

# EMOTIONS IN CONCERT: PERFORMERS' EXPERIENCED EMOTIONS ON STAGE

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## Abstract

Music is often said to be expressive of emotions. Surprisingly, not much is known about the role of performers' emotions while performing. Do musicians feel the musical emotions when expressing them? Or has expressive playing nothing to do with the emotional experiences of the performer? To investigate performers' perspectives on the role of emotions in performance, we conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with nineteen musicians teaching or studying at a European conservatoire. In the interviews, musicians were first asked to describe a recent performance experience in as much detail as possible, then to make a visual representation of their experiences on stage, and finally, to answer some general questions about the role of emotions in performance. Qualitative Thematic Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed a difference between performance related emotions and emotions related to the music. In addition, a difference was found between emotional and expressive playing. To allow the music to be expressive of emotions, performers seem to feel the musical emotions to some extent, while they make sure to have the technical ability to express them on their instrument, and stay in control of their playing.

**Keywords:** performing musicians, felt emotions, expressive performance

## 1. Introduction

Do musicians feel the musical emotions when expressing them? Or has expressive playing nothing to do with the emotional experiences of the performer? Little is known about the relationship between felt and expressed emotions in performing musicians (Gabrielsson, 2001-2002). Some musicians and researchers adhere to the vision that 'A musician cannot move others unless he too is moved' (C.Ph.E. Bach, quoted in Persson, 2001). Others argue that performing is more a matter of deliberate conscious awareness and planned expressiveness: 'I also have to play pieces which are not so emotionally connected to me, because I am a professional' (pianist interviewed by Sloboda & Lehmann, 2001).

Expressivity is a multi-dimensional and largely investigated subject (e.g., Juslin, 2001; 2003), as is the study of whether music is expressive of emotions (e.g., Juslin & Laukka, 2003; Vuoskoski, 2012). Surprisingly, there is little systematic knowledge about whether performers' experienced emotions play a role in the creation of an expressive performance (Juslin, 2009).

In several studies (e.g., Woody, 2000; Karlsson & Juslin, 2008), playing expressively and playing with emotions are considered as being one and the same. Studies by Lindström et al. (2003) and Van Zijl and Sloboda (2011), however, suggest that there might be a difference between emotional and expressive playing.

Lindström et al. (2003) conducted a questionnaire study to investigate how conservatoire students approach the subject of expressivity. They found that 44 percent of the students defined 'playing expressively' largely in terms of 'communicating emotions', while 16 percent defined 'playing expressively' in terms of 'playing with feeling'. According to Lindström et al., the first way of defining focuses more on actually conveying something to the audience, whereas the second one focuses more on the performer's own feelings.

In a diary and interview study investigating performers' emotions during the process of constructing an expressive performance in private practice or rehearsal, Van Zijl and Sloboda (2011) found that music students described 'emotional playing' as 'just feeling and enjoying the music'. In the case of an expressive performance, the communication of a previously constructed musical interpretation to an audience seemed to take centre stage, rather than the performers' own feelings.

In the present study we aimed to investigate what role performers' experienced emotions play on stage, by asking performers to reflect on a recent performance experience. In addition, we aimed to explicate the meaning of emotional and expressive playing in music performance.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants in the present study were nineteen musicians (11 females), teaching (N = 6) or studying (N = 13) at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, a conservatoire in London, United Kingdom. Participants played the violin, viola, cello, double bass, flute, clarinet, French horn, percussion, harp, or piano. Classical music was the stylistic aim in education for all participants. Participants were recruited via an invitation email.

### 2.2 Procedure

The in-depth, semi-structured interviews consisted of four parts. In the first part, the structure of the interview was explained, partici-

pants were asked to sign a consent form, and given the opportunity to ask any questions. In the second part, participants were asked to think of a recent performance experience. They were encouraged to describe this experience in as much detail as possible, and describe what they experienced before the performance, when going onstage, when starting to play, while playing, when ending the performance, and after the performance. In the third part, participants were asked to make a visual representation (with pencil on paper) of their experiences on stage. In the fourth part, participants were asked to answer some general, reflective questions: how they would describe their ideal performance, how they would describe emotional and expressive playing, whether emotions help them and whether they hinder them, to what extent they think emotions are necessary for a successful performance, if they could think of any aspect related to emotions not discussed yet, and whether they had anything to add or ask. The interviews typically lasted about 60 minutes (range: 50 – 90 minutes).

### 2.3. Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and subsequently analysed by means of Qualitative Thematic Analysis. This involves an interpretative analysis of textual meaning based on a coding scheme derived both deductively from pre-existing concerns, questions and hypotheses, and inductively from examination of the actual data (Seale, 2004).

## 3. Results

Analysis of the interviews allowed a detailed characterisation of the role of performers' emotions on stage. A distinction was revealed between performance-related emotions and emotions related to the music. In addition, it was found that emotional and expressive playing were perceived in different ways.

### 3.1. Performance-related emotions

Performance related emotions as described by the musicians were emotions such as excite-

ment or anxiety, and they were typically featured by an urge to move or play faster, and bodily sensations such as sweaty hands, muscle tension, or trembling. In the words of two of the participants:

I noticed that I was shaking slightly, like round my embouchure area. Erm...and I had, like, sweaty palms. But that's like a standard thing, really, when...well, when anyone performs, I guess. (Clarinetist, student)

...I was worried that I would mess up my playing and then it would be really embarrassing. But I think it just takes practise. Performance needs to be practised. (Harpist, student)

### 3.2. Music-related emotions

In addition to emotions related to the act of performing in front of an audience, performers tend to experience emotions in relation to the music they perform. The present study revealed that music-related emotions reflect a complex relationship between the music and the performer. This is illustrated by the following quote:

...Schubert G Major Quartet is such a work of immense scope and magnitude, and it really deals with the essence of light and dark and optimism and despair. Erm...and I guess in the music he has reflected that, very simply, in major and minor, and so there's a huge, sort of, dialogue between major and minor, even from the very first...or even from the opening of the piece. Erm...and I think also...I mean, obviously, he knew that he was dying when he wrote it, and...erm... Every person's interpretation of what he's written, I guess, would be different, but for me, I just do find a huge...erm...sense of loss and...and anger: I think there is anger in this music, or maybe anger at the loss that he's going through, in saying goodbye to his life. Erm...and also, huge tenderness as well, so...that's...that's, I guess, what I mean by extreme music. Because it encompasses such a huge scale of...of human emotion. Erm...and so, in this particular performance...erm...I just...I felt very connected to...to that. And...I...I felt able...to really...I felt very sad. I felt...I felt really sorry for him. And I felt...I could also identify, as I was playing, I could identify with the anger in the music, and the despair, and

the loss, and...erm...and I guess...I feel that I was able to, at least for myself, connect with that physically, and sort of manifest it on my instrument. And it...and it gave me like a spur of energy. To actually...to creating the line of music the way that I feel it. (Viola player, staff)

The score played a central role in the accounts of the musicians interviewed. This may reflect the fact that in classical music, the score, the composer's intentions, and conventions regarding styles of playing occupy centre stage. A score, however, needs to be interpreted. The process of interpreting the score mainly takes place in the practise room, where musicians translate the notes into a musical narrative and try to find and master the technical means to manifest the narrative on their instruments (see also Van Zijl & Sloboda, 2011).

In order to bring the musical narrative to life, on stage, the musicians in the present study tend to connect emotionally with the musical narrative by relying on life experiences, and connecting to the reason why they are musicians: their love for music, the desire to share their music with others, and the belief that music has some deeper meaning which needs to be understood and communicated.

When connecting emotionally with the musical narrative, all participants emphasised the importance of maintaining a balance between being emotionally involved (in a way a listener might be) and being in control of their playing. In addition, all musicians emphasised the need to have the technical ability to express the musical narrative on their instrument. The balance between being emotionally involved and being in control of their playing is reflected in the performers' perspectives on emotional and expressive playing.

### 3.3. Emotional playing

In the interviews, all musicians described the difference between emotional and expressive playing in a similar way. Emotional playing was associated with genuine playing, with experiencing raw emotions, and with directly feeling the emotional impact of the music. In the words of several participants:

'Emotional'... it's more of an adrenaline driven thing. I mean, in the moment, if you can...if you just feel the sudden sensation or emotion, it can really carry you. (Violinist, student)

'Emotional' is being involved in... in a very personal way...and feeling very directly the emotional impact on me while I'm playing... I'm going through the feeling, while I'm playing. (Flautist, staff)

...it's feeling the emotion you're dealing with when you play. And feeling a sense of catharsis or...or...it's almost a variant on...on having an orgasm while making love. Really. It can get to...to that. It's, of course, not the same, and...but some...some of the sensation is similar. (Pianist, staff)

In addition to emotional playing as a positive and personal experience of the music, emotional playing was associated with the risk of getting carried away, and losing control of performance. In the words of two participants:

...sometimes it's very easy to get so carried away that you're not in the room anymore. And then suddenly you come back to the room and it really sort of makes you jump, and...I think...erm...yeah: if you get too carried away, you go too far into your thoughts, and then when you come back into reality, it's quite a...a shock. And that's what makes you make mistakes, I think. (Pianist, student)

When I get emotional, I'm carried away, and I...I lose the sense of... my feeling is it's a risk of losing the sense of control, which is so important for...erm...you know: successful performance. (Flautist, staff)

Several musicians gave examples of concert situations in which they got carried away too much. In the words of one of them:

...today, I played the Shostakovich Prelude and Fugue No. 15, and the fugue is just insane. Like, the hardest thing I've ever attempted to play in my entire life. And...erm...because it was so difficult, and I was so excited by the...just the whole...the whole fugue is just basically...the emotion behind it, I'd probably describe it as something like... erm... bizarre madness... erm... and excitement with anxiety at the same

time. It was weird. But it's like really, really, really excited, and...you know: no rest in it at all, you know. So, as a performer, I have to try and generate that, you know, while I play it. And I just got so carried away in the middle that the technical aspect of it - which is very important...erm... probably because I was focusing on the meaning behind it more than the technique - then...erm...the technique got lost, and in losing the technique, you lose some of the communicative power, you know? Which is...er...a shame. (Pianist, student)

All musicians agreed that experiencing emotions while playing is important for their motivation to practise and perform. However, most musicians indicated that it is not that helpful to experience strong emotions on stage. In the words of two participants:

...the strong emotional experience possibly is not helpful at the time of performance. (...) I think my job is to play as beautifully as possible, and...and... in a way that doesn't distract anybody that's listening. So if I knock over a few notes, that's going to be distracting, and is going to stop the music having its effect on somebody else. So it's my responsibility to actually...you know: someone else receives; I give. (French horn player, staff)

Well, I think you have to control your emotions, basically, because you're not only...you have to...there's a physical element to playing an instrument, and as much as we'd like it all to be completely free or whatever, you have to assert some control, and control, kind of in some sense, goes against emotion. Like, raw emotion. (Cellist, student)

### 3.4. Expressive playing

Expressive playing, on the other hand, was associated with playing what the score prescribes, with bringing out the structure of the music, and having the technical ability to express the composer's intentions. In the words of three participants:

'Expressive' playing can be something which is...erm... done more in a distance from the emotion itself, from the pure emotion. It's more a musical phenomenon. It's about... maybe

more thinking about the differences in, you know: timing and timbre and whatever. Er... changing the music, you know, moment to moment, and fluctuations of all the musical parameters. 'Expressive' means being in and out at the same time. I'm observing while I'm doing, while experiencing. (Flautist, staff)

'Expressive' playing may suggest more that it comes from the music. So somebody who really thought about the music and really chooses which notes to...to lean on, for example. Erm... and it... has a real awareness of the structure of the whole piece, so you feel like they know where they're going in the piece, and they take you on that journey. Expressive playing makes me think of somebody who's actually really studied the score and worked out what they want to do with each part of the music. (Pianist, staff)

...expressive playing, I would say, contains the emotional aspect, and contains everything you feel about it, but you're also able to express it to somebody else... as opposed to keeping it in your head and just hoping it comes out. Erm...but having...having...yeah: having something to say and the tools to say it. (Violinist, student)

Although several musicians believed that one could give a successful performance without being emotionally involved, it was suggested that being emotionally connected with the musical narrative might turn a technically perfect performance into a remarkable one. In the words of two participants:

I think emotions might not be very essential if you have flawless technique. If you play everything correct... if you play the music beautifully, it is a successful performance. But maybe it's not the best performance. I think emotion, it's... it makes it the top. (Harpist, student)

I think if the emotions are channelled in the right way then they can really make a special performance, but I think that you could have a really brilliant performance without necessarily somebody having to be emotionally involved. (Pianist, staff)

On stage, the interviewed musicians all aimed for expressive playing rather than emotional

playing. They seemed to identify with and feel the musical emotions to some extent, while making sure to have the technical ability to express the musical emotions on their instrument, and while being in control of what they are doing.

#### 4. Discussion

In the present study we aimed to investigate what role performers' experienced emotions play on stage, by asking performers to reflect on a recent performance experience. We found a difference between performance-related emotions and emotions related to the music. As regards the music-related emotions, a complex relationship was found between the music and the performer.

In addition, we aimed to explicate the meaning of emotional and expressive playing in music performance. In line with the findings by Lindström et al. (2003) and Van Zijl and Sloboda (2011), we found a difference between emotional and expressive playing. Emotional playing was associated with genuine playing, with experiencing raw emotions, and with directly feeling the emotional impact of the music. It was also associated with the risk of getting carried away, and losing control of performance. Expressive playing, on the other hand, was associated with playing what the score prescribes, with bringing out the structure of the music, and having the technical ability to express the composer's intentions.

The finding by Lindström et al. (2003) that music students defined 'playing expressively' either in terms of 'communicating emotions' (focus on conveying something to the audience) or in terms of 'playing with feeling' (focus on the performer's own feelings), might suggest that the role of performers' experienced emotions in expressive performance is something musicians discover at some point during their education, and that musicians have to make the transition from approaching musical emotions as a listener to approaching musical emotions as a performer.

Although it is possible to experience strong emotions while playing, performers cannot neglect the fact that there is a physical aspect to playing an instrument, and that they are

likely to make mistakes and lose control of their playing when getting carried away too much. In addition, just feeling something does not necessarily mean that that feeling is transmitted to an audience. Several of the musicians interviewed indicated how different a recording could sound to how they thought it would sound based on their experiences while playing. All musicians interviewed emphasised the need to translate the notes into expressive music by finding and mastering the appropriate technical means before entering the stage.

Do musicians feel the musical emotions when expressing them? Or has expressive playing nothing to do with the emotional experiences of the performer? The results of the present study suggest that performers feel the musical emotions to some extent, while they make sure to have the technical ability to express them on their instrument, and stay in control of their playing. The findings support the validity of distinguishing between emotional and expressive playing, and seem to be valuable for both research and artistic practice and pedagogy.

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