

Gesture as a metaphorical process: an exploration through musical composition¹

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Abstract: From the current literature review it is clear that there isn't one shared definition of gesture. Studies of instrumental gesture are often related to body awareness, which is often not considered in traditional musical analysis. Departing from Ramstein's functional and intrinsic approaches to gesture, and Delalande's 2nd and 3rd level gesture categorization, this article aims to discuss, and give examples, on how different gestures were incorporated in the author's music, specifically a contemporary music composition. The objective is to analyse the use of gesture in a musical context, as a compositional metaphorical process. The conclusions suggest that for any given gesture there are multiple ideas, each of which can expand the concept of performance and composition.

Keywords: Contemporary music; Gesture; Musical narrative; Metaphor; Performance.

¹ Submitted on November 15th, 2016. Approved on June 26th, 2017.

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Gesture encompasses a number of different concepts and definitions. Generally, in traditional music analysis, when referring to music gestures, the notion is often connected to the analysis of the musical score. However, studies of instrumental gesture are often related to body awareness, which is rarely present in musical analysis. Moreover,

Analysing musical compositions is not a matter of standing back from one's musical experiences to investigate "objectively" the compositions or how they work on us. Analysis is continuous with appreciation, and explaining or understanding how it is that one hears a piece is not to be separated from the experience of hearing it. (...) analysis are usually meant to induce the recognition or acknowledgement that constitutes *understanding* of that way of hearing, understanding that goes beyond accepting what the analysis explicitly says and involves exercising one's own musical intuitions (WALTON, 1993: 44).

In general, gestures seem to be studied and classified either in terms of types of movement, or in terms of the different functions they accomplish. Even if this topic has been largely researched, there are several approaches when speaking about gesture in a musical context. Merleau-Ponty (1962: 186) expresses that

It is through my body that I understand other people; just as it is through my body that I perceive 'things'. The meaning of gesture thus 'understood' is not behind it, it is intermingled with the structure of the world, outlined by gesture, and which I take up on my own account. It is arrayed all over the gesture itself (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1962: 186).

Arnie Cox (2006: 45) refers that "musical gestures are musical acts, and our perception and understanding of gestures involves understanding the physicality involved in their production"; Marc Leman and Rolf Godøy (2010: 5) state that gesture "is a movement of part of the body, for example a hand or the head, to express an idea or meaning. In the context of musical performance, gestures are movements made by performers to control the musical instruments"; and Vilém Flusser (2014: 1) mentions that "Gestures are movements of the body that express an intention".

The word gesture makes (in)direct allusion to a person and to body actions. It is important to reflect on the idea of what gesture can both produce and suggest, and "Gesture adds something crucial to communication" (Zbikowski 2011, 83), otherwise stated, gestures evoke meaning. Merleau-Ponty (1962) considers that "The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1962: 184). The language of gesture seems to incite responses, which are not easily facilitated by any other established communicational practice. Therefore, musical gestures have different (in)direct effect on us. Gestural language seems to exist to (in)directly affect others, as it delivers "a wide repertory of gestures and responses by means of which information about relationships is given and received" (SMALL, 1998: 57). So, gesture can be either used in order to have a role on immediate communication, or its musical

meaning is indirectly processed in the listener's mind. Leppert (1993) highlights the importance of gestural images during a performance,

Precisely because musical sound is abstract, intangible, and ethereal (...) the visual experience of its production is crucial to both musicians and audience alike for locating and communicating the place of music and musical sound within society and culture (LEPPERT, 1993: xx-xxi).

As listeners need to make sense of the musical piece, gestures can help them structure the listening experience, and when a musical gesture is performed it can have as many interpretations as the number of people listening to the piece. So, to listen to a musical work is always to hear a personal interpretation of that work. If the composer has a specific intention in a piece, this is the dimension that should be emphasized in the performance of that same piece. The composer's role is to find for each musical event an expressive gesture, in order to assist the listener with meaning creation, so that he or she can participate in the performance, as "To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing) (...)" (SMALL, 1998: 9).

One could easily argue that gestures have the power to build personal narrative constructions, and induce *imagenings* (WALTON, 1997: 60). The idea of a *narrative mode of thought* (BRUNER, 1986) may provide a loom on to which music is both created and perceived. The narrative mode seeks to connect the listener in a process of joint construction of meaning through particular sequences of events and contexts. This allows individual musical understanding as "narrative acts as a potential link to important aspects of human experience" (ALMÉN, 2008: 41).

The philosopher Christopher Small says

In the seventeenth century (...) musical gestures were abstracted from physical movement so that the listeners no longer moved their bodies [no dance movement responses] but sat and watched and listened, and (...) the musical gestures represented not an emotional state itself nor a temperament but the type of physical gesture, both bodily and vocal, with which the emotional state or the temperament was associated. The musical gesture represented metaphorically the physical gesture that the audience recognized as belonging to that state. It thus had to be constructed at one removed, and the masters of that first brilliant explosion of the new art form worked through conscious striving, exchange of ideas, polemics and a good deal of trial and error, to perfect the representation (SMALL, 1998: 148).

The world metaphor comes from the Greek meaning to transfer. Any (musical) idea depends implicitly on a metaphorical structure, and the most useful metaphors are those that suggest many imaginative possibilities. Gestures can act as metaphors, and can be associated to almost anything: to events, to characters, to actions, to the narrative itself... A gesture has meaning because we associate it with things we already know from our experience. The meaning of a gesture can change based on any significant actions, and gestures can "(...) provide additional insights into how humans conceptualize

abstract concepts (...)” (MITTELBERG, 2008: 138).

Christophe Ramstein (1991) proposes the analysis of instrumental gestures through three approaches: 1) *phenomenological* approach; 2) *functional* approach; 3) *intrinsic* approach. Françoise Delalande (1988) categorizes gestures in three levels: 1) effective gestures; 2) accompanist gesture; 3) figurative gestures. Following on from Ramstein’s *functional* and *intrinsic* approaches to gesture [meaning the purposes that a gesture can have in a particular situation, and the circumstances of the performer’s gesture production], and Delalande’s 2nd and 3rd level gesture categorization [meaning the movement of the body associated to the gesture itself, and how a metaphorical gesture is perceived by the audience, when it has no clear correspondence to the body movement], this paper aims to discuss, and give examples, on how different gestures were incorporated in the author’s music. The objective of this research is to analyse, approach and reflect on gesture, in a musical context domain, as a compositional metaphorical process.

1. *Imaginary bars*: evoking meaning through movement

If music is a language at all, it is a language of gesture: of direct actions, of pauses, of startings and stoppings, of rises and falls, of tenseness and slackness, of accentuations (CONE, 1974: 164).

In 2012 the saxophonist Henrique Portovedo commissioned from me a piece for solo tenor saxophone “Imaginary bars”. I will examine the role of gesture in my piece, and I will discuss how several gestures were planned and incorporated in the piece.

While writing this piece I was especially interested in reflecting what a gesture could induce through listening. From the start of my research it was clear to me that when a performer plays an instrument he or she uses operational gestures to play, ie gestures that are related with the technical skill of playing an instrument in order to make sound. It was also clear to me the existence of expressive performing gestures, meaning the gestures that the performer adds to any performance when constructing an interpretation of that piece. Noting the performer’s operational and expressive gestures, as a composer I became further interested in Ramstein’s *functional* and *intrinsic* approaches to gesture, and Delalande’s 2nd and 3rd level gesture categorization, as it allowed me to expand concepts of performance and instrumental acoustic composition.

Ramstein’s (1991) second approach (*functional analysis*) refers to the purposes and/or functions that a gesture can have in a particular situation. In order to exemplify this idea I will use Delalande’s 2nd and 3rd level gesture categorization.

Delalande’s 2nd gesture categorization (*accompanist gestures*) refers to the movement of the body associated to the gesture itself, movement that reinforces the effective gesture, it corresponds to

physical actions, its function is related to imagination and to sound production as if “to conduct an imaginary orchestra” (Delalande, 1988:86). Inspired by Delalande’s (1988) analysis of Glenn Gould’s performance gestures I created in my score 3 instrumental gestures, which involve specific physical movements. These gestures follow the score, as a echo of the narrative; these gestures expand and contract in terms of time, intention and anticipation. The 3 gestures that I selected for “Imaginary bars” were 1) *Static*, 2) *Flying* and 3) *Heart Beat*:

1. Static – for sections with complete silence (Figure 1).

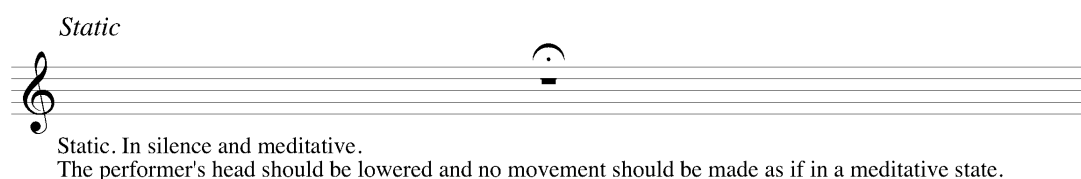


Figure 1 - Accompanist gestures: Static sections (in complete silence)

2. Flying - for sections with long continuous phrases. These sections have no measures and no defined duration. The objective is to create a hypnotic circular sound, using circular breathing. Music should be thought, listened and perceived as fluid flying gesture: take off – fly - change direction (Figure 2).

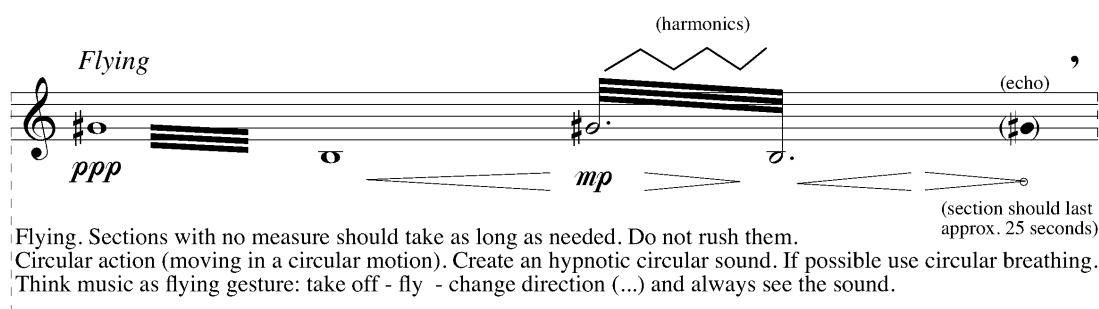


Figure 2 - Accompanist gestures: Flying sections (with long continuous phrases)

3. Heart beat – for sections with lively, short and expressive melodic motifs, in grace notes. In these sections tempo is precise, with metronome marking. The very short motives become increasingly bigger. Music should be thought, listened and perceived as vigorous heart beat gesture, with precise movement (Figure 3).

Heart beat (♩ = 56)

on the beat (sempre)

(always bend the pitch: very soft transition)

pppp *mp* *mf*

Heart beat. In these sections tempo should be more precise: use metronome marking as reference.
 Grace notes are fast but expressive and should always be played on the beat.
 Forward action (moving away and towards the listener).

Figure 3 - Accompanist gestures: Heart beat sections (with lively, short and expressive melodic motifs, in grace notes).

Here sound and gesture work together, in the planning of the composition itself. The intention is not to diminish the performers' expressive gesture as "music makers" (ELLIOT, 1995), thus transforming them to mere "music transmitters" (*ibid*), but to guide the performer's emotional content and also the listener experience in the performance. The performer's body gestures express an intended and pre-conceived compositional musical idea. Therefore, the composer's musical events are also enriched with specific planned gestural intention.

Delalande's 3rd gesture categorization (*figurative gesture*) refers to a metaphorical gesture that is perceived by the audience, when it has no clear correspondence to the body movement (this is representational). In "Imaginary bars" *figurative gestures* are found in some melodic articulation, or rhythm variations (Figure 4). The repetition of previously heard musical gestures, this time without any physical movement, is a musical gestural anticipation, meaning the musical gesture anticipates the forthcoming musical events. This is a gesture that can be sensed, and or anticipated by the listener, but there is not a clear connection to any physical movement.

Heart beat (♩ = 56)

(MV)

mp *mf* *mp* *mf*

(5)

Heart beat. This time do no Forward or Sideway action

Figure 4 – Figurative gestures: no correspondence to the body movement

Ramstein's (1991) third approach (*intrinsic analysis*) is based on the circumstances of the performer's gesture production. Inspired by this idea, another thing that became important in "Imaginary bars" was the overall environment of the player; as each performing space is unique it has to be addressed in a unique way. Therefore, and in connection to the previously described instrumental gestures, three action groups have been proposed:

- 1) Forward or Sideways action (moving away and towards the listeners or side-to-side);

- 2) Circular action (moving in a circular motion);
- 3) Motionless action (the performer's head should be lowered and no movement should be made as if in a meditative state).

Each of the proposed actions corresponds to the three previously mentioned instrumental gestures. Therefore, the “Forward or Sideway actions” were connected with “Heart beat”, as presented on Figure 3; the “Circular action” was connected, with “Flying” as presented on Figure 2; and the “Motionless action” connected with “Static”, as presented on Figure 1. In the première of “Imaginary bars” the audience surrounded the performer. This further underlined the concept of a unique listening experience for each listener that was present, reinforcing the idea that to listen to a musical work is always to hear a personal interpretation of that work.

2. Implications and final conclusion

In this paper I've mentioned some gestural ideas that could be relevant to the compositional process. It is my believe that any musical gesture, that is thought with a specific purpose, can easily become an essential component of the compositional communication process, if embedded in the compositional act. Most musical gestures can be represented through a physical gesture, and a listener recognizes, acknowledges, and interprets it from their own personal experience. As the musical or a physical gesture becomes more known to the audience, it brings further meaning to the musical composition. In order to allow this visitation of communicative familiarity, for as long as possible, I have attempted to predict gesture-forming tendencies within the composed structure, and then to expand each of them.

In my piece “Imaginary bars” there is a conscious work to find representations so that the musical gesture is aided by the physical gesture. The primarily objective was to allow the listener to recognize and associate the gestures, in order to achieve a better understanding of the music. Other intentions include the creation of *imagenings* (WALTON, 1997), or imaginative representations. Gestures become meaningful because they provide a higher projection of these *imagenings*, as they often convey ideas that seem to assign more resources to the memory task (WAGNER; NUSBAUM; GOLDIN-MEADOW, 2004). Gestures may “emerge as integral components of a carefully orchestrated embodied communicative process” (STREECK, 1994: 295) conducting the listeners' attention. Therefore, gesture can deliver independent information to listeners, they can facilitate aspects of memory, and they can be used to communicate emotions (PIKA; NOCOLADIS; MARENTETTE, 2006: 319). Moreover, gestures can also help listeners to acquire additional abstract knowledge. We

(composer, performer and listener) try to make sense of what we hear, and strive to make sense of it. If we try to understand what we listen to, we will be having an aesthetic experience with the music. If our listening, or if our attention is linked particularly with the performance of the performer it is because this is the dimension that either the composer, or the performer, is trying to stress in the execution of that same work.

The role of gesture was discussed in respect to a solo saxophone piece. In my musical discourse gestures are anticipations of a listening response. When planning any gesture, I create, and project, connections in certain events. Therefore, the performer has to be very conscious not to perform a non-written gesture, meaning a gesture that is not intended in the piece, as the listener may follow these accidental gestures. If the gestures are mixed in any event, then the event has a different signature. Of course the performer as “music maker” and not mere “music transmitters” (ELLIOT, 1995) is free to create their own individual interpretation of the gesture.

Conclusions point to: 1) the possibility of multiple ideas in any given (musical) gesture with communicative intention, 2) the construction by the composer of a narrative mode (BRUNER, 1986) is imagined by the performer and by the listener, as a process of constructing meaning through sequences of gestures, and contexts. This paper also suggests further research on how gestures may influence sound production, and what gestures may provoke through active listening. The instrumental gestures that were used in the examples, aimed to extend the concept of musical performance and music composition.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

University of Aveiro, Portugal, INET-MD - Instituto de Etnomusicologia - Centro de Estudos em Música e Dança, Portugal, FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, Portugal.

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