Student singers' development and use of performance cues

Jane Ginsborg, Emile Perkins, Chloe Latchmere and Victoria Barton

RNCM ROYAL NORTHERN COLLEGE of MUSIC

ABSTRACT

Performance cue (PC) theory comes from longitudinal research with professional musicians preparing for performance and performing from memory. It has recently been challenged by findings relating to spontaneity in performance. We aimed to explore students' development and use of PCs, for one song each. Two sopranos, one undergraduate, the other a graduate student, tracked their practice and reported the features to which they attended before the performance. Afterwards they reported their thoughts during the performance, PCs and spontaneous thoughts. The graduate student experimented and responded more to the audience in performance. Differences may be attributable to expertise and experience as well as the songs themselves.

INTRODUCTION

Previous research into PCs has been undertaken using the longitudinal case study method with professional musicians: classical pianists Gabriela Imreh (e.g. Chaffin & Imreh, 1994; Chaffin et al., 2002); Cristina Capparelli Gerling (e.g. Chaffin et al., 2013); jazz pianist Jeffrey John (Noice et al., 2008); cellist Tania Lisboa (e.g. Lisboa et al., 2012) and singer Jane Ginsborg (two studies: Ginsborg & Chaffin, 2011a, b; Ginsborg et al., 2013; Ginsborg et al., in press). It involves tracking engagement with a particular piece of music from the first time the musician starts working on it to performance and beyond, combining the scientist's objective "outside" viewpoint with the performer's subjective "insider" expertise in equal partnership.

From this research PC **theory derives**: musicians attend to particular features of the music when they practice, their locations become landmarks in the musician's mental representation of the piece and serve as retrieval cues during performance from memory. PC theory does not, however, account for spontaneity in performance. Ginsborg, Chaffin, & Demos (in press) compared practice features and thoughts in two performances. "Core PCs" reflecting practice features were more stable over time, occurring in both performances; the remainder were spontaneous thoughts that did not recur at the same locations.

Only one study involving student pianists has been reported to date (Chaffin et al., 2009). We aimed to explore the nature of the practice features, PCs and spontaneous thoughts reported by two students, compare their approaches with those of other musicians, and invite them to reflect on the effect of undertaking the project on their other practice and performance.

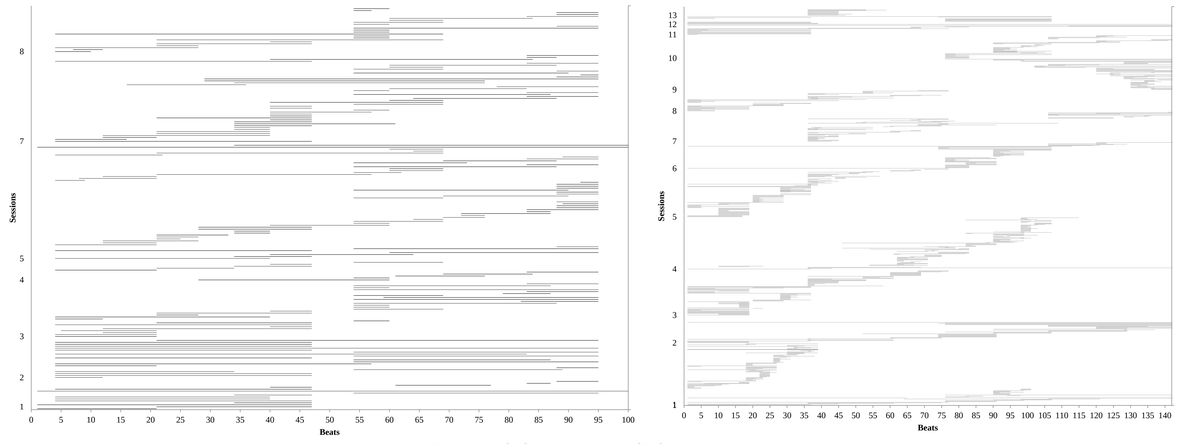
METHOD

Singers and songs: Chloe, 2nd year UG student, prepared and performed Charles Ives' *The Light That is Felt*, while Vic, 2nd year MMus student, prepared and performed the first of Jonathan Dove's *Five Am'rous Sighs* (both short, tonal songs with texts in English).

Procedure: Both singers audio-recorded their practice sessions and performances; annotated multiple copies of the score indicating *structural, basic, interpretive*, *expressive* and *ensemble* features at the end of the last practice session before the performance; annotated another copy of the score to indicate PCs and spontaneous thoughts in the same categories immediately after the performance; noted the first and last beats of their practice segments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Practice sessions: Chloe - 8 practice sessions lasting 3h 12m; Vic - 13 sessions lasting 3h 30m.



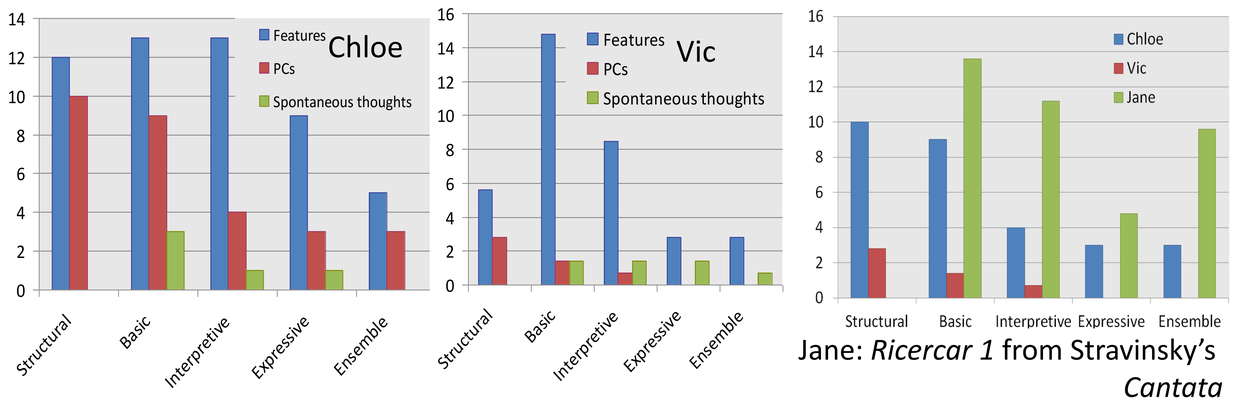
Chloe (L) and Vic (R): course of practice

Nature of features/PCs: Graduate student Vic may have had a more sophisticated approach to singing with less need to focus on technical issues.

Features, PCs and spontaneous thoughts: During performance, Chloe thought about more than half the features she'd identified during practice and had five spontaneous thoughts. Four reflected adjustments such as taking extra breaths because she was nervous. Most of Vic's practice features were automatic by the time of performance so she could focus on the most important ones; spontaneous thoughts reflected her confidence, enjoyment of the music and word-setting, and response to the audience.

Features/ PCs	Chloe	Vic
Structural	Section	
	Switch	
Basic	Clear vowels	Intonation
	Engagement / connection	Support
	Breathing / onset	
Interpretive	Tempo	Legato
	Phrasing	Word meaning
	Sound quality	
Expressive	Convey understanding of composer's intentions to audience	
Ensemble	Co-ordinate with pianist	

Findings challenge two earlier conclusions: 1) number of PCs is correlated positively with musician's experience and difficulty of piece; 2) nature of PCs. While Jane, with most experience, had most PCs (Ginsborg & Chaffin, 2011a), Chloe, with least, had almost as many. But the differences may well be attributable to the differences between the pieces.



Jane: *Ricercar 1* from Stravinsky's *Cantata*

Participants' reflections on taking part in the research:

Chloe: "I now start off by looking at the piece as a whole, read through the text and play through the music on the piano. Then… I strip away the text, use basic vowel sounds to learn the notes and see where technical issues arise, and use an appropriate exercise to deal with them. The important thing is that I extricate those parts and put them into a scalic or arpeggio exercise to get it really into my body. Once [the song] is technically secure I bring the text in again and so obviously then I think about the text, which illuminates the music for me and I can then look at it more expressively. The difference between before and after is that I now do it in a more structured way, it's more analytical and I'm aware of the individual processes that make up the whole."

Vic: "Particularly when I was listening to my practice sessions … I didn't realise there was so much repetition in my practice. I practise in quite a systematic way. When I was learning my next piece for my recital – I [paid] the same attention to detail … before going on to look at the interpretive and expressive aspects of the music. I know that I'm always concerned with the text regardless of what I'm singing, so attention to … ways in which I could make it more intense and dramatic, that's what I would have expected."

Emile: "Deconstructing the music to a point such as this where it is analysed for a study leads to questions in my own practice. Why is one passage easier to memorise than another? Because of the type of feature in the piece – a technical corner as opposed to an interpretive corner. A technical corner is easier to remember because I practise it a lot more. So for me it's about repetition. Being able to notice these differences makes practising more interesting."

FUTURE RESEARCH

Effects of PCs on practice will be analysed; different singers will sing the same songs; same singers will prepare and perform different songs (as in Ginsborg & Chaffin, 2011b).

REFERENCES

Chaffin, R., & Imreh, G. (1994, August). *Memorizing for piano performance: A case study of a concert pianist.* Paper presented at the 3rd Practical Aspects of Memory Conference, University of Maryland, College Park.

Chaffin, R., Demos, A., & Crawford, M. (2009, December). *Sources of variation in musicians' use of performance cues.* The Second International Conference on Music Communication Science, Sydney, Australia.

Chaffin, R., Gerling, C., Demos A.P., & Melms, A. (2013, August). Learning Chopin's Barcarolle: Performance cues as a mental map for performance. Paper presented at the International Symposium on Performance Science, Vienna, Austria.

Chaffin, R., Imreh, G., & Crawford, M. (2002). *Practicing perfection: Memory and piano performance.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum Associates.

Ginsborg, J. & Chaffin, R. (2011a). Performance cues in singing: evidence from practice and recall. In I. Deliège & J. Davidson (Eds.), *Music and the mind: Investigating the functions and processes of music (a book in honour of John Sloboda) (pp. 339-360).* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ginsborg, J. & Chaffin, R. (2011b). Preparation and spontaneity in performance: A singer's thoughts while singing Schoenberg. *Psychomusicology, 21*, 137-158.

Ginsborg, J., Chaffin, R., & Demos, A. (in press). Different roles for prepared and spontaneous thoughts: A practice-based study of musical performance from memory. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Music Studies.*

Ginsborg, J., Chaffin, R., Demos, A., & Nicholson, G. (2013, August). Reconstructing Schoenberg: Rehearsing and performing together. Paper presented at the International Symposium on Performance Science, Vienna, Austria.

Lisboa, T., Chaffin, R. & Logan, T. (2012). An account of deliberate practice: Thoughts, behaviour and the self in learning Bach's Prelude 6 for cello solo. In A. Cervino, M. Lettberg, C. Laws & T. Lisboa (Eds.), *Practice of Practising* (pp. 9-30). Orpheus Research Centre in Music: Leuven, Belgium.

Noice, H., John, J., Noice, T., & Chaffin, R. (2008). Memorization by a jazz pianist: A case study. *Psychology of Music, 36*(1), 63-79.