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VII. Performing Gender

Roger CHAFFIN, Mary CRAWFORD and Gabriela IMREH

For the past seven years we (the three authors) have been doing research on memory and piano performance. In this article we reflect on how gender issues have emerged in our research. Gender effects have become evident in the skills and perspectives brought to the project by each participant, in his/her differing subjectivities, and in the self-presentation of the pianist whose performance has been studied.

Gabriela, a concert pianist, wanted to know what psychology could tell her about memorization, an important aspect of her work. Roger, a cognitive psychologist, wondered whether the principles of expert memory, which had been developed for cognitive skills like chess playing, would apply to a task like piano performance that has a large motor component (Chaffin and Imreh, 1994; in press). To find out, Gabriela agreed to videotape herself learning two new pieces. As Gabriela and Roger worked at interpreting the practice records, the process of negotiating the meaning of the data proved to be almost as interesting as the data themselves, and resulted in the involvement of a second psychologist, the friend and student of the performer and spouse of the first psychologist. Viewing the negotiations as an opportunity to explore gender, communication and feminist methodology, Mary joined the project as informal ethnographer, and expanded its scope.

In the field of music, opening up the process of preparing a performance to observation and analysis threatens ideologies and discourses about the creative process that are central to the western European cultural tradition (Green, 1997): that art is the spontaneous outcome of inspiration rather than a carefully crafted and deliberate product (Weisberg, 1986), that the skills of the virtuoso are the

effortless expression of raw talent rather than a hard-won product of years of training (Ericsson and Charness, 1994), and that the emotions conveyed in a musical performance are an intimate and personal communication between artist and audience (Bloomfield, 1993; Gramit, 1998). In the field of psychology, blurring the line between 'subject' and 'investigator' threatens the objectivity on which science rests its claims to authority, and privileging a 'subject's' descriptions of her own thinking and planning runs counter to experimental psychology's long-standing skepticism about people's ability to provide useful descriptions of their own mental processes (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977; but see Ericsson and Simon, 1980).

SUBJECTIVITY AND KNOWLEDGE

Roger and Gabriela, embarking on the project in an optimistic spirit of interdisciplinary collaboration, soon began to encounter problems with miscommunication and mutual incomprehension. Mary, called on to bridge the gap, found that feminist theory provided a helpful framework for understanding what was happening. Roger and Gabriela each expressed a partial and situated knowledge shaped by their differences in gender as well as intellectual tradition, and other aspects of subjectivity (Haraway, 1988). In the western European cultural tradition, femininity is aligned with expressiveness and the artistic, masculinity with the scientific and objective. Discussing this polarity with respect to psychological research, William James (cited in Haaken, 1998: 247) noted, 'The scientific-academic mind and the feminine-mystical mind shy from each other's facts, just as they fly from each other's temper and spirit'. The project required both Gabriela and Roger to recognize the partiality of their positions. It also provided an opportunity to synthesize their disparate, situated knowledges into a more complete and useful knowledge (Haraway, 1988).

For both Gabriela and Roger, the project involved conflicts with the values of the professional communities to which they owed their primary allegiance. For Gabriela, it threatened the mystique of the performer by revealing to a potential audience the drudgery that goes into preparing a new work for performance. In the artistic tradition within which Gabriela works, an important part of the relationship between performer and audience is the genuineness of the emotion expressed (Bloomfield, 1993; Gramit, 1998; Huron, 1999). This discourse might be disrupted by drawing attention to the hard work involved in the preparation. But critical disruption of the ideology of authenticity was not Gabriela's goal. As an artist whose professional life is devoted to providing her audiences with a particular kind of aesthetic experience, Gabriela hoped to enhance her skills and her relationship with her audience. She feels that hard work, careful analysis and rehearsal of expressive effects are not at all incompatible with her unsimulated expression of emotion during performance. But they are inconsistent with popular stereotypes of the creative spirit (Weisberg, 1986). In drawing back the

veil from the creative process through scientific inquiry, Gabriela ran the risk of alienating the audience she hoped to reach as an artist.

The recent vogue for allowing the audience behind the scenes of the creative process can be seen as simultaneously resisting the construction of musical performance as spontaneous and unrehearsed emotional expression and, at the same time, as providing yet another turn of the screw, further enhancing the illusion of direct communion between artist and audience. The effect, of course, is to make rehearsal into another form of performance. We were participating in both of these processes. On the one hand, we wanted to demystify the process of learning a new piece, and in this we were resisting the construction of musical performance as inspired, spontaneous expression. On the other hand, by studying the learning process we were opening up even more of the creative process to performance pressure.

As a participant in the cultural tradition we are describing, Gabriela felt that her practice for our project *was* a type of performance, and she wanted it to be a good performance of its kind. In the early stages, when attempting to play through a large section of the piece, she frequently expressed dissatisfaction with her level of performance. For example, in session 7 she said to the video camera:

I'm afraid this is going to be a disaster compared to . . . [plays]. Sorry about that. It's been about four or five days since [I've] touched [it] . . . [plays]. Oh, it's still not good. It's really far from what I would like it to be. It is just so difficult. There are a couple of places where I have some excuses. There are some where I don't.

Gabriela's feeling that she was performing was also reflected in a concern with her appearance on camera, which sometimes kept her from practicing when she wanted to.

Sometimes I [would like to] just sit down and touch something up, but [the need to record] forces me to be very structured and be dressed appropriately Yesterday I was so frustrated because I wanted to practice, just touch up a few places. And I couldn't start the video at any time because I didn't have the continuous time, plus I wasn't dressed for the occasion. I love to practice in my robe and soft things that are comfortable.

Gabriela also thought about how she might look to her colleagues. While many performers have been interviewed about how they practice, interviews are generally celebratory rather than probing, and allow the performers to omit or color anything that might not reflect well on them (for example, Brower, 1926; Dubal, 1997; Elder, 1986; Mach, 1991; Noyle, 1987). Our goal was to verify (or refute) Gabriela's descriptions with observation of her practice. Gabriela understandably felt some apprehension:

My self-protective instincts rebelled against the video camera preserving my most personal, private time – practicing. Sometimes I felt terribly inadequate; my mistakes seemed embarrassing. (Imreh and Chaffin, 1996/97)

Roger experienced a different sort of concern about appearances. In departing from his usual research methods and topics he was concerned that he might damage his reputation as a 'serious' researcher. While the value of the project seemed clear enough, several of its characteristics ran counter to beliefs about scientific method that are widely held by the community of experimental psychologists, beliefs that Roger, to a large extent, shares.

First, the scope and exploratory nature of the project restricted us to studying a single pianist, limiting the generality of our conclusions. Experimental psychologists are generally wary of case studies as providing too many opportunities for bias (Dawes, 1994). Second, Gabriela's insistence that the methods of study respect the artistic and creative integrity of her work prevented the use of experimental manipulations. As a consequence, her first-person reports provided the primary insight into the process of learning and memorizing. The 'objective' behavioral measures played a secondary role, confirming her descriptions, a reversal of the status usually accorded to quantitative and qualitative data. This meant that Gabriela, in addition to being the subject of the inquiry and the source of its data, was also its primary interpreter, raising questions about objectivity and impartiality. Gabriela had her reputation as a performer to protect and it was not clear to Roger how this would shape the final product.

GENDER ISSUES FOR THE PERFORMER

Like any other pianist, Gabriela's playing is shaped by sex-linked physical characteristics, such as hand size. But these are just the tools she works with. As a musician, Gabriela would like to be judged for her musicianship, not for her femininity. As a concert artist and a woman, however, her femininity and glamour are part of her professional persona (Green, 1997). A performer must be expressive, a characteristic aligned with femininity, and Gabriela is perceived as an expressive performer. Of her recent recording of Liszt's *Soiree de Vienne*, a reviewer noted that Gabriela plays in 'the old romantic style, with her constant but controlled tempo fluctuations . . . she is a lyricist who sings her way through these lovely . . . pieces with real personality' (Schonberg, 1999). The (gender-linked) evaluation of her playing as lyrical, romantic and expressive is an important professional asset in a highly competitive market-place.

Appearance is part of a performer's stage presence and is important to Gabriela. When her new manager suggested sex appeal as a marketing tool, she reflected:

Lots of blown hair, low-cut dresses, sulky looks, new photos, etc. I feel funny about it. I feel deeply feminine. I like being a woman but I wish my music making and career would not be judged by anything but my work. My publicity photos seem like an ongoing burden. Finding a photographer, huge fees, and undesirable 'looks'. Nobody seems to want the real person. They want the pretty face, the cleavage. I go along and separate myself from it, ultimately

feeling more like the pictures are *some body* else. I always worried about my debut album where my record producer chose a picture that we took at the end of the photo session. I was wearing a hat, a dress that made me look like a teen, in a pose of taking the hat off. He thought this would attract attention, be noticed. I was afraid that nobody would take me seriously. I'll never know what the impact was really. My new record cover is different. I look probably older than I am, still wearing a tight black lace top . . . I have terrible hair, but the picture is calm, a bit more intelligent and thoughtful than the usual.

As for any other woman, the use of femininity creates double binds. Gabriela has sometimes found herself overlooked or dismissed as a serious artist on the basis of her gender, size or appearance. She provided the following examples:

I grew up in Romania where among the many evil limitations of the Communist system were hidden two marvelous benefits. Artists were considered (along with athletes, etc.) national 'treasures', and as much was expected of women as of men. The Communists created this ideal of the super-woman that still, to this day, continues to complicate my life, but which let me grow up without fears or inhibitions. My earliest memory of trouble came actually quite late. I was 19 or so, weighing in at about 95 pounds and showed up in a medium sized city to perform Tchaikovsky's first piano concerto. I have such a clear recollection of a beautiful summer day, close to summer vacation, my favorite sundress that I was wearing, and the kind musical secretary escorting me to meet the conductor through the beautiful arched hallways. We met, we shook hands, and he abruptly excused himself. Later I was told that he refused to conduct the concert with 'that skinny thing' as his soloist. It apparently took considerable effort on the part of the management to persuade him to give it one try. He did. He started the rehearsal, and that was the end of the problem.

I was 26–27, fairly new in America and making contacts in my new country. One of the people was the head of the concert department at Steinway in New York. The meeting was set – I still cringe, after years have passed, at the memory of it. This man, seeing me for the first time, not having heard me play, informed me that the only way I was ever to have anything of a career was to dress up – short skirts and provocative, show up after concerts, and try to get myself noticed by conductors. And, yes, if possible, omit the fact that I was married. And no, it wasn't possible for me to become [a] Steinway artist.

Just a few weeks ago, at a pleasant dinner party given by a friend, this older man told me that he found women playing difficult, ambitious, virtuosic music really turned him off. He found it emasculating, unpleasant, unconvincing. I was in shock. I found myself defending all women artists in a heated discussion.

Music theory has given little consideration to the effect of the performer's embodiment on musical expression (Cusick, 1998), just as psychology has largely overlooked the effects of embodiment on mental processes (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). Like any other musician, Gabriela makes music, quite literally, with her body, not just with her mind. Music making is not a purely cerebral activity. Gabriela's recognition of the importance of embodiment opened up new areas for theorizing that we are just beginning to explore.

CONCLUSION

Compiling, annotating and interpreting more than 30 hours of practice proved to be a huge project, but after seven years of work the first articles have begun to appear (Imreh and Chaffin, 1996/97; Chaffin and Imreh, 1997, 2001, in press) and a book has been completed (Chaffin et al., 2002). In the process our unlikely trio has come to share a methodological commitment to self-reflexivity (Crawford and Kimmel, 1999; Wilkinson, 1988) and strong objectivity (Harding, 1991); a new appreciation of the importance of speaking across situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988); and an inkling of the importance of embodiment in performance (Cusick, 1998; Green, 1997). One result has been a better understanding of how gender affects the life of a performer and shapes the research process.

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