Towards a Performer-Oriented Analysis: Communication between Analysis and Performance in Schumann’s D-minor Piano Trio

Cecilia Oinas

1. Introduction

In his article “Pianist as Critic,” Edward T. Cone regards interpretation as a link between analyst and performer, since both “depend first of all upon intuition guided by experience” (Cone 1995: 245). The ultimate aim of both the analyst and the performer is to create a comprehensive interpretation of the musical work, which has also been explained with terms such as musical narrative, plot, or, as Murray Perahia has poetically described, tones which “can somehow metaphorically transform themselves into some kind of story that one can make sense of” (Rink 2001: 12).

If analysis and performance share the same general basis, in what ways might they benefit from each other? This paper will try to answer the proposed question by combining aspects of analysis and performance in the opening movement of Robert Schumann’s D-minor Piano Trio Op. 63 (1847) in a two-dimensional way: a performance influenced by analysis and analysis influenced by performance. The purpose of this study is thus to illustrate both that analysis can help performers with their interpretation and that the experience gained from performance can inspire analytical insights.

2. Theoretical background

One of the most important issues related to performance is how to shape musical motion in time. The aspired shape usually emerges gradually during the performers’ rehearsal process, which includes experimentation with timing, articulation, dynamics, and so on. As John Rink comments, “[v]ital for intelligible, effective performance, it means giving the music a sense of shape in time by devising a hierarchy of temporally defined musical gestures from the small to large scale” (Rink 1999: 218).

The idea of shaping and controlling musical motion in performance has been expressed also by Heinrich Schenker in The Art of Performance as follows:

In a given piece, the tension must be maintained throughout. This must not result in using meter mechanically to ensure the flow of the music; the means that keep the piece in motion are of an inner nature, not of a superficially metric one. The impulse must renew itself continually from within. (Schenker 2000: 53)

From this and many other writings one can see how important it was for Schenker that analysis and performance communicate with each other. On the one hand, his own voice-leading graphs are often influenced by the way he viewed the works as a performer. On the other hand, he writes that “a thorough knowledge of all laws of composition” is the key for performers to recreate a musical composition (Schenker 2000: 3).

As we know, “thorough knowledge” primarily meant for Schenker the knowledge of harmony and voice leading. Yet many present-day theorists believe that other analytical tools can also be applied; for example, William Rothstein suggests that some of the most valuable tools are “analysis based on themes and motifs; metrical analysis; phrase analysis; and voice-leading analysis of the Schenkerian sort” (Rothstein 1995: 238). Janet Schmalfeldt uses, to quote her own words, “deliberately eclectic” analysis in her article of

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1 Cone uses the word ‘critic’ instead of ‘theorist’ or ‘analyst’ (Cone 1995: 241–253).
2 The first version of this paper was presented in 2010 at the International Music Theory Conference in Tallinn where the examined passages were also performed during the presentation (myself at the piano). For the present article, I have recorded two of the discussed musical examples with my trio. These examples can be heard online at the following address: http://coinas.wordpress.com/articles.
two Beethoven Bagatelles which she examines from the viewpoints of an imagined “Analyst” and “Performer” (Schmalfeldt 1985: 1–31). Particularly fascinating is the latter part of her article where the Analyst responds to the questions asked by the Performer; their collaboration gives justifiable options to specific performance issues that arise from the ambiguity between form and harmony.

Yet it is hardly surprising that Schmalfeldt’s conclusion is the following: “[…] there is no single, one-and-only performance decision that can be dictated by analytic observation” (Schmalfeldt 1985: 28). Furthermore, all analytical findings need not be directly projected in performance, since, as Rothstein comments “[…] the performer’s task is to provide the listener a vivid experience of the work, not an analytical understanding of it” (Rothstein 1995: 238). Analysis might rather reinforce, complement, or even challenge the decisions that the performer has originally made, especially since they have, according to Schmalfeldt, “a strange way of becoming obscure” (Schmalfeldt 1985: 19) as the rehearsal process progresses.

Indeed, the present-day discussion about the relationship between analysis and performance favours a pluralistic viewpoint where the role of analysis is to give performers a “second opinion” without being excessively authoritative over performance. In his article “Performance and analysis: interaction and interpretation,” Joel Lester suggests: “If pieces are regarded as composites of seemingly innumerable acceptable interpretative possibilities, the focus of analysis could shift from finding ‘the’ structure of a piece to defining multiple strategies for interpreting pieces. Performers could enter analytical dialogue as performers – as artistic/intellectual equals, not as intellectual inferiors who needed to learn from theorists.” (Lester 1995b: 214) This is the direction I will aspire to take in the following discussion.

3. From Analysis to Performance (and vice versa)

The “Shaping” Alternatives of the Opening Phrase (mm. 1–14)

The first movement of Schumann’s D-minor Piano Trio Op. 63 (Mit Energie und Leidenschaft) is an extensive sonata-form work with a dark and passionate character. I will begin with the opening phrase, which lasts from m. 1 to m. 14 and forms the primary-theme section (Example 1). One of the prominent features in the phrase is its metrical instability created with syncopations and somewhat irregular accentuation marks (sf or fp). In addition, long lines both in the strings and the piano's left hand create the impression of a perpetual melodic line, culminating in a perfect authentic cadence in m. 14 with the high a2 in the violin and two consecutive forte marks.

I propose that the interplay between unpredictable accentuations and the motion towards the perfect authentic cadence in m. 14 are the initial issues that performers must deal with when starting to shape the first phrase. Let us now examine how analysis might expand or challenge these assumptions.

Example 2 presents a voice-leading graph of mm. 1–7. From a harmonic point of view, the movement actually begins in medias res, since the I6–VI–II5–V–I-motion from m. 1 to 2 sounds more like a closing gesture than a beginning. This remarkable feature – although not unique in Schumann’s music – has its consequences: since the movement does not begin from a stable basis, it must find harmonic stability, that is, the root-position tonic, at some point elsewhere. But this effort is constantly postponed: even though we have a root-position tonic chord in m. 2, it is immediately overridden with both 5–6 motion and the ascending melody in the violin. In m. 4

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3 Other, more practical issues would be the balance: for example, since the cello line and the piano’s left hand are very often in unison, the pianist has to drop the dynamics occasionally by a great amount, especially if the work is performed with a modern grand piano.

4 The first phrase displays an interesting interplay between location and function in the so-called beginning–middle–end paradigm discussed by Kofi Agawu, among others: “Creative play of this kind is known in connection of classic music… It is also frequently enacted by Romantic composers within their individual and peculiar idiolects.” (Agawu 2009: 53)
we have the same harmonic motion as in m. 1. But now it both begins the next 4-bar unit and ends the previous one, thus creating an elision with the two similarly beginning units. Notice also that the tonic chord in m. 5 is obscured by the leading-tone suspension and the bass appoggiatura, which is even emphasized with a *sforzato* mark.\(^5\)

Example 3 presents a middleground voice-leading analysis of the whole opening phrase. After the sequential B section, or the contrasting middle section, A returns in m. 11.\(^6\) This time, however, the harmony moves to a subdominant chord (IV) at the end of m. 13 and continues to a perfect authentic cadence in the following measure. Thus in m. 14 we have, for the first time, an arrival at a root-position tonic chord that is not weakened in any way. Therefore I propose that the first phrase actually forms a large auxiliary cadence (I\(^6\)–IV–V–I) towards the structural tonic.

Besides the harmony and the bass line, also the top voice has an important role in creating a growing tension until the structural tonic is reached. Example 3 shows that especially scale degree 5\(^\sharp\) is present in many ways. First, it gradually travels from a to a\(^2\), shown in a separate staff above the voice-leading graph. Second, it supports the descending motion towards the structural tonic with a local 5\(^\sharp\)–1\(^\flat\) \(\text{Zug}\). Third, 5\(^\sharp\) is also presented in the motif that is first introduced in m. 3 (marked with brackets in the separate staff in Example 3) and played by the violin. This brief motif invigorates the otherwise steady stream of half and quarter notes, and helps the violin part become more distinct from the cello and piano.

With these analytical insights in mind, we will now perform the first phrase. In addition to following Schumann’s various performance indications as sensitively as possible, we will 1) concentrate on the dynamic motion towards the perfect authentic cadence in m. 14; 2) pay attention to scale degree 5\(^\sharp\), which operates in different octaves; and 3) slightly emphasize the previously mentioned violin motif.\(^7\)

Our goal here was a performance in which analytical insights primarily complement our initial impressions of the opening phrase. Yet, as noted earlier, there are always other, equally justifiable ways to interpret a musical work.

Let us turn to the issue of syncopations and accentuations, which was mentioned previously as something that performers must tackle. Could a more careful examination of them help performers create another, perhaps more vivid interpretation of the first phrase?

Example 4 presents the melodic contour of the violin, along with different performance indications from the score. As can be observed, there are many interesting details in the foreground.

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5 Although I have interpreted the second beat of m. 5 as part of the tonic 5–6 motion, it is also possible to understand it as a pivot chord that ends up functioning locally as a Neapolitan sixth chord in A minor key.

6 The opening phrase might be also interpreted as a modified quatrains (a a b a).

7 Please listen to performance (http://coinas.wordpress.com/articles).

Example 4. Schumann, Piano Trio Op. 63, first movement, mm. 1–14: melodic contour of the violin.
that require a decision from the performers: for example, the agogic hairpin marks (<>) and different accentuations seem to suggest that the music should not be played in a steady dynamic level and tempo all the time. In addition, the half-step motives and embellishments are mostly of a descending nature, which creates friction with the otherwise ascending melody.8 The arrows in Example 4 illustrate the ascent and descent of the melodic line and show that it becomes more turbulent during the middle section (mm. 7–10). By contrast, the final stage (mm. 11–14) has the most straightforward ascent where even the half-step motif is now ascending from f2 to g2 in m. 13.

It seems that even though our initial interpretation based on the auxiliary cadence with the ascending melody gave a plausible framework, it overlooked many crucial details. Do these details, presented in Example 4, suggest another way to shape the opening phrase?

In the chapter “Tempo and tempo modifications” of The Art of Performance, Schenker writes how “balance is established through the contrast of pushing ahead/holding back [or] holding back/pushing ahead” (Schenker 2000: 54). This is represented by the arrow symbols shown in Example 5. According to Schenker, there are several circumstances that require tempo modifications – in other words, rubato (Schenker 2000: 54). Particularly interesting is the notion of sforzatos (also fp and <> hairpins) on weak beats; these are advised to be played a bit earlier in time:

[...] ordinarily the bar organization gives the player no opportunity to shape the flow of time in an unusual way; an sf on the weak beat, however, gives the impression that the composer felt compelled to destroy the norm during a particular moment of intense emotion. (Schenker 2000: 61)

He also reminds the reader that when moving to the next strong beat, the performer “must hesitate” to maintain the balance (Schenker 2000: 61). Here, as elsewhere in The Art of Performance, Schenker’s “Analyst” and “Performer” are closely intertwined: it is obvious that as a pianist, conductor and composer, Schenker was intimately familiar with the performance tradition of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a period when rubato was still quintessential to most performances. Yet he also wants to combine this tacit knowledge with the “laws of composition.” However, Schenker’s ideas seem to shed light on the miscellaneous performance indications in the Schumann trio. The first phrase can also be performed with a more active approach to shaping the musical flow with tempo modifications, following Schenker’s advice.

Example 6 presents a score of the first phrase with added indications (Schenker’s arrows) on tempo modification. Notice that the two sforzatos in the A section are on dissonant chords and on strong beats (1 or 3), preceded by a crescendo, whereas the fp’s in the B section are on weak beats (2 or 4) without crescendo.9 In our second performance, the B section with its fp’s will have a more restless character, because of the slight hurrying towards the weak beats. There is also one minor distinction between mm. 1 and 11: m. 11 contains an agogic hairpin mark (<>) towards the piano’s B♭ bass note. It seems that Schumann wants to ensure here that the first beat of m. 11

8 An interesting compositional detail is found in Schumann’s sketches of the first movement: the fp which is used repeatedly in the contrasting midsection (mm. 7–10) follows the sequential pattern more predictably in the earlier version, where the last beat of m. 8 also has a fp. In the final, published version, the tension of the metrical expectation is manipulated even more since the “pattern” is distorted so that the next fp is only on the second beat of m. 9 (Kohlhase 1979: 37).

9 Interestingly, the performance indications themselves (sf’s and fp’s) distinguish the A and B sections from each other since sf’s are only found in A and fp’s in B.

10 Please listen to a second performance version of mm. 1–14 (http://coinas.wordpress.com/articles).

11 I would like to add that there were differing opinions about the performances among the participants at the Tallinn Conference; some preferred the first performance and even considered the second one awkward (!), while others liked the second version much better. Nevertheless, all participants agreed that the two versions were very different from each other.
Example 6. Schumann, Piano Trio Op. 63, first movement, mm. 1–14, with tempo modifications.
will not be played too emphatically, allowing the $B$ section to continue seamlessly back to $A$.

I have presented two possible interpretations of the opening phrase which are, by no means, the only ones. Analytical considerations, brought into close rapport with the performance, pointed out significant issues, such as the overarching motion towards the culmination in m. 14.

The tendency towards conclusions, climaxes or musical high points have also been commented on by Kofi Agawu who regards them as central features in Romantic music. According to Agawu, a high point is “a superlative moment” which “may be a moment of greatest intensity, a point of extreme tension, or the site of a decisive release of tension. It usually marks a turning point in the form […]” (Agawu 2009: 61) Clearly, the high point of the first phrase is situated in the closing chords, along with the $a^2$ of the violin. However, in a large work such as the D-minor trio, one finds many kinds of “superlative moments”: while some of them serve as local goals, some might also have far-reaching influence. Therefore, I would now like to introduce another, more complex example of a high point in the opening movement of the D-minor trio.

An “Intruder” in the Movement: the New Episode in the Development Section

About a third of the way into the relatively long development section, an unexpected episode emerges from m. 91 onwards. It begins in F major, the mediant key of the movement, and even has a dominant preparation in the previous measures (Example 7). The appearance of the new episode is certainly a turning point in the development section and has a stunning effect on the listener. Yet it also raises issues of interpretation for committed performers. For example, if one considers texture, dynamics, and the *sul ponticello*-playing technique of the strings, the contrast to the preceding music seems evident enough. But is this material so new after all? Example 8 suggests that the answer is both yes and no: Even though there is an abrupt change in texture and melody, the rhythmic contour of the cello part, with its upbeat and syncopations, is actually quite similar to the primary theme. In addition, part of it is a loose inversion of the primary theme.

Is the cello part a (distant) transformation of the first theme, or even another secondary theme candidate, although in a formally wrong place? And more importantly, how will the performers interpret the new episode – should it be disconnected from the previous material or should one emphasize the similarity of the rhythmic contour?

To answer the question, I would like to turn for a while to the formal coda (mm. 219–248) of the movement. The coda begins with an unusual harmonic failure, as the expected cadence on D major at the end of the recapitulation section proper is not fulfilled. The failure motivates the coda to begin a new motion towards a closing cadence. First, the music falls back to D minor and onto a dominant pedal from m. 224 onwards. What follows is another, even more dramatic, attempt to reach a perfect authentic cadence in m. 227, underlined with both $ff$ and $sf$. Yet again the harmony is not the tonic but a diminished vii chord, although the cello descends to D. Suddenly the music begins to slow down and the piano material from the episode is introduced once more between mm. 238–241, although without the triplet repetitions (Example 9). In addition, the string melody is omitted, the violin and the cello playing octave unisons instead. Finally, the violent violin arpeggio on a Neapolitan chord on the upbeat to m. 242 begins the motion towards the end.

12 In the score, Schumann has written the *sul ponticello* indication in German (*Am Steg*).

13 It is somewhat problematic to locate the real secondary theme of the movement: first, a new theme is introduced on the dominant of the secondary key (F major) between mm. 27–34. Yet when the tonic chord in F major is finally reached in m. 35, the following section (mm. 35–42) does not introduce thematically independent new material but is a combination of that of mm. 35–42 and the primary theme. Retrospectively, the theme on the dominant (mm. 27–34) turns out to be the secondary theme of the movement, or at least this is the way in which Schumann seems to treat it.

14 To me this is also the moment of greatest emotional frustration in the whole movement; for a few seconds, it seems that the music does not really know where to go. Unfortunately this peculiar moment is often overlooked in performances.

15 Even if one does not hear an attempt to cadence at m. 227, it is, in any case, a very dramatic moment serving as a local (registral) high point with the $c^4$ in the violin.
**Example 7.** Schumann, Piano Trio Op. 63, first movement, mm. 91–95.

**Example 8.** Schumann, Piano Trio Op. 63, first movement, mm. 91–95 compared with mm. 1–5.

**Example 9.** Schumann, Piano Trio Op. 63, first movement, mm. 238–241.
I believe that, metaphorically, the episode tries to raise the music to another, more spiritual level. It can be seen as an idealized, purified version of something that the movement eventually cannot become. Yet at the same time the episode is an “intruder,” an integral part of the movement from this moment on, since after the recapitulation section it recurs in the coda, surrounded by the dark main character of the movement.

Because of the highly original episode and its surprising recurrence in the coda, I propose that performers “act” with the music: although the episode blends into the harmonic process later in the development section, its first appearance should sound new and surprising. The similarity of the rhythmic contour with that of the primary theme is evident, but performers do not need to bring it out. The situation is different in the coda, however. Even though the episode is still somewhat surprising, it is not harmonically independent, since it begins on the cadential chord, preceded by a dominant pedal in D minor. After two measures, the harmony moves to a Bb-major chord – a very magical moment itself – before beginning the final motion towards the closing cadence. Thus I feel that the episode is a quiet reminiscence, which no longer opens a new avenue. It holds the music for a while before the final goal, although Schumann has tried to evade this goal in almost any possible way.

Pondering the role of the episode from the performers’ viewpoint can serve as an inspiration for the structural voice-leading analysis as well (Example 10). Because of the distinctive nature of the formal coda, and the fact that the recapitulation does not succeed in creating a satisfactory closing cadence, I believe that the Urlinie descends to only in the final measures. The beginning of the formal coda with a deceptive cadence might be regarded as creating an upper neighbour tone of the structural dominant, beginning from m. 224. Correspondingly, the Neapolitan sixth chord is a lower neighbour of the structural dominant, decorating the final closure in a most dramatic way. Yet even the structural tonic in m. 245 seems to leave some tensions unresolved: notice how

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16 The analogy between performing music and acting has been discussed for example by Rothstein (see Rothstein 1995: 237).
17 Even though one finds an authentic cadence (albeit syncopated) in the recapitulation proper (m. 213), it is difficult for me to experience – even in an abstract sense – that the rest of the music prolongs the structural tonic or belongs to the cadential section.
the violin plays a descending a♭–f♯–d♯ arpeggio in the high register before moving to the lower d♭. As such, it also relates to the ascending a♭–f♯ arpeggio of the primary theme and thus beautifully rounds off the movement.

In his article on Schumann, Lester remarks: “Each of Schumann’s sonata-form movements is individual in conception, because each uniquely relates its large structural and narrative plans to its thematic content” (Lester 1995a: 190). There could be no better example of individual conception than the surprising use of the episode in the middle of the development section and its final ramification in the coda. Seen in this light, the formal coda of the D-minor trio becomes a crucial part of the movement, both in the voice leading and the musical narrative, since many things are as yet unresolved at its beginning.

4. Conclusions

If our manner of speaking were continually to remain on one pitch and the syllables were the same length we would have no structure, no differentiation, and thus we would lose any possibility of communication. (Schenker 2000: 45)

In this paper, I have aspired to show that analysis and performance communicate with each other on many levels. By taking another look at the musical work, analysis can offer choices for musical interpretation, or, as Rink notes, “even if the music seems to ‘exert its own control,’ interpretation always involves choice, and the basis for choosing, for discrimination, must be musically – that is, historically, stylistically, analytically, technically, expressively – viable” (Rink 1995: 257).

Although historically informed performance practice has come to encompass the music of the 19th century in the past decades, Romantic music still presents many challenges for performers, especially in musical motion and shaping. One reason for this might be the fact that performers are accustomed to maintaining a steady tempo throughout the piece, unless clearly stated otherwise in the score. But there is also the issue of the notation tradition: a score that was informative enough for 19th-century musicians might leave many questions unanswered for today’s musician.

The need to shape musical motion in Schumann’s music was also noted by his contemporaries: in 1883, Franz Liszt described how “Schumann especially must be phrased well in details; and played very compact[ly] – rhythmically well articulated. With him ritenutos should be great, as with Mendelssohn the accelerandos and animatos are great” (Hamilton 2008: 20). I find Liszt’s instruction on Schumann’s phrasing, rhetorical articulation and ritenutos extremely useful in the first movement of the D-minor trio, where tension and release along with different levels of high points create a complex web, which musicians must resolve in some way or another in performance.

References


Interpretatsioonile orienteeritud analüüsi katse: analüüsi ja interpretatsiooni vastasmõju Schumannini klaveritrios d-moll

Cecilia Oinas
(tõlkinud Mart Humal)


Osa vaatlus algab reljeefsest, harmoniliselt ebapüsivast alguslausest (taktid 1–14, näide 1), mis jõuab struktuuralse toonikani alles oma lõppkulminatsioonis. Analüütiliste tõlgenduste põhjal pakutakse välja lausekujunduse kaks alternatiivset, kuid võrdselt põhjendatud esitusevarianti.


Schenker on kasutanud rubato kujutamiseks ette- või tahapoole suunatud nooli, tähistamaks vastavalt tempo kiirendamist ja aeglustamist (näide 5 – Schenker 2000: 54). Näites 6 on samasuguste noolte abil kujutatud soovitatavaid tempomuudatusi taktimes 1–14, lähtudes meloodiajoonist (näide 4) ja Schenkeri seisukohtadest tempomuutustest seostest rõhkude ja sforzato'dega.

Teisena on vaadeldud töötluses leiduvat üllatuslikku episoodzi (taktid 81–95, näide 7), mis tõstatab mitmeid esitusalaseid küsimusi. Näites 8 on seda võrreltud ekspositsiooni algusest. Kuna episoodi materjal naaseb võimendatult koodas (taktid 238–241, näide 9), on sellel kaugeleulatuv mõju tervele osale nii hääletjuhtimise kui ka narratiivsuse mõettes.

Näide 10 kujutab osa süvatasandi hääletjuhtimist. Kuna repriisi ei teki rahuldavat lõpukadentsi, saabub Urtline ^1 alles kooda lõputaktes, pärast töötluse episoodi meenutust.

Lõpetuseks on väljendatud mõtet, et analüüsi ja interpretatsiooni vastasmõju leib aset paljudel tasanditel. Valgustades heliteost uuest perspektiivist, pakub analüüs esituse jaoks mitmesuguseid valikuid ja „eriarvamusi“, mis siiski pole liialt siduvad. Samal ajal võib interpretatsiooniline kogemus rikastada analüütilisi tähelipanekeid.