

*Imagined Sound in Performances of  
Nineteenth-Century Piano Music: An  
Embodied Approach*

Hamish Robb  
(Princeton University)

# “Modes of Embodiment”

Determined by 3 reciprocally influential factors :

- 1) The nature of our bodily states or movements
- 2) The nature of our imagined sounds
- 3) The bodily schema(s) we prioritize in our conceptualizations of sound

These factors are shaped by compositional features, performance inflections, performance and listening spaces, recording equipment, sound editing, past cultural and personal experiences, familiarity with the piece and performance in question etc.

# Lakoff and Johnson: “Embodied Schemas” & “Conceptual Metaphors”

- We use metaphor to understand and conceptualize
- Conceptual metaphors draw on “source domains” that are *based in and on the body*
- In other words, we use the basic outlines of our experientially-based bodily knowledge as the basis for understanding and conceptualizing
- This happens via “embodied schemas”

# “Modes of Embodiment”

Determined by 3 reciprocally influential factors :

- 1) The nature of our bodily states or movements
- 2) The nature of our imagined sounds
- 3) The bodily schema(s) we prioritize in our conceptualizations of sound

These factors are shaped by **compositional features**, **performance inflections**, performance and listening spaces, recording equipment, sound editing, past cultural and personal experiences, familiarity with the piece and performance in question etc.

# 5 MODES OF EMBODIMENT

- Mode 1
- Mode 1a
- Mode 2
- Mode 3
- Mode 4
- Mode 5

# 5 MODES OF EMBODIMENT

- Mode 1
- Mode 1a
- Mode 2
- Mode 3
- Mode 4
- Mode 5

# Mode 1

- We prioritize the PATH schema
- We actively imagine fluid sound and bodily movement *between* consecutive melodic notes
- The embodier *creates* the musical “line”
- We often conceive of music in this mode as “singing” or “vocal”

# Some Techniques of Illusion (Mode 1)

## Illusion of a crescendo

Example 1: Julius Katchen, Brahms Op. 118/2,  
mm. 1-2



Example 2: Julius Katchen, Brahms Op. 118/2,  
mm. 29-30





# Some Techniques of Illusion (Mode 1)

Elasticizing melody notes through “splitting”

Example 3: Rafal Blechacz, Chopin Piano  
Concerto No. 1, mm. 155-170



# Some Techniques of Illusion (Mode 1)

## “Reaching”

Example 4: Vladimir Ashkenazy, Chopin  
Nocturne Op. 32/2, mm. 33-36



Example 5: Julius Katchen, Brahms Variations on  
a Theme by Schumann, Op. 9, var. 4, mm. 17-24



# Some Techniques of Illusion (Mode 1)

Embracing the decay of long notes as a means of suggesting inevitable descent

Example 6: Alfred Brendel, Schubert Sonata D. 537, 1<sup>st</sup> mvt, mm. 33-39



# 5 MODES OF EMBODIMENT

- Mode 1
- Mode 1a
- Mode 2
- Mode 3
- Mode 4
- Mode 5

# 5 MODES OF EMBODIMENT

- Mode 1
- Mode 1a
- Mode 2
- Mode 3
- Mode 4
- Mode 5

# Mode 2

- We revel in the bell-like, decaying quality of individual melodic notes
- We prioritize the CYCLE schema
- We sense a feeling of inevitability of decay
- But we also participate in this decay

Example 7: Alfred Brendel, Schubert Sonata D.  
894. 1<sup>st</sup> mvt, mm. 1-4



Example 8: Angela Hewitt, Schumann  
*Davidsbündlertänze*, No. 2, mm. 1-8



# 5 MODES OF EMBODIMENT

- Mode 1
- Mode 1a
- Mode 2
- Mode 3
- Mode 4
- Mode 5



# Mode 3

- We prioritize the OBJECT schema
- We use small amounts of imagined sound and bodily exertion to lead up to, mark, and “count” separate attack points, as if accounting for objects in space
- We often conceive of ourselves as “going along with” the music or of moving *to* the music
- Pulse, meter, periodicity, and harmonic rhythm play especially important roles

Example 9: Vladimir Ashkenazy, Schumann  
“Herberge,” from *Waldszenen*, mm. 1-8



Example 9: András Schiff, Schumann  
“Herberge,” from *Waldszenen*, mm. 1-8



# 5 MODES OF EMBODIMENT

- Mode 1
- Mode 1a
- Mode 2
- Mode 3
- Mode 4
- Mode 5

# Mode 4

- We “bathe in an ocean of sound”
- We feel sound *on* rather than *through* our bodies
- We prioritize the CONTAINER schema and the CENTER-PERIPHERY schema
- We conceive of our bodies as central to all the sonic material around us

Example 10: Vladimir Ashkenazy, Chopin  
*Berceuse*, mm. 1-12



# 5 MODES OF EMBODIMENT

- Mode 1
- Mode 1a
- Mode 2
- Mode 3
- Mode 4
- Mode 5

# Mode 5

- Musical inflections “happen to us” because we do not have enough time to actively embody local tensions between melodic notes
- Melodic tones get from one place to another in a “miraculously” short space of time, leading us to *not* conceive of melody in terms of human motion through physical space
- We prioritize the CENTER-PERIPHERY schema and the CONTACT schema
- We conceive of the sonic world around us as “throwing” inflections at our centrally placed bodies
- We often conceive of music in terms of natural elements, such as wind or water

Example 11: Vladimir Ashkenazy, Chopin  
*Berceuse*, mm. 27-30



Example 12: Vladimir Ashkenazy, Chopin  
*Berceuse*, mm. 39-42





# IMPLICATIONS

1. (For theories of musical gesture): Gesture only exists in our embodiments, and we all engage with sound in different ways. Thus, a compositional “gesture” in the score cannot mean “this” or “that.” The mode of embodiment we inhabit *shapes* the meaning of the gesture.
2. (For theories of narrative): Rather than see narrative as something already existing in “the music,” I propose that we, the embodiers, *create* our own narratives through inhabiting (and transitioning into and out of) a series of modes of embodiment, each mode having unique bearings on our conceptions of agency, time, and memory.

# IMPLICATIONS (continued)

3. (For performance criticism): Common attitudes towards performance (such as those that describe “musical,” “cold,” “intellectual,” or “sentimental” playing) often say more about our own embodiments than the physical sound of the performances being listened to. Different listeners may embody the same performance through different modes of embodiment and thus “hear” different things. More specifically, they may not submit to the imagined sound implied by the performer, and thus not understand or sympathize with the physically heard inflections.

# CONCLUSIONS

- Musical meaning is embodied: we *create* meaning through our bodies
- I have proposed 5 modes of embodiment. Each mode prioritizes different conceptual metaphors, involves different types of imagined sound, and involves different types of bodily states and exertions.
- Different performances and performance techniques profoundly shape our modes of embodiment and thus meaning formations. We must therefore be aware of which real or imagined performances we are drawing on when talking about or analyzing music.
- Knowing a particular recorded performance well – and thus being able to self-fashion imagined sound in perfect accord with the physical sounds heard – greatly alters the embodied experience.