focus on the extent to which students

have found the project effective in enhancing their performance output, in terms of expressivity and reduced anxiety. 2. Quantitative data based on judgments made by a panel of experts on changes in expressive output.

Method

An experimental group of 20 students received the Feeling Sound Curriculum delivered in 20 weekly 2-hour sessions. A control group of 20 students received no extra input beyond their normal studies at TCM. All students were asked to give prepared performances of Chopin’s Prelude in E minor in an audition situation both before and after the intervention. Expert judges rated the performances on a number of dimensions, and objective analysis of MIDI data from the performances was undertaken. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at two points in the programme.

Results

This paper will concentrate on quantitative data relating to changes in performances of the Chopin Prelude, and related changes in judges’ ratings.

Conclusions

The paper will attempt to link individual differences in outcomes to differing levels of “internalization” of the concepts and techniques offered, as revealed through the interviews. Practical and theoretical implications of the study will be addressed.