

Lost in Translation: Playing Orchestral Reductions

Frank Corliss



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I STILL RECALL, WITH MORE THAN a little shame, an embarrassing experience from early in my tenure as the staff pianist for the Boston Symphony. It occurred during a rehearsal with conductor Seiji Ozawa, a pack of vocal soloists, a huge chorus, and one overmatched, terrified rehearsal pianist whose best laid plans for this rehearsal were falling apart—and quickly. All the tricky passagework that seemed so secure in the practice room somehow became wayward clusters of incoherent notes. The phrases that seemed only slightly awkward when I practiced them became as tortuous as a Sunday stroll up Mt. Everest. The leaps that didn't seem so bad in the calm of the practice room now seemed to span vast chasms of space. I was desperately trying to hang on to any semblance of fluency and competence when I heard the voice of maestro Ozawa shouting like an angry samurai over my piano-generated chaos, “MY TEMPO!” I had completely failed. Lost in the specific pianistic difficulties of playing the orchestral reduction, I was unable to play with any sense of coherent musical expression. I was not even able to play in a steady tempo—inexcusable, and a quick way to get yourself yelled at!

Then and there I decided that, if I was going to have any chance of playing in the “big leagues” with the great artists that came to the Boston Symphony, I needed to figure out a way to play these orchestral reductions with more competence, more expression, and, yes, with some modicum of artistry. I needed to be more systematic in my approach. I needed to strategize and be more clever in my preparation, planning, and execution. I had to rethink my approach and perhaps even put into practice some of the things my teachers had told me—and to which I had only half listened (the arrogance of youth).

One problem for us as collaborative pianists is that at some metaphysical and purely practical level it is obviously impossible for one person to play music designed to be played by an orchestra made up of dozens of musicians. Even in the simplest of orchestrations there is usually more going on than can be covered by two hands. Those seemingly transparent and lucid Mozart orchestrations are often, upon closer inspection, a surprisingly complex and rich tapestry of counterpoint, harmonic detail, and figuration. And that is to say nothing of the extravagant orchestrations of Strauss and Mahler, or the equally extravagant counterpoint of Bach's works.

And then we come to the piano reductions of those orchestral scores. How faithful do we need to be to the score of the piano reduction? Do we need to

treat them with the same sense of sacredness with which we approach a Beethoven Violin Sonata or a Schubert song? I don't think so. Piano reductions often represent the personal judgments and choices of some good, hard working, and too often unnamed musician slaving away (I often imagine) in the back of a music publishing house. Or perhaps it is some musician from an earlier era when the musical tastes—and the musical choices—were vastly different than our current ones. For example, those old reductions of Bach and Handel works seem designed for the broad tempos of an earlier era and not for the fleet tempos currently favored by our “historically informed” performance practices. Most intriguingly, and most challengingly, the creator of the reduction is occasionally the composer himself or a close surrogate. I think of Ravel's piano version of his *Shéhérazade*, the reduction of Bernstein's *Serenade* for violin and orchestra, or the piano version of Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder* by Alban Berg. Although these may be effective purely as creations for the piano, which is after all perhaps the composer's intent, they often add detail that make them at times surprisingly ineffective (I tread on sacrilege here) at capturing the orchestral rhythmic heft and drive. At the other extreme on the spectrum of complexity are some of the newer reductions that attempt to be more “accurate” and spare but often don't give enough tonal support to match that of an orchestra.

So what exactly is the task for the hard working collaborative pianist when playing orchestral reductions? It obviously can't be a slavish, exact reproduction of the notes of the full score. That is clearly impossible. Neither can it be an unthinking, unimaginative, and literal reading of the piano reduction. Our ultimate goal is more akin to an act of translation than to an act of reading—a translation of the sonority, energy, and color of an orchestra into the language of the piano, with its own unique sonorities and capabilities.

Unfortunately our training as young pianists, with its insistence (and rightly so!) on playing exactly what is on the page, is not always helpful to us when we do this translation work. Simple minded word-for-word translation, as we know from Google translate, can often end up in unintelligible gibberish. So our “translation” must be informed by deep understanding of the core musical expression of the work and of the characteristics of the orchestral sound. We have to make intelligent musical

choices about how we balance the importance of the basic parameters of music: melody, harmony, rhythm. Finally—and often painfully—we have to reconcile ourselves to the fact that all translation is ultimately an act of compromise. As the British writer and essayist Julian Barnes wrote of the art of translation of literature: “The plainest sentence is full of hazard; often the choices available seem to be between different percentages of loss.” In the same way, we as pianists must choose carefully and cleverly between our “percentages of loss” in order to keep the illusion of the sound and character of the orchestra alive in our piano sound.

So in the end, perhaps the best piano reduction (the best translation) is the one we make ourselves, using a decent printed piano reduction as a basis for our own edits, which are informed by our musical judgment, our ear for orchestral sound, our thorough knowledge of the full score, and perhaps most importantly, our own strengths and weaknesses as a pianist.

Are there any guidelines to help us in our act of translation? “Rules” are clearly not possible! I can only put forth the general ideas that I have collected from master teachers and colleagues, or those I have learned through hard won experience. (It pays to have a thick skin as a rehearsal pianist.) The guidelines below are ones I break almost as often as I follow. But whatever the choices I make, I ultimately try to play something that captures the essence of the musical character and sweep of the orchestra.

Guidelines for “translation”

1. *Rhythm is king, harmony is queen.* Orchestras can play with the rhythmic drive of a freight train and, conversely, with incredible suppleness and flexibility. But in all cases the orchestra provides the rhythmic framework for the music. If you are playing the correct harmonies with the correct rhythmic feel, you are probably doing pretty well. However, if the complexity of the reduction makes you unable to play at the correct tempo, or, more subtly, is causing you to insert rubatos that the orchestra would not make, it is a sign that you need to rearrange or simplify things in the reduction to allow you to play with more fluency.
2. *The Rule of Two.* In particularly difficult and complicated reductions I remind myself that, since I have

only two hands, I should play only two elements in the music. For example, I will play melody and bass line, or melody and figuration, or figuration and bass line, or figuration and countermelody. But I *won't* play melody, countermelody, *and* bass line; or melody, figuration, *and* countermelody, etc. If three elements in the music are absolutely necessary someone will need to provide me an extra pianist to help out.

3. *Play what you hear not what you see.* Remember, the piano reduction has no particular sacredness as a score. Do not treat it in the same way you might a score for a Beethoven piano sonata. Know the orchestra part—through recording and study of the full score—and play what *you* think is most important to hear, not what someone else has decided for you. Keep your focus on the big musical picture and play only what you hear as most essential. Chances are it will be both easier to play and more effective. When I have real difficulties deciding what is most important to play, then I will “sing” the orchestra part back to myself (twice, since I have two hands) and then simply choose to play that. Somehow the act of singing focuses our attention on the most important musical elements.
4. *Less is more.* Sometimes playing less of the orchestra detail is better because it allows us to play with fluency, solidity, and musicality—the point of our whole enterprise as collaborative pianists. I would rather hear less elements in the music played well, than more elements of the music played sloppily or unmusically. Of course, it is also possible to play too little, which leads us to . . .
5. *The “Goldilocks” Rule.* As in the story of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” you need to play at the level of complexity and detail that is “just right.” If you play too much you risk not being able to play with fluency, expression, and musicality—the most important goals. But if you play too little you will not be able to give enough tonal and rhythmic support. This is especially crucial for singers, who need the sonic and rhythmic energy of the orchestra to be captured in the piano reduction in order to carry them through the phrase and to inspire their own artistry.
6. *Be a magician and a thief—but don't be a hero!* Like most magicians, and all thieves, I don't like to be

caught. Ideally, when I simplify I like to do it in such a way that no one notices, or, if they do, that what I am playing is so compelling that the absence of any particular musical element is overlooked. On the other hand, I don't try to be a hero; no one expects us to be able to play everything in really complicated scores, so we shouldn't. But we *are* expected to play beautifully and expressively that which we do choose to play.

7. *Fake precisely.* Intelligent “faking” is always involved when playing orchestral reductions. It is a personal choice, but I don't do my faking on the fly in the heat of performance. Somehow it never ends well when I do attempt this. So I figure out exactly how I am going to fake; I work out precisely what I am going to play—or not play; I mark it in my score; and then I practice it (sometimes a lot!). There are no surprises or last minute improvisations. Working this way also has the added benefit of saving me time if have to relearn the score again later. Much of the initial “translating” work is done and I just have to get the notes and my arrangement back in my fingers.
8. *Trust, but verify.* For practical reasons we need to use piano reductions. But remember, the people who make these piano reductions are fallible human beings like the rest of us. It is a rare piano reduction that does not have at least one error. In my years of playing reductions I have found countless mistakes: missing measures, extra measures, missing instrumental parts, incorrect accidentals, incorrect meter markings, incorrect or misplaced tempo indications. The list is endless. Save yourself some embarrassment by taking a few minutes to proofread the reduction against the full score. (And of course in studying the score you may be prompted to make different choices as to what to play. That is good.)
9. *Know the score.* After study of the full score and, if possible, close listening to recordings, we should know the sound of the orchestra well enough to always have a clear idea which instrument is playing what in the piano reduction. Is that bass note in the left hand of the piano reduction played by the double basses? By the cellos? By the timpani? Is that beautiful right hand melody played by the full violin section? By a solo flute? Or by the oboe?

The answers to these questions will affect how you play. In your mind's ear you should always hear the orchestra playing along with your piano playing.

10. *Play and think like an orchestra.* Each instrument and orchestral section has its own color, timbre, and character of attack. The rich warm sound of a brass section, the bracing sound of the winds at full volume, the deep vibrant sound of the double basses, a melody played with the plangent tone of the oboe—the music for each of these has its own distinctive flavor which we need to capture in our piano sound. And the attack of a chord played by the brass section is distinctly different than one played by the wind section or the string section. Can we mimic this on the piano? With sensitive listening and playing, I think so. Just because it is a piano reduction doesn't mean we shouldn't play sensitively and artistically. Thinking this way also has the added benefit of inspiring a greater range of color choices when we play music actually written for the piano.

**A grab bag of ideas for simplifying/translating
(Use with care and judgment!)**

1. *No jumps.* If leaps and jumps in the piano reduction are impeding the fluency of your playing rearrange them to element or reduce the jumps. We can often use octave displacement of notes or musical figures in order to keep things closer together, which can allow us to play more steadily and fluently.
2. *Revoice chords.* If chords in the reduction are too wide for your hand, revoice them so they fit your hand better.
3. *No rolled chords.* For some unknown reason many piano reductions are full of rolled and broken chords. In general, orchestras cannot "roll" or break chords; this is a pianistic device, not an orchestral one, so we lose the orchestral illusion when we break or roll chords (unless of course it is a harp arpeggio, in which case roll away). Make the attack of the chord in your piano reduction match exactly the attack in the orchestra.
4. *Redistribute between the hands.* There is nothing sacred about which hand plays what. If it helps to split something between the hands go ahead and do it.
5. *No octaves.* Octaves in the piano reduction are usually a vestige of some sort of doubling that occurs in the original orchestration. If playing the octaves is difficult just make them single notes. (If you want to practice your octaves better to spend your time learning the Chopin "Octave" Etude.)
6. *No double thirds.* A corollary to the previous idea. (Check out the Chopin "Double Thirds" Etude if you are really into double thirds.)
7. *Repeated chords can be converted into alternating chords (i.e., a measured tremolo).* Fast repeated chords or repeated notes are usually fairly easy for orchestral instruments to play but can be more labored on the piano. You can convert them into measured tremolos in order to make them more fluent to play.
8. *Convert percussion parts.* Percussion parts are often the most difficult to translate onto the piano. Timpani parts—often musically important—can simply become octaves played by the left hand. Unpitched percussion parts can be converted into clusters on the piano. For instance, choose a low cluster of notes on the piano and that can become your bass drum. A triangle can be a cluster played high up on the piano and a snare drum could be a cluster played in the middle of the piano. Everything should be played of course with sharp attack and precise rhythm.
9. *Eliminate figuration.* The big romantic orchestrations of, for example, Strauss, Mahler, and Wagner are often full of 16th-note figurations played by the strings. Many times when you listen to the orchestra you don't even hear the notes of the figuration distinctly. In those cases it often sounds better to simply play a strong bass and then fill in the harmonies with tremolos or our own simplified figuration.
10. *"Recompose" if you need to.* If changing or eliminating one or two notes allows you to play a fast passage with more ease, musical flow, and character, and if making this change is not noticeable, go ahead and do it. I promise not to tell anyone!
11. *Orchestral dynamics are not always piano dynamics.* The musicians who make piano reductions usually simply put the dynamics found in the full score into the piano reduction. But the dynamics in the full score are often "technical" dynamics (i.e., they are trying to indicate to the orchestra not to overbalance the soloists). But these dynamics sometimes don't

give a sense of the power of the whole orchestra. Music marked as *piano* in the reduction often will be quite loud when played by a full orchestra. In order to capture the energy of the orchestra part it is important not to underplay these parts—the soloist needs the tonal support from the piano.

12. *Orchestral rubato vs. piano rubato.* Orchestras can of course play with great flexibility and sensitivity, but they can not always make the same kind of rubatos that a single pianist can. Unlike a solo pianist, orchestras have the challenge of playing together, which can limit the type of rhythmic flexibility they can provide. Beware of using solo pianistic rubato when playing orchestral scores. It destroys the illusion that you are an orchestra, and it also doesn't help our vocal or instrumental soloist get an accurate sense of how the orchestra will, or can, respond to them.
13. *Bach Two-Part Inventions and Broadway showtunes.* If things get particularly complicated in a piano reduction of an orchestral score you can follow two possible models. You can play it like a Bach Two-Part Invention. In other words, you can choose two lines in the orchestral texture and just play those. Or you can play it like a Broadway showtune. That is, just find the chords and use those as the basis for what you play. (In these cases I often mark in chord symbols in my score just to keep myself on track.)

Our task as collaborative pianists in playing orchestral reductions is a large one. We have to somehow play music designed to be performed by the largest symphonic orchestras; we have to be able to play with the energy and rhythmic drive of 80 people. Our imagination for sound must allow us to recreate the color of the orchestra, evoking the unique timbre and character of each instrument. We have to make intelligent choices about what to play and how to play it. Finally, and most importantly, we must have deep understanding of the music so that we can distill its very essence with just our two hands and our 88 keys.

The artist Pablo Picasso did his own act of distillation—or one could say act of translation—in an amazing series of one-line drawings. With just a few strokes of a pencil he was able to capture the essence of a rooster, a mouse, a grasshopper, a woman's silhouette. He knew exactly what to include and what to leave out, and he had an amazing understanding of how much could be communicated with a single line. These drawings are masterful both in their simplicity and their expressive power. And for us as collaborative pianists they can be both model and inspiration to meet our own artistic challenge of trying to reproduce the essence of an orchestral score with our own few "strokes of a pencil."

Frank Corliss is currently the associate director of the Bard College Conservatory of Music and the director of its Collaborative Piano Fellowship program. Before coming to Bard he was for 16 years the staff pianist for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, where his duties included playing rehearsals for the Tanglewood Festival Chorus and for soloists and conductors of the BSO. During that time he was also the director of music at the Walnut Hill School for the Arts and a frequent performer on the Boston Symphony Prelude Concert series.

He has worked as a musical assistant for Yo-Yo Ma and has assisted Ma in the musical preparation of many new works for performance and recording, including concertos by Elliot Carter, Richard Danielpour, Tan Dun, John Harbison, Leon Kirchner, Peter Lieberson, Christopher Rouse, and John Williams. Corliss can be heard in recording on Yo-Yo Ma's Grammy-winning Sony disc *Soul of the Tango*, as well as the Koch International CD of music by Elliott Carter for chorus and piano with the John Oliver Chorale.

A frequent performer throughout the United States, Corliss was appointed as an Artistic Ambassador for the United States Information Agency and in that capacity went on a three-week concert tour of Eastern Europe. He was also the recipient of a Rockefeller grant from the Cultural Contact US-Mexico Fund for Culture to commission works by American and Mexican composers for flute and piano, which were premiered in Boston and in Mexico City.

A graduate of the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, he received his Master of Music degree from Stony Brook University, where he studied with Gilbert Kalish. He has also studied at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria, and the Cracow Academy of Music in Poland, and participated in several summer festivals, including the Aspen Music Festival, Tanglewood Music Festival, and the Taos Chamber Music Festival.