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DIRECT ACTION AND THE PRIMACY OF GESTURE IN THE
ECOLOGY OF PERFORMANCE

While the central role embodied gesture plays in the cognition of musical meaning has been widely established, the role of metaphorical musical gesture in the physical act of performance and subsequent construction of performance practices remains less clear. Performance is all too often presented as a sort of Cartesian dialectic: the cultural and social dimensions of “performance practice” separated from the cognition and kinesthetic actions of the performer. Rather, it is becoming clear that embodied gesture, both musical and kinesthetic, is the primary interface underlying the creative act of performance and construction of performance practices. Ecological Psychology, as established by James J. Gibson offers powerful means with which to understand the perception and cognition of musical meaning, from metaphorical gestures to complex culturally-constructed semiosis (Clarke 2005). In this paper I turn the framework of ecological perception on its head and present an empirically grounded picture of musical performance as an ecological situation fundamentally rooted in the equivalency of cognitively unmediated musical gesture with kinesthetic gestures constrained by the affordances of a instrument.

The ecological model of musical performance I propose draws from the work of Gibsonian Ecology and Eric Clarke’s theories of ecological listening, the neuroscience of Common Coding in perception and action, and the techniques of Actor-Network Theory as explicated by Bruno Latour. I argue that performers and musical instruments (or any mediation technology) 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 (Figure 1). 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 interface kinesthetically 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.”

A performer-instrument dynamic is shaped, through the process of Perceptual Learning in the performer’s gestures and Adaptation in the design of the instrument, by a vast array of actors and agencies: physical, psychological, pedagogical, aesthetic, and social—both human, and non-human. Highlighting this diversity of actors, I propose that the act of performance amounts to the construction of what I call “Ecologies of Practice,” a concept that more fully encompasses the psychological and cultural complexities of performance than traditional notions of performance practice. In order to reconstruct a thick description of any given Ecology of Practice, contemporary or historical, one must “follow the actors,” to quote Latour, underlying the construction of the gestures defining the ecology. Consequently, from an ecological perspective, musical gesture and kinesthetic gesture are not only the fundamental gestalts underlying the unmediated cognition of musical meaning and performance of musical expression, respectively, but are in fact one and the same.

Figure 1. The three pillars of Gibsonian ecological theory and their manifestations in an Ecological Theory of Performance

