

## Playing with Genre: An Interpreter's Tale

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In this article, Ally Mohs digs deep into the way musicians prepare to play a piece of music. By looking at sheet music through the lens of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), Ally focuses on how a person can take what they learn through writing research and apply those ideas to different, incredibly complex situations, such as learning to play a piece of music.

I'm what you might consider a music snob. I play both the violin and viola and can sing pretty okay (not *American Idol*-worthy, but still not awful). I can read alto and treble clef almost fluently and can figure out how to read bass clef in a life-or-death situation. While I am able to read music, this does not necessarily mean that I am an expert at actually playing whichever instrument these clefs call for me to play. Even if I can somewhat fake my way through whichever piece of music I need to play, I also know there is a lot of background information that is needed in order to play the piece with as much integrity as intended by the composer. It may come as somewhat of a surprise, but playing a piece of music is actually more than just playing a bunch of dots on a page. I learn this the hard way whenever I am given a new piece of music. Although a certain piece may be new to the musician personally, each individual piece comes with its own set of interpretations, all depending on who the musician, or interpreter of the piece, is.

Although I am a self-proclaimed music snob, I experienced my fair share of panic moments when my high school orchestra director wrote on the board "New Music!" Without fail, every time I saw those words, my thought process went a little like this. "Shit, what have I gotten myself into?" I would

calmly unpack my instrument and take my seat, bracing myself for what was to come. While the director was talking, she passed out the music, causing the panic inside of me to increase as everyone around me would begin to chatter with excitement about the new music. I mean, come on people, this may be the end of the world as we know it. Once the music was placed in front of me, the panic would only heighten as I saw what we were actually going to have to play. “Serenade for Strings.” I would then think: Are you kidding me? Those are sixteenth notes in a set of three eighth notes. Nope, I can’t. I refuse to play this. I can’t get through this piece without losing every ounce of sanity I have.

## Now What?

Before we take on those first moments of panic, it is important to gain a better knowledge of what exactly cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) actually means. CHAT combines historical theory, cultural theory, and activity theory into one nice acronym. It allows readers to step back from what they are reading and get a better sense of how all three of these theories interact with one another. At the time when I was actually reading the many different pieces of music, I didn’t really understand what it was that I was doing. After learning about CHAT, I realized I had been using the CHAT approach when I was learning a new piece of music. This is how a typical first run-through of a new piece of music went for me:

After I took a few deep breaths, the panic subsided enough for me to begin to think clearly again and focus on the task at hand: getting through this piece of music. Before anything else, I needed to go through the *production*, or what helped shape the piece—the parts of the music that make it actual music. The musician looks at things such as the speed in which the piece will be played, where it gets loud and soft, etc. (Figure 1). What do I need to look at in order to actually begin to play the dreaded new piece of music (aka “Serenade for Strings”)? Well, here goes nothing.

- What is the key signature (what sharps or flats will be in the piece)?

It’s in C Major. That means no sharps or flats. Okay, not too bad, that makes this piece a little easier . . . but not by much.

- What is the time signature (how many beats will be in a measure)?

It’s in 6/8 time. So it will be counted in either six or two.

- What is the tempo (how fast will this piece actually go)?

An eighth note equals 126. Not too fast, not too slow. So she’ll be beating most likely in two since the eighth notes will be a little too fast to beat normally.

- Any major changes throughout the piece?

There are a few throughout, but stylistically, it should be fine.

- Who is the composer?

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. Alright, he’s a pretty cool dude. He has written a lot of good pieces of music. Hopefully, this should be a cool piece.

Next came the hard part: actually playing the piece. As any normal person would do before a big moment, or not-so-big moment, I would give myself a pep talk. It went along the lines of: Remember to look ahead when playing. It makes things a little easier. Don’t get too caught up on mistakes. You got this.

FULL SCORE

**Serenade in C major**  
Op. 48  
for string orchestra  
**1. Pezzo in forma di sonatina**

P. Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)

1. Time signature: 6/8  
Key Signature: C Major
2. Tempo: *Andante non troppo*.
3. Composer: Piotr Tchaikovsky
4. Playing Part: Viola

Figure 1: Shown above are some of the important details that a musician must look at in order to play any piece of music.

## Here Goes Nothing

After I completed the first run-through of the piece, I thought to myself: that went pretty smoothly, no major bumps in the road, just a few hiccups, nothing a little practicing won’t fix. Then came the hard part: actually learning the piece. As we packed up, the director told us to do some research. In what time period was it written? What was the story behind the piece? Who was the composer? What was their life like? What historically was going on at that

time? And so on. By answering these few questions, the interpreter is able to gain a better grasp on what it is that makes this particular piece unique. What makes this piece stand out among the hundreds of other classical pieces?

First, I needed to figure out how I was going to get all of this information. Because I am a frequent user of Google, my automatic idea was to use my favorite search engine, so I just hopped on my computer to surf the web. I had to figure out what to do first. Should I start with the composer or the piece? I thought it was better to get to know the man behind the piece before the piece itself, so I typed in the composer, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (Figure 2).

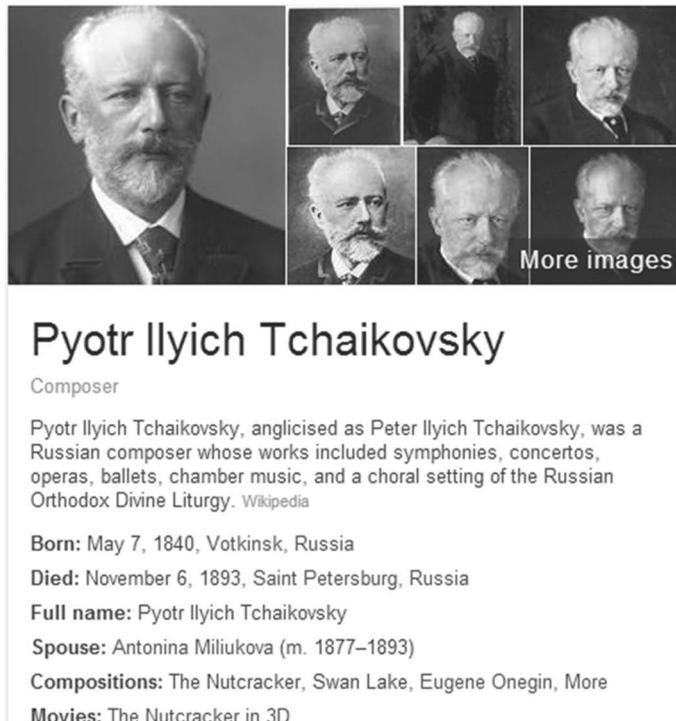


Figure 2: Biographical information on Tchaikovsky found via Google.

Okay, so Tchaikovsky wrote a lot of music to be performed with other artistic talents, such as dancing and singing. But what does that mean? How could looking at his other pieces help me to understand the piece I was playing? By looking at Tchaikovsky’s pieces before and after he wrote “Serenade for Strings,” a musician is able to see where he was coming from as well as where he was going, thus painting a picture of his life as a composer. By gaining this perspective, the musician is better able to grasp what it is that makes the composer unique. What is the message behind this piece? What is the composer’s *representation*, or how he wants others

to see this particular text (and how they actually see it)? How did he go about writing this when he did? After years of reading concert critiques and reviews, I know the best way to find this information is by looking at program notes. For most concerts, the program includes background on the pieces being played; and thanks to technology, most programs are available online, making it easier to retrieve the information that you are looking for. For example, at a Chicago Symphony Orchestra concert, attendees will receive a small booklet containing advertisements for upcoming performances, information on certain spotlight performances, and details on what pieces will be played at that particular show. Many, but not all, programs contain basic information about the piece. Because of the *distribution* of the piece of music (how it gets circulated into people's lives), a lot of major concerts have notes on each of the pieces being played and give a background on the piece, thus creating an understanding of whatever piece of music is going to be played.

### You Want Me to Play What?

Since it was important to dig a little deeper into the background of the piece of music, it was time to turn back to one of the easiest ways to retrieve information, Google. Since there are many professional orchestras that have performed this particular piece, program notes were not hard to find. After looking at several different programs, I came across one that seemed to stick out to me. The particular program is from the Los Angeles Philharmonic. This program note showed some background on Tchaikovsky and then went into further detail about the piece itself. According to the program note, "Serenade for Strings" is "a piece from the heart" (Los Angeles Philharmonic). This particular piece "defines the precedent of classical models" (Los Angeles Philharmonic). By the time the piece reaches the fourth movement, the listener will hear a sense of unity that draws all of the movements together. So now that we know a little bit more about the piece from the program notes, we can move on to the more important part: actually playing it.

Researching for the piece is only half of the battle. The fun is only just beginning. When you get to the actual playing of the music, there is a lot more involved than you might originally think. Music is more than just dots on a page. It tells a story. This being said, musicians must think of the *reception* of the piece, or how people take it in. Musicians must play to the best of their ability in order for the audience to really appreciate the piece that they are playing. The audience has not done as much background research as the musician has and they only experience it once, so how can the musician play the piece and connect with the audience? The musician has to tell the music's

story and show the audience what the piece means not only to the composer, but also to the musician AND to the audience. It is important that musicians draw the audience in and make them look at the piece and find meaning in it. Musicians need to play it stylistically and understand what it is that they are playing. In other words, they must look at **socialization**, or how people use the piece. What will one member of the audience tell his or her best friend about that particular piece? How will the performance of the piece affect how the audience reacts to other pieces, or even to the same one years down the road? This, yet again, required more research.

First, I looked at what the beginning tempo of the piece was. *Andante non troppo*. Seeing as I don't speak Italian, I had to look it up to get an understanding of how fast the piece should be (Figure 3).

**an-dan-te**  [ahn-dahn-tey, an-dan-tee; Italian ahn-dahn-te]  [Show IPA](#) **adjective, adverb, noun, plural an-dan-tes.** *Music.*  
**adjective, adverb**  
1. moderately slow and even.  
**noun**  
2. an andante movement or piece.

**non troppo** (non 'troppo)

**adv**

1. (Classical Music) *music* (preceded by a musical direction, esp a tempo marking) not to be observed too strictly (esp in the phrases **allegro ma non troppo**, **adagio ma non troppo**)

Figure 3: Definitions of “*adante*” and “*non troppo*” found via online dictionaries.

Okay, so since *andante* means it's a moderate tempo and *non troppo* means to not take that for face value, *andante non troppo* means the tempo is going to be kind of slow but not too slow. Interesting. Confusing, but still interesting. As I said earlier, I don't speak Italian so in order to play the rest of the piece, I had to look up the rest of the terms so that I could actually understand what I was doing. After looking up the definitions for all the fun little Italian words, it was important to include my findings on my piece of music, so I could understand what the words were telling me. Then I could look at the style of this piece. Although it is similar to a piece by Mozart, this work is still very much Tchaikovsky's, which means that while playing the piece, I needed to combine elements from both of these two stylistically different composers.

## Practice Makes Perfect

After you know what everything means and how exactly you are supposed to put everything together you can begin to think about **activity** and **ecology**, which are elements of CHAT that focus on both the physical moments

of authors and tools (what's actually happening) and the physical and environmental boundaries of the piece. Where do you want this piece to go? What do you need to do to make sure that this piece gets to where you want it to go? When trying to perfect anything, from playing an instrument to trying to learn how to do a backflip, you need to practice this piece over and over again until you can no longer get it wrong. You need to have your fingers know what to do if your brain fails you and you lose track of where you are.

Yet to musicians, performing a piece of music is more than just playing all the right notes and being able to make it through a piece without passing out. Chances are, more than likely I will mess up at one point or another, but that is okay. Playing a piece is not just about telling the composer's story, but also a little bit of my own. Through analyzing the different aspects of preparing a piece, I begin to interpret the genre of not only the piece, but the composer. If I mess up, oh well. It only adds to that particular story. Be careful not to get too caught up in the details of the piece. If you do, the point of the piece being played can be completely missed. Musicians need to be able to take all that they learn and transfer it into their playing. In order for people to care about what it is that you are doing, playing music or writing a paper, you have to care about it enough to make them care about it almost as much as you do.

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