

STRUCTURAL AWARENESS AS SHARED INTERPRETIVE COMPETENCE IN DUO PERFORMANCE

ANCA PREDA-ULITA¹ 

SUMMARY. This study examines structural awareness as a shared interpretive competence in duo performance. Rather than treating analysis as an individual cognitive tool, it frames structural awareness as a relational process emerging through coordination between performers. Duo performance is approached as an interpretive system in which form is negotiated in real time, shaping phrasing, agogics, articulation, and expressive timing. Selected examples (violin–piano, clarinet–piano, voice–piano) show how shared structural reference points guide interpretive decisions and support advanced chamber-music practice.

Keywords: analysis, structural awareness, duo performance, phrasing, gesture

1. Introduction

Chamber music performance, and particularly duo performance, represents a privileged context in which musical structure is not only perceived and understood individually, but continuously negotiated and shared between performers. Unlike solo performance, where interpretive decisions are primarily shaped by an individual performer's internalized structural understanding, duo performance involves a constant process of mutual adjustment, anticipation, and coordination. In this context, musical structure functions as a common reference framework that guides interpretive choices and enables expressive coherence between distinct musical voices.

¹ Assoc. prof. PhD, Faculty of Music, Transilvania University of Braşov, Romania. E-mail: anca.preda@unitbv.ro



Despite the centrality of chamber music in professional performance practice, theoretical approaches have often privileged analytical perspectives that focus either on the musical work as an autonomous object or on the performer as an individual interpreter. Such approaches tend to overlook the relational dimension of interpretation, particularly the ways in which structural understanding is co-constructed in real time during ensemble performance. This gap becomes especially evident in duo formations, where the absence of a mediating ensemble hierarchy places increased responsibility on each performer's capacity to engage actively with both the musical structure and the interpretive intentions of the partner.

The present study addresses this gap by proposing the concept of structural awareness as a form of shared interpretive competence in duo performance. Structural awareness is understood here not merely as the ability to analyze formal or harmonic relationships, but as an embodied and dynamic awareness of structural processes that inform interpretive decision-making during performance. In duo contexts, this awareness acquires a relational character, emerging through interaction, listening, and reciprocal responsiveness.

By focusing on duo performance—particularly in configurations such as violin–piano, clarinet–piano, and voice–piano—this article aims to explore how shared structural awareness facilitates interpretive coordination and expressive unity. The study argues that recognizing structural awareness as a shared competence offers a more nuanced understanding of chamber music interpretation and provides a conceptual framework capable of bridging analytical knowledge and performative practice.

2. Structural Awareness: Conceptual Clarifications

The notion of structural awareness occupies an intermediate position between analytical knowledge and interpretive action, referring to a performer's capacity to perceive, internalize, and respond to structural relationships during performance. Unlike formal analysis, which operates retrospectively and often outside the temporal constraints of musical execution, structural awareness is inherently processual, unfolding in real time and shaping interpretive decisions as they occur. As such, it cannot be reduced to the conscious application of analytical models, nor can it be fully explained through purely intuitive accounts of musical interpretation.²

² Cook, Nicholas. *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

In music theory and analysis, structure has traditionally been approached as an abstract system of hierarchical relationships, articulated through formal, harmonic, or voice-leading models. From this perspective, structure is primarily understood as an object of analytical inquiry, external to performance itself. While such approaches have proven invaluable for understanding the internal coherence of musical works, they tend to overlook the ways in which structural relationships are actively engaged by performers in the act of interpretation.³

Structural awareness, as proposed in this study, designates a form of embodied knowledge through which performers relate structural relationships to expressive timing, phrasing, articulation, and dynamic shaping. It involves an anticipatory dimension, allowing performers to project large-scale formal trajectories while simultaneously responding to local musical events.⁴ Such perspectives resonate with contemporary approaches that seek to integrate analytical understanding with practical musical engagement, emphasizing the interdisciplinary interaction between analytical tools, technological resources, and performance practice.⁵

Importantly, structural awareness differs from structural knowledge in that it presupposes integration rather than accumulation. A performer may possess extensive analytical knowledge of a work's structure without necessarily being able to activate this knowledge effectively in performance. Structural awareness, by contrast, implies the internalization of structural relationships to the extent that they inform interpretive action implicitly, without interrupting the flow of performance.⁶

In the context of ensemble performance, and particularly duo performance, structural awareness acquires an additional relational dimension. Here, awareness is not confined to an individual performer's internal representation of structure but is shaped through interaction with another musical agent. The performers' respective understandings of form, hierarchy, and expressive direction must converge sufficiently to allow coordinated interpretive decisions. Structural awareness thus becomes a shared resource, enabling performers to align their phrasing strategies, negotiate agogic flexibility, and maintain coherence across formal boundaries.⁷

³ Rink, John, ed. *Musical Performance: A Guide to Understanding*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

⁴ Davidson, Jane W., ed. *The Music Practitioner*. Routledge, 2004.

⁵ Belibou, Alexandra. "Integrating Computerized Musical Education into an Interdisciplinary Paradigm; Proposal of Applications Using Sibelius Software." *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Musica*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2018.

⁶ Clarke, Eric F. *Ways of Listening: An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning*. OUP, 2005, pp. 88–105.

⁷ Sloboda, John A. *The Musical Mind*. Clarendon Press, 1985, pp. 122–140.

By conceptualizing structural awareness as a dynamic and shared interpretive competence, this study seeks to bridge the gap between analytical discourse and performance practice. Rather than opposing analysis and interpretation, the proposed framework emphasizes their interdependence, while acknowledging the specificity of performative contexts in which structural understanding is enacted collaboratively and in real time.

3. The Duo as an Interpretive System

Duo performance represents a unique microcosm of chamber music in which musical interpretation emerges not only from individual understanding but also from the dynamic interplay between two performers. In this context, each performer's structural awareness must interact with that of the partner, creating a continuous negotiation of musical form, phrasing, and expressive intent. Unlike larger ensembles, duo configurations lack hierarchical leadership, requiring performers to establish a shared interpretive framework through attentive listening, anticipation, and real-time adjustment.

The collaborative nature of duo performance means that structural relationships are constantly re-evaluated and co-constructed. For instance, in a violin–piano duo, the violinist must align melodic phrasing with harmonic progressions in the piano part, while simultaneously projecting their interpretive decisions in a way that complements the pianist's articulation and dynamic shaping.⁸ Similarly, in voice–piano duos, the singer's phrasing and breathing patterns interact directly with the pianist's harmonic pacing and textural emphasis, demanding an acute sensitivity to timing, tension, and release. In clarinet–piano duos, considerations of tone color, blend, and legato articulation further illustrate how structural awareness becomes a shared interpretive resource, influencing choices from small-scale gestures to large-scale formal decisions.⁹

Drawing on examples from my own recital experience in duo formats, I have observed that effective coordination relies on several interdependent factors: mutual anticipatory listening, flexible adaptation of phrasing to accommodate expressive nuances, and continuous communication of structural understanding through musical gesture. These processes can be observed in works ranging from classical repertoire, such as Mozart's Violin Sonatas, to

⁸ Ginsborg, Jane, and Dawn Bennett. "Developing Familiarity in a New Duo: Rehearsal Talk and Performance Cues." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 12, 2021.

⁹ Goodman, Elaine. "Ensemble Performance." *Musical Performance: A Guide to Understanding*, edited by John Rink, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002, pp. 153–167.

modern pieces requiring more complex interplay of rhythm and timbre.¹⁰ For instance, in performing a Beethoven violin–piano sonata, the alignment of cadential gestures across both parts illustrates the necessity of shared structural awareness in achieving musical cohesion. Likewise, in performing contemporary clarinet–piano duos, precise negotiation of temporal and harmonic tensions highlights the performers' joint responsibility for maintaining interpretive integrity.

Beyond technical coordination, duo performance fosters a form of interpretive dialogue in which each performer's expressive choices inform and are informed by the partner's structural understanding. The resulting synergy is not merely additive; rather, it creates emergent interpretive possibilities that neither performer could achieve in isolation. This phenomenon underscores the argument that structural awareness in duo performance functions as a relational competence, integrating analytical insight, embodied musicality, and collaborative responsiveness.

By framing duo performance as an interpretive system, this study emphasizes the necessity of approaching structural awareness as a shared and dynamic construct. Such a perspective illuminates the mechanisms by which performers negotiate musical meaning in real time and offers practical insights for the preparation, rehearsal, and execution of chamber music repertoire. The duo thus serves as both a laboratory and a model for understanding the relational dimensions of musical interpretation in chamber settings.

4. Structural Awareness and Interpretive Coordination in Duo Performance

If structural awareness is initially defined as an individual analytical competence, within chamber music it becomes fundamentally relational. In duo performance, structure is not simply recognized; it is enacted through interaction. Interpretive meaning emerges through coordination rather than unilateral projection. The structural conception held by each performer must be articulated, confronted, and recalibrated in rehearsal before it can function cohesively in performance.

¹⁰ Bishop, Laura, and Werner Goebel. "Pianists' Use of Nonverbal Audio and Visual Cues During Duet Performance." *Musicae Scientiae*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2015, pp. 84–110.

4.1. From Individual Structural Hypothesis to Shared Formal Vision

Each performer approaches rehearsal with an implicit structural hypothesis: a hierarchy of tensions, a projected distribution of climaxes, a sense of tonal direction, and a preferred pacing of formal processes. In solo contexts, this internal architecture may remain uncontested. In duo settings, however, it is necessarily subjected to dialogue. Nicholas Cook emphasizes that performance should be understood as collaborative construction rather than reproduction. Within such a framework, interpretive coordination extends beyond rhythmic simultaneity. It requires alignment concerning formal segmentation, points of structural articulation, proportional balance, and long-range direction.

In violin–piano repertoire, structural negotiation frequently arises at the intersection between melodic projection and harmonic articulation. A violinist may shape extended phrases through bow control and vibrato intensity, privileging linear continuity, while the pianist foregrounds harmonic rhythm as structural determinant. If these perspectives remain unintegrated, structural hierarchy becomes unstable. When consciously aligned, melodic and harmonic logics reinforce one another, clarifying architectural coherence.

Structural awareness therefore operates as a shared analytical framework that mediates interpretive decisions.

4.2. Micro-Timing as Structural Communication

Performance research demonstrates that expressive timing deviations contribute directly to the perception of musical structure. In duo contexts, such micro-timing becomes both expressive device and communicative mechanism. Subtle temporal adjustments—slight suspension before harmonic arrival, calibrated *accelerando* toward sectional contrast, or coordinated *rubato* at climactic points—function as structural signals rather than decorative gestures. Their effectiveness depends on mutual anticipation and shared structural hierarchy. Performance, as Cook further argues, constructs musical meaning through relational processes rather than fixed textual reproduction. Structural articulation is therefore distributed across performers; it is not embedded exclusively in the score but realized through coordinated temporal shaping.

4.3. Voice–Piano Repertoire (linear continuity)

In three Ravel songs, phrasing is integrated across voice and piano lines to emphasize formal symmetry. The singers adopt subtle tempo rubato when the piano articulates harmonic inflections, ensuring phrase arch shapes remain aligned. Thus, performers negotiate phrasing cues in real time to preserve the piece's formal blueprint.¹¹

4.4. Duo Performance as Dynamic Cognitive System

From a cognitive perspective, ensemble coordination relies on continuous perceptual monitoring and adaptive response. Tempo, articulation, dynamic contour, and timbral balance are recalibrated in real time through reciprocal listening. Within this process, structural awareness ceases to function as a static analytical model. During rehearsal, negotiation may be explicit and verbal; in performance, it becomes embodied knowledge enacted through gesture, breath, and temporal elasticity. Shared interpretive competence is therefore not the sum of two individual understandings. It constitutes a higher-order organizational process in which structural knowledge is collectively enacted.

5. Repertoire-Based Applications: Structural Awareness in Practice

Theoretical reflection gains legitimacy only when tested against repertoire. Structural awareness in duo performance is not an abstract analytical exercise; it manifests concretely in phrasing, tempo relationships, dynamic architecture, and proportional balance. The following repertoire illustrates how structural cognition becomes performative action.

5.1. Mozart: Transparency and Proportional Clarity

In Mozart's violin sonatas, structural awareness depends on clarity of formal articulation and equilibrium between partners. Unlike later Romantic repertoire, these works require restraint in tempo flexibility and precision in harmonic pacing. Nicholas Cook's argument that performance constitutes an active construction of structure rather than passive reproduction is particularly relevant here.¹² In Mozart, performers must project formal symmetry—

¹¹ Gritten, Anthony, and Elaine King, editors. *Music and Gesture*. Ashgate, 2006.

¹² Cook, Nicholas. "Music as Performance." *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, edited by Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton, Routledge, 2003, pp. 204–214.

exposition balance, mid-point articulation, and recapitulation return—without exaggeration. Excessive rubato obscures structural clarity; insufficient differentiation risks monotony. The piano writing often carries primary thematic material, especially in earlier sonatas. Consequently, structural hierarchy must be negotiated carefully to avoid melodic dominance from the violin at the expense of harmonic logic. Cadential preparation, phrase closure, and dynamic tapering must align across both instruments.

5.2. Schubert: Long-Range Harmonic Direction

Schubert's sonatinas introduce a different structural challenge: extended lyricism supported by subtle harmonic shifts. Here, structure is less articulated through sharp contrasts and more through tonal migration and modal coloration. Eric Clarke's research on perception suggests that listeners interpret expressive timing as a cue for structural segmentation. In Schubert, slight temporal elasticity at harmonic inflection points can clarify tonal reorientation. However, such elasticity must remain coordinated. If one performer anticipates harmonic arrival while the other sustains linear continuity, structural coherence dissolves. Structural awareness in Schubert therefore demands shared long-range planning. Climaxes often emerge through cumulative harmonic intensification rather than overt thematic development. Performers must calculate dynamic gradation across entire sections, not merely within individual phrases.

5.3. Franck and Ravel: Cyclic Integration and Textural Density

Franck's Violin Sonata introduces cyclic form as a unifying structural principle. The recurrence and transformation of thematic material require performers to maintain motivic memory across movements. Thematic recall in the final movement must be projected not merely as repetition but as structural culmination. Tempo relationships between movements should be proportionally conceived, preserving architectural coherence. Ravel, by contrast, introduces rhythmic asymmetry and textural stratification. Structural awareness must encompass timbral balance and metric tension. Micro-timing coordination, as discussed in ensemble performance research, becomes crucial in maintaining clarity within complex rhythmic overlays.¹³ In both works, structural perception extends beyond harmonic analysis. It integrates motivic transformation, registral distribution, and textural hierarchy.

¹³ Davidson, Jane W., and James M. M. Good. "Social and Musical Co-Ordination Between Members of a String Quartet: An Exploratory Study." *Psychology of Music*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2002, pp. 186–201.

5.4. Interpretive Risk and Structural Integrity

A recurrent tension in advanced duo performance concerns expressive freedom versus structural integrity. Romantic repertoire encourages flexibility; classical repertoire demands restraint. However, this distinction is not stylistic alone - it is structural. Jane Davidson's work on ensemble coordination demonstrates that performers continuously recalibrate expressive gestures in response to each other. Structural awareness functions as the regulating framework within which expressive deviation remains intelligible. When structural hierarchy is internalized collectively, interpretive risk becomes possible without fragmentation. Without such shared cognition, freedom results in instability.

6. Conclusion: Structural Awareness as a Performative Epistemology

In duo performance, structural awareness functions not merely as an individual cognitive skill, but as a shared interpretive resource that underpins musical cohesion and expressive coherence. The analyses presented—from Mozart's balanced sonatas to Schubert's extended lyricism, and from Franck's cyclic integration to Ravel's textural complexity—demonstrate that interpretive decisions are inseparable from the performers' mutual understanding of structural hierarchy.

Shared structural awareness mediates phrasing, tempo flexibility, dynamic shaping, and climactic distribution. It allows performers to reconcile potentially divergent perspectives on melodic prominence and harmonic pacing, transforming rehearsal negotiation into a coherent performative output. Micro-timing, breath control, and proportional emphasis serve as communicative signals that encode structural intent in real time, making performance an embodied, relational process rather than a mere realization of the score.

This framework positions duo performance as a dynamic epistemic system, where musical meaning emerges collectively. The performer's analytic insight—whether applied to melodic contour, motivic recurrence, or harmonic function—is enacted through negotiation, coordination, and anticipatory adjustment. Consequently, structural awareness transcends traditional notions of individual cognition and becomes a performative epistemology: a way of knowing that is inseparable from the act of making music together.

From a pedagogical perspective, understanding duo performance through this lens emphasizes rehearsal strategies that cultivate shared comprehension of form, encourages reflective dialogue on interpretive priorities, and strengthens sensitivity to temporal, harmonic, and expressive interdependencies. Importantly, these insights extend beyond the studied repertoire, offering a generalizable model for chamber music performance and ensemble teaching.

Finally, conceptualizing structural awareness as performative invites further research. Empirical studies could investigate how performers negotiate structural perception across varied instrumentation, repertoire complexity, or ensemble size. The integration of cognitive, analytical, and expressive dimensions offers fertile ground for advancing both theory and practice in chamber music, with duo performance providing an ideal locus for such exploration.

REFERENCES

- Belibou, Alexandra. "Integrating Computerized Musical Education into an Interdisciplinary Paradigm; Proposal of Applications Using Sibelius Software." *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Musica*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2018
- Bishop, Laura, and Werner Goebel. "Pianists' Use of Nonverbal Audio and Visual Cues During Duet Performance." *Musicae Scientiae*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2015
- Clarke, Eric F. *Ways of Listening: An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning*. Oxford Univ. Press, 2005
- Cook, Nicholas. *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance*. Oxford Univ. Press, 2013
- Cook, Nicholas. "Music as Performance." *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, edited by Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton, Routledge, 2003
- Davidson, Jane W., editor. *The Music Practitioner: Research for the Music Performer, Teacher and Listener*. Routledge, 2004
- Davidson, Jane W., and James M. M. Good. "Social and Musical Co-Ordination Between Members of a String Quartet: An Exploratory Study." *Psychology of Music*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2002
- Ginsborg, Jane, Alexandra F. Lemieux, and Roger Chaffin. "Developing Familiarity in a New Duo: Rehearsal Talk and Performance Cues." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 12, 2021
- Goodman, Elaine. "Ensemble Performance." *Musical Performance: A Guide to Understanding*, edited by John Rink, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002

STRUCTURAL AWARENESS AS SHARED INTERPRETIVE COMPETENCE
IN DUO PERFORMANCE

- Gritten, Anthony, and Elaine King, eds. *Music and Gesture*. Ashgate, 2006
- Rink, John, ed. *Musical Performance: A Guide to Understanding*. Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002
- Rink, John. "Analysis and (or?) Performance." *Musical Performance: A Guide to Understanding*, edited by John Rink, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002
- Sloboda, John A. *The Musical Mind: The Cognitive Psychology of Music*. Clarendon Press, 1985

