

Fazil Say and His Musical Identity: Musical Embellishments in “Black Earth”

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Keywords: Embellishments, Modification, Fazil Say, Pianist.

Abstract: The role of a performer in the twenty-first century has progressed tremendously with regards to performance practices developed from the Renaissance until the present. Many virtuosic performers currently perform similar solo repertoire but with their own interpretation, which may result in score modifications. An important question is: how does the performer modify the scores appropriately? This study examines Fazil Say’s piano work of the Black Earth based on recorded performances. A musical analysis was conducted, where transcriptions of four recorded live performances by Fazil Say were compared with the corresponding music scores. This was to identify the melodic and rhythmic embellishment modifications that he made during his live-recorded performances. These modifications were different in each performance. It is evident that the role of a performer is not limited to interpreting dynamics, articulations, and pedalling, but also modifying the score through melodic fragments and rhythmic patterns that can be considered one’s own interpretation of the composers’ work. However, this may also apply to specific compositional works of contemporary composers such as Fazil Say who is known as a performer, composer and improviser.

1 INTRODUCTION

Each performer has their own interpretation and musical identity in their performances, whether interpreting the classics or modern masterpieces. With increasing numbers of virtuosic pianists being trained through conservatories and competitions, it has become more challenging to craft individual artistry in order to sound different from the others. The originality of their approach to sound warrants an in-depth study, through listening to early and modern recordings by pianists, then comparing them to existing music scores.

There is a clear need to be highly imaginative in interpreting the masterpieces to the best of the performers’ abilities and skills. It is common for pianists to modify music scores to accommodate their interpretation and musicality. The most common modifications are with dynamics, tempo alterations, and embellishments, and these are typically found in many musical studies. For example, Davidović’s case study on the interpretation of Chopin’s Nocturne Opus 27, No. 2 by Vladimir de Pachmann based on three of his recording mediums: piano roll; acoustic and electric recordings, where differences in tempo

alterations can be found; rhythmic alterations and text variation; as well as dislocation and unnotated arpeggiations in each recording medium (Davidović, 2016).

Although music scores are fixed, the musical feelings and perspectives of each performer vary. The musical feelings are based on reading the score and music literature, exploring through practising, and several performances.

In this paper, we focus on Fazil Say’s piano work entitled “Black Earth”. Say is a contemporary Turkish composer, performer and an improviser. We will specifically discuss the melodic fragments and rhythmic alterations applied by Say in four of his live-recorded performances.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Fazil Say: Pianist

Fazil Say is a virtuosic pianist who performs internationally. His work has been widely acknowledged through several prestigious awards

such as an Honorary prize at the Zelt-Musik-Festival in Freiburg, the International Beethoven Award for Human Rights, Peace, Freedom, Poverty Reduction, and Inclusion, as well as a Music Award from the City of Duisburg. He has also won an ECHO Klassik prize for his complete recording of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's piano sonatas.

His interpretation of classic masterpieces, including those by Mozart, Beethoven and Chopin, as well as other works, have received positive reviews from the media and audiences alike. However, this highly successful pianist has also received criticism about his interpretations of the classic masterpieces. Most of his concerts are sold out prior to the event based on the evidence from concert venues and also his social media profiles. He has successfully created his own interpretations and identity through his performances that possibly persuade the listeners to experience his live performances.

2.2 Embellishment

‘Embellishment’ is a well-known term in Western classical music that refers to adding notes to a melody and accompaniment lines on the keyboard or modifying the rhythms to make a composition more interesting. The Cambridge online dictionary defines embellishment as, “to make something more beautiful by adding something to it.” Robert Donington (2001) defines embellishment in *Groove Music Online* as a “decoration that includes both free and specific ornamentation by adding the notation or using signs in the notation or left to be improvised by a performer” (Donington, 2001). The term embellishments is not limited to a Western classical approach but also applies those from other cultures in a composition.

Historically, the practice of adding embellishments was widely practiced during the Renaissance. Virtuoso performers were expected to improvise during the performance of each work. There are several treatises and manuals for performers to refer to as guidelines on how to improvise. One of the first published books was the “*Opera Intitulata Fontegara*” by Sylvestro di Ganassi (1535). Singers during the Renaissance were renowned for their improvised embellishments, using the technique of diminution (Horsley, 1951). It is evident that during this time, performers had the freedom to apply their own embellishments in performance.

However, composers of the eighteenth century began to control the application of embellishments in their works by notating them, or using a specific

symbol, giving the performer less freedom to apply their own choices. According to Carl Phillip Emmanuel Bach in his “*Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*”, a poor choice of embellishments negatively affect the composers’ work, while too many good embellishments sometimes create an imbalance in the works (Bach, 1974). Keyboardists were expected to improvise for a position as an organist and perform for social events. The practice of improvisation continued from the Baroque up until the Classical period where virtuosic musicians were composers, performers and improvisers, such as J.S. Bach, Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven.

During the nineteenth century, composers wrote embellishments specifically for performers and students of theirs to play as written. However, it was primarily trained improvisers who were able to improvise on music scores, and composers such as Chopin and Liszt often improvised and added embellishments to their own works and those of others during performance.

In recent decades, the practice of Western classical improvisation has been considered demanding among musicians. There are several virtuosic pianists who include improvisation as part of their recital program, such as Gabriela Montero, Robert Levine, David Dolan, Noam Sivan, among others. Fazil Say has also improvised based on a theme given by the audience in Turkey and Tokyo. In this paper, we focus on Say’s embellishments during his live-performances.

2.3 Modifying the Score

Hellaby (2009) describes modification as “more or less to the original” music score, and either formal (published) or informal (performer controlled). Modifications that have been made by the performer are documented in a score and categorised as ‘formal modifications’. Informal modifications are more flexible, and not written in a document but based on the memory of the performer and their choice of what to embellish in a original score (Hellaby, 2009).

It was common for pianists during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to alter scores (Hamilton, 2008). There was a period during which some nineteenth century composers wrote their own style of cadenza for other composers’ works. One example is Beethoven’s cadenza on Mozart’s D minor Concerto No. 20, where the cadenza is not consistent with Mozart’s own style. Pianists of the twentieth century, such as Vladimir Horowitz, modified Liszt’s Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2 in C

sharp minor using challenging playing techniques, resulting in a cadenza that was more virtuosic than of Liszt himself. It is evident that modifications of the score were needed for performers to showcase their ability and skills as a virtuoso (Hamilton, 2008). What about the twenty first century pianists? Should pianists also modify the scores? If so, what types of modifications or embellishments should they choose to modify?

2.4 The Piano Work “Black Earth”

Kara Toprak is a well-known song by a Turkish blind composer and poet, Aşık Veysel (1891-1973). Kara Toprak inspired Fazil Say to compose his version of Black Earth, which was written in 1997. Veysel’s song is about loneliness and loss; the poem laments the loss of life on earth (Otten, 2011). Say, however, describes his piece, “Black Earth”, as a lonely journey of an artist in the twenty-first century (Otten, 2011). He plays this piano work as part of his program, and it is also one of his popular encores. Fazil Say has performed this piece for several years and we assume that he has explored several interpretations based on his performances. Therefore, we chose this piece for this paper to unveil his embellishments in his piano work and performance

3 DATA COLLECTION

There are four live-recorded performance of Fazil Say performing “Black Earth” from the years 2007, 2015 and 2017. In 2015, we selected two recordings in different venues. In 2007, he performed in Tokyo, and in later years, Frankfurt and Bucharest in 2015, and again in Frankfurt in 2017. These have been published as full-length recordings on his official YouTube channel.

We compared his melodic and rhythmic modifications with the corresponding scores published by Schott (2007). We notated the modifications of each recording through software known as Tune Transcriber, which can decrease the tempo without changing the original pitch. Through this process, we were able to listen in fragments and notate the differences in the performances.

4 ANALYSIS

Our method was to notate the modifications of melodic and rhythmic fragments performed by Fazil

Say during live-recorded performances. Melodic and Rhythmic Modifications. “Black Earth” is a three-part ballad with microtones, modal phrases, jazz fragments and prepared keys or extended techniques. The tempo indication in the introductory section is Lento (Quasi improvvisazione) with no specific time signature written. The term (Quasi improvvisazione) resembles an improvisation. In this work, he applies an extended technique, an imitation of the Bağlama effect, a stringed instrument from Turkey, which is also known as the saz. In the introduction section, Say begins with a dark colour and soft dynamics. His repetition of melodic fragments is inconsistent and different from the music score, played either with augmentation or diminution. There are five repetitions of the notes in the melodic fragments written in the score at Figure 1. This was the original number of repetitions, whereas the longest was in 2015 in Frankfurt at Figure 3, with nine repetitions of the notes. However, in 2017, he shortens the fragments to eight repetitions shows at Figure 5. The examples of the augmentation and diminution in comparison to the music score and his performances at bar 4 is shown in Figure 1 to 5:



Figure 1: 5 notes repetitions from the Schott Publication (2007)



Figure 2: 6 notes repetitions in Tokyo (2007)



Figure 3: 9 notes repetitions in Frankfurt (2015)

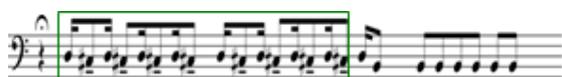


Figure 4: 8 notes repetitions in Bucharest (2015)



Figure 5: 9 notes repetitions in Frankfurt (2017)

Another example of Say’s modifications of melodic and rhythmic fragments is in bar 8. The original melodic fragments in Schott publication have

three repetitions of D, C sharp, D, two of the E notes shows in Figure 6. He modifies from the written score and remain the same of 4 notes repetitions in Bucharest, year of 2015 shows in Figure 9, and in Frankfurt, year of 2017 shows in Figure 10. He also modifies the rhythmic pattern from quavers to syncopated rhythms in two of his performances (Frankfurt and Bucharest, both in 2015). However, in Tokyo, he adds a crotchet at the end of the phrase and sounds slightly longer, that difference from the other performances.

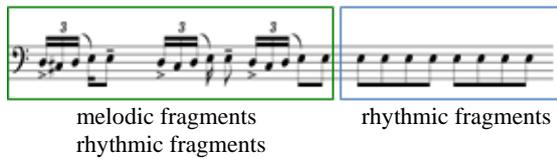


Figure 6: 3 melodic fragments repetitions and quavers rhythm fragments in Schott Publication (2007)

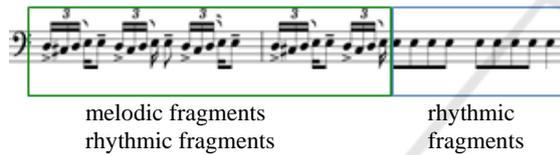


Figure 7: 5 melodic fragments repetitions and quavers rhythmic fragments in Tokyo (2007)



Figure 8: 5 melodic fragments repetitions and syncopated rhythmic fragments in Frankfurt (2015)



Figure 9: 4 melodic fragments repetitions and syncopated rhythmic fragments in Bucharest (2015)

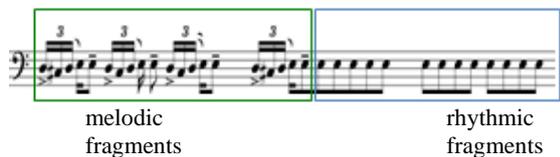


Figure 10: 4 melodic fragments repetitions and quavers rhythmic fragments in Frankfurt (2017)

In the introduction, Say modifies several rhythmic patterns that are mostly syncopated. He also changes the triplets from bar 8 to quavers in four of his performances. His melodic fragments are inconsistent; he either expands or shortens the fragments in each of his performances.

After the *Quasi improvvisazione* in the introduction section, there are eight bars in the second section which have a different tempo indication, marked as *Largo doloroso*. In bar 11, the rhythm on the first beat changes to a smaller value. He also modified the B natural to a C sharp during his performances in Tokyo, and later in Frankfurt (twice). An example of each performances of the rhythmic and note changes in bar 11 are shown in Figure 11 and 12:



Figure 11: The original notations from Schott Publication (2007)

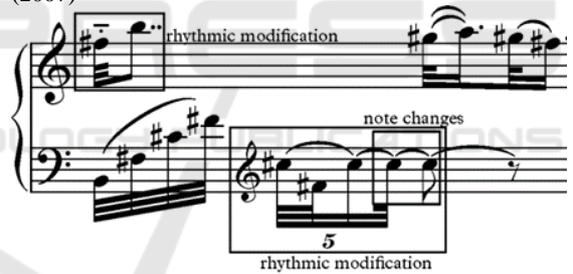


Figure 12: The rhythmic and pitch modifications in Tokyo (2015) and both Frankfurt (2015 and 2017) in bar 11.

Another example of modifications is in bar 14. The melody was played with additional chords rather than single notes in three of his performances except in Tokyo. The chord changes were not the same in each performance. Figure 14 shows the chord changes but remain the same rhythmic pattern with the written score. Figure 16 shows that he adds the chords at the fullest in Frankfurt in year 2017. As the melody, tempo and dynamics were gradually increased in the jazz style fragments, the tempo began to change to a dramatic and energetic mood, which led him to add those chords. He produced a bigger sound to prepare for the mood changes. An example of the additional chords in bar 14 are shown at Figure 14 to Figure 16:



Figure 13: The original notations from Schott Publication (2007)



Figure 14: Additional of chords in Frankfurt (2015)



Figure 15: Additional of chords in Bucharest (2015)



Figure 16: Additional of chords in Frankfurt (2017)

In the third section, the tempo changes to *Allegro assai-Drammatico*, with syncopated rhythms in the bass lines to keep the jazz-like pulse steady. There are no major embellishments or modifications in this fast tempo section. As this section repeats in a similar manner to the second section, there is an extension of the rhythmic fragments and additions of melodic fragments and arpeggiated chords during these performances.

5 DISCUSSION

In this study, we analysed the embellishments from a music score and compared these with those in the four

live-recorded performances by Fazil Say. Our analysis shows that there were several melodic and rhythmic modifications that occurred in each performance. Fazil Say frequently applied the extension of melodic fragments that were inconsistent in terms of note repetitions. Some changed and some were similar in each of his live performances. He changed the notes which remained the same in three of his performances. The addition of chords in a second section of the piece, created a vast sound with minor changes of harmony in each performance.

There were also several rhythmic modifications that occurred during the performances that were similar to each other. In this piece, Say simply played syncopated rhythms and chose smaller values from the original. He also changed a group of triplets to quavers in the introduction section of the score, in four of his performances, generating a more excited feel in each of his performances.

It is evident that Say interprets and embellishes differently in each of his performances. There is a possibility that he creates the embellishment spontaneously through inconsistency of fragments and notations. The consistent fragments are not too revealing and perhaps he does this intentionally. “Black Earth” was published 10 years after his composition and perhaps the publisher might consider revising the music score.

Say’s embellishments consist of additional notes and rhythmic modifications. Through our observations, his embellishments resemble the Baglama instrument effects especially at the *Quasi improvvisazione*. The notes repetitions resemble the *Taksim*. According to the Turkish Music Dictionary website, the definition of *Taksim* is ‘a free-meter instrumental improvisation section in Turkish classical music. The modification in Say’s performances only happens in a slow tempo. In comparison with the western classical practice, this was a common practice during the Baroque period where embellishments apply in the slow movements of sonatas (Rowland, 2001). Furthermore, the composer has indicated the work should be played *Quasi improvvisazione*, (like improvisation).

6 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we characterized Say’s commonly used embellishments in “Black Earth”. As the term embellishment means a ‘decoration’ and ‘to make something beautiful’, the embellishments can be a combination of Western and other embellishments originating from other styles. In this study, we

conclude that Fazil Say’s embellishments consideration reflects his originality in comparison through his piano work of the Black Earth.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank our institutions, Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia, and the MARA University of Technology, Malaysia for their support of this study.

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