

# Transfer of meaning from the educator to the student in piano interpretation within the framework of the constructionist perspective

Fahrettin Eren Yahşi

Assoc.Prof., Fahrettin Eren Yahşi, Anadolu University, State Conservatory, Music Department, Eskisehir, Turkiye. Email: feyahsi@anadolu.edu.tr ORCID: 0000-0001-8983-4615

DOI 10.12975/rastmd.20231122 Submitted December 28, 2022 Accepted April 26, 2023

## Abstract

This research analyzes the concept of meaning from a constructionist perspective. From this perspective, while trying to determine how meaning is constructed and conveyed in piano interpretation, the study determined three different categories of meaning as a framework. One can list these categories as aesthetic meaning, symbolic meaning, and pragmatic meaning. In the aesthetic meaning category, music is essentially analyzed in terms of its formal qualities, that is, its immutable characteristics as indicated on the note. Researchers who analyze music based on this category often argue that music carries its meaning. The second category, symbolic meaning, refers to the symbolic meanings attributed to music in relation to the cultural context to which it belongs. Within the framework of this category of meaning, people also consider music in terms of its aesthetic qualities, but the focus is the meanings attributed to music by individuals or societies. The third and final category, pragmatic meaning, is directly related to how one uses music. Within the framework of pragmatic meaning, people base music analysis on the functional uses of music, and they analyze the other two categories accordingly. Here, in line with the brief definitions of the categories of meaning, this study examines the construction and transfer of meaning in piano interpretation with examples from selected works by Ludwig van Beethoven, Frederic Chopin, and Sergei Rachmaninoff. Beethoven's No. 23 Piano Sonata "Appassionata" is characterized by the concept of contrast based on the fate motif; Chopin's Op. 31, No. 2 Scherzo is characterized by serenity and calmness; and Rachmaninoff's Op. 33 Etude No. 8 is characterized based on fairytale-like storytelling. These examples, interpreted according to the requirements of notation and edition, do not vary fundamentally because there is no information on the notes that contribute to the interpretation and explain the subject of the piece. However, the information we have about the composers' works has shown us that more meaning can be attributed to the work beyond the interpretation suggestions on the notation. These attributed meanings act as a suggestion for the interpreter. However, since interpretation is directly related to the individual's qualities, these examples of suggestive meaning do not have a given and fixed structure; they vary from person to person.

## Keywords

*Beethoven, Chopin, constructionist perspective, meaning, piano interpretation, Rachmaninoff*

## Introduction

One of the most important factors underlying the survival of Western Classical Music as a centuries-old tradition is its institutionalized structure. One of the crucial components of this structure is conservatories, which provide a basis for the transfer of knowledge from generation to generation. In these institutions, where interpretation and productivity are the basis, education is carried out in a way that can be defined as a master-apprentice relationship. This form of education in

question allows for the emergence of different meaning integrities due to the nature of the master-apprentice relationship. This situation is supported by the differences in the individual creative processes of both the educator and the student. The knowledge transferred from the educator to the student passes through the student's filter and turns into a new product. One of the most important factors in this process is the meaning constructed by the interpreters, whom we consider educators and students.

As Meyer states in the introduction to his book "Emotion and Meaning in Music" (1956), "composers and performers from all cultures, theorists from different schools and styles, aestheticians and critics from many different perspectives agree that music has meaning and that this meaning is somehow communicated to both participants and listeners. [...] But what constitutes musical meaning and the processes by which it is communicated have been the subject of numerous and often heated debates. In this context, one can speak of a fundamental difference of opinion and two groups with different tendencies" (1956, p.1). "On the one hand, there are those who argue that music is only a collection of sounds and should not have any meaning beyond that (absolute music)" (Kutluk, 2022, p.84), "on the other hand, there are those who argue that music should have a program, that music reaches its true function when it tells, describes, and expresses something" (Kutluk, 2022, p.84-85). Meyer calls these two groups "absolutist" and "referentialist" (1956, p.1). The first group, as in Kutluk's definition, "consists of those who insist that musical meaning lies solely in the context of the work itself, in the perception of the relationships revealed in the musical work of art" (Meyer, 1956, p.1). Hanslick's statements can be given as an example of the approach of people in this group. Hanslick states that one of the basic premises of his work "The Beautiful in Music" is "the widely accepted doctrine that the task of music is to 'represent emotions'" (Hanslick, 1891, p.11). However, this proposition is included in Hanslick's approach to music as a negative proposition that he does not accept. In other words, the author does not exclude the emotions that music creates in a person, but he is against the view that the main task of music is to represent emotions (Hanslick, 1891, p.11). In this context, it seems possible to argue that Hanslick, within the framework of music's aesthetic qualities, creates a state of emotion in the individual. The second group includes "those who argue that in addition to this abstract information, music serves to convey intellectual meanings that refer to

the extra-musical world of concepts, actions, emotional states, and character" (Meyer, 1956, p.1). An example of this approach is the quite generally accepted definition of music as "the aesthetic expression of feelings and thoughts." However, as will be argued later in this paper in the context of different types of meaning, Meyer claims that "despite the persistent debate between these two groups, absolute meanings and referential meanings are not mutually exclusive, on the contrary, they can coexist in the same piece of music, just as in a poem or a painting" (1956, p.1). Based on these definitions, the first group can be said to be based on music aesthetics while those in the second group can be said to accept music as a cultural and social phenomenon, and from this point of view, to argue that music can be considered a means of conveying meaning. The second approach, in which music is accepted as a means of conveying meaning, is also considered functional when it comes to piano interpretation and education.

This study will examine how interpreters, who can be characterized as educators and students, can construct their meanings within the framework of the concept of meaning. In this context, the study will explain the selected L.v. Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 23 Op. 57, F. Chopin's Scherzo No. 2 Op. 31, and S. Rachmaninoff'un Etudes-Tableaux Op. 33 No. 8 works based on the perspective of the constructionist approach with various examples.

### **Meaning as a Concept**

Meaning, as Allan puts it, is "something that is conveyed, indicated or shown through acts, words or objects. Notice that meaning is not the following: an action, experience, or object. Whatever these things may be, meaning, by definition, is not these things themselves" (Allan, 2020, p.61). The emphasis on "what is indicated or shown" in these statements draws attention to the position of meaning in communication. In the context of communication, one can characterize meaning as "the cognitive or emotional content of a word, symbol, sign, expression,

theory, etc. that expresses the interaction between the reader/viewer/listener, etc., and the message/sentiment” (Erol, 2009, p.145). Based on these statements, meaning can be said to be related to the context of any social phenomenon, its limitations, and the codes and rules that regulate the form of communication. At the same time, meaning is “directly related to the choices made by the society that uses it among the qualities that any object/thing possesses”.

In other words, meaning is a cultural phenomenon.

Semiotics plays a major role in the study of meaning as a cultural phenomenon from a scientific perspective. In the later process, under the influence of the cultural studies school that emerged with the research of British academics, “ethnomusicology, whose main field of interest is musical meaning, or cultural musicology” (Kramer, 2003, p.7) allowed the concept of meaning to be examined from a constructionist perspective. In this context, one can say that the approaches of researchers such as Stuart Hall, one of the most important names of the cultural studies school, and Michel Foucault, whom Hall frequently refers to in his work “Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices” (2017), are the foundational sources for researchers who study the concept of meaning. For this study, the Foucauldian approach, which has a significant place in the study of meaning through the concepts of discourse and discursive formation, and the constructionist perspective, which forms the basis of the approach, constitute the basis of the theoretical framework, just as in Hall’s study (2017).

In Hall’s words, the constructionist perspective accepts the idea that “things do not have meaning; we construct meaning by using systems of representation, concepts, and signs”. In this context, the author emphasizes that “according to the constructionist approach, we should not confuse the material world in which things and people exist with symbolic practices

and processes that function through representation, meaning, and language” (2017, p.36). While the main points of the Foucauldian approach, which is based on this perspective, are discourses and the formation of discourses, the concepts in question are again directly related to meaning. Hall conveys Foucault’s definition of the concept of discourse with the following statements:

Discourse is a set of utterances that provides a language for talking about a particular topic -a way of representing relevant knowledge- at a particular historical moment. Discourse is about producing knowledge through language. But since all social practices require meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do (our behavior) all practices have a discourse character (Hall, 2017, p.59).

In the statements quoted, one can observe that in the Foucauldian approach, discourse is defined by considering its relationship with language and meaning and emphasizing the historical context. However, researchers who came after Foucault, such as Hall, dealt with discourse from a much broader perspective. In Hall’s words, over time, the concept of discourse “has become a general term used to describe all approaches in which meaning, representation, and culture are considered determinative” (2017, p.14). This comprehensive position of the concept and its direct relationship with meaning provides a framework for examining the construction and transmission of meaning in piano interpretation, which this paper will discuss in the following sections. In this context, the concept of discourse can be easily said to represent the whole of piano interpretation in general, while meaning is a phenomenon that is regularly reconstructed by individuals—that is, interpreter instructors and students—within the framework of these discursive formations. As Allan already puts it, “Meanings are created by the bargain made through interactions, this bargain is about the social objects specified in the interaction” (2020, p.63).

## Meaning in Music

This study considers meaning as a phenomenon constructed in the context of social consensus. In the case of music, “although meaning has a quality that reflects the social structure, it is dynamic, can appear subjectively in different ways, and often has symbolic definitions” (Lewis, 1982, p.185). Considering the dynamic structure in question, meaning in music generally appears in three categories of analysis.

Meaning, accepted as a phenomenon constructed in the context of social consensus, generally appears in three categories of analysis when it is considered in music. One can list these categories as aesthetic meaning, symbolic meaning, and pragmatic meaning. In the case of a musical work, one or more of the aesthetic, symbolic, and pragmatic meanings may be identified for a single work during the analysis. Although it is currently possible to define and exemplify these categories of meaning in isolation, given the importance of context in cultural studies, the claim that only one type of meaning exists in a musical work is unlikely to hold. In other words, a single work can be evaluated in a different category of meaning according to its field of use and function. An example of this is Beethoven’s 3<sup>rd</sup> Symphony. While the 3<sup>rd</sup> Symphony has a quality that can be interpreted only in the context of aesthetic meaning by the Classical Western Music audience, as can be encountered in any classical work, the symbolic meaning attributed to the work comes to the fore with it being called the “Heroic Symphony.” Furthermore, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Symphony is perceived with a pragmatic dimension of meaning, both as a status symbol for the audience and in its ideological function within the framework of nation-state policies. It is known that the composer first dedicated it to Napoleon but later changed his mind, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Symphony was then dedicated to Hitler. However, Beethoven had no role in the dedication to Hitler, and one can only consider this situation in the context of the pragmatic use of composers and their works

by social groups. Considering all these, the main features of the three categories of meaning will be briefly described below.

## Aesthetic Meaning

This category of meaning indicated by the concept of “aesthetics,” which is usually defined as “the philosophy or study of the ‘beautiful’” (Erol, 2009, p.158), examines music in the context of its inherent structural characteristics, such as timbre, rhythm, and melody. In other words,

an investigation with a perspective that views music as an aesthetic experience inevitably turns to the aesthetic qualities that people assume to be inherent in the music under consideration; what is desired to be described is the beauty of the timbre and what it wants to convey (without reference to anything else). Such a perspective adopts from the outset the basic view that there is a direct meaning in music and that music tells something (Özer, 1997, p.3).

In the studies conducted in the context of aesthetic meaning in music, one can observe that the musical structure and taste of Western societies are at the forefront. One of the reasons for this situation is that “the connection between the concepts of musical structure and musical aesthetics in Western societies is partly related to the connection between music and mathematics that has existed since Greek civilization. Both pitches and rhythms are standardized in precise mathematical relationships” (Kaemmer, 1993, p.161). These standardized musical structures point to the consensus of taste that Western societies have reached on Classical Western Music and especially “people of the age of enlightenment generally opposed the idea of music expressing something and preferred it to stand alone” (Kutluk, 2022, p.96).

Based on the information presented, in studies on aesthetic meaning in music, the cultural context can be said to be generally ignored due to the acceptance of the view

that music carries and conveys meaning within the framework of its structural characteristics. Nicholas Cook's statements on the relationship between music and meaning are an example of this approach. Cook mentions, "a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century 'flurry of interpretation' in which exaggerated claims about musical meaning were made without serious engagement with musical texts" (Cook, 2001, p.173). These statements indicate that some researchers consider aesthetic meaning in music primary.

### Symbolic Meaning

In the context of the acceptance of the view that "people use symbols to create meaningful social bonds and cultures" (Allan, 2020, p.62), "the perspective that treats music as symbolic meaning starts from the view that timbre is a symbolic expression that is associated with meanings outside of itself and predicts that the meaning is attributed by the music creator and the perceiver" (Özer, 1997, p.3). Perhaps the most important point to be emphasized at this point is the fact that "naturally, there are differences between the meanings attributed to music by those who make it and those who perceive it" (ibid). Moreover, the meanings they attribute to music may also be different according to the individual differences of the people who make it. In addition to these, one can say that "symbolic thought requires an aesthetic consciousness and at the same time the desire to influence the perceptions of that person by transmitting this thought to someone else" (Barnard, 2016, p.19). When considered in this context, symbolic meaning in music is not completely independent from the category of aesthetic meaning, which is related only to the structural features of music. Within the scope of this study, the researcher believes that this way of thinking will be useful in examining the transfer of meaning from the educator to the student in piano interpretation.

### Pragmatic Meaning

Allan argues that "meaning itself is a pragmatic issue" and emphasizes that "in

pragmatism, ideas and meanings function as a means of organization." In the author's words, "meaning is, therefore, a tool for action and is valuable insofar as it facilitates behavior" (2020, p.62). In general, the pragmatic approach, on the other hand, "in summary, suggests that the main motivating feature of all human behavior is a practical benefit" (Erol, 2009, p.180), and people try to understand music in the pragmatic sense from this framework, which is considered the last category in the context of meaning in music. In the most basic terms, pragmatic meaning is related to the functional use of music, that is, what music does. When considered in this context, the examples that elicit instant recall regarding pragmatic meaning in music are pieces such as lullabies, anthems, or work songs used to leave various effects on individuals and get them to act in the desired way. Advertising music, political music that "varies according to the political and social conditions within the government" (Erol, 2012, p.36), and religious music can easily be evaluated under the same category. Each example already given is used for pragmatic purposes in social and everyday life. In its pragmatic use, music is "understood, used, and reinterpreted in many ways as a result of constantly changing circumstances" (ibid).

### Theoretical Framework

The creation of meaning in piano interpretation is based on imagination. Composers such as L.v. Beethoven, F. Chopin, and S. Rachmaninoff left it to interpreters, students, and listeners to form the meaning of their works. The views of these composers have been determined as the theoretical basis in the creation and transmission of meaning in piano interpretation.

### Research Importance and Problem

Meaning transfer in piano teaching is one of the main elements of teaching. In this respect, it is important to investigate how this can be done and to go to educational approaches. In this study, the following main problem was emphasized:

- How does the transfer of meaning occur in piano interpretation?

The sub-problems are:

- How should meaning be found and conveyed in line with Beethoven's ideas?
- How should the meaning approach be in Chopin's work?
- How is the imagination-based approach at Rachmaninoff?
- How is the basic framework for how meaning transfer will take place in piano interpretation?

## Method

In this research, the transfer of meaning in piano interpretation has been analyzed by examining the documents related to the views of important composers. These documents; Beethoven Piano Sonata No.23, Chopin Scherzo No.2 and Rachmaninoff Etudes- Tableaux Op. 33 is No.8. These works were included in the research because their composers were among the leading pianists of the period and the works should be shaped with a high imagination.

## Results

This study argued that the cultural phenomenon that is music is constructed, and in this regard, it tried to put forward views on how meaning is and can be created in piano interpretation. From the constructionist perspective, the phenomenon of meaning is recognized as constantly recreated. In the case of music, three different categories of meaning can be analyzed with this approach. These categories—*aesthetic meaning, symbolic meaning, and pragmatic meaning*—are useful in examining how music functions in social and cultural contexts.

## While the 3<sup>rd</sup> The Framework of Transfer of Meaning in the Interpretation in L.v. Beethoven's Op. 57 "Appassionata", F. Chopin's Scherzo No. 2 Op. 31, and S. Rachmaninoff's Etudes-Tableaux Op. 33 No. 8

All three categories of meaning in music, briefly defined so far, have characteristics that can be explained by considering them in the context of culture. The meanings attributed to music by individuals who grow up in a certain social environment could possibly be said to vary under the influence of the relevant sociocultural environment. The phenomena of educators and students as piano interpreters discussed in this study can possibly be said to have an important place in the creation and transmission of meaning in music as individuals within conservatories, which have an important place in the institutionalized structure of Classical Western Music. In this context, *aesthetic meaning*, which forms the basis of music, and *symbolic meaning*, which has an important role in shaping interpretation, can be easily said to come to the fore. The study tries to explain these meanings by considering three different examples below.



Photo 1. L.v. Beethoven (web 1)

## Ludwig van Beethoven "Op. 57 23. Piano Sonata "Appassionata" examination of the work in terms of meaning

Completed in 1807, it is one of the best-known works of piano literature. It stands out for its musical expression and technical difficulty. This work, which has an indispensable place in the repertoire of today's performers, represents a difficulty level that requires maturity in expression due to the musical ideas it contains and the difficulty of

expressing these ideas. This makes interpreters' search for meaning difficult. In the research conducted, a statement by the composer regarding the interpretation of the work has not yet been found. Therefore, to make sense of this work, we are left with no data other than the musical terms that provide a theoretical understanding of the music. This is not enough for an effective interpretation. For this, it is necessary to discover the hidden meaning of the note. Although we do not have any data on this from Beethoven himself, a criticism that has survived from that period draws attention;

“Everyone knows Beethoven’s method of composing a major sonata; and in all of them, in his most multitudinous ways of presenting bizarre material, Beethoven generally adheres to the same method. In the first movement of this sonata, he once again releases many evil spirits similar to those already familiar through their appearance in other major sonatas.

But truly, this time it is worth the trouble of fighting to overcome, not only the extreme difficulties of the piece but also the repugnance that one often feels over forced waywardness and eccentricity (Schindler, 1996, p.138).”

This critique reflects the meaning that the listener attributes to Beethoven’s work. Similarly, one can observe the same interaction in the field of interpretation. The educator’s transfer to the student and the student’s interpretation of this transfer through their filter emerges as a result. We know about Beethoven’s thoughts on this subject from the account of Ignaz Mosheles (1794-1870);

“Neither did Beethoven explain his works, nor did he let other people talk about this subject in his presence; his students needed to find out the emotions and thoughts that they wanted to express via their imagination (Herriot, 2002, p.22).”

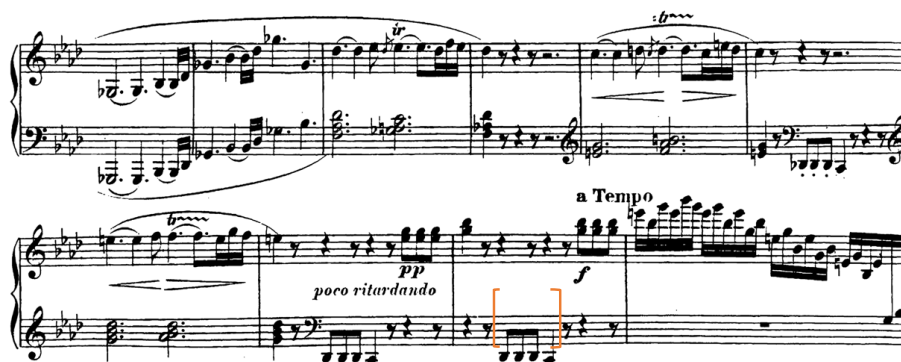


Figure 1. Presentation of fate motif in Piano Sonata no.23. op.57 measures 6-15

Beethoven’s thoughts on the subject are still valid in today’s interpretation. What is important at this point is how the educator conveys the interpretation suggestion, a necessity of the music, beyond the technical details. This transfer may vary as it is shaped according to people’s perceptions, but the decisive point here is that the educator is the one who realizes this situation. Examples of the educator’s transfer to the learner are personal and can be reproduced specifically by the educator or the learner.

The most obvious example of interpretation in this work is the one that can be built on opposing themes that have the power to repel each other. The first phenomenon that can be the starting point for interpretation is the aforementioned contrasts. The whole movement is an attempt to dominate the music with themes completely opposed to each other. The contrasts based on the motif of fate form the outlines of the first chapter in particular.

However, the other motif, heard as the opposite of the fate motif, is the second fundamental point of the main line.



Figure 2. Piano Sonata no.23, the motif which moves in the opposite direction of fate motif sonata no.23 op.57 measures 13-14

At this point, the interpretation should be evaluated within the meaning of the concepts of fate and the rejection of fate (Yahşi, 2017). For example, the motif of fate represents an irresistible reality and causes the music to sound more pessimistic, rebellious, and to some extent, aggressive in all musical structures influenced by it. The opposite motif, which can be thought of as a rejection of fate, likewise, creates a more positive, peaceful, and relatively calm effect on all the musical structures it affects. This calmness ties itself to the motif of fate throughout the episode, and the calmness is replaced by the pessimism represented by the motif of fate. The mood represented by the fate motif, however, invariably surrenders itself to its opposite, the peaceful mood. What is realized at the end of the episode is that these two different moods are struggling against each other in the episode and that there is no winner in this struggle. In other words, the episode is the product of an unresolved struggle. The composer's putting these two opposite structures into a struggle with each other can be considered a rebellious stance against fate in his inner world and an inability to accept it. Also possible is to think of Beethoven's confusion about his fate as reflected in that section or even in the whole work. However, since each person's perception of fate is different, what the interpreters understand from the musical expression in the work may not comply with Beethoven's perception. Beethoven's

thoughts are of great importance for the authenticity of the interpretation, but this too has to remain in the composer's private domain. This is because no matter how much knowledge we have, it is not possible to know what the composer had in mind. At this point, the important thing is to discover the interpreter's meaning by acting in line with the information at hand and to reflect what has been interpreted this way with music. The musical expression of the struggle between the belief in the power of fate to limit life and the inability to accept it represents the most prominent example of this work's search for meaning. The interpretation of performance based on these two opposites constitutes the outline of the first section in particular. The details in Beethoven's music writing also support these concepts. From this point of view, the second and third parts of the work can be seen to be based on these contrasts. Considering the sonata form of the period, it is natural for the second movement to be in a calm and major key. However, given that the sections are interconnected and the third movement contains themes reminiscent of the fate motif, these contrasts have a musical meaning that encompasses the entire work. In other words, the second movement is a sectionalized version of the calm mood in the first movement, while the third movement is composed with a more expressive approach that develops under the influence of the fate motif.

If the transfer process between the educator and the student is realized on this basis, the technical details will be shaped accordingly. The sound colors that will be shaped according to the musical meaning to be conveyed, the expressive playing styles, and the technical approaches that enable them to be achieved naturally become part of the transfer of meaning.



### Frederic Chopin “Scherzo No. 2 Op. 31” examination of the work in terms of meaning

Composed between 1833 and 1843, these works are among the best known of Chopin’s literature. This series of four works brought innovation to the understanding of the form of the period. The scherzo form, which usually appeared as sections of sonatas in the Classical period, began to be a standalone work with Chopin. In these works, the composer did not move away from the polished and detailed playing of the Classical period but added deep musical meanings and technical challenges, bringing a new perspective to the scherzo form.



Photo 2. Frederic Chopin (web 2)

Scherzo, which means “joke,” is far from carrying this meaning in Chopin’s works. In other words, the concept of “joke” was reshaped and gained a new dimension with Chopin’s perspective. For example, for the 1<sup>st</sup> Scherzo, Robert Schumann said the following: “How is ‘gravity’ to clothe itself if ‘jest’ goes about in dark veils? (Niecks, 2009, p.494). As can be understood from this remark, these works have unique qualities in terms of both their technical structure and their musical meanings. Although Chopin did not give a detailed account of the meaning of these works, we have information from his students and listeners of the period. Regarding the 2<sup>nd</sup> Scherzo, Robert Schumann remarked, “so overflowing with tenderness, boldness, love, and contempt” (Dubal, 2004, p.469). Wilhelm von Lenz, who took lessons from Chopin in the 1840s on the same scherzo, described how the composer wanted the opening triple figure to be, “‘It must be a question,’ Chopin taught, and for him [the performance] was never enough of

a question, there was never enough piano, it was never rounded enough, never significant enough. [...] I saw Chopin spending a long time on these measures and repetitions many times. That’s the key to the whole thing, I heard him say” (Chopin, 2018, pp. XI). In line with this information, one can form an idea about the interpretation of the work and reveal the meaning of music or which concepts correspond to the music. Although this information sheds light on the interpreter’s search for meaning, it is not enough to give meaning to every detail of the work. At this point, the imagination of the interpreter is an important factor. The musical structures in the piece need to make sense based on the interpreter’s personal life experiences or by imagining the possibility of this happening. Only by taking this approach can one gain an understanding of interpretation that goes beyond what is written in the notation. For example, let us consider the opening triplets and the chords that follow. Although playful, the music is tense, and there is a state of being in search of something to a certain extent. When considered in the form of a question/ answer, there is a talkative quality. One can regard the opening triplets as a silent or hesitant question, and the chords that follow as a decisive and definitive answer. After this contrasting dialogue, the music finds its direction and progresses in a somewhat exciting and polite way. At this point, the concept that the interpreter needs to internalize is “being excited.” This excitement can be exemplified as the excitement one feels when doing something for the first time, adding meaning to the music. In other words, it is the uniqueness of the subject that one is excited about, which is the feeling that a new experience creates in a person. Of course, this approach is personal and variable. The state of being excited, which the composer has specified for this part of the piece, is not open to interpretation, but one can interpret the state of being excited. Additionally, let us consider the slow movement in the B section of the piece in terms of musical expressions and meanings.



Figure 3. Scherzo No. 2, slow section in B part, Scherzo no.2 op.31 measures 263-274

We can imagine that we are sitting alone on a bench and are full of thoughts, which can be peaceful and calm at times sad and loving at others. Considering that the E major part in the development of theme B first represents happiness and then transforms itself into a more aggressive and angry mood, happiness and anger are added to our thoughts, and many concepts experienced in life are included in musical expression. The important point here is that these concepts only happen in our minds when we are sitting alone on a bench. In other words, being angry or happy has a submeaning within this calmness. This explains the serene mood and musical structures of the B section of the piece. When the work is examined in general, the concepts described above can be observed to form a unity. As a result, all these concepts are specific not only to motifs but also to the entire work. Therefore, the interpreter should not only focus on the notes when interpreting the piece. Naturally, there is a difference between the music that emerges when interpreting this work by the signs that direct the music on the notation and the music that emerges with the effect of the concepts explained in the motif. This difference is as great as the simplicity of the musician's interpretation with only note markings, while on the other hand, the depth of the interpreter's presentation is formed by the reflection of the meaning of the concepts in the music. Making sense of the motifs and reflecting these meanings in the overall work also means that the interpreter reveals their inner world.

Life itself, of course, is a personal phenomenon and variable. However, the

above concepts are common to everyone, and everyone can experience them in the course of life. The interpreter needs to construct these concepts according to the flow of the music. Determining which motif or theme corresponds to which concept gives the music a special meaning. The meaning here does not mean that one considers concepts such as happiness, anger, or thoughtfulness during interpretation. It is the revitalization of the feeling that these concepts give people and their expression through music. In other words, it is not simply the reexperiencing of the reality of these feelings but also the translation of these feelings into music and the music itself making sense of these concepts. This approach directly affects the transfer of meaning between the performer and the listener during the performance of the piece.

### Sergei Rachmaninoff "Etude Op. 33 No. 8 (Published as No. 6, Originally No. 9)" Examination of the work in terms of meaning

Etudes-Tableaux, Op. 33 is the first of two sets of piano etudes composed by Sergei Rachmaninoff. They are essentially intended to be "picture pieces" with "musical associations of external visual stimuli." But Rachmaninoff did not explain what inspired each of them and said: "I do not believe in the artist who reveals too much of his images. Let [the listener] paint for themselves what is being most alluded to" (Bertensson, 1956). "Rachmaninoff's creative imagination was most stimulated by impressions from outside the field of music (Rieseman, 1970, p.230)." These impressions are often related to poetry and painting, which are arts in

relation to each other. Before composing the Etudes-Tableaux, Rachmaninoff had established himself as a “tone painter” in the orchestral composition *The Isle of The Dead*, inspired by the painting of the same name by the Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin. Rachmaninoff specifically chose the title “painting,” explaining to his biographer von Rieseemann that “the inspiration for composing them came mainly from pictorial impressions of a real or imaginary character” (Rieseeman, 1970, p.167). This approach, which forms the basis of today’s interpretation, shows us how one should find the musical meanings of these works. In addition to their technical difficulty, these etudes require a great deal of imagination to interpret and make sense of. Although the etudes are “picture pieces,” it is not clear whether these pictures exist, and since it is not known exactly what Rachmaninoff was thinking when he composed them, the performer has to create their picture while playing these works.



Photo 3. Sergei Rachmaninoff (web 3)

Op. 33 Etude No. 8 is one of the most played etudes in this opus. The etude is a piece with a high sound intensity that includes violent fluctuations between minor and major, as well as harmonic dips and turns at the end, chromatic runs, big leaps in the left hand, and a bravura (effect for effect’s sake) with opposing melodies. In line with all this information, a fairytale approach seems possible to make sense of the etude. A mythological heroic story can be an example of this approach. For example, let us imagine a fight between a mythological monster and a hero. The first, opening chords of the piece and the chords and arpeggios in different tonalities that follow represent the monster. From the moment this monster appears, it terrorizes and frightens everyone around it.



Figure 4. Study no.8, opening chords of the work and the wide arpeggios on the left hand, Study no.8 op.33 measures 1-5

The mood of the music, with its broad chords of deep sounds, fits not only the fear and tension but also the presence of a majestic monster. At the end of these chords and arpeggios, the hero emerges and begins to fight against the monster with a scale that progresses as an ascending scale and must

be played so fast as not to be included in the number of measures. Especially the musical structures of the middle section, consisting of dotted 16<sup>th</sup> notes, shape this bravura structure, which, in turn, here, depicts the hero himself.

Figure 5. Study no.8, the middle part and dotted semiquavers, Study no.8 op.33 measures 17-20

In the continuation of this section, with the wide arpeggios coming again, the monster and the hero enter into a fight. In this part of the piece, the hero appears in long melodies and rhythmic structures in the right hand. At the end of this struggle, which continues for a while, the hero triumphs with the closing chords, and the piece ends.

As a result of this storytelling, certain concepts, such as fear, heroism, anxiety, and war, emerge, and these concepts shape the overall musical character of the piece. At this point, it is important to narrate the work using imagination. This narrativization can be understood by considering the phenomenon of film scores, which can be defined as adding music to the image. In the storytelling of music, we do not have an image or a movie, but conversely, finding the image of the music and interpreting what has already been composed accordingly can

be much more effective than interpretation based on technical details.

Another approach to this work is to think of it as a state of depression or a turbulent mood in one's inner world. The spectacular and intense nature of the music supports this approach. For example, let us imagine a state of inner distress in response to an event or situation. This time, the struggle may be to get out of this state of mind. Or it can be conceived as the musical expression of this state of depression and boredom caused only by external factors. The reflection of these concepts that people feel during the performance of music can be as effective as storytelling. It is important at this point to construct the interpretation of the work with the interpreter's imagination. The fact that the composer, and as mentioned above, the listeners, will attach their meanings to these works makes it necessary for the interpreter

to make sense of the work with their own imagination. This results in the transfer of meaning from the interpreter to the listener.

### Creating and Transferring Meaning in Piano Interpretation in the Context of Aesthetic and Symbolic Meaning in Music

The examples given above reflect a subjective approach to the construction of meaning in piano interpretation. However, although it is subjective, it is also thought to have qualities usable to make some inferences about the nature of interpretation and the role of meaning in interpretation.

In Beethoven's "Appassionata" sonata, the first example analyzed, the search for meaning based on "fate" is based on the contrast between the fate motif and its opposite motif that moves in the other direction. The two motifs' combative nature, which dominates the entire first movement in particular, creates the integrity of the work's meaning. What remains constant here is the struggle between the themes and their representation of major and minor keys in the continuation phrases. While the fate motif brings a darker musical structure, its opposite motif brings peaceful and relatively happy music. Another approach to this work in terms of motifs can be constructed as the struggle between good and evil as opposites. Other concepts such as positive-negative can be attributed to this unchanging opposition.

In the second example of Chopin's 2<sup>nd</sup> Scherzo, the contemplative state on the bench can also happen in any peaceful and solitary environment, depending on the interpreter's wishes. At this point, it is important that calmness is represented through the music. This state of calmness will be shaped by the interpreter's imagination, life experiences, and perceptions. In other words, calmness is an immutable state, while space is a phenomenon shaped by interpreters. Where a commentator feels lonely or calm is therefore a purely personal matter and

likely varies by person.

The last example is the Rachmaninoff Etude, which deals with a fairytale approach and a turbulent state of mind within oneself. Through music, one can make sense of this inner turbulence created by the reflection of one's own life experiences on one's mood. As the interpreter's inner world will decide which concepts the music corresponds to in this state of mind, concepts such as anger, opposition, and struggle could be included as also in the fairytale approach. One can also interpret the work as inspired by a mythological story. The same or similar concepts are likely found in a mythological story. At this point, again, as in the examples above, it is important to make sense of the concepts that music contains, or is thought to contain, through music.

These examples, which the study discussed in detail in the previous section as a construct and presented with alternative meanings above, provide a framework to produce and transfer meaning in piano interpretation. However, these examples form the basis for analyzing the aesthetic meaning and the symbolic meaning that develop from this aesthetic meaning in interpretationism. The works analyzed primarily focus on the intrinsic characteristics of music. These features prepare the ground for the meaning or meanings obtainable by interpreting music in terms of an aesthetic approach. However, due to the perspective adopted in this study, music is considered not only as a phenomenon, the aesthetic characteristics of which are observed, but also as aesthetic meaning that should be carried to a new dimension with different concepts, facts, and stories in each work. At this juncture, we come across a separate category under the name of symbolic meaning. In the most basic approach, one can consider symbolic meaning the associations formed in the individual through the signs created by any phenomenon in cognition. In this respect, symbolic meaning can be said to also be related to many different external factors

and therefore to have a quality that varies by individual and society. As Blumer notes, “people’s acts towards things [in this case, piano interpretation] are based on meanings” and “meaning emerges or derives from the individual’s social interactions” (1969, p.2). Considering piano interpretation in line with these statements, the institutionalized structure of conservatories comes to mind first, and then people think of the cultural, social, economic, and ideological position of the interpreter regardless of whether they are an educator or a student. All these factors naturally affect the meaning attributed to the interpreted work as they shape the individual as the interpreter. In this context, the process of interpretation of a work by an individual as an interpreter can be easily said to be primarily characterized by its aesthetic dimension, then by the historical information or stories passed down to the present day, and finally by what they experience and observe in their personal life. In other words, the individual interpreter appears to reinterpret the information and worlds of meaning conveyed to them through their filter and thus reconstruct meaning. The interpreter, who is the educator, conveys to the student the meaning they have constructed or can construct in line with their own experiences, and the student, again based on their own experiences, reveals their meaning by considering the “new” information they have learned until the moment of practice, the “new” information they have received from their educator, and their individual experiences.

## **Conclusion**

This study argued that the cultural phenomenon that is music is constructed, and in this regard, it tried to put forward views on how meaning is and can be created in piano interpretation. From the constructionist perspective, the phenomenon of meaning is recognized as constantly recreated. In the case of music, three different categories of meaning can be analyzed with this approach. These categories—*aesthetic meaning, symbolic meaning, and pragmatic meaning*—

are useful in examining how music functions in social and cultural contexts. In the case of piano interpretation, these categories play a significant role in discovering the basic building blocks for the transfer of meaning from the educator to the student and the listener. In piano interpretation, the notation of a piece lays the groundwork for the aesthetic meaning attributable to that piece. The structure of this symbolic meaning built upon this given meaning varies both socially and individually. The transformation of the note into “an expression that can convey something” is directly related to symbolic meaning. While the symbolic meaning is linked to the information, assumptions, and stories passed down from the past to the present, the interpreter’s personal experience is a highly important factor in the creation of this meaning. Each interpreter creates the meaning they want to convey by considering the meanings transmitted until the present day in line with their individual experience. In other words, each interpreter reconstructs meaning as an individual. In this context, the tradition of Classical Western Music, in which piano interpretation is situated, can be said to continue to exist today as a sustainable tradition thanks to the regular construction and transmission of meanings by interpreters. In conclusion, piano interpretation can be said to have a dynamic structure, with the meaning conveyed constantly reshaped both individually and socially. Based on this perspective, constructing and transmitting the aforementioned meaning is considered an acceptable *facta factor* underlying the acceptance of Classical Western Music as a centuries-old tradition that has not lost its appeal.

## **Recommendations**

Educators and students related to this subject can follow the framework I have laid out in the formation of instructional approaches or artistic perspectives.

## **Acknowledgment**

The translation of this article was made by Enago translation team.

## References

- Allan, K. (2020). *Çağdaş sosyal ve sosyolojik teori: toplumsal dünyaları görünür kılmak (Contemporary social and sociological theory: visualizing social worlds)*. (trans Bora,A; Cosar,S; Ergül,H; Pamir, M; Unal, E.) Istanbul Bilgi University.
- Aslan, U. (2018). Metaphors and meaning in the Turkish contemporary Christian music. *Musicologist*, 2(1), 78-95.
- Barnard, A. (2016). *Simgesel düşüncenin doğuşu (Genesis of symbolic thought)*. (trans. Dogan, M.). Boğaziçi University.
- Bertensson, S.A. (1956). *Sergei Rachmaninoff: a life time in music*. New York University.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: perspective and method*. University of California.
- Chopin, F. (2018). *Scherzi*. (N. Müllemann, Dü.). G. Henle Verlag.
- Cook, N. (2001). Theorizing musical meaning. *Music Theory Spectrum*, 23(2), 170-195.
- Dubal, D. (2004). *The art of the piano: its performers, literature and recordings*. Amadeus.
- Erol, A. (2009). *Popüler müziği anlamak: kültürel kimlik bağlamında popüler müzikte anlam (Understanding popular music: meaning in popular music in the context of cultural identity)*. Bağlam.
- Erol, A. (2012). Music, power and symbolic violence: the Turkish state's music policies during the early republican period. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15(1), 35-52.
- Hall, S. (2017). *Temsil-kültürel temsiller ve anlamlandırma uygulamaları (Cultural representations and signifying practices)*. (trans. İ. Dünder). Pinhan.
- Herriot, E. (2007). *Beethoven*. (trans. C. Aktüze). Pan.
- Kaemmer, J.E. (1993). *Music in human life, anthropological perspectives*. University of Texas.
- Kramer, L. (2003). Musicology and meaning. *The Musical Times*, 144(1883), 6-12.
- Kutluk, F. (2022). *Neden müzik dinleriz? (Why are we listening music?)*. H2O.
- Lewis, G.H. (1982). Popular music: symbolic resource and transformer of meaning in society. *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 13(2), 183-189.
- Niecks, F. (2009). *Frederic Chopin as a man and musician*. Echo Library.
- Özer, Y. (1997). *Bilim perspektifinde müzik (Music in the perspective of science)*. Dokuz Eylül.
- Riesemann, O.v. (1970). *Rachmaninoff's recollections*. Books for Libraries.
- Schindler, A.F. (1996). *Beethoven as I knew him*. Dover.
- Yahşi, F.E. (2017). Aninterpretationsuggestion for the first movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata no.23 in accordance with faith motif. *Art and Design Studies*, 58, 1-8.

## Web Sites

**web 1.** <https://nationaltoday.com/birthday/ludwig-van-beethoven/>

**web 2.** <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Frederic-Chopin>

**web 3.** [https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergey\\_Rahmaninov](https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergey_Rahmaninov)

## **Biodata of Author**



Assoc. Prof., **Fahrettin Eren Yahşi** has won first prizes at “Second National Young Talent Piano Competition” organized by Anadolu University in 2002 and “First Adnan Saygun International Bodrum Piano Competition” in 2012, arranged by “9<sup>th</sup> International Gümüşlük Piano Festival”. In 2013, he was named “Finalist Phenom Lourate” at “The World Pianist Invitational Piano Competition” in Washington D.C., USA and has won third prize at “Performance Without Limits Piano Competition” arranged by Lodz Music Academy, in Poland. He also has won the “Aspiration Special Prize” at the 1<sup>st</sup> Olga Kern International Piano Competition in 2016, Albuquerque, NM, USA.

He started his piano education in 1995 at Anadolu University State Conservatory. From 1999 until his graduation in 2005, he studied with Prof. Zöhrab Adıgüzelzade, a famous Azerbaijani State artist. Eren Yahşi has participated in many master classes of well-known professors such as Prof. Mihail Lidsky and Prof. Naum Starkman both at Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow. In 2008, he got accepted at the University for Music and Performing Arts Vienna to study with Prof. İnci Hausler-Altınok; Prof. Mikhail Krist; Prof. Roland Keller and Prof. Oleg Meisenberg. Turkish National Television (TRT Okul) and TV8 both have broadcasted Yahşi’s performances. Yahşi has performed with Anadolu University Symphony Orchestra; Eskişehir Municipality Symphony Orchestra and Azerbaijani Opera Orchestra. Azerbaijani and Turkish media praised his performances at many occasions but especially the ones at Baku Music Academy and Baku State Conservatory. Since 2005 Eren Yahşi has been a faculty member at Anadolu University State Conservatory.

**Affiliation:** Anadolu University, State Conservatory, Music Department, Eskisehir, Turkiye.

**Email:** feyahsi@anadolu.edu.tr

**ORCID:** 0000-0001-8983-4615

**Personal Web Site :** [www.erenyahsi.com](http://www.erenyahsi.com)

**Academiaedu:** <https://anadolu.academia.edu/erenyahsi>