

# An Examination of the Evaluation Criteria for Piano Performances

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## ABSTRACT

The evaluation of piano performance plays a critical role in objectively measuring the quality of the performance and determining its overall merit. This evaluation process helps to balance the depth of musical expression with technical proficiency, while also identifying the artist's strengths and areas for improvement. These evaluations, conducted in various contexts, serve as a cornerstone in shaping the performer's career and contributing to music education. Evaluations vary significantly across different settings, from classroom performances to examination recitals, from competition performances to those presented by professional concert artists. This study aims to identify the criteria used in the evaluation of piano performances in these contexts through a literature review and to examine how these criteria contribute to the evaluation processes.

**Keywords:** Music education, evaluation of piano performance, musical expression, technical proficiency

## INTRODUCTION

Evaluating piano performance is essential for gauging both technical skill and artistic expression. Since music is fundamentally a performing art, evaluation plays a crucial role in musical education and professional growth. It not only highlights an individual's strengths and areas for improvement but also acts as a source of motivation and direction.

However, evaluating musical performances is inherently challenging due to the subjective nature of music. As Barry (2009/2010:247) points out, an evaluator's perception can be shaped by personal taste, background, and interpretative preferences, leading to significant variations in judgment. Moreover, evaluation criteria can shift depending on the purpose whether it be for education, competition, or professional critique. The distinction between an "ideal" and a "great" performance further complicates matters, as technical accuracy is crucial, but individuality and emotional depth are equally significant (Bar-Elli, 2004:7-8).

Another key challenge is maintaining consistency among evaluators over time. Some factors such as fatigue, leniency, or shifts in judgment can impact the fairness and reliability of evaluation, particularly in long-duration evaluations like competitions or exams. Given these complexities, analyzing evaluation criteria across different contexts can offer valuable insights into how performances are evaluated, ultimately enhancing our understanding of its role in both music education and artistic growth.

## The Importance of Evaluating Piano Performances

Evaluating piano performances is a crucial aspect of both music education and professional musicianship. Since music

inherently comes to life through performance, the piano's versatility in both solo and ensemble settings amplifies the need for structured evaluation. This process takes into account various factors, including technical proficiency, musical interpretation, stage presence, and repertoire choice, offering a systematic approach to understanding both the artistic and technical dimensions of a performance. Beyond simply measuring performance quality, evaluation provides valuable insights into an artist's growth, shaping their educational and professional journey (Holmes, 1932:23).

A thorough evaluation of musical performances must consider the unique interpretative qualities of each performance, the level of technical mastery, and the degree to which the musician remains faithful to the composer's original intent. Given the piano's extensive repertoire and technical demands, establishing clear evaluation criteria is essential to maintaining objectivity and consistency (Barry, 2009/2010:246). The way a performance balances musical expressiveness, technical precision, and stage presence plays a significant role in how it is perceived by both audiences and educators.

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## **The Role of Evaluation and Its Influence on Performance Quality**

The primary goal of performance evaluations is to provide an objective evaluation of a musician's current abilities while identifying areas for improvement, and these evaluations play a crucial role in shaping educational programs and setting clear musical goals for students. For professional musicians, they serve as strategic tools in preparing for competitions, auditions, and concert performances (Bar-Elli, 2004:7-8). Constructive feedback from evaluations has the potential to enhance motivation and directly contribute to improving performance quality.

It is suggested that objective and comprehensive evaluations encourage musicians to grow, not just in technical proficiency, but also in musical interpretation and emotional expression. The insights gained from these evaluations provide a structured framework for refining performance skills, and by recognizing strengths and pinpointing areas for improvement, musicians can establish clear goals for achieving a more polished and cohesive performance in future stages (Fiske, 1979:27).

## **Key Considerations in Evaluating a Piano Performance**

When evaluating a piano performance, it is important to consider a variety of aspects. A thorough evaluation should encompass more than just technical execution, but also elements of expressivity, interpretation, and stylistic accuracy. In academic and professional settings, a structured evaluation framework can help ensure that performances are evaluated based on objective criteria, while also allowing room for artistic individuality (Madsen & Geringer, 1976:13). The evaluation process is important not only for competitions and recitals, but also for educational purposes, where constructive feedback can help students refine their skills and develop their unique artistic voice. A well-rounded evaluation should consider both the technical aspects of playing (such as finger dexterity, rhythmic accuracy, and tonal control) and the interpretive dimensions that contribute to an engaging performance. Roberts suggests that performances should not merely replicate a score but should also communicate the artistic intentions behind the music, making the listener an active participant in the musical experience (Roberts, 1975). Building on these insights, scholarship indicates that jurors and educators often rely on a blend of analytical listening and intuitive judgment to determine the effectiveness of a performance, underscoring the need for both structured rubrics and personal musical insight in evaluations (Davidson, 1994, 2001). This perspective appears to align with a rater

behavior-centered approach that focuses on the ecological content of human judgment, including extramusical effects related to the performer, such as expressive variations (Repp, 1990, 1995). Ultimately, a successful piano performance is one that achieves a balance between technical precision and expressive communication. Pianists must demonstrate control over tempo, phrasing, articulation, and dynamic contrasts, all of which contribute to the overall impact of a piece. In the context of music performance evaluation, it is expected that adjudicators evaluate these elements consistently and fairly, ensuring that the evaluation process accurately reflects the true quality of the performance (Engelhard, 2013). Whether in the context of an academic jury, a competition, or a concert hall, the evaluation of piano performances plays a pivotal role in shaping the standards of musical excellence and guiding performers towards greater artistic maturity. The evaluation of a piano performance can be broadly categorized into two main aspects: technical proficiency and musicality.

### **a. Technical Proficiency**

It is widely acknowledged that technical proficiency is the cornerstone of effective piano performance, with a pianist's ability to play with accuracy and precision serving as the foundation for clear musical expression. When evaluating a performance, specific technical aspects (such as rhythmic accuracy, touch, articulation, and dynamic control) are taken into account. However, technique extends beyond mere precision in execution. While musical compositions are intended for performance, the act of performing itself holds aesthetic significance and can sometimes be appreciated independently of the piece being played (Mark, 1980a, 1980b). On the other hand, technical proficiency alone does not entirely determine the overall quality of a performance. Elements such as fidelity to the original composition, depth of musical interpretation, and emotional resonance with the audience are equally significant. Ideally, a performance would embody all the aesthetic and normative qualities of the composition, though this is rarely realized. In practice, many performances stand out by emphasizing distinct aesthetic characteristics or offering unique interpretations, each of which possesses its own artistic merit (Scruton, Chapter 12). Consequently, technical proficiency is just one of many essential components that contribute meaningfully to the evaluation of a performance.

It is widely acknowledged that technical proficiency is the foundation for a piano performance that is both engaging and enjoyable. A pianist's ability to play with accuracy and precision is essential for achieving clear musical expression. When evaluating technical proficiency, four key aspects are taken into consideration;

### 1. Note Accuracy and Clean Execution

In the art of piano performance, the importance of playing the correct notes cannot be overstated. It is essential for maintaining the integrity of a piece and ensuring that the composer's intentions are faithfully conveyed. When notes are played with accuracy, listeners are able to fully grasp the melodic and harmonic structures (Holmes, 1932:23). However, precision in note execution goes beyond merely striking the right keys; it also involves clarity, articulation, and tonal control. It is suggested that each note is played with a consistent touch and appropriate weight to create a well-balanced sound, which is especially important in passages that require rapid finger movements or intricate harmonic layering, where even minor inaccuracies can disrupt the overall cohesion of the piece. It is thought that a well-executed note enhances the structure of a musical phrase, allowing for smooth transitions between melodic lines and harmonic progressions.

Furthermore, precision in note execution plays a crucial role in shaping the emotional and expressive quality of a performance, and it is important for pianists to consider how each note contributes to the overall musical narrative. Research suggests that a successful performance is not solely defined by technical precision, but also by the performer's ability to shape the music expressively, utilizing phrasing, articulation, and dynamic contrast to communicate meaning beyond the written notes (Thompson & Williamon, 2003:21). For instance, in a lyrical passage, softer, more connected notes may be necessary to create a flowing, expressive character, whereas in rhythmic or percussive sections, precise articulation and dynamic control are essential for clarity. Mastering these elements ensures that a performance is technically sound and artistically compelling.

### 2. Finger Technique and Hand Coordination

Finger technique encompasses control, dexterity, and mobility across the keyboard, all of which are essential for executing passages with precision and fluidity. Well-developed finger technique allows pianists to navigate complex patterns and rapid note sequences effortlessly, ensuring clarity and articulation in performance. This skill becomes particularly crucial in virtuosic passages, where even the slightest inaccuracy can compromise the intended phrasing and overall musical coherence. Additionally, finger strength and independence enable the pianist to execute intricate embellishments, trills, and rapid scale runs with consistency, contributing to a more polished and refined interpretation. It is also worth noting that hand coordination is of great importance. If both hands are to work in perfect synchrony, this will help to maintain rhythmic accuracy and

harmonic balance. Ideally, the left hand should provide a stable harmonic foundation, while the right hand can carry the melodic line with clarity and expression (Fiske, 1979:27). Without proper coordination, the rhythmic structure may become uneven, which can cause disruptions in phrasing and musical flow. It is therefore suggested that pianists develop the ability to distribute weight and movement efficiently between hands, particularly in contrapuntal textures or passages requiring simultaneous dynamic control in both hands. By mastering finger technique and hand coordination, pianists may achieve greater technical command and expressive depth in their performances.

### 3. Rhythm and Tempo Control

Rhythm is widely considered to be the structural foundation of music, and achieving consistency in rhythmic execution is therefore of great importance. It has been suggested that irregularities in rhythm have the potential to obscure the natural flow of a piece, which may in turn affect its overall coherence. Tempo control, whether maintaining a steady speed or implementing intentional fluctuations (such as *ritardando* or *accelerando*), is believed by some to play a vital role in shaping musical interpretation, and when applied thoughtfully, these tempo variations have the potential to contribute to a performance's expressive unity. Some scholars have suggested that performers use expressive timing not as a deviation but as an essential tool to shape the phrasing and emotional character of a musical work (Epstein, 1995:35). Such flexibility in tempo can enhance the sense of movement and tension within a piece, reinforcing the listener's engagement and deepening the artistic expression. It has been suggested that subtle variations in timing, often employed by experienced performers, influence how a composition is perceived, shaping its emotional weight and structural clarity. This concept aligns with the idea that tempo adjustments, including *rubato* and gradual accelerations, can create a sense of anticipation or resolution in a musical passage. A carefully executed tempo change has the potential to guide the listener through different expressive states, reinforcing the music's dramatic impact while maintaining its structural integrity.

### 4. Dynamic and Articulation Skills

It is suggested that dynamics (*p*, *mp*, *mf*, *f* etc.) play a crucial role in conveying emotional depth and musical contrast, and that a pianist should strive to execute dynamic shifts with precision and control to bring out expressive nuances effectively. Articulation techniques, including *legato*, *staccato*, and *tenuto*, could be said to further define the character of a piece (Levinson, 1987:75). For instance, a theme played with *staccato* articulation can create a sharp, detached effect,

while the same theme played legato can produce a smoother, more connected sound. Thus, it could be said that technical proficiency encompasses the nuanced application of dynamics and articulation, and not just speed or accuracy. Evaluating technical proficiency involves a combination of objective criteria and subjective interpretation by educators or jury members. In academic settings, detailed technical analysis can help students refine their skills and address weaknesses. In professional contexts, a pianist's technical command can have a significant influence on their artistic reputation and career standing.

## **b. Musicality**

It could be said that musicality embodies the artistic and emotional essence of a performance, and while technical accuracy is essential, merely playing the correct notes does not guarantee a compelling interpretation. A performance that lacks expressiveness may sound mechanical, failing to engage the listener on a deeper level. The ability to convey emotion, dramatic structure, and expressive depth is just as crucial in creating a meaningful musical experience. A skilled performer may use phrasing, dynamics, and subtle timing adjustments to bring out the character of a piece, allowing it to resonate with the audience in a more profound way (Bar-Elli, 2004:7-8). It could be said that musicality is not just about the performer's emotional engagement, but also about their understanding of the stylistic and structural aspects of the composition. Each musical era, from Baroque to Romantic, carries distinct interpretative expectations that influence articulation, tempo flexibility, and dynamic contrast, and a pianist must navigate these stylistic nuances while maintaining a balance between technical precision and expressive freedom. When these elements are thoughtfully combined, they contribute to a performance that is both technically refined and artistically compelling. Musicality can be analyzed through the following key elements;

### **1. Expressive Power and Emotional Interpretation**

It is possible that a performance which lacks expression, no matter how technically flawless, may come across as somewhat flat or uninspiring. It is possible that mechanical playing, devoid of emotional intent, may fail to captivate the audience and diminish the impact of even the most beautifully written compositions. It is suggested that pianists should strive to strike a balance between precision and expressiveness, ensuring that their performance is both accurate and emotionally resonant. By thoughtfully incorporating subtle expressive gestures and shaping phrases with intention, a musician can perhaps breathe life into a piece, making it truly memorable and impactful.

### **2. Style Knowledge and Adaptation to Period Characteristics:**

The piano repertoire is extensive and spans various musical eras, each with its own stylistic characteristics and performance practices, which pianists may wish to consider when delivering interpretations that align with the conventions of the time period while also allowing for personal artistic expression. For example, interpreting a Baroque composition (such as works by Bach or Handel) requires a different approach than performing a romantic piece (by composers like Chopin or Liszt). While Baroque music is often characterized by clarity, ornamentation, and a steady rhythmic flow, Romantic music allows for greater flexibility in phrasing, dynamic contrast, and expressive freedom.

Herndon (1987:456) states that understanding the period styles of the pieces being studied is an important factor in preserving the authenticity of the work and respecting the composer's original intentions. For instance, the proper execution of ornaments such as trills, mordents, and appoggiaturas in Baroque music is said to be essential for capturing the stylistic essence of the era. Similarly, the effective application of rubato in Romantic compositions is believed to enhance the emotional depth of a performance, allowing for expressive fluctuations in tempo that reflect the dramatic nature of the music. A pianist's ability to navigate these stylistic nuances is said to demonstrate both technical skill and historical understanding, elevating the overall quality of their interpretation.

### **3. Phrasing and Breathing**

One of the core aspects of musicality is phrasing, the art of shaping melodic and rhythmic structures into expressive, meaningful units, and this is similar to reading a passage with proper punctuation and emphasis. Well-defined phrasing has the potential to enhance the natural flow of music, making it more engaging and coherent. "Breathing" in piano playing refers not only to physical pauses but also to subtle moments of hesitation or separation between phrases (Fiske, 1979:28). These micro-pauses contribute to a more natural, expressive delivery, preventing the performance from sounding mechanical.

### **4. Dynamic Variety and Use of Contrast**

It is thought that dynamic control plays a crucial role in musical expression, with a piece potentially beginning with a soft, delicate passage (*pianissimo*) and building up to an intense, powerful climax (*forte*), with the aim of creating a compelling dramatic effect. It has been suggested that skillful application of dynamic contrasts keeps the listener engaged and enhances the emotional impact of the music (Johnson, 1997:4). However, it is important to note that excessive loudness

without variation can diminish expressiveness, making the performance feel monotonous. It is suggested that a pianist's ability to navigate the full dynamic spectrum contributes to the overall depth and authenticity of their interpretation. Musicality and technical proficiency are deeply intertwined, and while technical flaws can limit expressive potential, it is thought that technical perfection alone does not guarantee an emotionally engaging performance. It is suggested that a truly remarkable interpretation emerges when both elements are balanced, allowing for a performance that is not only precise but also deeply expressive (Levinson, 1987:75).

It is also worth considering that a pianist's impact extends beyond technical precision and musical expressiveness, and that elements such as stage presence, performance presentation and repertoire selection become equally vital in shaping a compelling artistic identity. These aspects influence how the audience perceives the performer and contribute to the overall effectiveness of a musical interpretation, making a performance more immersive, engaging and memorable.

### **Stage Presence, Performance Presentation, and Repertoire Selection**

It is important to acknowledge the significant influence that a performer's stage presence and confidence have on audience perception, which in turn shapes the overall impact of a performance. From the moment a musician steps on stage until the final note, their demeanor, body language and level of engagement play a crucial role. A musician who exudes confidence has been shown to enhance the listener's experience, whereas visible nervousness (such as hesitant movements or anxious expressions) has the potential to detract from even the most technically flawless performance. Players are often evaluated not only on their musical abilities but also on noticeable stage attributes such as posture, stage movement, and overall presentation, which can sometimes influence an audience's perception more than purely musical elements (Bar-Elli, 2004:13). Beyond technical execution, effective stage presentation includes facial expressions, gestures, posture, and an ability to direct the audience's focus toward the music. Some musicologists argue that performance is not only an auditory but also a visual and social experience, meaning that a strong stage presence enhances both emotional expression and listener engagement (Wesolowski, Wind, & Engelhard, 2017:75-76). Professionalism on stage extends to pre-performance preparation, etiquette, and post-performance acknowledgments, all of which contribute to an artist's credibility and audience admiration.

It is worth considering that the selection of repertoire is another vital aspect of a polished and compelling performance, and that a well-balanced program should ideally

align with the performer's technical and artistic strengths, ensuring consistency and expressive depth. Some scholars have suggested that the way a performance is structured and programmed may have an effect on audience reception, as the order and variety of pieces can shape the overall musical experience (Herndon, 1987:79). While students may benefit from repertoire that supports technical progression, professional artists use their selections to shape their artistic identity. Choosing pieces that match one's skill level has the potential to enhance the coherence and overall quality of a performance.

### **Performance Evaluation and Repertoire Planning**

#### **Program Flow and Repertoire Integrity**

It is thought that a well-structured performance program enhances audience engagement by creating a cohesive and immersive experience. In concerts or recitals, the sequence of pieces should be carefully considered to maintain listener interest and ensure smooth emotional and stylistic transitions. For example, a sudden shift from a Baroque composition to a modern piece may create an intriguing contrast or disrupt the overall flow. Thoughtful programming strengthens recital coherence and highlights the performer's interpretative approach. The quality of a pianist's repertoire can reflect their musical identity and technical capacity, and establishing connections between selected works can enhance program fluidity. Therefore, performance evaluation extends beyond evaluating individual pieces, as it also considers the effectiveness of the entire program as a unified artistic statement (Johnson, 1997:4).

### **Variation in Performance Evaluation Based on Context**

Performance evaluation criteria vary depending on the context, as different settings prioritize distinct artistic and technical aspects. A piano performance may be presented in an academic exam, a competition, a professional concert, or a student recital, each with unique evaluation standards.

- **Exam Performances:** Conducted in academic institutions or conservatories, exam performances evaluate a student's progress over time. Evaluations focus on alignment with educational goals, demonstration of technical skills, and overall musical development. Because exams are part of a learning process, minor errors may be tolerated if the student demonstrates artistic growth (Wesolowski, Wind, Engelhard, 2017:75-76).
- **Competition Performances:** In high-stakes competitions, performers must exhibit technical brilliance

and artistic originality. Beyond accuracy, juries seek expressive depth, individuality, and a captivating interpretation. Research indicates that evaluation in competitions is often influenced not only by technical precision but also by broader aspects such as stage presence, confidence, and performance style, which can differentiate one musician from another (Ryan & Costa-Giomi, 2004:141).

- **Recital Performances:** Student recitals offer young musicians an opportunity to gain stage experience, manage performance anxiety, and receive constructive feedback. Errors are expected as part of the learning process, and evaluations focus on progress rather than perfection. In contrast, professional recitals demand technical mastery and deep artistic interpretation, where even minor imperfections are subject to critical scrutiny (Merriam, 1964:58). In all contexts, performance evaluation is a balance of technical accuracy, artistic expression, and the ability to engage an audience. Whether in an exam, competition, or recital, a musician's interpretative choices and stage presence shape the overall effectiveness of their performance.

## Recital Performances

### Student Recitals

Student recitals play a crucial role in music education, offering young musicians an opportunity to experience live performance and build confidence. Evaluations in this setting may be conducted by teachers, a jury, or even through audience feedback. The primary focus is on tracking technical and musical progress (Barry, 2009/2010:246-248).

Since errors are considered part of the learning process, feedback in student recitals is often constructive and encouraging. These performances help students develop stage presence, manage performance anxiety, and gain valuable real-world experience.

### Professional Artist Recitals

For professional musicians, recitals demand technical perfection and profound artistic interpretation. Audiences expect not only precise execution but also a deeply personal and emotive performance (Johnson, 1997:4).

Professional recitals often feature diverse repertoire selections spanning various styles and historical periods. A well-structured concert program enhances audience engagement by offering a cohesive musical journey. However, with higher artistic expectations come stricter evaluations, every nuance is subject to critique, and even minor imperfections can attract attention.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study tentatively suggests that the criteria used to evaluate piano performance can vary depending on the context in which it is taking place. For instance, in examinations, the emphasis is often on technical proficiency and interpretative growth, while in competitions, the focus is more on achieving artistic and technical excellence. In contrast, recitals provide a platform for musicians to develop their artistic identity and stage presence. These findings appear to align with the research by Barry (2009/2010) and Bar-Elli (2004), who emphasize the subjective nature of performance evaluation and the balance between technical accuracy and artistic expression. Furthermore, the study appears to support the conclusions of Wesolowski, Wind, and Engelhard (2017), who suggest that structured rubrics and quantitative evaluation methods enhance reliability. However, the presence of subjective biases in jury evaluation remains a challenge (Barry2009/2010), underscoring the necessity for more sophisticated evaluation frameworks that promote fairness and artistic appreciation. Beyond the evaluation criteria, performance evaluations can influence musicians' motivation, with constructive feedback playing a pivotal role in artistic development (Fiske, 1979; Johnson, 1997), while inconsistent or overly critical evaluation can potentially hinder confidence. Therefore, evaluations in both academic and professional settings should ideally strive to be objective yet supportive. In conclusion, piano performance evaluation is a fundamental aspect of music education and career progression. Ensuring consistency and fairness requires well-structured methodologies that balance technical skill, artistic interpretation, and stage presence. This study contributes to a broader understanding of effective evaluation practices in piano performance.

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