

On the Assignment of Structure in Music Performance *Caroline Palmer*

In this paper, Palmer examines the phenomenon of melody leading in piano performance. In four different experiments, she compares the use of melody leading between experts and novices, its evolution over a series of successive performances of an unfamiliar piece, the effect of varying musical intent on melody leading, and how well melody leading communicates performers' interpretations.

Palmer begins by explaining that performance in our culture represents a performer's attempt to convey some interpretation of the structural content in a given piece. Performers are often afforded freedom in determining which voice(s) should be melody. This leaves them with the task of adding expressive cues to communicate their choice of melodic voicing. Melody leading is one such cue, and is defined as the playing of melodic notes slightly earlier than the remaining notes occupying the same metrical position in the score. In piano, melody leading is especially important since other cues such as alteration of pitch or timbre are less achievable.

The goal of the first experiment was to determine if melody leading is common across performers, pieces, and acoustical and mechanical keyboard properties. Additionally, she wished to test how much flexibility performers have with expressive features such as melody leads. Six pianists from the Boston area participated in the experiment. Three were professional musicians and three were student musicians. The pianists recorded excerpts from a Chopin piece using a Bosendorfer grand piano which contained optical sensors to detect movements of each key and foot pedal. The musicians, who were all familiar with the piece, performed the excerpt and then notated what they considered to be the primary melody, phrasing, tempo, and dynamics. After notation, they were asked to perform a mechanical performance without expression. Melody leading was found in all performances, but more so for the experts than the students. Interestingly, melody leading was more pronounced at the beginning of phrases. Also, it was found that melody leading did not completely disappear in the mechanical performances, suggesting some limitations on the flexibility of well-learned performance.

In the second experiment, ten pianists performed an unfamiliar piece using the same setup. They recorded 6 to 10 versions of the piece and finally a mechanical version. Four of the five students and none of the experts showed significant increase in melody leading from first to last performance. However, the experts did show larger melody leading than students at the outset. The mechanical performances showed less melody leading, suggesting that there is more flexibility in changing melody leading in unfamiliar pieces. This is consistent with my own experience, and I agree with her speculation that it is because cues such as melody leading become somewhat automatic with practice.

The third experiment had performers record an excerpt in four different styles: emphasizing the upper voice as melody, the lower voice as melody, and exaggerated versions of each. The voice intended as melody did indeed exhibit leading behavior. As expected, melody leading increased with the exaggerated performances. Melody leading was less pronounced for the lower voice version.

The fourth experiment tested listeners' perception of melody leading. Sixteen musicians – eight pianists and eight non-pianists – participated. The recordings from experiment three were altered into three versions: the original performances, the performances with intensity difference in the melody voice removed, and the performances with both melody leading and

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intensity difference removed. The listeners with keyboard experience tended to perceive the voice with the largest melody lead as the intended melody. The intensity cues proved to be an influence on the melody interpretation of the listeners. Music experience had an effect on perception of interpretive goals: only the pianists showed influences of melody lead while all showed the influences of intensity cues.

Overall, Palmer presents an interesting study of melody leading. I believe this phenomenon is probably most applicable to piano performance, and I would be curious to see whether it applies to ensemble performance as well. It would be especially interesting to see if melody leading occurred in all-string or all-wind ensembles where the instruments have other expressive tools available to convey melodic structure.