

# CLASSICAL MUSIC AND KATA PERFORMANCE. By Bruce Green.

Let's have some fun with an admittedly tangential – maybe esoteric – but relevant subject. In SKM Issue 138 quite recently featured an insightful article titled 'Kata as Music', by Dr. Wolfgang Herbert.

Well here's another verse. Classical music and karate; in particular, kata, have some intriguing parallels. If you'll bear with me, I'll explain some revealing and maybe helpful analogous traits shared by these two fields of endeavour and artistic expression.

I am not a musician, but I would easily qualify as a classical music aficionado. I am also a karateka of 49 years, having spent virtually all my time in Traditional JKA-style ISKF Shotokan. While admittedly an unusual topic for a karate article, let's nonetheless push the envelop a bit playing with these concepts and expanding our performing-arts knowledge to the benefit of our karate.

## Structure and Order:

As with most music, and certainly with classical music, there is a score containing notes and symbols of expression, typically recognized as authoritative. The score provides structure, order, and clear performance expectations.

Traditional Kata is quite similar; we yearn for and thankfully have some authoritative texts (e.g. Best Karate series/ Nakayama, Karate: The Complete Kata/ Kanazawa, Masterclass Shotokan DVD/ Okazaki) that attempt to convey specificity of technique and target, with interpretation based on traditions of understanding.

Audience feedback for a thrilling, exemplary classical music performance is shown by enthusiastic ovation – not unlike a really good individual or team kata performance in a tournament.

Analogous with kata and specified techniques and targets, there are specific notes and rhythm marks in music. In both cases, variance is generally frowned upon within a traditional environment. Karateka are penalized for variance, and conductors and orchestras can be booed for too much variance from expectation. Structure brings coherence and pattern recognition to the performance. Like togetherness and sharpness in team kata, a choral choir or group must demonstrate tightness of synchronization and diction.

Musical performance dynamics (e.g., loudness/quiet, fast/slow, one big note/many notes) are also identified within a score. We can draw some parallels in performance terminology: loud = bold/big technique; quiet = subtle, maybe sneaky; fast = urgent; slow = patience, caution,

and poise; one pronounced big note = kiai point.

## Formality and Tradition:

As anyone who has attended numerous classical music concerts will recognize, traditions also pervade the performance. By tradition, the conductor enters, bows to audience, performs the expected piece properly, professionally, and recognizably, finishes the performance, and then bows to the audience.

Just as in classical music performance, there is protocol, tradition, and even culture underpinning kata performance. Historical and cultural traditions of behaviour are the norm. By convention, the conductor usually wears a tux, and orchestra members wear black and white formal attire (generally, no blue or red shoes), unless it is clearly an informal affair. In karate tournaments, the officials, referees, and judges wear specified official garments, usually quite formal. In traditional Shotokan karate, performers wear a clean, neat white gi (generally, no blue tops, red bottoms, gold lapels, and sleeve advertising, etc). There's a visual message and it's all about respect for formal traditions.

Or how about the strict 'old school' maestro – so strikingly similar to a demanding, even dictatorial sensei; what is it about these disciplines that elicits these traits? Their very formal and traditional demeanour seems such a part of 'classical' arts like these – it's the expectation of discipline, respect, concentration, and order. Historically, early martial arts was a very serious and strict endeavour; as an



Patrick McCarthy (circa 2000) author of 'The Bubushi', first published October 1995.

analogous example, Toscanini had notably strict artistic tendencies and expectations as well.

## Performance Factors:

Obviously, there is a definite and specified program with classical music – the score. We sometimes yearn for the same thing in kata – something highly specific – we do have it to a degree, as described earlier.

In classical music, you can have disagreement about which 'original' score – the one written in Vienna or the one in Hamburg? A conductor or performer can get away with some interpretational latitude, but not much with a classical piece or you get booed and rotten tomatoes thrown at you.

Likewise, a kata interpretation and performance can allow some individuality up to some point, but beyond, it might appear insincere, showy, egotistical, trivial, or even pathetic.

In the 1960s and 1970s, an 'Original Instruments' or 'Historically Informed Performance/HIP' movement arose in classical music throughout the United Kingdom and Germany to use original score metronome markings AND original instruments (e.g., valveless horns, real wood woodwinds, use of gut strings for violins, smaller percussion, etc.). This 'movement' represented a studied return to traditions prevalent at the time of original composition, and a desire to know and feel the historical context.

I see a parallel in karate and kata origins research in recent popular literature (e.g., The Bible of Karate – Bubushi, Patrick McCarthy, and Shotokan's Secret, Bruce Clayton).

Taking the historical vs. contemporary comparison, you could advocate for 'historic performance' with kata; should we return to the 'authenticity' of using front kicks in Heian Nidan and Yondan instead of side-snap kicks? For Shotokan, I think not. Should we return to the 'original' Tekki Sandan (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmvOsNAAv0w>) with the additional hand strikes and blocks? Should we revive the use of the hand-position switch then twist/turn against a bo from old Jutte performances?

Knowing some of this historical background is enriching, and for the advanced student, important context.

Orchestra size became a historical concern, given the trend toward 'bigger is better' (and louder). A smaller orchestra (e.g., chamber; 25 to 40 members) meant greater definition, detail, and agility; a larger



orchestra (60 to 90 members) imbued a comparatively heavy, 'big-bodied,' even dense sound when coherent.

Or, a large orchestra sound can be like a good, big, and bold performance of Jutte or Sochin; a smaller orchestra sound can be like a crisp, quick, and agile Empi or Kanku Sho, to continue this analogy.

In today's traditional karate market, not unlike classical music circles, it's still who you trained with and how long – this helps convey some sense of legitimacy and authenticity. Name affiliation is still important, the same as in classical music; it conveys a sense of pedigree. As a classical music conductor, who you studied under is really important. Is that wrong?

Of course, there are many parallels in professional life, such as what university did you graduate from and in what discipline is your degree? Who was your graduate advisor or mentor? How long did you work at company X? What's your lineage and pedigree?

## Terms of Art:

Like kata, without proper rhythm,

expressive dynamics, and conviction, the performance is metronomic and robotic – too rhythmless; boring and lacking character. To the expert musical ear, wrong rhythm and emphasis draws a twinge; likewise in traditional kata performance.

A classical music performance starts with attentiveness, seriousness, and focus – ending in alertness and conviction; a completion.

In kata performance, the beginning kamae must demonstrate alertness, fighting spirit, correct eye position, and alertness, with appropriate intensity and conviction throughout. Zanshin (finishing/remaining feeling) must be demonstrated in the ending. Similarly, orchestral music making is seeking accuracy, consummate cohesiveness and execution, and realization of artistic intent. In fact, these descriptive terms can sound remarkably interchangeable between music and kata; take a quick perusal of the terms below and you'll see similarities.

## Music Performance:

**Dynamics:** The intensity (loudness or

softness) of the music. *Forte*: A dynamic marking meaning loud. *Fortissimo*: A dynamic marking meaning very loud. *Interval*: The time between two notes. *Piano*: A dynamic marking meaning soft. *Pianissimo*: A dynamic marking meaning very soft. *Rhythm*: The patterns of sound which combine pulse and metre and makes the music flow. *Tempo*: The speed at which the music is played.

## Kata Performance:

**Department (Taido)** The contestant should approach the starting point smartly. A bow is performed at the beginning and the end of the kata. **Line of Movement (Embusen)**. The performance must be along the predetermined line and must begin and end at the same point. **Body Movement (Unsoku)** – The performance should be fluid and rhythmic. Movement should not be jerky nor there unnecessary stamping of the feet. **Interpretation (Waza no)** – The performer must fully understand and clearly demonstrate the meaning of each movement. **Continuity (Renzokusei)** Kata moves are integrally related. The performance should demonstrate the cohesiveness of the movements. **Position and Posture (Shisei)** Is the performer's body vertical when required to be so? Is the body straight, half-facing or side facing when required? **Stance (Tachi kata)** Length and/or width of stances should be correct. **Hip position and location of the center of gravity** must be correct. **Basic Techniques (Kihon waza)** Each technique must be made in the proper sequence, direction, and at proper target. **Correct Application of Power (Chikara no kyojaku)** Does the performer use strength indiscriminately and/or excessively? **Speed of Techniques (Waza no kamkyu)** Does the performer use speed indiscriminately and/or excessively? **Body Expansion and Contraction (Karada no shin-shuku)** Does the performer demonstrate dynamic muscle and body action?

And so to wrap up, below are some accolades that any karateka would love to hear describing their kata performance. Note how easily you could overlay these adjectives and phrases to describe a fine Kata performance.

## Classical Music Review Terms – Kata Performance Parallels?

*Commanding and powerful; full of fire. – Expressive, cohesive, and concentrated. – Highly accomplished and fluent. Compelling and urgent. – Detailed, yet sympathetic, lyrical performance. – A brilliant performance of utterly impressive power. Sure control, crisp articulation, and real spontaneity. Played with huge dedication and skill.*

A great performance is transcendent! There's boldness, conviction, ownership, confidence, and supreme competence.

(Bruce Green, JKA of Boulder, USA).



"A large Orchestra sound can be like a good, big and bold performance of Kata Sochin."

(Here demonstrated by Sensei Minoru Kawawada 8th Dan JKA. (October 2003).