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Randall Harlow
University of Northern Iowa, USA

THE ECOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION OF PERFORMANCE

The rich and complex act of musical performance can be examined from a variety of perspectives, from an empirical cognitive picture of the performer in action, to the social dimensions of the performance situation, to the cultural factors shaping, and shaped by, the practice of performance. However, each approach, by the very nature of its methodology, provides an incomplete picture. Furthermore, performance is all too often presented as a sort of Cartesian dialectic: the cultural and social dimensions of "performance practice" separated from the embodied cognition and action of a performer. In seeking to unify the disparate forces shaping the performative act, this paper presents a new picture of musical performance, as a network of actors constructed by a performer through an ecological relationship with a musical instrument.

The ecological model of musical performance presented in this paper draws from the work of James J. Gibson and Ecological Psychology, Eric Clarke's theories of ecological listening, and the techniques of Actor-Network Theory as explicated by Bruno Latour. I argue that performers and musical instruments exist in an ecological relationship at the level of embodied gesture, a relationship grounded in the same three pillars of Ecological perception as laid out by Clarke: Perception and Action, Adaptation, and Perceptual Learning (Clarke 2005). Based on empirical research illustrating a deep connection between the haptic and topological properties of an instrument and the gestures utilized in performance (Goebl and Palmer 2009), and which paints a picture of performance as embodied in and emergent from a unified instrument-performer dynamic (Repp and Knoblich 2004), I propose that performers engage with their instruments at the level of embodied gesture through unmediated "Direct Action," a principle analogous to and the reverse of Gibson's "Direct Perception" (Gibson 1977).

A performer-instrument dynamic is shaped, through the process of Perceptual Learning in the gestures of the performer and Adaptation in the design of the instrument, by a vast array of physical, pedagogical, aesthetic, historical, human, and non-human actors and agents. As such, I propose that each act of performance amounts to a live construction of a network of actors and defines what I call an "Ecology of Practice," a thick description more fully encompassing the complexity of performance than traditional notions of performance practice. Citing examples from extemporized performance traditions in the 17th and 20th centuries, as well as schools of prepared performance, I will illustrate how one must "follow the actors," to quote Latour, to reconstruct Ecologies of Practice and consequently gain a richer picture of the act of performance.

Considering performance through Actor-Network Theory within a Gibsonian ecological perspective presents a more comprehensive means with which to discuss the complex multidisciplinary forces shaping the performer and performance-act: from the physiological and cognitive, to the kinesthetic and haptic, to the social, cultural and political. By tracing and normalizing the diverse actors that are constructed through Direct Action by a performer one can build thick descriptions of Ecologies of Practice, descriptions which compel new means for the study of extemporized and prepared solo and collaborative performance and performance pedagogies across cultures.