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Towards a holistic and multimodal analysis of music performance

Since the mid-1990s there has been a growing emphasis on investigating the visual and muscular aspects of music performance. These undoubtedly play an important role in our perception, enjoyment and judgement. Nevertheless, rich information is enclosed in the sounds of performed music and the listener’s knowledge also plays a crucial part, as phenomenologists and music theorists have argued for long. Interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary approaches to studying music performance therefore need to be circumspect not to put the cart before the horse; to remain focussed on the musicologically important questions while adopting cross-disciplinary methods when they are useful. Considering two pairs of examples from western classical repertoire (a song by De Falla and an excerpt from Bach’s B minor Partita for Solo Violin) I address the relative merit of multimodal versus audio-only perception of recorded performances. By contextualizing the relative importance in music perception of the visual, the kinesthetic and the mental (i.e. knowledge) I argue for the merit of a more holistic approach to investigating our experience of listening to musical performances. This will more likely enable us to account for the complex, multi-layered and multi-directional interactions of performance features (such as articulation, dynamics, tempo, tone, timing, etc.), instrumental techniques, and cultural and emotional pre-dispositions, all contributing crucially to the experience.

Conference themes:
- New approaches to music performance
- Interdisciplinary, and multi-disciplinary practices