The following article is adapted from the standard booklet text in my Naxos CD series *Classics Explained*

Reflections on the Role of the Interpreter

In any masterwork, the challenges to the interpreter are almost literally infinite. But this should be a cause for joy rather than intimidation. Since there is no performance of even the simplest tune that can fully realise every aspect of the music, it follows that every performance of almost anything (from a nursery song to Mahler's'Symphony of a Thousand'), is at least potentially a voyage of discovery. It's one of the many things that make being a musician so much fun. We should never forget that while we may be performing a piece, we're also *playing* a *work*. Even the most profound masterpiece is at one level a game, and more specifically, a game of suspense. Because of the dynamic nature of the diatonic scale, held together by its interrelated but disparate tensions, composers are able to excite varying degrees of expectation in the listener which they can then either fulfil or frustrate, once again in varying degrees. A perfect example is the beginning of the last movement of Beethoven's First Symphony, where he pays out the notes of an ascending scale one by one ("Wait for it, folks"), each new step arousing a different vision of the likely outcome. And there's no composer in history who got more artistic mileage out of the frustration of expectation than Beethoven. No conductor unaware of the wit behind this shameless tease is likely to communicate the humour of it. This, then, is an example where the subtlety of the interpreter, or lack of it, can have a decisive influence on the experience of the listener.

One of the great fascinations of music, and one of the greatest rewards for the really attentive listener, is the fact that even in the hands of the greatest interpreters, every performance, including successive performances by the same artist, gives us a different cross-section of the musical possibilities inherent in the score itself. The following discussion, then, is no more than a sketch of the kinds of things we interpreters are required to do and some of the things, just as important, that we are required not to do.

To begin with the term itself: what exactly do we mean by 'interpretation'? If we accept that the chief function of the performer is to perceive and to communicate the intentions of the composer as written into the score, then, strictly speaking, interpretation arises only in cases of ambiguity; the rest is a matter of respectful obedience. When a composer writes forte, for

instance, the actual degree of relative loudness is absolutely a matter for interpretation; what he or she is saying *unambiguously* is that they mean "not piano or pianissimo" (these distinctions were by no means universally made during the recent preliminary round, nor, alas, are they made by a remarkable number of professionally successful pianists!).

Leaving aside the realms of spiritual and emotional experience, there are certain, basic types of challenges which confront the interpreter of virtually any piece, relating to tempo, rhythm, dynamics, phrasing, articulation and tone colour, as well as to characterisation, dramatic development and ensemble. Before turning spiritual, then, it might be useful to take a more general look at the role of each of these categories in the whole elusive business of 'interpretation', whatever the work.

Tempo. Generally the first question to be settled. And here, it should be stressed, the metronome is a dangerously two-edged sword – perhaps particularly in the case of Beethoven, but also in Wagner, Schoenberg, Bartók, Stravinsky and many more apostles of exactitude. Like almost everything else in music, tempo is relative rather than absolute, which is one reason why metronome markings are seldom more than a rough guide (composers themselves have tended to flout rather than heed their own). The marking Allegro, for example, can mean many things and can be interpreted in a great variety of ways. Appearing on its own, it allows for a wide degree of latitude. Appearing in the immediate wake of a movement, passage or phrase marked Andante, however, the first thing it says – quite unambiguously - is 'noticeably faster than the preceding'. If in the context of a movement or passage marked Allegro, a composer writes Presto, he means, unambiguously, 'suddenly faster'. When he writes accelerando, he means, unambiguously, 'gradually getting faster'. Just how fast and how soon and at what rate, of course, he leaves to us. That *is* a matter for interpretation. But here a crucial distinction must be made between tempo and pace.

Tempo, the actual note-to-note speed of the music - is established by the main pulse of a piece, and like the heartbeat, this is something more or less constant. Pace, on the other hand, is the *impression* of speed - which takes us into the realms of psychology. "How time flies," we say, "when you're enjoying yourself." When we're bored, we complain that "time drags" and "the minutes felt like hours". But none of this is a function of the clock. A minute is a minute is a minute; an hour is an hour - not a second more, not a second less.

The impression of speed in music is determined, basically, by the rate and pattern of change. It may be simply a matter of harmony: the more harmonies or chords you have within a certain space of time, the faster the movement will feel. If there's only one harmony or chord per bar, the impression of movement will be slower. And the same applies to melody. If there are

only two main notes within a given space, the impression of movement is obviously slower than when there are four main notes. Much of this can be built into the music by the composer (harmonic changes, contrasting durations of the notes themselves, the use of instrumental colouration, expressly marked tempo indications and so on), but much of it lies in the hands of the interpreter.

Perhaps the first thing to be understood when determining and controlling tempo and pace is that the number and the rapidity of the notes in any given passage don't necessarily have a direct bearing on the overall tempo or on the sense of pace. A long trill, for instance, may pack 64 notes or more into a single bar without suggesting a fast tempo at all. The effect is rather of a single note, shimmeringly prolonged by a kind of vibrato. We don't hear each individual note as an entity in itself, we don't hear each pair of notes, or any other number of notes, in terms of melody. We hear one note, decorated and prolonged. Because notes can have a decorative or prolonging rather than a specifically melodic role, an auxiliary rather than a central one, music is full of 'hidden', 'background' rhythms behind the foreground. And the foreground may have no durational contrasts at all. There are many pieces by Bach, for instance, which look on the page like an apparently endless sequence of identically spaced notes, of identical duration: dadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadada and so on. And if it sounded the way it looks, it would be pulverizingly boring (which doesn't stop some performers from playing it that way).

This perception of events happening at different levels of importance, this sense of a foreground and a background, is perhaps the single greatest key there is to what we might call musical understanding. It's something that everyone with any response to music at all understands instinctively and unconsciously. And there's a perfect linguistic analogy to this. To virtually every child, and most adults, it seems that all foreigners whose language we don't understand speak much faster than we do. This is a near-universal experience. And the explanation is quite simple: when we hear a language unknown to us, what we hear is a steady sequence of single syllables, none of which has any meaning of its own. When English-speakers (or even English-understanders) hear the word 'radioactivity', for instance, we hear one thing, not seven. The syllables combine to make a word, and the word takes precedence in our minds over the syllables that make it up. Music functions in exactly the same way. Like Monsieur Jourdain in Molière's play *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, who is astounded to learn that all his life he's been speaking prose, so we need no technical training to distinguish the wood from the trees where music is concerned.

Rhythm. The life-blood of music, of course - more fundamental even than pitch. Like the beating of our hearts, it exists in two dimensions, which can appear either separately or combined. One (and the most important) is time - the contrasting of longer and shorter durations of sound. This is one of the many areas in which even the most sophisticated musical notation is frustratingly inexact as far as performance is concerned. On paper, it all boils down to simple sums and fractions. If that's what it sounds like, interpreters are not doing their job.

According to the notation, the length of one note is exactly half, or one quarter, or three quarters as long or as short as another. In musical reality - in performance - this is hardly ever the case. In truly musical performance, as in speech, an enormous amount of its expressive character or power will result from an almost infinite variety of tiny, irregular contrasts: the performer will very slightly (or in some cases very noticeably) lengthen or shorten the written value of any given note. Of all the elements of musical performance, of 'interpretation', none is more subtle, elusive (or, very often, more unconscious) than this.

The second dimension of rhythm, of course, is that of accentuation or stress. And like melodic patterns, this can impose durational contrasts on notes which on paper are relentlessly identical in length. According to the pattern of accentuation alone, the ear will hear not an exact succession of equally spaced single notes, but a succession of varying groups of notes, Not, that's to say:

"ta -ta - ta - ta -ta - ta - ta - ta -ta- ta -ta - ta -ta - ta -ta -ta -ta etc."
(1-2-3-4-5-6- 7-8-9-10-11-12-13-14-15-16-17-ad infinitum)

but perhaps:

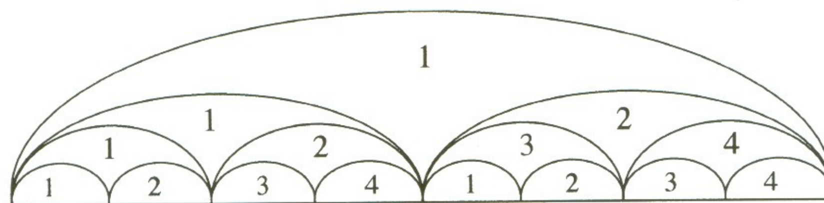
"**TA**-ta-ta-ta **TA**-ta **TA**-ta ta-**TA**-ta-**TA**, ta **TA** -ta-ta, **TA**-ta-ta-**TA TA!"**
(**1** – 2 – 3 - 4 / **1** - 2 **3** – 4 / 1 – **2** – 3 - **4 /** 1 – **2** – 3 – 4 / **1** – 2 – 3 – **4 / 1**

- and so on, again in almost infinitely variable permutations. The stressed notes will themselves be of varying loudness, and will thus be heard to relate to each other, in varying groups, as well as to the unaccented notes on either side of them. Here again lies one of the subtlest and often least conscious aspects of performance - and more specifically, of interpretation, if only because no composer can possibly notate such subtleties. In this respect, the score is no more than a blueprint.

Surprising though it may seem, the most important fact of rhythmic life in so-called tonal music has almost nothing to do with either duration or accentuation. The most important property

of any note, bar or phrase, regardless of its length or placement, is its rhythmic function. There are only three, they are almost always dictated by particular note-patterns, and they sum up the whole of our conscious experience: one (the upbeat) is active, restless, looking forward to the future; the second (the beat itself) is neutral, a symbol of the present; and the third (the afterbeat) is passive, deriving its identity entirely from the past, and therefore dependent on the listener's memory for its functional recognition.

Much of the performer's responsibility lies in the clarification of these three functions, which really boil down to two: active (upbeat), and passive (beat and afterbeat). We throw a basketball (upbeat); it hits the ground (beat) and bounces off it (afterbeat). In many cases, the notes do all the clarifying, in an unequivocal, unambiguous manner. In others, they are, or can be made to be, highly ambiguous. There are many notes that can function equally well, equally naturally, as upbeat or afterbeat. This is the essence of phrasing: the defining of a group, the identifying of a community, the relating of one group to another. For many wonderful performers, these are all things that go on unconsciously, intuitively, and their interpretations are not by that token any less great than those of 'intellectual' performers. Music is a largely intuitive art, even for composers, who frequently surprise themselves. Nevertheless, clarity of rhythmic function, except where ambiguity is clearly intended, is one of the interpreter's most important responsibilities. These functions operate at every level, from the subdivisions of a single beat, to beats within a bar, to bars within a phrase, and so on. Within a four-bar phrase, for instance, the bars themselves take on the functions of upbeat, beat and afterbeat, and this will normally be clarified by the relative accentuations of their first beats. Performers who give equal stress to the first beats in every bar will rob the music of its forward movement, its momentum. Their phrases will not cohere, because they won't be there. This multi-layered order is well represented by the following, pavilion-like diagram:



Dynamics. The range of dynamic contrasts, and more importantly, the particular patterns of their juxtaposition, will often determine the success or failure of a performance. Here, too, the composer can only indicate crude multiples: f = loud, ff = twice as loud, fff = three times as loud, etc. This, then, is a realm where interpretation is absolutely essential.

Phrasing and articulation. As in speech and the written word, these concern the definition and grouping of groups. And here, for a change, our vocabulary of notation can be definitively exact. When composers slur two notes together, they mean, quite unambiguously, that these notes are not to be separated, that they are effectively part of a single breath. When groups of notes, or several bars, are similarly marked, they are to function, again unambiguously, not as individual 'words', so to speak, but as clauses, sentences or paragraphs, depending on the size of the units marked or implied. When clauses or phrases of different lengths are combined in sequence, they form patterns of shorter and longer durations which are directly comparable to the differing lengths of individual notes.

Viewed on the largest scale, we have here one of the least attended aspects of performance, namely 'phrase rhythm'. To a very great extent (depending on the performance), this will determine whether the music moves ahead or stagnates. Especially in the case of large-scale works, the ability to unfurl musical sentences, effectively within a single breath, is crucial to the dramatic coherence of the whole.

Tone colour. Pretty much a 50:50 split between composer and interpreter. In lesser performances, the composer keeps the upper hand (an oboe, after all, will sound like an oboe no matter how it's played). Obviously the particular instrumentation plays a determining role here, but the degree to which performers can 'mix' the colours through different balances, dynamics, underlying rhythmic schemes and so on is far greater than most music-lovers (and too many musicians) generally realise. In a symphony, as opposed to a piano sonata, much of this is taken care of by the composer. Beethoven, for instance, whose use of orchestral colour, both individual and collective, was phenomenal on several counts: for its intrinsic beauty, variety and character, for its clarity of texture, for its extraordinary aptness in whatever emotional or dramatic context, and for its use as an agent of structure. In the breadth and depth of his emotional range, and the instrumentation with which he expressed it, he was the boldest and most resourceful orchestrator there had ever been up to his time. But in the very breadth and depth of that range lie some of the subtlest challenges to the interpreter.

Because at times he expressed the ugly and the cruel and the pitiless, the conductor or instrumentalist who indiscriminately beautifies Beethoven's tonal palette at every turn betrays him. In any instrumental grouping, there are certain combinations and internal balances which can either enhance the 'harmonious', the sensually pleasing possibilities of the sound, or accentuate the opposite qualities. Even within the tonally homogeneous sonorities of the string

family, the effect can be strikingly different according to the use or non-use of vibrato, for instance. If the mood is one of desolation, despair or death, the use of a romantically shimmering vibrato, however beautiful it may be in itself, will be not only unmusical but anti-musical, whereas a flat, hard, 'empty' sound in the same passage can almost literally chill the blood (the ending of the *Coriolan Overture* springs to mind). The same sort of thing applies to the balancing of the highly variegated wind instruments. Differences not only of vibrato but of the relative volume of each individual instrument can reflect almost diametrically opposed states of mind or atmospheric suggestion. The composer can choose the instruments but the use of them is up to the conductor. A chord in which the greatest volume is given to the 'low' horns, bassoons and clarinets, while the 'high' oboes and flutes play very softly, is going to sound very different indeed from the same chord played with a 'top heavy' balance. And when you mix in the brass and percussion families, the varieties of tonal quality are potentially infinite. All of these can be emulated if not actually reproduced by the pianist.

Structure. For many music-lovers, the very term is a turn-off - so imposing, so cold, so 'technical', so cerebral. So far from feeling. In point of fact, it's a good deal closer than it may seem, but on the whole, in any case, structure is more in the composer's court than in the performer's. In the masterworks of a genius like Beethoven, the structure is self-evident to any well-trained musician, and can be largely relied on to look after itself. If it doesn't, the strong likelihood is that the performer is failing to convey every detail of the composer's score.

The principal agent of structure in music, for the interpreter, is contrast. Music is not a liberal democracy, not a Utopian vision of a world in which all notes are created equal - or in which all notes acquire equality. Where music is concerned, this wouldn't be a Utopia, it would be a Hell. Some notes are very decidedly more important than others. And in any group of notes, from two upwards, there will always be one which is more important than all the others. As indicated earlier, in a different context, the performance that doesn't reflect this - consciously, unconsciously, it doesn't matter - is not only unmusical but anti-musical. Music is full of big fish in little ponds, but some ponds are littler than others, and so are the fish. And some ponds are more like lakes, and some lakes more like oceans. Everything in music - everything without exception - is relative. In many cases the first duty of the interpreter is to *prevent* equality at all costs.

The very term 'interpreter', however, is misleading. In spoken language, the job of an interpreter is quite specifically to translate what's said in one language as exactly as possible into another. Subjective coloration has nothing to do with it. Nor can one legitimately say "I interpret

this adverb as a verb", or decree that 'slow' means 'fast' (despite similar 'interpretations' by Glenn Gould).

The Interpreter and Sonata Form. The central drama of sonata form is the tension, or rather the rivalry, between two main keys, and its final resolution. More important still, however, for the performer, is the resultant alternation in sonata form of stability and flux. In any rhythmic group, from the subdivisions of a single beat to the balancing of bars within a phrase (and beyond, to the balancing of whole phrases themselves) there are patterns which can emphasise or undermine a sense of stability. In a straightforward, march-like rhythm, for instance, the 'strong' beats are 1 and 3, the 'weak' beats are 2 and 4: **1** 2, **3** 4 / **1** 2, **3** 4 / **1** 2, **3** 4 / **1** 2, **3** 4 / **1** 2, **3** 4 / etc. - the very model of stability and order.

If we want to 'destabilise' this rhythm, we can emphasise the 'weak' beats over the 'strong', and introduce irregular patterns:

1-2-3 **4** / 1 **2-** 3 **4** / 1-2 **3**-4 / 1 **2-3** 4 / **l** 2-3 **4** / 1 2, **3-4**/ 1 etc.

Perhaps the commonest way of integrating a large-scale movement, particularly one that follows the broadly symmetrical plan of Classical sonata form, is to relate the whole thing to a single rhythmical pulse. This isn't to say that it has to be all in the same tempo - only that the disparate elements, which may range from the very slow to the very fast, should emerge against the background of a single underlying pulse.

One of the main pitfalls of a deliberately architectural approach, however, is that the music will suffer from excessive symmetry, that the feeling of forward movement, of large-scale 'breathing', will get bogged down into a kind of rigid monumentality, through a confusion of metre with rhythm.

The solution lies almost entirely in the realm of rhythmic variety. This means, among other things, that the interpreter must look not only at the immediate foreground but at the surrounding landscape - because markings in one place can tell us, retrospectively, important things about the preceding context: if composers, in an otherwise unchanging passage, ask for sharp accents on each beat of a particular bar, they are presupposing that the beats in the immediately preceding bar or passage have not been accented in such a way. We may be strictly obedient in observing the accents where they're indicated, but disobedient if we've deprived them of the context in which they can be heard as accents.

One of the most fundamental challenges to the performer is to perceive, to understand and to reflect the very great extent to which context alters content. But again, this can be a largely

unconscious process. The finer points of musical interpretation, like the listener's experience, are notoriously subjective.