

Transcriptions and Arrangements

What is essential, is invisible to the eye

By Douglas Niedt

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It's not my intention to defend the right to transcribe or arrange a musical work. This has been dealt with, hashed out, and pretty much successfully defended many times in past years. Incidentally, though most people don't, I like to make a distinction between a transcription and an arrangement. I like to use the word "transcription" in regard to taking a musical work (usually classical) and adapting it to another instrument, trying to stay fairly close to the original. I like to use the word "arrangement" to describe the end result of taking a piece (classical or non-classical) and adapting it very freely (perhaps changing the meter, harmonizations, melody, or altering the rhythms).

In regard to the transcription side, there has been a trend going on for many years that disturbs me. Some transcribers engage in an almost blind pursuit of the original. They stick to the original text as closely as possible, unaware of the consequences. In their dogged pursuit of the original notes, these transcribers lose sight of their ultimate goal--*to bring the music to life*. Instead, with their automaton-like original-note for original-note approach to transcription, they snuff out the very life of the music.

But don't misunderstand. Closely checking the original music is an important part of transcription and even *performing* a transcription. I don't let my students play a transcription (even of mine!) without them comparing it to and studying the original version.

But studying the original notes should not in itself determine the final character of the transcription. One of the important criteria of the effectiveness of a transcription is that THE MUSIC MUST SOUND GOOD ON THE GUITAR. A transcription is not supposed to be an imitation of the original instrument. We performers are not in the business of doing impersonations of other instruments! Segovia said it very well: "Transcribing is not merely passing literally from

one instrument to another. It means finding equivalents which change neither the esthetic spirit nor the harmonic structure of the work..."

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To take an obvious example, in performing any of the Bach solo violin or cello works, one cannot play on the guitar only what is written in the original violin or cello music and expect any kind of musical result. One will end up with a poor impersonation of a violin or cello. The addition of bass notes, inversion of harmonies, additions or deletions of chordal notes, etc. are all sometimes needed to make a transcription "guitaristic."

Our goal is ultimately to make the work sound on the guitar as good as or better than the original instrument, and to accentuate a particular quality of the music that the original instrument could not capture.

This quality could be something technical such as contrapuntal transparency and clarity, or something more abstract such as an air of tenderness or fragility which the guitar can capture better than say the piano in some impressionistic works. One cannot usually achieve these goals by slavishly following the original music. Incidentally, the above statement can be used not only in making transcriptions, but also in judging the quality of a transcription done by someone else.

On the other hand, one must also guard against the other extreme of taking too much liberty with the text, also resulting in losing the spirit of the original music. Changes must be made with unerring instinct and taste. Perhaps it is in reaction to past musicians taking too much liberty with the original text, that today more and more transcriptions are being written by people who, sticking so closely to the original text, stifle or lose the spirit of the music.

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But one needs only to listen to some good transcriptions to hear the philosophy of freedom from the printed note work successfully. Segovia's transcriptions of Albeniz and Granados (based on those by Llobet and Tárrega) by no means closely follow the original piano music. And though one could possibly rein in the freedom of adaptation in these versions a bit here and there, nevertheless these transcriptions magically bring these pieces to life with a soulfulness and musical quality that the piano cannot touch.

Similarly, Rick Foster's famous transcription of Bach's *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring* leaves out many, many notes of the original music. But by avoiding entanglement in mere notes and instead concentrating on the spiritual qualities of the music, Foster was able to produce a musical version of tremendous beauty and communicative power. This version (in contrast to others that attempt to follow the original music more closely) sounds so right on the guitar that when listening to it we never think of the notes, chord voicings, or even the fact that much of the music in the original is sung by a choir!

Again, let me emphasize that in transcription there is nothing wrong with authenticity and following the original score as long as the music sounds better that way. If it does not, and in most cases it will not, this does not necessarily mean the piece is unsuitable for transcription, but only that something is wrong with the "authenticity." Musicology by itself is not enough. *Musical knowledge is good for the performer in that it frees his imagination.* Only when knowledge of the score, real musicianship, and an instinctive feeling for what works on the guitar are brought together, does a transcription come to life.

Finally, as in all aspects of musical study, one must trust one's instincts, feelings, and ears. As Antoine de Saint-Exupery wrote in his classic, *The Little Prince*, **"It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."**

And so it is with transcription. What is important is not just what we see on the original score before us. What is important goes far beyond that. Many young musicians today in our music schools and on our concert stages do not understand this, and that disturbs me. We should not be afraid to close our eyes more often, and discover what really matters. Remember, what is essential is invisible to the eye.