

“SEEING THE BIG PICTURE”: PIANO PRACTICE AS EXPERT PROBLEM SOLVING

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Background

Experts in many fields approach a new problem by identifying the general principles involved before starting work on details.

Aims

Do expert musicians similarly begin work on a new piece with the “big picture” of the piece in mind?

Method

To find out, a concert pianist recorded her practice of the third movement, Presto, of J.S. Bach’s Italian Concerto, commenting as she did so about what she was doing. The comments indicated the main focus of the pianist’s attention. The practice showed both what she was attending to and also effects that were more automatic and less deliberate. Practice was transcribed by counting the frequency of starts, stops, and repetitions in each bar and measuring inter-bar-intervals (IBI) during practice performances. These measures were related by multiple regression to features of the music as reported by the pianist for three basic dimensions (fingering, technical difficulties, familiar patterns of notes), four interpretative dimensions (phrasing, dynamics, tempo, pedal), three performance dimensions representing features of the music attended to during performance (basic, interpretative, expressive), and structural dimensions representing the formal structure of the piece.

Results

A “big picture” was already evident in effects of structure and performance cues on the initial sight read performance, and on work on technique in sessions 1-6, even though the “big picture” was rarely mentioned directly in these sessions. The “big picture” was also evident in practice of performance cues in sessions 7-10 and in comments about memorization and structure in the same sessions.

Conclusions

Like experts in other fields, the pianist in this study was guided by a “big picture” which included an “artistic image” of what she wanted to create.