

# **The meaning of Interpretation: an investigation of an area of study in instrumental lessons in Higher Education**

Kim Burwell

Senior Lecturer, Canterbury Christ Church University College

[klb10@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:klb10@canterbury.ac.uk)

---

## **Abstract**

This investigation of Interpretation as an area of study in instrumental lessons takes place within the context of a larger research project investigating instrumental teaching and learning in a Music Department in the Higher Education sector. Emphasising the need to develop a shared understanding among participants, this paper examines student perceptions of Interpretation, with reference to written definitions given by undergraduate students of Performance. Teachers' approaches to interpretation in individual lessons is illustrated and analysed with reference to video evidence and interviews with teachers and students. Finally, implications for practice are considered.

For the purposes of this paper, "instrumental" should be taken to mean "instrumental and vocal". For the sake of clarity, and the anonymity of participants in the research, teachers are normally described as being male, and the students female.

---

## **Introduction**

Research into instrumental teaching and learning in the Music Department at Canterbury Christ Church has been given increasing attention and support over the past several years. A substantial body of material for study has been collected, in the form of interviews with teachers and students, questionnaires, and the filming of lessons in the Department. Internal funding, through both the Research programme and the Staff Development scheme, was supplemented in 2002 by a generous grant from the LTSN, through PALATINE. As a result, the project has begun to come to fruition, by informing courses in the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes; providing feedback to teachers through the staff development programme; and more widely, the sharing of findings through research papers, seminar presentations, and conferences.

Perhaps the most important motive behind research into instrumental lessons in the Higher Education sector is the need to develop a common understanding among the teachers involved. In spite of what we know to be high levels of expertise, many of us have no formal teaching qualifications; most instrumental teachers are engaged on a part-time basis; and instrumental lessons normally take place in a one-to-one situation. These factors mean that teachers often work in a degree of isolation, which places obvious constraints on the sharing of good practice.

These constraints also have an affect on our students. At Canterbury Christ Church, in the level 3 undergraduate course entitled Instrumental Teaching and Learning, it has become apparent over several years that students do not always have a common vocabulary through which they can sensibly discuss issues crucial to the subject. Interpretation, in particular, is an area of study which is notoriously difficult to discuss, write about and even define.

In this paper, Interpretation as an area of study is examined from two perspectives. In the first part, student perceptions of Interpretation are explored, and considered in the context of other areas of study, and of historical attitudes to musical performance. In the second part, teachers' approaches to Interpretation in individual lessons are analysed and discussed, in the light of evidence from the larger research project, and implications for practice are considered.

### **Students' perceptions of Areas of Study**

In order to study a range of student perceptions, 25 undergraduates were asked to define a series of terms which seemed crucial to Instrumental Teaching and Learning, and yet which might be understood in a variety of ways. These students represented an interesting cross-section of instruments and musical styles, including classical (voice, flute, clarinet, oboe, trombone, violin, piano, guitar), popular (voice, electric bass, saxophone, percussion), Irish fiddle, and Indian Raga singing. Without discussion, and over the course of 45 minutes, they were asked to give written definitions for each of the following terms: Technique, Interpretation, Communication, Improvisation, Practice, and Learning. The results were wide-

ranging, in terms of both written expression and the opinions conveyed, and the range served to emphasise the degree and nature of the problem rather than suggesting an existing consensus.

In defining Interpretation, a number of students offered concise and articulate answers. These typically referred to the intentions of a composer, the meaning of a musical text, and the individuality of the interpreter. A representative example follows:

Student 1      An individual's understanding of a piece of music (whether this be their own thoughts or what they think was the composer's intentions) conveyed through their playing.

In many ways, the more unusual definitions were more interesting. For instance, several definitions demonstrated a perceived difference in meaning, depending on the style of music involved:

Student 15      One's "version" of a song/piece. This can be a subtle thing (relating to dynamics, timbre, phrasing etc) or can mean the way in which a piece is actually arranged by the performer/composer.

Student 16      The ability to show musical expression. This may be personal as in popular singing or implied by the composer in a classical piece. It gives the music another level of meaning and can engage an audience.

For other students, however, Interpretation would depend not so much on the musical style as on the performer herself, as shown in the following extracts:

Student 4      Interpretation is the ways in which someone takes a particular source and produces it again in a way that they feel appropriate and comfortable, in a way which is personal to them... it can also reflect the inner person of someone.

Student 9      Interpretation is the individual's spin on the composer's music... which emotions, sections, are more important to them personally...

Student 10      ...They generally add some of their personality to the music, which other players could not achieve...

Student 20      How you choose to express yourself through a given piece of music...

The fact that these students evidently perceive Interpretation as such a deeply personal issue – apparently more closely related to *themselves* than to their reading of a musical text – raises questions about their experience in the degree programme. How have these students coped with the formal assessment of their interpretations, over a period of several years, in the Performance Studies course?

Some definitions suggest that students do not immediately assume that Interpretation is something which *can* be sensibly assessed. Several extracts follow:

Student 13      Interpretation is stating something in a way that you think is right, which someone else may differ with...

Student 23      Your interpretation is how you think a particular piece should sound... It is a personal thing – no right or wrong.

Are these attitudes peculiar to Interpretation as an area of study? In an attempt to capture the essence of their attitudes, “hallmark” words were extracted from students’ definitions, for comparison. Words which occurred in five or more definitions were classified as being hallmarks, and are listed in Table 1. Some hallmarks are used for more than one area: the highest frequency is indicated by bold type. No term is listed under the definition of itself.

STUDENTS' DEFINITIONS: HALLMARKS						
<i>f</i>	technique	interpretation	communication	improvisation	practice	learning
21			<b>performer, performance</b>		<b>technique, techniques, technical</b>	
20			<b>audience, listener</b>			
19	<b>instrument</b>					
	<b>play, plays, playing, player</b>					
18			<b>music, musical, musicality</b>			
17		music, musical		music, musical		
16						
15		<b>way, ways</b>		<b>chord, harmony</b>		
14						
13						
12						<b>new</b>
11		play, playing, played, player	<b>interpretation</b>	<b>made up, make up, makes up making up</b>	play, playing, player	<b>understanding, understood</b>
11				<b>notated, notation, printed, written, unwritten, scored</b>		
10				play, plays, players	<b>improve, improves, improved, improving</b>	<b>knowledge</b>
10				perform, performs, performer, performance, performed	<b>repeat, repeats, repeated, repeating, repetitive, repetition</b>	
9	<b>sound, sounds</b>	understand, understanding	<b>emotion, emotions</b>		performs, performer, performance	
9	<b>good, bad, poor, better, best</b>	perform, performer, performed, performance			<b>learn, learned, learning</b>	
8	<b>style, styles</b>	<b>style, styles</b>	<b>conveys, conveying</b>		instrument, instrumental	
8		<b>personal, personally, personality</b>				

8		<b>composer</b>				
7	way	<b>individual</b>		<b>jazz</b>	<b>tutorial, taught, teacher, lessons</b>	<b>tutors, teacher, teachers, teaching, taught</b>
7	music, musical, musicality, musicianship					<b>pupil</b>
7						technique, techniques
7						improve, improved, improvement
7						<b>skill</b>
6		<b>different, differences</b>	<b>express, expressing, expression</b>		better, best	
6			way		individual, individually	
6					skill, skills	
6					<b>work, working</b>	
5	<b>physical, physically, mechanical</b>					music, musical
5	<b>approach</b>					play, plays, player, playing
5	<b>method, methodical</b>					

**Table 1: Hallmarks of Students' definitions, of six terms crucial to Instrumental Teaching and Learning**

The hallmark *Interpretation* occurs in eleven students' definitions of Communication, reflecting a perception that these are closely related areas of study.

*Way* occurs with reference to Interpretation (15), Technique (7), and Communication (6), and *Style* is shared by both Interpretation (8) and Technique (8). Both imply that these areas of study vary from one player to another. An examination of similar hallmarks, however, demonstrates subtle differences. *Individual* is used to define Interpretation (7) and Practice (6); *Personal* and *Different* (and words derived from them) are exclusive to Interpretation (8, 6). In contrast, the hallmarks *Approach* and

*Method* – more prosaic perhaps, and more easily grasped – are exclusive to Technique (5, 5).

Hallmarks implying judgement tend not to occur in the definition of “artistic” areas of study: *Improve* is found only with reference to Practice (10) and Learning (7), while *Good/bad/poor/better/best* are exclusive to Practice (6) and Technique (9). In the perception of students, are Interpretation and Communication areas of study which can be improved? Do they think that these can, or should, be rated in the same way as Practice and Technique? *Learn* is exclusive to Practice (9); *Pupil* occurs only in the definition of Learning (7); and *Teacher* occurs with reference to Practice (7) and Learning (7) only. Do students feel that the “artistic” areas of study can actually be taught and learned?

There does seem to be a degree of confusion underlying the study of Interpretation at H.E. level. No such air of uncertainty surrounds Improvisation, if student definitions are any indication. Improvisation is not mandatory in any individual lesson in the Music Department at Canterbury Christ Church, and in the 67 individual lessons filmed for research purposes over the past several years, only eight include any discussion of Improvisation. All students are explicitly introduced to this area of study, however, through group lessons given at an early stage in the degree programme. In their definitions most students explained Improvisation confidently, giving clear examples of how it might be done and rarely implying that anything abstruse might be involved. Indeed, many seemed to enjoy demystifying what might previously have been relatively alien to them. Interpretation is never formally aired in the same way within the degree programme; and it seems to remain a subject for the “secret garden” of individual lessons.

### **The broader context**

In part, at least, this confusion arises from the fact that Interpretation is – by definition – intangible. Casals declared that “The art of interpretation is *not* to play what is written. ...the written note... is like a strait jacket, whereas music, like life itself, is constant movement, continuous spontaneity, free from any restriction...” (Blum, 1980, p69-70). The written text – if there is one – is only a graphic representation of

the music itself; its realisation relies on the performer's understanding of contemporary conventions, of broad musical principles, and of the performing nature of her own instrument. All of this would seem to leave some scope for the performer's own musical character; and while some scores may place more or less precise constraints on the interpreter's individuality, others may positively depend on it.

The notion that Interpretation should involve the performer's own personality is not unique to modern students. According to Liszt,

The virtuoso is not a mason, chiselling his stone conscientiously according to the sketches of the architect. He is not a passive tool for reproducing feelings and thoughts, without adding anything of his own. He is not a more or less experienced "interpreter" of works which leave him no scope for his own comments... for the virtuoso, musical works are in fact nothing but tragic and moving materialisations of his emotions; he is called upon to make them speak, weep, sing and sigh, to recreate them in accordance with his own consciousness. (Toff, 1985, p144)

The tension between this archetypically egocentric view of Interpretation, and the notion that the performer should be the servant of the text, marked performance practice for much of the twentieth century. Furtwängler, in his notebooks of 1930, attributed both to the distancing of performance from its original cultural context:

The theory came about that tempi, dynamics, in fact all questions of interpretation, were matters of taste. More or less ridiculously, interpreters became more prominent than creators, as true... drawing their strength from the creators and usually ending up by ruining them. It was the onset of chaos; and the consideration of the score, of what the author wanted, the demand for fidelity to the work, was a natural reaction to this, a deliverance.

Now it also becomes apparent, however, that both tendencies, apparently so mutually contradictory, towards unlimited freedom of interpretation on the one hand and literal rendering on the other, flow from the same source. Both stem from the deep insecurity of the age when faced with the great art of the past, the complete lack of any instinctively assured direction. (Tanner 1989, p48-9)

This tension remains influential with students today, and may be found in much of the literature that is written for them. From James Galway's "Flute":

Lastly, a warning. Playing the disinterred music of the past can be intimidating, especially when the music in question carries so many rules, regulations and conventions that it takes volumes to list and explain them. The temptation is to be correct to the point of inflexibility. This temptation must be resisted. ... So, in playing baroque music, don't be afraid of

expressing sentiment. Remember it was written to give pleasure, and that's what you must perform it for now. (Galway 1982, p164)

Alongside this book in the students' library is another, in which this attitude, along with Galway himself, is rather dismissed:

Performers are still showy, and so, they have a tendency to play too fast. Both Rampal and Galway, the current idols of the flute world, are guilty on this count. In 1976, the *New York Times* reported with perhaps just a shade of journalistic hyperbole, Rampal "will never hesitate to hurtle ahead of an orchestra or pianist, knowing that even if a minority of critics may scowl, the public is as thrilled by a racing vivace as they are to see a fine thoroughbred not merely hold a lead but break away. (Toff 1985, p145)

The line of tension has had a parallel too in jazz, traditional and popular music, distanced from their original cultural contexts, to some extent, through their incorporation into Higher Education. A further parallel may be found in the professional context of popular music, in which "technique versus emotion became a hardened dichotomy by the 1990s, exacerbated by the resurgence of punk values that occurred under the rubric of 'grunge'. ... [Neil] Young himself, in the midst of renewed notoriety, made some of the most pointed statements in favour of expression over technique, declaring that 'it doesn't matter if you can play a scale. It doesn't matter if your technique is good. If you have feelings that you want to get out through music, that's what matters.'" (Waksman, 2003, p128-9)

An obvious danger is that students might be persuaded that Interpretation – vague as it seems – should be divorced from instrumental technique and scholarship: that 'science', far from being able to inform an interpretation, might actually harm it. Even a performer of the stature of Jascha Heifetz "was convinced that being 'brainy', that is, thinking too much about what and how one is going to play, including consideration of textbook rules on style, destroys feelings in the player and results in a calculated, cold, unemotional performance". (Agus, 2001, p60)

Baroque specialist Ralph Kirkpatrick struck an attitude which would seem to be more useful, with regard for both teaching and learning:

Interpretation functions between two extremes. One extreme is indicated by the text and by the composer's supposed intentions, in other words, by the work itself. The other extreme is indicated by the contribution, often

necessary and desirable, of the interpreter and by the liberties that he is entitled to take. One of the extremes can be regarded as fixed and obligatory, as a firmly established point of departure; the other extreme can be regarded as created by the infinitely variable possibilities of interpretation and by the play of choice and fantasy around the structure that the composer has given us. (Kirkpatrick, 1984, p127)

The eminently sensible Joan Last, too, urges teachers not to shy away from dealing with the problem of Interpretation, indeed asserting that

they have not realised how much of the interpretative side... has to be taught. The ability to interpret music is not just a heaven-sent gift, though pupils may vary considerably in their potential artistry. Even the most promising need careful guidance and teaching in the understanding of the basic principles that lie behind the art of interpretation. The less bright pupil, too, can add considerably to the value of his performance, if such principles have been instilled by the teacher. (Last 1960, p.xii)

“As for the rest,” said piano virtuoso Josef Hofmann, “some of it may be impossible to teach, but lots of it can be learned if the imagination is properly educated and stimulated.” (Chasins 1957, p21)

### **Teachers’ approaches to Interpretation**

The research project at Canterbury provided a unique opportunity to study the ways in which teachers and students approach the problems of Interpretation. On average, over the 67 individual lessons on film, 29% of dialogue was devoted to this area of study, albeit not exclusively, giving it third ranking after Technique (59%) and Critical Awareness (49%). It is interesting that, while the student contribution to dialogue overall was 17%, this proportion fell for dialogue devoted to most areas of study, and for the discussion of Interpretation in particular, was only 13%. This might mean that the teacher became more dominant when Interpretation was discussed; or that the student had less to offer on this subject; or possibly, both. Regardless, it is difficult to reconcile this information with the student perception, noted earlier, that Interpretation involves the performer’s individuality and personal input.

On close investigation of the lesson dialogue devoted to Interpretation, it became possible to divide the approach taken by teachers into several distinct types. Two of these, labelled Type A (Specific) and Type B (General) essentially involve an appeal

to the intellect; while the other two, Type C (Abstract) and Type D (Metaphorical) involve an appeal to the imagination.

### **Type A (Specific)**

Type A (Specific) is an approach referring directly to the musical work at hand. Often, this involves a discussion of textual details, as in Example 1. The student's speech is shown in italics, and performing is indicated in bold.

#### **Example 1. Interpretation Type A (Specific): Lesson C3**

*I don't get this bit, do I go back down again?*

Forte here, you crescendo through to the B and suddenly go piano. Go from...

**PLAYS. TEACHER MARKS COPY.**

Same again there, you've got to prepare it, focus it

**PLAYS**

With some vibrato

**PLAYS. TEACHER MARKS COPY.**

When you are with the pianist that will be together. That's much better.

The teacher in Lesson C3 is no doubt giving good advice, though the student's question does not seem complex, and it might be argued that the student could have been induced to work out the answer for herself. The teacher's commanding attitude here has parallel in the use of modelling which occurs in Example 2:

#### **Example 2. Type A (Specific): Lesson D3**

I'll play that for you just to there. Just so that you can hear just how fast it will eventually go.

**TEACHER PLAYS**

It's quite fast. You are not going to get up to that yet. Even if you take a little bit of time in the pause, feel free, it's unaccompanied; there's a rubato that should be there. He says "Although this is rhythmically free the effects should be produced?... with detailed care. Variable ligatures in the second movement indicate small rubato, like fluctuations of tempo." So although you have got to be precise, none the less you've got room.

In this example, the teacher presents himself as exemplar, and no doubt makes his point effectively and economically; once again, however, he seems to be doing the student's score-reading for her, and her contribution to the procedure is limited to imitation.

The Type A approach might also admit more genuinely exploratory procedures:

**Example 3. Type A (Specific): Lesson E1**

*I think probably what I would do is maybe play a little bit heavier at the beginning so I can go down almost to a triple p [here]*

Yes, that would be lovely... Now this is repeated isn't it?

*Yeah – softer second time round?*

If you can.

*Like Mozart.*

It would be wonderful if you could do it, but there's quite a lot going on.

Maybe we should make this mp, not piano.

**PLAYS**

Where does the echo really start?

*Here.*

Well, except on the C sharp and the B flat...

*Yeah... it's really about here isn't it?*

I see what you mean. Maybe starting here but leading up to the p on this note, because that's leading into this really isn't it? You'd better play around with it and see what you like best then.

We cannot tell, from the transcript alone, whether the student's "playing around" makes for a superior performance; but it does seem likely that this shared approach would, over time, help to build her confidence and independence.

Occasionally, Type A dialogue involves some analysis of the score, particularly if a harmony instrument is involved:

**Example 4. Type A (Specific): Lesson Q3**

So, where does the next phrase begin?

*There.*

There.

*Where that comes back in.*

That's a big phrase, so, well, yes. But break it into smaller phrases.

*But then it's after each one of the...*

What? Where? Where does the next phrase start?

*There.*

You're saying that is the beginning?

*No, the next one.*

That one? Why? It's on the beat.

*Inaudible*

The phrase starts before the beat.

This teacher seems to be working hard, here, to draw a contribution from the student, and the process is certainly less economical than the modelling shown in Example 2. After pursuing the discussion further, the teacher eventually resorts to demonstration, to prove his case. One wonders whether it might have been more constructive, in the long term, if not immediately, to ask the student to demonstrate hers.

### **Type B (General)**

In Type B (General) the approach addresses broad principles, which may be relevant to the text at hand, but may also be applied to other, similar work, perhaps when the student is working independently. In Example 5, the teacher begins with comments specific to the text, but moves on to a more general explanation:

#### **Example 5. Type B (General): Lesson R1 (extract abbreviated)**

When you put the metronome on, don't put it on in one ... if you put it on two and four, it gives you more of that jazz feel ... You get this triple effect in your head as well, a triple effect. So this is another thing because you want it to swing, you don't want to play it like a classical player – it won't sound right. So you have to, you know, once you get the notes and make it comfortable, get that metronome on, put it on two and four and try and make it swing.

This explanation goes some way toward putting the work at hand into the context of musical style. In example 6 the context is twofold: the repertoire, and the performing nature of the instrument:

#### **Example 6. Type B (General): Lesson A1**

Good. The A is a very bright note so don't take any extra fingers off. If I'm crescendoing to an A I'd take the crescendo a quaver beyond the change of note, at least, like in the Poulenc Sonata I'd take it a bar or longer though it's not marked like that. It's just overcoming the inadequacies of the instrument. Do it once more, pushing into the A a little bit and see how that feels.

Occasionally, the Type B approach involves the discussion of the performances of others, as in Example 7, where an historical recording is played in the lesson.

#### **Example 7. Type B (General): Lesson G1**

It's a very old recording from 1925, but it's actually the man himself playing. It's very lyrical isn't it? It's funny how your ears forget the bad quality of the recording. I think that's a much better speed. He pulled that back didn't he? You see the other interesting thing is – if you've got a recording of something from 1925 he's the man. How Williams came up with something three times the speed I don't know.

### **Type C (Abstract)**

With Type C (Abstract) the teacher employs more colourful language in order to provoke a response from the student. Interestingly, the response is typically

performed rather than verbal. The following is an exceptional case in which Type C is shared:

**Example 8. Type C (Abstract): Lesson C3**

*I don't like the sound that I'm making.*

Much, much softer and find a colour that you do like. Play around on a G.

**PLAYS**

What's the mood that you want to evoke?

*It's quite sad, and reflective, but calm*

Okay, is it eerie?

*Mystic.*

I think so

**PLAYS**

Much better quality of sound. Second phrase again.

More typically, Type C comments tend to be concise assertions from the teacher, making for an immediate impression. The following three, separate statements come from lesson J2:

**Example 9. Type C (Abstract): Lesson J2**

Now that has more elasticity and the phrases just ebb and flow very naturally.

And then this is... cheeky, more energetic there. Okay. So...

The next section? A little bit more relaxed and jazzy.

Teacher Q sometimes emphasises a Type B, general point, by moving into more exaggerated, Type C terms:

**Example 10. Type C (Abstract): Lesson Q3**

What does Adagio mean?

*It's fast. No, it's not fast, it's slow.*

Now slow, but VERY slow! Dolorido, delirious! And oozing gunch, and sliding, urgh.

*Okay.*

And, espressivo, which means lush.

**Type D (Metaphorical)**

In Type D, closely related to Type C, the teacher makes use of metaphor to appeal to the imagination of the student. For singers, this normally means referring to the poetic or dramatic sense of the works studied, and overlaps closely with the issue of communication. Two examples follow.

**Example 11. Type D (Metaphorical): Lesson L3.**

Jane, as much quality as you can put into it. Because when you sing this aria, you are not moved. You just stand over the young man.

*Just tower over him.*

Absolutely. He's probably sitting on a couch in tears, and you just stand there and sing it. So all you've got to do is think of the quality that you are sending out, and the language.

### **Example 12. Type D (Metaphorical): Lesson M1**

I think what Schumann has done here is, it just gives it that little lift, because this song is bliss, and it just gives the little emphasis on the [German]. Joy, all right? So you're smiling. And that's what it's all about. This song has got to be heavenly, Jane. And when you sing it, we need to feel that. And when you smile, we do feel it. So let's do now...

Among instrumentalists, the most extensive use of metaphor comes from the lessons of Teacher A. Several short, separate examples are listed below. Interestingly, two of the three metaphors involve singing:

### **Example 13. Type D (Metaphorical): Lesson A1**

Good! Now can you make it more operatic, make it two characters; this one is er... a soprano two, the jilted sister or something, then come in and almost interrupt it.

Yes, Frank Sinatra or Shirley Bassey routine, keeping the bars the same length but draping things within them. Right, good! Go on.

Can you imagine like a dandelion puff ball floating by, and you're just trying to go like that. Phrase after this beautifully smoothly, then grabbing like that.

### **Striking a balance**

On average, over the 67 lessons on film, Type A (Specific) is the prevalent approach occupying 60% of the dialogue devoted to Interpretation. Type B (General) is second in rank, at 25%. Both would seem to be essential; Type A represents the application of whatever they student may know or be learning about Interpretation, while Type B helps to put the procedures into context. Crucially, Type B also provides information from which the student might extrapolate, for her independent work later.

The more imaginative approaches occupy a far smaller proportion of the lesson dialogue devoted to Interpretation, partly perhaps because they seem to be used as wedged tools, designed for immediate impact, and partly because the student rarely contributes substantially to discussions of this nature. Type C (Abstract) occupies an

average of only 6% of dialogue devoted to Interpretation, and Type D (Metaphorical) 9%.

The balance among these types of approach to Interpretation varies, obviously, among both teachers and students. Grouping students according to their ability, for instance, suggests that this might be a significant influence on the approaches taken. Table 1 shows students grouped in four approximately equal bands, according to their ranking in the performance examinations following the filming of their lessons:

BAND	<i>Number of students</i>	Type A	Type B	Type C	Type D
1 (highest)	16	70	20	4	6
2	16	61	24	8	7
3	16	59	24	5	11
4 (lowest)	14	49	35	5	11
<i>Total number of students, 62. Of 67 lessons on film, 64 included Interpretation; 2 students left or changed programme before undertaking an examination.</i>					

**Table 1: Types of Interpretation, divided according to Students' examination ranking**

It does seem clear that the proportion of Type A, addressing Interpretation in very specific terms, is higher for stronger students, while that for Type B, the more general approach, increases for weaker students. Perhaps this means that weaker students do not already have the knowledge base required for building interpretations, and therefore need more general input. At the same time, the proportion of Types C and D grows gently for weaker students, suggesting that teachers are trying to appeal more to their imaginations than they might with stronger players.

Other interesting trends are suggested when students are divided according to their year of study, as shown in Table 2.

Year of study	Number of students	Type 1	Type B	Type C	Type D
1	22	53	31	5	11
2	14	61	32	4	3
3	25	63	19	7	11
<i>Total number of students, 61. Of 67 lessons on film, 64 included Interpretation; 3 of these were postgraduates, not included in this table.</i>					

**Table 2. Types of Interpretation, divided according to students' year of study**

It seems that the Type A Specific approach is relatively restrained for first year students, allowing for more even spread of emphasis among approaches. The attention given to the development of a broad knowledge base, represented by the Type B General approach, does not fall off until the third year. During the second year, high proportions of both Type A and Type B mean that the use of Types C and D is minimised.

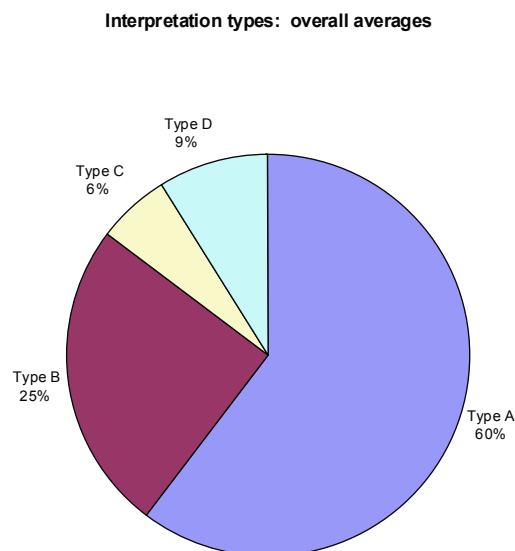
Gender too seems to influence the balance among the four approaches. In lessons given by male teachers (a total of 36 lessons) the average total of Types C and D is only 9%, whereas female teachers (28 lessons) reach 22%, appealing to the student's imagination more than twice as often. Similarly, in the lessons of male students (26) Types C and D comprise 7% of the dialogue devoted to Interpretation; for female students (38), this figure reaches 19%. For male teachers with male students (19 lessons) the figure is 4%; for female teachers with female students (21) it is 24%: six times as much.

This is undoubtedly related to the instruments and musical styles preferred by men and women. Flute and voice lessons are both dominated, in this sample, by female students and teachers: the total proportions for the "imaginative" Types C and D are 17% for flute and 33% for voice. Lessons on plucked strings (classical and electric guitar) are dominated by male students and teachers, and have an average total of only 6%.

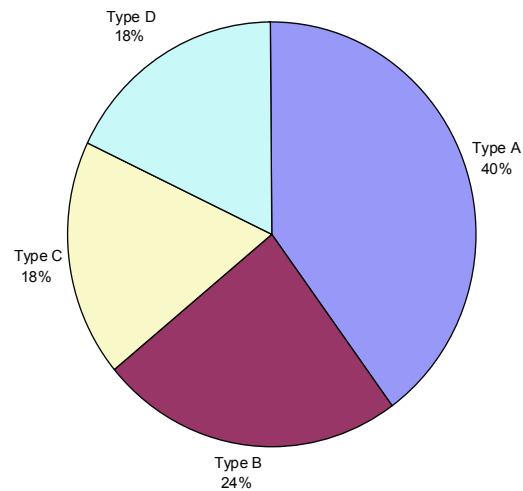
In some cases, the instruments themselves seem to require different approaches. In lessons on Harmony instruments (piano, and classical and electric guitar), which often involve some musical analysis, Types A and B reach a total proportion of 93% of the dialogue devoted to interpretation; on single line instruments (including voice) this total is only 82%. Interestingly, too, lessons on “traditional conservatoire instruments” (piano, voice, flute, clarinet) have an average proportion of 19% for Types C and D together; while on “non-traditional conservatoire instruments” (guitar, electric guitar, saxophone, drum kit, and recorder) the figure is only a little more than a quarter of this, at 5%.

### **A model of good practice?**

These general trends are reflected in the profiles of each teacher. One teacher in particular, however, seems to stand outside these trends in many ways. The two charts below show the general average for the entire sample, and the average over four lessons given by Teacher A.



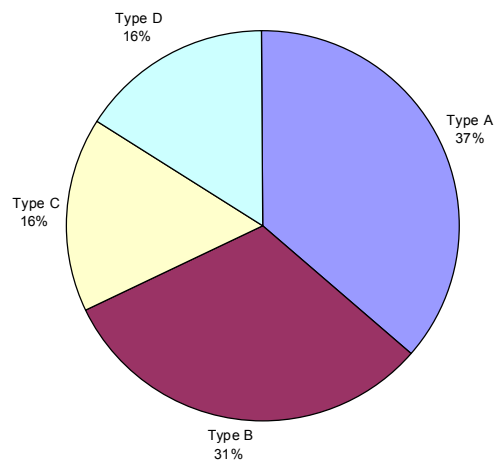
Interpretation types: averages for Teacher A



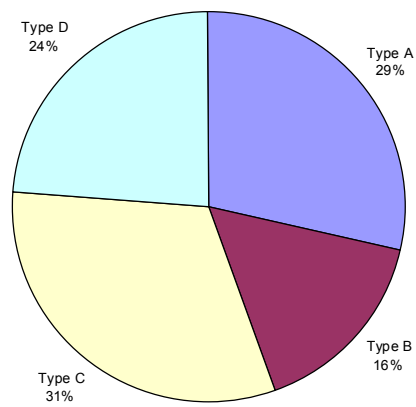
The minimum proportion devoted to any one type of approach by Teacher A (18%, devoted to both Type C and Type D) is higher than for any other teacher; the nearest is Teacher C, whose minimum is 10%, devoted to Type C. Teacher A seems confident in using any of these approaches, implying a remarkable degree of versatility.

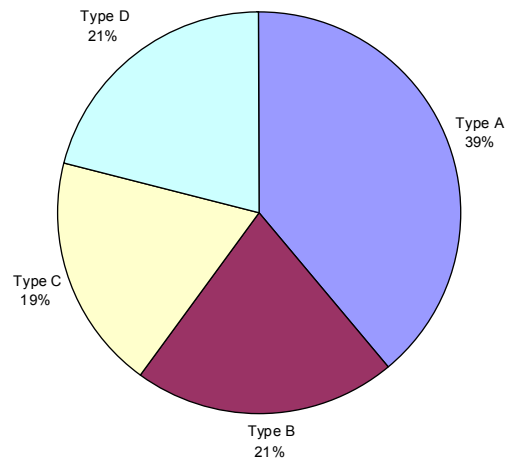
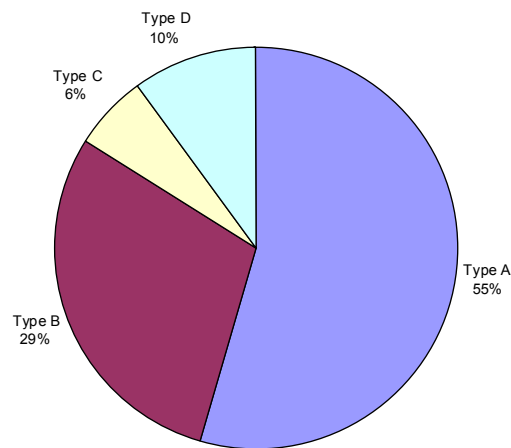
More than this, the variety of balances among Teacher A's lessons exceeds that of any other teacher; a high degree of flexibility means that he is prepared to adapt his approaches considerably for each student. Of five of his lessons on film, one contains no substantial reference to Interpretation; the remaining four, depicted in the charts below, show remarkably varied proportions.

**Interpretation types: Lesson A1**



**Interpretation types: Lesson A2**



**Interpretation types: Lesson A3****Interpretation types: Lesson A4**

The differences among lessons A1, A2 and A4 are perhaps all the more remarkable for the fact that these students had much in common. All were in their third year when filmed; all graduated with lower second degrees; and all had performance examinations shortly after they were filmed. The differences among them were more subtle, and yet clearly, from the teacher's point of view, more significant.

Student A1 scored an exceptional A+ in the subsequent performance examination. The chart showing the Interpretation types for this lesson suggests a greater appeal to the imagination than might be expected, for such a strong student. One possible reason for this is that the teacher might be trying to counterbalance the nature of the student's earlier experience, of seven and a half years in an Army band. The student referred to background in an interview following the filming of their lesson:

**Example 14. Extract from Interview A1**  
**Student shown in italics.**

So you had quite a thorough grounding before you came here?

*Sort of. I wouldn't say it was along the same lines, because it was more military-based – marches and stuff like that.*

So you are good at playing in time!

*Too good. I don't go outside the boundaries.*

The word rubato was not used very often?

*No, not at all. Musicality as well was another thing that was never used. In the last three years [my current teacher] said I have come out of my shell. It has taken three years.*

Teacher A described this student as being focused and motivated, while Student A1 said, "I absolutely adore his style. ...for me, he brings everything out in the lesson, usually without really having to say so. It always seems to happen with him there. It is his presence, really."

It would seem that Teacher A is very charismatic; and yet the charts would seem to suggest that more than "presence" is involved. A clear contrast to Lesson A1 is provided in Lesson A2, given to a student who scored C+ in her next examination. In her interview, this student made remarks which suggested a much lower level of confidence, and she gave several explanations for what she perceived to be a lack of progress during her degree programme. Student A2 described her teacher as being "really nice. He's cool"; but complained, "I need to be forced to do well. ... He doesn't shout at me! ... I think the difference [between] going to College and coming to University is that you are meant to be able to do everything on your own anyway, but that's not easy." This rather dependent attitude would presumably pose particular challenges for the teacher, and in this lesson Teacher A works hard to draw a successful interpretation from the student. The chart shows a strong appeal to the imagination, with Types C and D actually dominating the balance of approaches; in this respect it is almost a mirror image of the chart for lesson A1.

Even further removed is the balance struck for the rather capable Student A4, whose next examination mark was B+, and who passed a Trinity College Licentiate diploma two Days after the lesson filmed. The use of Types C and D are minimal here, and the dominance of Types A and B is as might be expected for a relatively strong student. This is perhaps related, too, to the fact that Student A4 makes a greater contribution to lesson dialogue than either Student A1 or A2: these are, after all, the types of approach which seem to be associated with the greatest student contribution. The following extract from Lesson A4 shows Teacher A moving quickly and easily from one approach to another, in a subtle and sophisticated manner:

**Example 14. Lesson A4**

*I didn't play very well... I slowed down quite a bit towards the beginning.*  
I don't think that matters, it is rubato. What struck me were the dynamic contrasts, although the loudest points – you've got quite beefy now – you still got quite pp there. Some of these slight bits of turbulence could be exaggerated a little bit more. Especially in this phrase here. In that sort of register you become completely engulfed in the piano sound. You have to do a fair amount of that crescendo to show your presence at all.

In a Type A approach, the teacher refers to “pp there” and “this phrase here”. Some general information – Type B – is given, about the principle of rubato and the problems of balance in “that sort of register”. From Type C, come colourful words such as “beefy” and “turbulent”; and if no clear example of Type D appears here, the idea of turbulence is developed later in the lesson, with a metaphor (“I think it should be like a storm is brewing. Have you been at the seaside when a storm is about to break? You're in this beautiful day, and within about fifteen minutes the weather totally changes from bright sun to storm. The sea gets choppier, it's that kind of feeling. You have to have these kind of pictures when you're playing.”)

**Implications for practice**

Interpretation is a problematic area of study, and this is true for professional performers as it is for students in Higher Education. Its essential nature means that individuality is involved, and therefore – perhaps inevitably – disagreement. The definitions given by third-year undergraduates, and discussed above, imply that some remain unconvinced that Interpretation can be taught and learned; or improved; or assessed.

Within the degree programme at Canterbury Christ Church, clarity and confidence in this area of study can be fostered through several courses. In Instrumental Teaching and Learning, an optional course for third-year students, the discussion of this and other concepts essential to the subject can lead to an airing of problems, understanding, and opinions. At the same time, the use of seminars within Performance Studies – a course available through all three years of the degree programme – provides some opportunity for students to clarify and compare their own views.

At the same time, it must be helpful for students if teachers too have a forum through which to clarify and compare their views. An ongoing staff development programme allows and encourages teachers to discuss their work, provides feedback in terms of the research project, and raises questions which might provoke the sharing of good practice.

Would it be helpful, for instance, for teachers to follow the example of Teacher A, by adapting their approaches more freely to meet the needs of each student? Should instrumental teachers take their cue from vocal teachers, and make a more deliberate effort to engage students' imaginations? Often a leap of the imagination can help a student to bypass the intellectual or technical problems which might stand in the way of the development of an interpretation; often, too, the use of imagery can help a student make the connection between her interpretation and her communication of it, to an audience.

At the same time, perhaps teachers already adept in this approach should consider deliberately connecting such imaginative leaps to an appeal to the intellect. An appeal to the imagination can produce a quick result; but it could be argued that if the student is to be able to reproduce that result at a later date, and – perhaps more significant – apply such an approach to repertoire which she is studying independently, she needs to be able to understand exactly how she produced it. The research project has provided many examples of teachers using imagery, with the student responding by performing, and the teacher responding further with approval and praise. Perhaps the

teacher should go further, and help the student to develop her metacognitive skills by asking “Now, how did you achieve it?”

One of the conspicuous features of Type C and D approaches to teaching interpretation is that it often produces an immediate result, and economy of means seems to have considerable priority in many instrumental lessons. The existence of a performance goal must give both teachers and students a sense of pressure on time. At Canterbury Christ Church, performance is central to instrumental studies and students have performance goals in every term, though the Performance Examination in the final, Trinity term remains the major assessment exercise of the year. There is some evidence to suggest that the middle, Lent term is the most relaxed in terms of teaching; certainly, among the sample lessons on film, student contribution is highest at this time, when students have already been able to settle into their courses, perhaps getting to know a new teacher, and yet still do not feel the imminent pressure of the final examination. The Type B, General approach reaches its peak during the Lent term, and it is perhaps now that the best investment in the student’s long-term learning is made. We do know, through interviews carried out in the research project, that many teachers feel responsible for their students’ examination grades, and adapt their approaches accordingly as the exams approach; nevertheless, it might be argued that it would be better in the long term to avoid the temptation of making students’ interpretative decisions for them, of doing their score-reading and even their listening for them, even if this results in a lower mark. Indeed, since student confidence and independence are intimately connected with their success in performance, perhaps we should question the perception that this *would* result in a lower mark.

Perhaps this brings us to the most important questions: to the area in which the need for a shared understanding, among both teachers and students, is greatest: what is a good result? What are the real aims of Performance Studies in Higher Education?

## Bibliography

- Agus, A. (2001): Heifetz as I knew him. *Amadeus*
- Blum, D. (1980): Casals and the art of interpretation. *University of California Press*
- Bryant, M. (1995): The clarinet on record. In Lawson, C. (Ed): The Cambridge companion to the clarinet. *Cambridge University Press*.
- Burwell, K. (2003): Speaking of instrumental teaching and learning. An investigation of dialogue in instrumental and vocal lessons, in Higher Education. *Unpublished conference paper, Royal Northern College of Music*
- Burwell, K., Young, V. and Pickup, D. (2003): Taking the lead. the development of student as reflective practitioner in instrumental lessons at H.E. level. *Unpublished conference paper, Research in Music Education, University of Exeter*
- Burwell, K., Young, V. and Pickup, D. (2004): The dynamics of the instrumental tutorial. In Hunter, D. (Ed): How am I doing? valuing and rewarding learning in musical performance in higher education. *University of Ulster Press*
- Chasins, A. (1957) 3<sup>RD</sup> edition 1981: Speaking of Pianists. *Da Capo Press*
- Dart, T. (1954, 1973): The interpretation of music. *Hutchinson University Library*.
- Gerig, R. R. (1974): Famous pianists and their technique. *Luce*
- Hultberg, C. (2000): The printed score as a mediator of musical meaning. Approaches to music notation in Western tonal tradition. *Malmö Academy of Music*
- Kirkpatrick, R. (1984): Interpreting Bach's Well-tempered Clavier. A performer's discourse of method. *Yale University Press*.
- Last, J. (1960): Interpretation for the piano student. *Oxford University Press*.
- Reder, P. (Ed)(1872; this ed, 1983): Wilhelm von Lenz. The Great Piano Virtuosos of our time. A classic account of studies with Liszt, Chopin, Tausig and Henselt. *Kahn and Averill*.
- Reisenauer, A. (1917): Systematic Musical training. In Cooke, J.F.(Ed): Great pianists on piano playing. *Dover*
- Rowland-Jones, A. (1995): The Baroque recorder sonata. In Thomson, J.M. (Ed): The Cambridge companion to the recorder. *Cambridge University Press*.
- Stojowski, S. (1917): What interpretation really is. In Cooke, J.F.(Ed): Great pianists on piano playing. *Dover*
- Tanenbaum, D. (2003): Perspectives on the classical guitar in the twentieth century. In 1976 In Coelho, V.A. (Ed): The Cambridge Companion to the Guitar. *Cambridge University Press*
- Tanner, M. (Ed)(1989): Wilhelm Furtwängler. Notebooks 1924-54. Tr. Whiteside S. *Quartet*
- Toff, F. (1985): The flute book. *Oxford University Press*
- Young, V., Burwell, K. and Pickup, D. (2003): Areas of study and teaching strategies in instrumental teaching. A case study research project. *Music Education Research, 5.2*