

# Glossary of Terms

*This glossary is provided as a handy reference to some of the unique terminology used in the essays and comparative surveys. It became apparent that such a tool would be helpful to both writer and reader when in nearly every essay or comparative survey I'd have to refer the reader to another essay or take a paragraph to define a unique term for the umpteenth time. Many of the concepts discussed on this website address fundamental issues of interpretation and musical performance that are not addressed in any other review forum that I am familiar with. This has been one of the motivating forces behind the inception of this site, that with a proper understanding of aesthetic evaluation many of the so-called subjective hot buttons (and source of heated debates between listeners and critics) could be explained within an overall objective framework.*

**Acceptable Variance.** Or, the acceptable range of interpretive variance. Anything outside of a 30% differential in tempo (15% either side of a statistical median) falls outside the acceptable range of variance, and many critics fail to sufficiently point this out (or mention it at all) in their reviews. This does not mean that outliers may not be of some interest, but it needs to be discussed so that the reader is aware of highly individualistic (i.e. eccentric) interpretations. Some few individual listeners aside, most listeners prefer interpretations which fall within the acceptable range of variance. Of course, a critic can't just pick up and record and know this, therefore the need for considerable experience to understand comparative context.

**Articulation.** Variants: articular, articulation, articulacy. Consider this as the enunciation and emphasis in speech. On keyboard instruments this means the degree of legato or staccato, and the manner in which the smaller components of the musical phrase are characterized. Especially important in music of the Baroque and Classical era. Without variation musical lines can become monotonous, with overly vigorous articulation the music can become too emphatic and hyperactive.

**Empathetic Connectivity.** The ability of the performer to connect with the listener by means of leading the listener along in the narrative flow. Inconsistencies, lapses of focus on the performer's part, or unexpected turns in the narrative can quickly sever the empathetic connection. Arrau has one of the highest levels of focus and narrative consistency.

**Gestalt.** The manner in which performance particulars and acoustic characteristics of the venue impact each other, and how this interface is received by the listener. Do the elements of the pianist's style (projection, articulation, textural delineation) work harmoniously within the given acoustic? Dry studio recordings, or reverberant concert halls present an entirely different experience (Gestalt) to the listener who may have strong preferences one way or the other.

**Hermeneutical Implication.** The innate expressive potential within each musical gesture, interval, figuration or ornament, whether thematically based or not. Many performers do not understand this principle and as a consequence they apply inflections inconsistently, this in turn creates a disconnect with the listener, whether realized on a conscious level or only subliminally inferred.

**Layered Complexity.** Refers to multiple lines or events happening simultaneously. The music may be polyphonic, or simply have a slow moving bass foundation, a middle melodic tune and an upper ornamental line. I tend to praise performers who clearly delineate the various layers of the music by means of dynamic differentiation or by means of varying tonal color (or both).

**Macro.** This broader view, or big picture. Small inflections and passing details are minimized so that the listener may focus on and grasp the structural connection between larger segments of the work.

**Macro Dynamic.** A manner of playing that emphasizes the long line with minimal attention to passing detail or small expressive inflections. Macro players may be loud and vigorous or soft and sensitive, macro merely means that the players tend to prefer smooth legato lines with minimal metric delineation. Perahia is an example of a macro player.

**Meso.** Literally, middle, or medium. A term which refers to a manner of playing that exhibits the defining characteristics of neither micro nor macro playing. Meso refers to a player that consistently sits in the middle, not somebody who picks and chooses micro or macro elements on an inconsistent basis. Hewitt is a true Meso player, whereas Brendel is a bit of a magpie who imbues his interpretations with micro, meso and macro elements. Because the term is not as consistently precise as micro or macro I use it infrequently.

**Micro.** The close-up or detailed view of the music. Every figurative gesture or ornament is shaped and nuanced, metric delineation is emphasized, different textures or layers within the music are given individual articulation or dynamic levels whereas in macro playing these elements are more homogenized.

**Micro Dynamic.** A manner of playing that emphasizes the expressive potential within each line, phrase or musical gesture, either by dynamic emphasis, or articulation. Strong metric contour lends for propulsive forward motion in the narrative. Micro dynamic players may play loudly or softly, micro merely means that they play with many adjustments to the dynamic energy level as opposed to macro players who minimize the amount of continuous adjustment in favor of a more stable dynamic presentation. Schiff is an example of a micro dynamic player.

**Narrative.** Every piece of music whether a Bach prelude, a Wagner opera or the “Happy Birthday” song has a natural progression, sense of direction, or ‘mood.’ This I call narrative because it implies an unfolding story with a beginning and an ending. When the story is too forced, too dispassionate, or riddled with disruptive and unexpected turns, the narrative is unconvincing. Like an amateur comedian who has no sense of timing when delivering the lines, or an actor who lets his accent slip here and there while playing the part of a foreigner. The manner of emphatic or subdued deliver may be a matter of subjective interpretation, but inconsistencies in the narrative are a big pet-peeve of mine.

**Preference Profile.** Due to each listener’s innate psychological disposition, there is a tendency to consistently gravitate towards music and performers who exemplify the preferred manner of musical discourse. Usually this centers around the issue of energetic projection (smooth or edgy) which I describe using the terms micro and macro. In my comparative survey of the Bach Goldberg Variations I experimented with making recommendations based on Listener Preference Profiles, and have since made occasional mention of performances that may appeal to one type of Preference Profile or another.

**Psychological Disposition.** These are the various constituent parts of a person’s character which may result in a specific Preference Profile. Preference Profile matches styles of music and performance to specific psychological indicators.

**Register.** Or registral, or registrational. Think of registers as different regions of the keyboard. Depending on the type of piano and how it has been voiced, the notes from top to bottom may sound like higher or lower pitches of the same instrument (on an organ this would be notes played from the same rank of pipes), that is with the same ratio of fundamental and overtones, or it may display a gradual change in tonal character. Compositionally, some composers, such as Liszt, may utilize more effects of registrational color and sonority, while others, such as Chopin,

rely more on textural and figural differentiation. The pianist's manner of playing may emphasize or minimize registrational color. John Browning was a master of Registrational effects.

**Spannung.** A German word (always italicized) with many meanings, usually having to do with something suspenseful or fraught with tension. As it is used in a musical context it denotes an elastic connective tissue or sense of inner tension that connects two ideas. If I were to use an English term I'd probably say Connective Tension, but I like *spannung* because it also implies elasticity rather than rigidity. An example of usage would be in discussing a rest between two musical phrases; does the music simply stop and start again, and thus disrupt any sense of connection between the two ideas, or is there a sense of implied tension which acts like a bridge spanning the two ideas. Think of *spannung* as spanning. There are many ways in which a performer can convey that two ideas are connected, therefore I often rile against performers who don't have any sense of *spannung*, who merely give us disparate and unconnected musical ideas with no underlying connective tension.

**Syntax.** The manner in which musical gestures and phrases are combined to form a logical sense of narrative exposition or progression. Inconsistent application of articulation in two identical passages would likely demonstrate a lack of understanding of the musical syntax.

**Textural Differentiation.** Similar to layered complexity, but in this case not likely to be polyphonic music, rather each of the separate music lines (or layers) have been written with different textures, perhaps a swirling ostinato in the treble, a detached and angular rhythmic idea in the middle register, and deep tolling tones in the low bass. Each of these textures should stimulate the ear in different ways, emerging with distinctive resonance and transient attack. I tend to criticize performers who minimize or homogenize music that is clearly written with different textures. Many pianos are designed to minimize registrational difference and/or range of tonal modulus (Kawai, Fazioli, for example) so I'll often criticize the artist's choice of piano if it is not entirely suitable to the musical requirements.

**Tonal Modulus.** Or, range of tonal modulus. With many instruments, and the human voice, there is a naturally occurring difference in harmonic color (ratio of fundamental to overtones) as the instrument progresses in range from a soft to loud dynamic level. Pipe organs would be a notable exception. Some pianos are designed to have little or no variance in color whether played softly or loudly (Fazioli notably) and many performers praise this 'stability' as being useful in exploiting a full range of dynamic without disrupting the continuity of color characteristics. Other pianos (notably Steinway) are designed to have a maximum range of tonal modulus, which may be more difficult to balance, but has the advantage of imitating a more orchestral sense of color. Depending on the music (Art of Fugue or Liszt Sonata) one may require one or the other type of instrument, but in most cases it is my belief that a range of color and especially of increased harmonic 'stress' helps convey the underlying, natural psychological expression of intensity as the dynamic level increases.

**Untersatz.** A German word which in everyday parlance means the saucer you put underneath your tea cup, but which in musical usage describes the foundational tones in music, usually with some sort of sense of physicality, as in the low vibrating tones of a pipe organ's deepest tones, or the lowest tones on a large concert grand piano. To use an English equivalent I'd have to say something like "the palpable physical vibrations of the deep bass." I'll just stick with *Untersatz*, so add it to your vocabulary.