

THE MEANING OF TEMPO IN THE PERFORMANCE OF WORKS FOR PIANO

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Tempo, I believe, is the most important element in a piano performance as it is for any other instrument or orchestra work. If we grade the importance of the various elements of music, we would rank tempo first, rhythm second, melody third and harmony last. Tempo is the element which gives vitality to a piece of music. That is why it is the most important element of music.

In Grove's Dictionary the Italian word tempo is defined as «the time of musical composition, hence the speed at which its performance proceeds. The French *temps* normally means either measure or, more usually, beat. *Mouvement* is French for speed but, in English and other languages, *tempo* is an acclimatized and common term»¹. The Oxford Dictionary defines tempo as "The speed at which a piece of music is performed"².

I am confident that the tempo of a music piece is one and only one. It is not possible for a musical composition to be performed in different tempo each time: Sometimes slower and sometimes faster³. Some sensitivity is essential on the part of the performer so that he can evaluate which tempo is suitable for each tone of the composition. If a piece of music is performed much slower than normal then it loses its liveliness. Again, if it is performed faster than normal, then it becomes comical.

Of course, we are of the opinion, that in order for the interpreter to smoothly decide on which tempo to use, he, first, has to master the musical composition. From the moment the performer starts to learn a piece of music feelings of excitation begin to ferment within his soul. «Only when you have perfected a musical composition and mastered it through emotional experience you can find the suitable tempo and only if you consider everything that relates to that piece of music: The composer and the era of his composition»⁴.

There are performers who perform a piece of music slightly slower or faster than normal. This depends on many factors: The mood of the performer and the intensity with which the work is performed, that is how loud or softly it is performed. In this particular case tempo can vary but the difference in tempo will be minimal. Hardly noticeable. «The correct tempo of a musical composition is, to a minor extent, relevant to the performer's mood. For example, when it is performed slightly louder or slightly softer»⁵.

It is, though, essential to have in mind that in musical compositions, tempo and intensity should not be regarded as analogous to each other. Usually, when some of the beginner-students perform a work slowly, they are, at the same time, being drifted away in performing it softer than normal. Of course this does not mean that all

¹ STANLEY SADIE, *The new Grove dictionary of music and musicians*, London ⁶1980, vol. 18, pg. 675.

² MICHAEL KENNEDY, *The concise Oxford dictionary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford ³1980, pg. 651.

³ Vide. CHRISTODOULOS VASSILIADES, *The piano, From left and right*, Saint Taisia publications, Lefkosia 1999, pg. 17. We are, of course, referring to the case when we have performance of works of classical music in public and not when a performer is learning a work. In such a case the performer may initially execute the work in slower tempo, when he feels he has mastered it then he can apply the normal tempo.

⁴ VASSILIADES, *The piano*, op. cit., pg. 17.

⁵ VASSILIADES, *The piano*, op. cit., pg. 18.

fast sections should be delivered louder. This suggestion is simply a «smart» exercise enabling students to work against the above-mentioned, strongly tied to human nature, tendencies.

In the Greek language we employ only one word to express two separate meanings that is intensity and tempo. We feel that intensity and tempo go together. When we say "softly" we mean both, that is to say, the lowering of intensity and the tempo. This is the reason why teachers / instructors should point out the difference between the two. Intensity and tempo should not go hand in hand but should be two independent factors. However one can not exclude cases where there is direct correlation between intensity and tempo. That is, fast together with loud or slow together with soft performance. The melodious combinations of these two factors overcome the difficulties caused by imperfection in human nature and mark out the competent performer.

There are performers who may deliver a slow movement slightly slower than normal. For example, the second movement of a sonata and of a concerto. Here the work runs the risk to become boring. The performer must keep the audience's attention focused. It is better to perform a slow movement slightly faster than perform slightly slower if he is to keep the audience's attention.

Another important issue, which concerns the meaning of tempo, is the application of the metronome both by students and by teachers / instructors of piano playing. Some believe that the use of the metronome is always necessary. Others that the metronome should not be used at all. My opinion is that a beginner must make use of the metronome, when he has made some progress so that he can keep pace with the metronome. I believe that the metronome is an essential tool for the student's progress since it impresses on him the various gradations of tempo. It is the only way that a student can become familiar with tiny detailed gradations of tempo.

A frequent phenomenon when learning a work without the metronome, is the involuntary change in tempo observed even amongst examinee during diploma level examinations. It is extremely difficult for someone to preserve the sense of tempo at perfect level, throughout the whole of a musical movement.

Once an advanced student or a piano teacher becomes familiar with the various gradations of the metronome then he can learn a musical composition without a metronome. When he has learnt a piece, he simply uses the metronome occasionally to check if he is maintaining the correct tempo throughout. The use of the metronome by advanced students and piano teachers is considered unnecessary. We simply use it only to confirm and verify the soundness of the correct tempo.

Several times, the metronome can damage our inner disposition towards a piano piece. If, for example, we use very slow tempos to study, it is enough to lead us to disappointment. As a result, we shall not have the correct disposition to study a piano work. The same applies to teaching. We should always determine the correct tempo for each student. It must be neither very slow, for the fear of disappointment, nor very fast, for the risk of technical difficulties that the student will not be able to handle. This is exactly why an experienced piano teacher must be able to judge every time, which tempo is suitable for a student.

In reference to this we can say that a student must first learn to play a piece in the appropriate tempo and at a later stage, when he has mastered it, then he can perform the various gradations in tempo (*rallentando*, *accelerando*, *rubato* etc.), of the piece⁶. If he starts to perform the various gradations in tempo, from the beginning,

⁶ VASSILIADES, *The piano*, op. cit., pg. 17.

then there is a high risk to perform them incorrectly. This is why the teacher should help the students to learn the pieces with the metronome and only when they have mastered them must allow the students to perform the pieces freely, but always guiding them where there are tempo gradations.

An also good practice is when rather fast musical movements or the whole of the piano works, which are to be performed during a concert, are first being studied at slow tempos. In this way the pianists' fingers, wrist and hand as well as their mind are allowed to adjust to the details of the work and get used to its various melodies, smoothly and gently. The same applies, of course, to students who should begin their daily piano study with a gradual increase in tempo, avoiding, thus, the tension which is caused by a «hasty» learning, a fact that will surely lead to inelegant performances.

Many times, reason functions as a restraining factor. On the contrary, feelings always guide him towards a correct interpretation of the work. Obviously the pianist must employ both feelings and reason in order to interpret the work correctly. Perhaps an easy way to activate the brain it is to perform the work slightly faster than normal. Thus the brain moves in a parallel line with the emotions.

Many performers employ much faster tempos than they should. Usually to show off skills. Not for the correct interpretation⁷.

As it regards *ritenuto* or *accelerando*, which may be found at different points in the music work, these must be executed carefully and thoughtfully. As mentioned earlier, students must first master the work at its correct tempo and only then can they try to execute the *rallentando*. To be aided to the executions, the student might have in mind the way a machine slows down gradually from 100 to zero. It is my opinion that the *rallentando* is correct only when it is also analogous to the work's tempo. Again, the mastering of the right way with which a *rallentando* is executed is part of the responsibilities of the instructor.

In order to give emphasis to when a musical movement is ending, we need to deliver the last note or chord with a slight delay. Even in cases where a relevant indication is absent and regardless to how loud or soft our music piece is. Technically, a slight breathing in helps to achieve a successful *ritenuto*.

Once a student has learnt a piece well we could use the metronome for a whole bar rather than just one beat. For example, if in a piece of music the crotchet must be performed at 120, then, since we are referring to a bar of three quarters, we beat the half dotted minim at 40. In this way we give more movement not speed to the piece⁸. Thus the piece is more live and flow. On the contrary, if a student counts every crotchet, then the piece loses its expression. It is performed awkwardly in a stilted way⁹.

Whenever a work is executed by the pianist in slightly faster tempo then it is suitable to do this with lesser sound. On the contrary, whenever the execution is done in slightly slower tempo, then in order to maintain the work lively and pleasant to hearing, the pianist should apply more sound and grandeur.

As a conclusion, I would like to stress the importance of the notation of tempo with the following rule: If a piece of music is performed in the correct tempo, this is optimum. If, on the contrary the notes of a piece are performed before the correct tune, then, this is a sheer failure. Finally, if the notes are delayed slightly - meaning where appropriate - then, this is excellent. It is much better to delay a note or a chord

⁷ Vide. VASSILIADES, *The piano*, op. cit., pg. 18.

⁸ The same applies to Byzantine chanting when performing in abridged tempo.

⁹ The same phenomenon occurs when a poem is recited by an inexperienced person who will recite in syllables, whereas a poet of repute will do so in style and vividness, without syllabizing.

where you should, so that the audience hear the sound of the chord slightly delayed.
«Precision is good, haste is tragic and delay is excellent».