

Expression in Romantic Piano Music: Criteria for Choice of Score Events for Emphasis

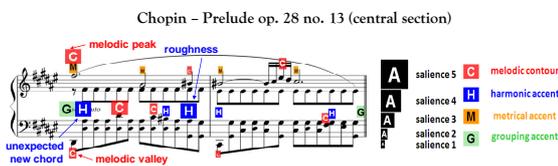


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Background

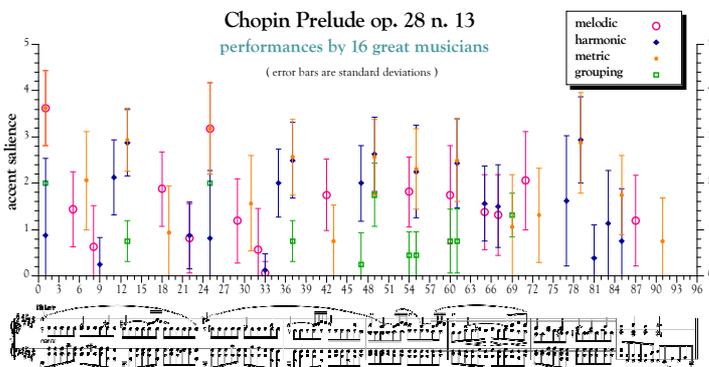
A striking way to communicate expression is by emphasizing the local structure of the music. Bisesi & Parncutt (2011), Bisesi, Parncutt & Friberg (2011), and Parncutt (2003) investigated the relationship between accents and expression in piano performance. Accents are local musical events that attract a listener's attention. They may be **immanent** (melodic, harmonic, metric, grouping) or **performed** (variations in timing, dynamics and articulation). The degree of accentuation varies on a continuous scale. Here we use the term "salience" for the perceptual importance of a musical event.

Immanent accents



Performed accents

Performers use performed accents to "bring out" immanent accents. How they do that depends on musical/personal style, temporal/cultural context, and intended emotion/meaning.



Implications

Previous research on expression has searched for underlying principles but neglected qualitative accounts of the rich detail in individual performances. We are balancing sciences (psychology, computing), humanities (theory/analysis, history) and performance (intuitive knowledge of pianists). Our intuitive listening method has advantages and disadvantages over quantitative analysis of MIDI files, so the two approaches should be combined.

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References

- [1] Bisesi, E., & Parncutt, R. (2011). An accent-based approach to automatic rendering of piano performance: Preliminary auditory evaluation. *Archives of Acoustics*, 36(2), 1-14. [2] Bisesi, E., Parncutt, R., & Friberg, A. (2011, in press). An accent-based approach to performance rendering: Music theory meets music psychology. In *Proceedings of the International Symposium on Performance Science*, Toronto, Canada, 24-27 August 2011. [3] Parncutt, R. (2003). Accents and expression in piano performance, In K. W. Niemöller (Ed.), *Perspektiven und Methoden einer Systemischen Musikwissenschaft (Festschrift Fricke)* (pp. 163-185). Frankfurt/Main, Germany: Peter Lang.

Aims

We are investigating pianists' intuitive artistic criteria for selecting score events for emphasis and for deciding what kind of emphasis to apply.

- Q1. In what aspects do great pianists agree when selecting score events (immanent accents) for local emphasis?
- Q2. What are the features characterizing individual performers' styles or clusters of performances?
- Q3. How do individual performers or groups of performers emphasize immanent accents by mean of performed accents?

Methodology

Participants: 2 individual listeners from the University of Graz.

Material: 16 high-quality commercial recordings of Chopin Prelude op. 28 no. 13. Performers are M. Argerich (1977), C. Arrau (1973), V. Ashkenazy (1978), D. Barenboim (1976), I. Biret (1992), J. Bolet (1974), A. Cortot (1942), S. François (1959), R. Kehrler (1992), E. Kissin (1999), A. Kravtchenko (2005), M. Lympany (1995), N. Magaloff (1975), M. Perahia (1975), I. Pogorelich (1989), and M. Pollini (1975).

Procedure: We are independently listening to diverse commercially available recordings of Chopin Prelude op. 28 no. 13 (central section) and intuitively marking salient features of each pianist's performance. We concentrate on the individual emphasis on local events (melodic, harmonic, metrical and grouping accents) and on patterns of timing, dynamics and articulation on the score, focusing on striking differences among performances. On the basis of this data we are formulating intuitive individual principles for selecting and emphasizing score events.

Results

- The data are generally consistent with our theory of accent salience, confirming its music-theoretic reality.
- Generally, **metric** and **melodic** accents are more important than is generally assumed in the psychological literature, which focuses first on phrasing and second on harmonic accents.

accent	C	H	M	G	total
% of pianists emphasizing the accent	81.67	70.94	85.94	63.54	75.52

We find out two groups of performed accents: those that are emphasized by more than 68% of performers (**based on theory**), and those corresponding to a lower agreement among pianists (**based on interpretation**). The accents belonging to the first group are mainly **melodic** and **metric**.

% of accents	C	H	M	G	total
emphasized by more than 68% of pianists	80	65	75	50	68.25

- Pianists who play at faster tempi and with softer sound tend to shape big phrase arches by mean of wide changes in timing and dynamics, while emphasis on melodic and harmonic accents is specific of slower and more meditative performances.
- Regarding performances at slower tempi, we find out two main groups of performances: those where accents are locally emphasized contrasting the stability of the phrases, and those where they are pillars supporting the agogics of phrases and sub-phrases.