EXPLORING THE CONCEPT OF FREEDOM IN A STRICTLY NOTATED SCORE THROUGH THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH METHOD: CASE STUDY – KARLHEINZ STOCKHAUSEN'S *KLAVIERSTÜCK I*

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Abstract

Autoethnography is a research method that focuses on the researcher's personal experiences and, through the analysis of experiences, can contribute to a fuller understanding of a phenomenon on a wider cultural level. In music, personal experience, whilst unique, can be a relatable and reliable source for the community. I am researching the individual – myself – to show my perspectives and share my experiences with others. In this article, I aim to show how the autoethnographic research method, applied to the rather technical research question of how to understand and practice a strictly notated score, can lead to an attempt to understand the meaning of freedom in musical interpretation. The article presents my own research project, with the methodology and analytical process of the data, and describes one example of the practical work conducted in my research with the piano pieces of Karlheinz Stockhausen. I aim to examine the understanding of freedom in musical interpretation and discuss why precise notation that at first might not give an impression of free interpretation possibilities can in fact be an interesting way of finding oneself and one's personal approach.

Keywords: *autoethnographic research, Stockhausen, interpretation, freedom, strictly notated score*.

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CULTURE CROSSROADS

Introduction

The concept of freedom in the interpretation of a notated score will have as many definitions as there are people in a room. It is beyond the scope of this article to include the variety of philosophical understandings of the concept of freedom, even when limiting these to the context of music the concept can have many definitions. However, freedom is something we talk about in music on a daily basis and is a difficult concept that a musician has to embody and understand already from a young age. When turning to literature sources on piano playing, the word "freedom" is used without much definition, with the expectation that the reader will understand it automatically within the context. Heinrich Neuhaus, in his monumental work *The Art of Piano Playing*, uses the same word "freedom" both to describe the physical aspects of piano playing, such as relaxing stiff muscles [Neuhaus 1973: 98] or freedom of the arm and wrist [Neuhaus 1973: 69], and to characterize the connection between the musical confidence and the freedom of interpretation [Neuhaus 1973: 88]. Pianists form their own understanding of "freedom" through years of practicing their instruments and work on it with every new piece. The danger is that they tend to find a comfortable understanding of the concept of freedom that stays with them throughout their musical journey, while at the same time being intimidated by the philosophical weight of the concept. In this article, I want to show how my own understanding of freedom has shifted from literal *rubato* and the concept of interpretation to being a feeling of having control of my own mind, my decisions and the end result of a piece. I will discuss how autoethnographic research and being able to look at my practice as a research tool have liberated me to see freedom even in a score whose notation can at first seem limiting and even to require a literal, mathematical and almost scientific approach to the practice methods.

In order to get into the mind of a musician who applies autoethnographic research, and since the research is heavily structured around this musician, I will describe my artistic research project and explain the ways that autoethnography and the analysis of autoethnographic data are reflected in my research process. I will define some of the main concepts and methods of my research, focusing specifically on autoethnography as a research method and phenomenology as an analytical tool. In this article, I will also include one very specific example of a practice approach that I came across in my work and look at it not from the perspective of a practice process but from the point of view of a pianist who has to execute this method on a daily basis. The example will be taken from *Klavierstück I* (1953) by Karlheinz Stockhausen and will lead to the exploration of the concept of interpretation and the analysis of the possibility of interpretation within a precisely notated score. Finally, I will share my conclusions and the discoveries that I made when going through this unusual process and show how I ended up seeing musical freedom from a new perspective.

I am a pianist dedicated to the performance of post-tonal and contemporary music. My current artistic research project consists of the artistic component of a concert series and a monograph that focuses on the specific problems presented in the concert series. The series includes five thematical concerts focusing on the artistical and technical realization of the pianist's many roles in contemporary music. The concerts explore the development of the pianist's role from the middle of the 20th century and follow the change in the understanding of the piano, piano playing and the pianist as a person and an interpreter during the past 70 years through the works of Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928–2007), Pierre Boulez (1925–2016) and Morton Feldman (1926–1987), all three of whom, while belonging to different aesthetic compositional schools, were commonly inspired by one composer – Anton Webern [Griffiths 2005: 152, 186]. They widened the demands of piano playing in their own ways, while at the same time expanding the pianist's roles and abilities – for example, the precise mathematical counting of rhythms, reading graphic scores, adding theatrical elements to the performance and simply expanding the understanding of listening to silence.

The goal of this monograph is to write a practical guide for pianists, introducing them to the practice methods of Karlheinz Stockhausen's piano music, focusing on the *Klavierstücke* written for the acoustic piano, totaling 14 piano pieces. I want to offer possibilities for the first steps of learning to help navigate these complicated scores. With that, my goal is not only to help with the music of Stockhausen but, through those methods and techniques, to present pianists with the tools they can use to learn more contemporary and even more complex repertoire.

I divided my research process into two stages: gaining background knowledge and autoethnographic reflection. Even though I want to research interpretation possibilities and performance practices through my own practice, I need the background material to make sure that the musical decisions I make are informed. I am relying on archive materials, Stockhausen's books and articles, lectures and conversations with musicians who worked with Stockhausen personally. In my practical guide for pianists, I am also aiming to give a certain level of background information of the pieces, but in my own words and not overpowering readers with technical or analytical information.

The main phase of my research is autoethnographic research. My autoethnographic data consist of practice diaries, recordings of practicing, markings in my score, creative writing, memories and recollections. I am focusing on the process of practice, the experience gained through it and the guidance of my own emotions, trials and errors throughout the process.

Autoethnography

There is no overall definition for autoethnography, but *Autoethnography. Understanding Qualitative Research* by Adams, Jones and Ellis [2015] put together several definitions that can be used as an approach to this research method. The definitions that I tend to lean into when defining autoethnography are the ones that state that it is a research method that "*uses the researcher's personal experiences to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices and experiences*" and that "*uses deep and careful self-reflection – typically referred to as "reflectivity"– to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political*" [Adams et al. 2015: 2]. What I particularly like about these definitions is the emphasis on using personal experience to examine wider cultural issues, which is also a part of an inductive qualitative research method, which autoethnography is. The term "inductive research method" here is very important – I produce a research result that is applicable on a larger scale [Lodico et al. 2010: 10]. In my case, I identify a problem in a piece of music that becomes relatable to the wider audience. Thus, my problem and the solution become a phenomenon. In my journey to understand autoethnography and the ways of exploring my own experience, I rely on the works of Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner. Just as they stated in their work about the researcher as a subject, what I am doing is "*an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural*" [Ellis, Bochner 2000: 739]. I write "*a story about the past, not the past itself*" [Ellis, Bochner 2000: 745] – I do not just analyse what I have done but recollect how it felt, how it affected me, my playing, my understanding of the piece and of the experience the music brings me. I focus on my own transformation in the hope that it will help others to transform and gain power over their playing experiences.

I found a small poem or rather an autoethnographic diary entry in a chapter in *Autoethnography Handbook* written by Kitrina Douglas and David Carless, and in my opinion, it is a poetic yet extremely precise and concrete description of autoethnography as a research method.

So you read my words
Sketched on the page
And learned of entanglement
Well, here now is my flesh
What say you, as I sing my song?
Where do you belong? [Douglas, Carless 2013: 93]

So you read my words sketched on the page – here, we have a verbalization of the experience written down; *And learnt of entanglement* – we learn through the detailed analysis and understanding of the experience; *Well, here is my flesh* – autoethnography

sometimes digs into deep places and reaches the most vulnerable moments, leaving the researcher rather open to the public; *What say you, as I sing my song* – the authors call to the reader to self-reflect, to relate and to resonate; and finally, *Where do you belong* – positioning a personal experience and the analysis of such as a part of the cultural phenomenon within a larger understanding of the world (in my case, the world of contemporary music).

Phenomenology as an analytical tool

Phenomenology is a tool to analyse my autoethnographic data. As I am a pianist focusing primarily on physical awareness during the practice process of pieces, the notions of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his focus on the body as a source of knowing the world are the primary source of my inspiration. While in his writings Merleau-Ponty focuses on the senses, body and perception in the literal manner, I find it inspiring to think of these concepts from the perspective of my own research. Merleau-Ponty states that "*I consider my body, which is my point of view upon the world, as one of the objects of that world*" [Merleau-Ponty 2012: 73], which when practically applied to my own research can suggest that when I practice piano pieces, I should not look at the music from the point of view of an outsider but, on the contrary, I experience them as a member of the piano playing world, seeing myself as one with the traditions of piano playing and the pianist community and using those past experiences to bounce off when creating practice methods and suggestions for problem solving in music. By clearly identifying myself as part of the classical piano world, I can better "infiltrate" and see the issues in the piano pieces from the perception of a classically trained pianist and not only from the perception of a pianist who is experienced in post-tonal and contemporary music practice, which might easily make the research data analysis alienating. For me, the most important point from Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is the notion of the **me** being influenced by time and surroundings – by experiences – thus, navigating the discovery through the prism of the experienced moulding [Merleau-Ponty 2012: 228] – in my case, within the community of classical pianists. His elegant expression about being "*unmade and remade with time*" is how I think about myself in the piano tradition [Merleau-Ponty 2012: 228]. My knowledge, my skills and my abilities were shaped and developed within the classical piano culture, which is also a background for most of my future readers. By acknowledging that, I can focus on the challenges in the pieces that would be the challenges unique to only contemporary music performance practice or what I call universal challenges. Additionally, I have to consider the fact that, as much as I was shaped by the classical piano culture, I have now had years of diversion into contemporary music, making me different from my target audience. This thought serves as a second filter for the challenges. For example, I consider whether the problem is due to my own physical limitations, such as smaller hands; if I did not notice some

issues in the piece due to my experience with contemporary music; if I learned the piece quickly, because I had just learnt a similar piece; or if this issue could be solved with traditional piano playing skills or is unique to new music performance practice.

Case study – *Klavierstück I* (1952)

Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Klavierstück I* is one of his four piano pieces composed between 1952 and 1953. These pieces can be seen as the composer's journey and an example of creativity within point and group composition [Harvey 1975: 21]. *Klavierstück I* is a mathematically calculated piece that was composed with measurements and relationships, not around the instrument [Stockhausen 1963: 74]. These measurements create a complex score, where the pitches define their relationships with dynamics, rhythms, chordal arrangements and durations [Harvey 1975: 23]. This is reflected in the strictness of the notation. The score gives an overwhelming amount of information, which is detailed and fills each moment of the piece (Figure 1). Almost each pitch has a determined dynamic and exact length. To me, strict notation like this can be approached in a reversed way: as the pianist Ian Pace simply yet elegantly put in his article, it is not necessary for the composer to focus on expressing what to do but "*telling the performer what* ***not*** *to do*" [Pace 2009: 155]. As much as the score here dictates the instructions for almost every pitch, it is indeed easier to determine what not to do in the piece – to me, this was to not be free and to try to calculate, precisely execute and endlessly count.

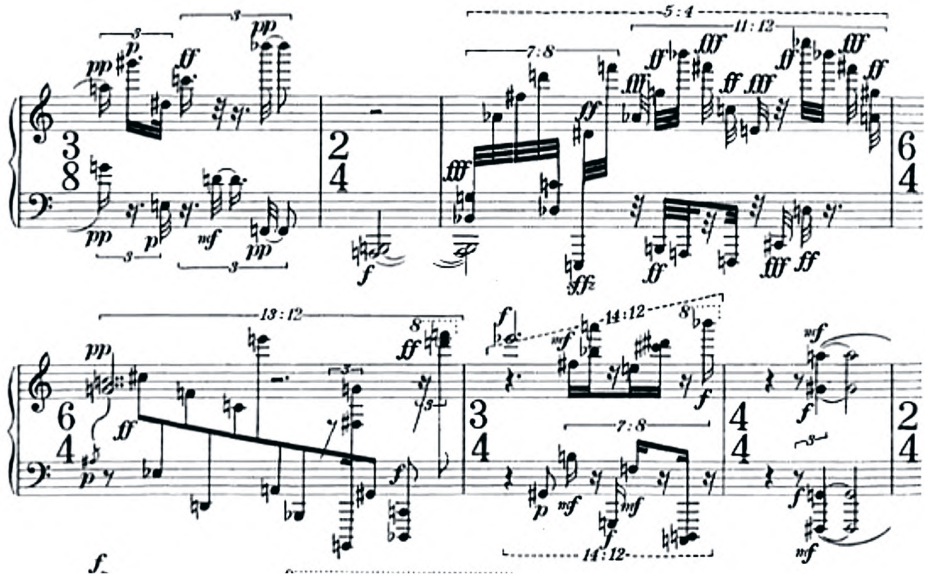

Figure 1. Example of the strict notation in *Klavierstück I* [Stockhausen 1954].

I determined the two types of practice issues: the issues that are only characteristic for this piece and the more traditional pianistic issues that the pianist would face in practicing traditional classical music. The issues unique to the piece, from the point of view of a traditional classical music performer, would be the complex polyrhythms, sudden dynamic changes and the precision of note lengths. More traditional issues would be fast jumps between pitches – something that pianists face in many classical pieces – and colouring chords with different dynamics (perhaps in traditional music, dynamical colouration is not as extreme, but it is one of the tools the pianist would possess anyway, with each finger playing a slightly different dynamic within one chord). The polyrhythmic proportions in the score are marked either with dashed brackets or traditional straight-line brackets. In the short introduction in the score, Stockhausen writes that the time proportions marked under the dashed brackets can be seen as tempo changes [Stockhausen 1954], meaning that the pianist must calculate the tempos for each section under the brackets.

I had to learn to tackle the issue of the calculated tempo ratios. I got the information on how to do the calculations from the work of such pianists as Ellen Corver [2018] and Jürg Henneberger [2021]. In order to execute the polyrhythms, I have to calculate a tempo for each ratio block, making sure that I execute the note lengths and tempo changes as precisely as possible. I will show the calculation process that I followed with the first bar as an example (Figure 2). I calculate the speed of each eighth-note depending on the ratio mentioned in the bracket above the bar. In this piece, the pianist chooses their own basic tempo based on the possibility of the execution of the faster passages. My basic tempo is 80 for an eighth note. In a bar, we have 11 eighth notes that need to be played in the time of 10, meaning that the speed of eighth notes with this ratio is 80:10 × 11 = 88. This gives us the tempo for the first six eighth notes. Since there is another bracket of 7:5, we calculate the speed of the following 7 eighth notes by dividing 88 by 5 and multiplying it by 7, resulting in 123. Within a bar, we go from 88 to 123, starting with fewer notes and ending in more pitches; thus, we have a written-out accelerando.

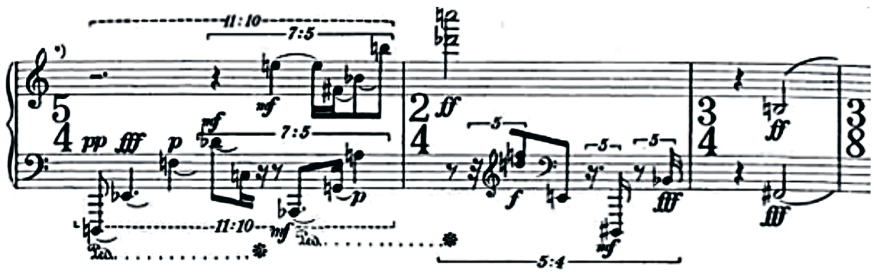

Figure 2. First line including the first bar of the *Klavierstück I* [Stockhausen 1954].

I had to do this with every single bar that had polyrhythm bracket indications, which was most of the bars. In order to be able to practice these tempo changes as precisely as possible, I had to create my own metronome in the Click Tracker app, which made it possible to change tempos easily and practice in slower or faster tempos if needed; however, keeping the original tempo ratios.

This was just an example of the process of practicing, but it can be seen that it was very technical, mathematical, straight-forward and in the end very mechanical. I had to count and practice dynamic changes by training my muscles to do so; since the tempos were so fast, I had no time to listen, and so I just had to train my muscles to execute. I had to constantly count in order to ensure the precision of the note lengths and tempo changes. I was counting in my head, subdividing each beat into smaller values in order to make sure that a note was exactly as long as notated. As the tempos were quick, my goal in this aspect as well was to train my fingers and arms to lift at the exact time, not overlapping with the notes, and to make sure that no pitch was too long or too short. I had no freedom in tempo, dynamics or specifically in phrasing since, due to the compositional method of the piece, there was no such thing. I was constantly striving for execution and perfection. This led me to become a machine – an automatized player, who had to perform hundreds of repeats of each bar every day, constantly striving for precision and a religious approach to the score. Additionally, whenever I listened to the recordings of other pianists, such as David Tudor [1994], who worked closely with Stockhausen for decades, I would realize that my playing still sounded very different – I wasn't as fast, I couldn't hear his tempo ratios clearly, and thus I was constantly doubting myself.

Autoethnography as self-reflection and self-approval

I always thought of myself as a soulful pianist. I loved listening to silences, to dynamics and to the resonances of the instrument. I strive to hear music where others do not necessarily hear it, and I enjoy playing just because I enjoy being around the piano. However, this time, I realized that I didn't experience any of those things. Here is a note from my practice diary that appeared at the peak of my learning process of the piece.

> *I feel as I am drowning in the numbers, the self-criticism and the constant aim for precision. Someone asked me today how I interpret this music, and I couldn't understand the question. I literally forgot that I too exist within the piece. All I am doing is focusing on the precision, aiming for perfection, analysing, recording, listening, comparing myself to David Tudor. My brain doesn't feel anything, my ears feel useless. I don't listen, I only execute* [Karen 2022].

After writing that and seeing it on the page, I realized that my issue was that the score, the pitches and the music had taken power over my mind. I was empty and numb. I was unlearning all the aspects of music I used to enjoy and becoming only focused on the technique. At the same time, I knew that the approach that I had taken with the calculations and striving for precision was the right one. **I didn't want** to do anything freely in the piece – **I didn't want** to not calculate, not count and not automatize. Suddenly, with the conscious thought of understanding my choices, I achieved the feeling of "I have done enough". I realized that my interpretation of the piece is in fact **my** interpretation. I chose to be precise, I chose to be pedantic, I chose to count and, in the end, I chose to be a machine. Even aside from the compositional technique of the piece leading to that method of practice, more importantly, **I wanted** to do it this way. I didn't want to cheat and use approximations in the tempo relations. My willingness and my obedience to the score became in fact a form of interpretation because it was a choice made with an aware and conscious mind.

Interestingly, I still played in the same way. Musically, my playing didn't change, as I still gladly followed the metronome, practiced the precision of the dynamic execution and took control over the note lengths. I still didn't sound exactly like any other recording; however, now just seeing myself working on the precision and seeing the striving for precision that I had never experienced before with quite that intensity as a way of interpreting and a way of making the piece my own made my practice process relaxed, accepting and joyful. The sounding result might not have changed, but my goals when practicing the piece had a deeper meaning: the practice process of counting, calculating and sticking to the score became an interpretation in itself. I saw interpretation as a choice, and I made those choices; thus, I was indeed interpreting. Interestingly, I returned to Neuhaus and the basic concepts of freedom and found another understanding of the word, which was tied exactly to what I was experiencing – executing the rhythmical elements as strictly as possible with great discipline leading to such freedom, where the smallest shift in disciplined rhythmical execution has the most powerful effect. [Neuhaus 1973: 32].

To me, freedom always meant *rubato* and often had to do with tempo or articulation or the way I would read *urtexts* of the pieces. However, through my experience with Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke*, freedom showed itself as a state of mind – the strength to make decisions and the state of awareness. Today, to me, musical freedom is gaining control and discipline over my own way of thinking and understanding something and most importantly validating it for myself.

At the same time, I was thinking why this understanding of freedom manifested itself in such a strong way in my mind. Why was I so relieved to see that freedom, to experience that feeling and for the first time not to be **afraid** to be free and to make choices? I instinctively made a connection with my own self as a classically trained

pianist – did I like being free in traditional classical music? Did I enjoy playing Bach from the *urtext*? Did I like playing *rubato* in Chopin? I did not. Because all these "freedoms" would mean that, no matter what freedom I took or decision I made, it was open for the widest range of criticism, and I would immediately feel the heaviness of tradition. Was it the fear of criticism from my traditional classical music performance days that lead me to have an anxiety-like reaction to the concept of "freedom"? After all, it takes a lot of bravery to interpret and present your own version of a piece, especially as a young pianist. Aiming to play the piece as closely to the notated score as possible means that, when I succeed in doing that, I have built an armour against the critics. I take away the pressure of interpretation and put it fully on the score and the composer's expressions notated in the score. This is another conscious choice that I make, which yet again gives me an empowering feeling of freedom of choice and decision making. Interestingly, I can still be criticised for making that choice, but psychologically, I feel protected against the criticism towards my interpretation. Inside, I know that I have done everything I could and what was asked of me, because my choices were informed and literally calculated.

Even though every pianist is different, we travel a similar path when becoming professional musicians. We do similar exercises, work on the same standard repertoire and indeed all face the same problems of interpreting *urtexts*, playing *rubatos* and adding our own flavour in our pedaling. This made me think that perhaps it could be healthy and even somewhat therapeutic for all classical musicians to step outside the conventional impressions of what freedom is in music and try to redefine it and search for it in the most unconventional places, such as a precisely notated score that at first glance does not give much freedom at all. This view of freedom and seeing interpretation as a choice or state of awareness were my epiphanies in this process. As an autoethnographic researcher, my goal is to share these epiphanies [Ellis, Adams, Bochner 2010: 4]. I experience and write about my experience in order to create relatable content for other pianists and musicians, which makes me a process and a product of research in one [Ellis, Adams, Bochner 2010: 1].

Conclusion

It is impossible to redefine the concept of freedom without first actually defining the concept of freedom for oneself. Freedom will mean something slightly different to each classical pianist, but due to their similar backgrounds in training, repertoire and education structure, we all will have something similar uniting our common understanding of musical freedom. That is one of the reasons why autoethnography as a research method is valuable for music research. Opening up more personal and unique meanings of deep musical concepts will help us to find a common ground for difficult definitions. At the same time, those whose experiences are different or those

who have found new ways of looking at the traditional understandings can bring something new to think about for the community. At the same time, open discussion about freedom, interpretation, execution, control and other daunting philosophical questions can help to release the stigma and heaviness around those concepts and open up a light and lively discussion amongst the musicians, sharing the good and the bad when embodying these concepts in practice.

As an autoethnographic researcher, my writing aims to engage a wider audience through accessible descriptions of my working process to ensure the connectivity between the personal and cultural domains [Ellis, Adams, Bochner 2010: 5]. I want my work to resonate and to support. When reading my story, did you know what I am talking about when I said I feel like a machine – numb, empty or even bored? Did you feel my desperation? Did you feel seen? Are you a young pianist demanding 101% of yourself and who has forgotten what music means to you? This might not even be slightly related to the topic of tempo relation calculations or the desperation around a lack of freedom in anything; it can be any other challenge around the keyboard that numbs your brain and puts you in a trance of constant repeats. What I want to show is perhaps not how to just deal with the issue and move forward but how, when facing a wall, to see a problem not as a problem but as an opportunity to let go of the known and find a new angle and a new approach. The idea of awareness of choice, the willingness to choose to be a machine, to calculate and to be as close to the score as possible in the end is of course not a new definition of freedom, but it is **a new view of a possibility of approaching** freedom, to be in control, to be empowered by that new possibility and to see freedom from a different angle – freedom not as "I can do anything", but freedom as "I know what I am doing and where I am going".

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