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Artículos científicos

La ejecución del piano a cuatro manos: análisis técnicos e interpretativos de algunos casos

***Four Hands Piano Performance:
Technical and Interpretative Analyses of Some Cases***

***Tocar piano a quatro mãos:
análise técnica e interpretativa de alguns casos***

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Resumen

El tocar piano a cuatro manos es una de las formas más interesantes de interpretación musical, pero, también, de las más difíciles porque se requiere que el intérprete no solo muestre habilidades individuales, sino que también sepa escuchar al otro pianista y coordinar varios aspectos interpretativos: fraseo, dinámica, velocidad, posición en el piano, etc. Este estudio explora los elementos de comunicación entre los integrantes del ensamble de piano a cuatro manos necesarios para lograr una ejecución correcta, así como las dificultades con las cuales se enfrentan los pianistas. Se entrevistó a 27 pianistas de diferentes niveles —maestros, estudiantes y egresados— que contaban con la experiencia de tocar en ensambles de piano a cuatro manos. Entre las dificultades con las que se enfrentaban los músicos, se encontró la manera de sentarse ante el piano, la ubicación de los brazos y manos en pasajes cruzados, el equilibrio del sonido, la sincronización y algunos problemas musculoesqueléticos. A pesar



de las dificultades técnico-interpretativas y de la incomodidad física que pudieran presentarse en el ensamble, este tipo de práctica puede enriquecer ampliamente la experiencia pianística y ayudar a mejorar la propia interpretación desde el punto de vista del solista.

Palabras clave: ensamble de piano, repertorio musical, técnica pianística.

Abstract

Playing piano “four hands” is one of the most interesting forms of musical performance, but also one of the most difficult. It requires that the player not only shows individual skills, but also knows how to listen to the other pianist and coordinate various interpretive aspects, such as phrasing, dynamics, velocity, and piano position. This study explores the elements of communication between the members of the four-handed piano ensemble necessary to achieve a top performance, as well as the challenges that pianists face. 27 pianists of different levels were interviewed, including teachers, students and graduates who had experience playing in four-handed piano ensembles. Some of the common challenges faced by the musicians included how to sit at the piano, placement of the arms and hands in crossed passages, balance of sound, synchronization, and musculoskeletal issues. Despite the technical-interpretive difficulties and the physical discomfort that could arise in the four-handed ensemble, this type of practice can greatly enrich the piano playing experience and help to improve one’s own interpretation from the ‘soloist’ point of view.

Keywords: piano ensemble, musical repertoire, piano technique.

Resumo

Tocar o piano a quatro mãos é uma das formas mais interessantes de interpretação musical, mas também uma das mais difíceis, pois exige do intérprete não só habilidades individuais, mas também saber ouvir o outro pianista e coordenar várias aspectos interpretativos. : fraseado, dinâmica, velocidade, posição do piano, etc. Este estudo explora os elementos de comunicação entre os membros do ensemble de piano a quatro mãos necessários para alcançar uma execução correta, bem como as dificuldades que os pianistas enfrentam. Foram entrevistados 27 pianistas de diferentes níveis —professores, alunos e graduados— que tiveram a experiência de tocar em conjuntos de piano a quatro mãos. Entre as dificuldades que os músicos enfrentaram estavam a forma de sentar ao piano, a colocação dos braços e mãos em passagens cruzadas, o equilíbrio do som, o timing e alguns problemas



musculoesqueléticos. Apesar das dificuldades técnico-interpretativas e do desconforto físico que podem surgir no conjunto, este tipo de prática pode enriquecer muito a experiência pianística e ajudar a melhorar a interpretação do ponto de vista do solista.

Palavras-chave: conjunto pianístico, repertório musical, técnica pianística.

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Introduction

Throughout the history of music, the piano repertoire has been extensively approached by expert musicians: from the different facets of execution and analysis to teaching; of course, it has also been approached from a musicological perspective. However, it was not until about the middle of the 18th century that some composers became interested in performing works for two pianists. There are two aspects in this aspect: 1) where two pianists play two different instruments, each one in one, which we will call piano duo¹ y 2) where two pianists play on the same instrument, a case that we will refer to as four-hand piano.

Initially it was thought that the repertoire assigned to two pianists and a single piano could prevent seeing the possible virtuosity of the musicians, since they could not have the entire keyboard at their disposal, however, Franz Schubert—who is considered one of the greatest exponents in this genre—, proved otherwise in several of his compositions, such as the Sonata in B flat major, op. 30, the Great Duet, Op. 140, the Fantasia in F minor, Op. 103 and the Duet Lebensströme, Op. 144. But not only has Schubert composed for this organ, there is also a record of some works from the beginning of the 17th century attributed to the Englishmen John Bull, Nicholas Carleton and Thomas Tomkins. On the other hand, in 1765 Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart composed a sonata for four hands, and in 1777 four more sonatas by Charles Burney were published, followed by some duets of the op. 15 and op. 18 by Johann Christian Bach, which served as a prototype for some works by Muzio Clementi (Dawes, 2001).

Special mention should be made of the sonatas written for four hands by Mozart, Jan Ladislav Dussek, Anton Diabelli, Friedrich Kuhlau, Johann Nepomuk Hummel, the famous

¹ Dúo: “Este nombre se da en general a toda la música [escrita] a dos partes, pero actualmente se restringe su significado a dos partes solistas, vocales o instrumentales, con exclusión de los simples acompañamientos, que no se toman en consideración. [...]. En una palabra, para constituir un dúo son necesarias dos partes principales entre las cuales el canto se halle distribuido por igual” (Rousseau, 2007, p. 191).

Il maestro e lo scolare by Franz Joseph Haydn and some works by Ludwig van Beethoven, as they are considered an elementary repertoire academically speaking for the development of highly fundamental four-hand playing skills.

At this point, the creation of compositions for four hands or duet piano was intimately connected with the elaboration of arrangements of orchestral works, through which rehearsals and their execution were considerably facilitated. Some examples of these cases are: Haydn's creation, the Papillons, op. 2 by Robert Schumann, the Symphonic Poems by Franz Liszt, the Requiem by Giuseppe Verdi, the famous Waltzes and Hungarian Dances by Johannes Brahms, the Folk Songs by Piotr Ilich Tchaikovsky, the Slavic Dances by Antonín Dvorak and the Norwegian Dances by Edvard Grieg, among many others. In fact, it is no coincidence that various researchers have been interested in works of this type, for example, the researcher Aleksandr Kulikov, who analyzed the factor of innovation in the works for piano duo by the composer Carl Czerny, especially in the sonatas for four hands (Kulikov, 2015).

Initially there was a tradition not only of playing on a piano for four hands, but on two or three keyboard instruments simultaneously, such is the case, in Germany, of the concertos for two, three and four harpsichords by Johann Sebastian Bach or those of his musically respected sons; and in Russia, in the house of the composer Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka, where fragments of his operas transcribed for six and eight hands were used to be performed, which were played on two or three grand pianos (Bguasheva, 2018). An interesting event was held in 1869 in Rio de Janeiro, when 32 pianists participated in a concert on 16 pianos (Bguasheva, 2018).

Today, four-hands and piano duet performance continues to interest musicians. An example of this is the work of Tatiana Nerovnaia (2020), who studied the development of the duet piano from the middle of the 20th century to the present day, and categorized duet pianos according to their interpretive, broadcast, theatrical or eccentric roles, using methods comparative, logical and retrospective research methods.

The International Piano Duet Association (IPDA),² which includes members of piano ensembles from 33 countries, has organized competitions since 1990. The first composition competition for piano duo works organized by the IPDA was held on May 12, 1990 at the Ongaku-no-Tomo Hall in Tokyo; a year later, in 1991, he organized the International Piano

² www.ipda-pianoduo.com.



Duo Competition. From this date the competitions were held every two years. The winners of the last International Piano Duo Competition 22nd Performance Section 2019-21 were the Japanese Yoshiaki Sato and Nao Kanemura.

Recently, on April 8 and 9, 2021, at the National Pedagogical University of Herzen, in Saint Petersburg (Russia), the Second International Research and Practice Conference “Piano Duo in Modern Musical Art and Education” was held.³ The first international conference was in October 2001, but now the organizers plan to hold this event every five years. Conferences, round tables and concerts were presented in this program, with the participation of pianists, performers and composers, researchers and pedagogues (Medvedeva, 2021). Due to the conditions of the pandemic resulting from the 2019 coronavirus disease (covid-19), face-to-face events have been combined with virtual events. Piano teachers of different levels participated in the round tables, from children's teachers to university professors who discussed the problems they face in ensemble classes and their different ways of solving them.

At the headquarters of the Glazunov State Conservatory, in Petrozavodsk, Russia, the International Piano Duo Festival has been held for the last 18 years,⁴ which includes concerts and scientific-practical conferences on duo performance. Lately, this event includes the piano ensemble composition contest.

Among the most outstanding and world-renowned duos we can mention: PetRo Duo, made up of Anastacia Rogaleva and Dmitry Petrov, existing since 2001 and winners of the Steinway & Sons award; SPECTRUM-duo, formed by Marina Klimova and Nadezhda Medvedeva since 2000 and whose repertoire is based on the music of contemporary composers from Saint Petersburg and other Russian cities —such as Alexander Tunik, Georgy Portnov, Gennady Belov, Nikolay Morozov, among others— ; Sozvuchie, formed in 2014 by Elena Mijailenko and Natalia Platonova, winners of several competitions and whose repertoire includes works by Russian and European classical composers.

The interpretation of piano for four hands or duet piano also caught the attention of several researchers who investigated this topic in their doctoral theses. Russian researcher Vladislav Petrov (2006) wrote his dissertation on historical and theoretical issues of the duet

³ 2.ª Conferencia Internacional de Investigación y Práctica “Piano Dúo en el Arte Musical Moderno y en la Educación”: <https://vk.com/club203730391>.

⁴ https://glazunovcons.ru/projects/festivals/piano_duo_xvii.



piano genre in the 20th century. In his work, the musicologist investigated the dialogue between two performers and the leadership within the ensemble.

In turn, the musicologist Olga Grines (2005) investigated the piano ensemble genre and its representation in the works of Igor Stravinsky and Nikolay Metner. Grines (2005) believes that the tradition of renowned soloists getting together in a piano ensemble increases year after year due to the great interest shown by the public. The researcher mentions the duets that are made up of soloists, such as Argerich-Pletnev, Liubimov-Sokolov, Petrov-Gindin, Rudenco-Lugansky, among others. It should be noted that Grines (2005) divides ensembles according to their function: 1) ensembles that can be called instrumental theater ensembles, for example, Pistina-Tzigankova's and 2) duets whose objective is cultural dissemination, such as Sorokina-Tzigankova's. Bakhchiev. The latter performed numerous educational concerts rescuing little-known works for piano duet.

Natalia Katonova's doctoral thesis (2002) is devoted to different aspects of performance for two pianos. In addition to the history of the genre, she analyzes suites no. 1, op. 5 and no. 2, op. 17 for two pianos by Sergei Rachmaninov, works for two pianos by Igor Stravinsky, Béla Bartók, Paul Hindemith, Ivan Vishegradsky and Oliver Messiaen.

According to the author, the formation of ensembles for two pianos began in the middle of the 16th century, when it was common for two harpsichordists to improvise simultaneously. Katonova (2002) considers that this culture of improvisation on two harpsichords was the purest expression of the essence of the genre, although later this type of performance disappeared and the development of the genre as such took a different direction.

In 2016, the researcher Anna Gringberg (2016) presented, at the University of Queensland, her doctoral thesis dedicated to studies of duet piano performance covering topics from repertoire to ontology and epistemology of artistic research.

Unquestionably, with the passage of time, the repertoire for piano four hands and piano duo has expanded considerably to the point of dedicating entire concert programs for performance in some of the world's most renowned theaters, which has evidenced the high levels of quality and creative virtuosity that this form demands, in addition to the great technical and interpretive difficulties involved.

Regarding communication within the context of a musical performance, it does not refer initially and only to the basic or essential prior agreements between performers to begin the study together, for example, in the case of four-hand ensemble and piano duo, a The



agreement would involve firstly: 1) the choice of the repertoire, which in many cases depends on the space or the type of audience the concert will be aimed at, and 2) the determination of who plays the prima or second part, or piano one and piano one. piano two. On the contrary, beyond these resolutions, it is convenient to establish some criteria that favor, above all else, individual study and consequently the moment of assembling both parts, not for nothing Laura Bishop and Werner Goebel (2018) mention the importance of synchronization, communication and gestures, among other elements.

But then, what are those communication elements that are necessary and optimal for a correct and quality performance for four hands or piano duo? Through this study some of them will be analyzed.

Materials and methods

One of the main objectives of this study has been to know and identify the technical-interpretative difficulties that some pianists of four-hand piano and piano duo ensembles may face, taking as an example the experience of some performers of this nature in the university community of the Department of Music and Performing Arts of the University of Guanajuato. In addition, once these difficulties were known, identified and classified, it was essential to know the way in which pianists have been able to overcome or cope with them both in individual preparation and in the group and to identify the technical and musical resources applied.

To carry out the above, it was necessary to prepare the "Questionnaire to know the experience of playing four hands and piano duo", an essential resource for the collection, identification, classification and analysis of the data collected. Approved criteria were established for this instrument and elements such as the number of ensembles in which it has participated, the type of difficulties faced, manifestation of some physical discomfort in the musculoskeletal apparatus, coordination and synchronization between the members, piano techniques were taken into consideration. , selection of repertoire and communication between the members.

The application of the questionnaire was carried out individually through some electronic resources such as email and social networks. The results obtained were analyzed and compared with the intention of discovering some constant or some point in common that

would allow establishing one or more strategies for the technical and interpretive study of the repertoire for four hands and piano duo.

Results

Through the application of this questionnaire, information was obtained on various aspects of the execution of works for piano four hands and piano duo.

Twenty-seven pianists participated in the study, of which 12 were women and 15 were men. Of the total, 22% were teachers, 33% students and 44% graduates (Figure 1). Each of the pianists participated, on average, in five ensembles.

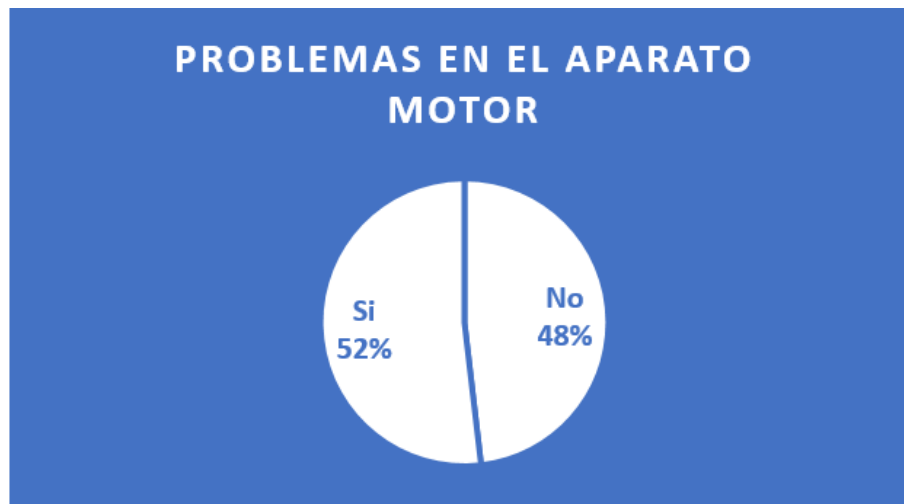
Figura 1. Participantes



Fuente: Elaboración propia

The survey showed that 52% of the 27 musicians reported problems related to pain or tension in different parts of the body during the four-hand study (Figure 2): 75% in women and 25% in men.

Figura 2. Problemas en el aparato motor



Fuente: Elaboración propia

In relation to the level of studies (according to the questionnaire), those who presented the most problems were the students, and the least affected were the teachers (Table 1).

Tabla 1. Problemas musculoesqueléticos durante el estudio a cuatro manos

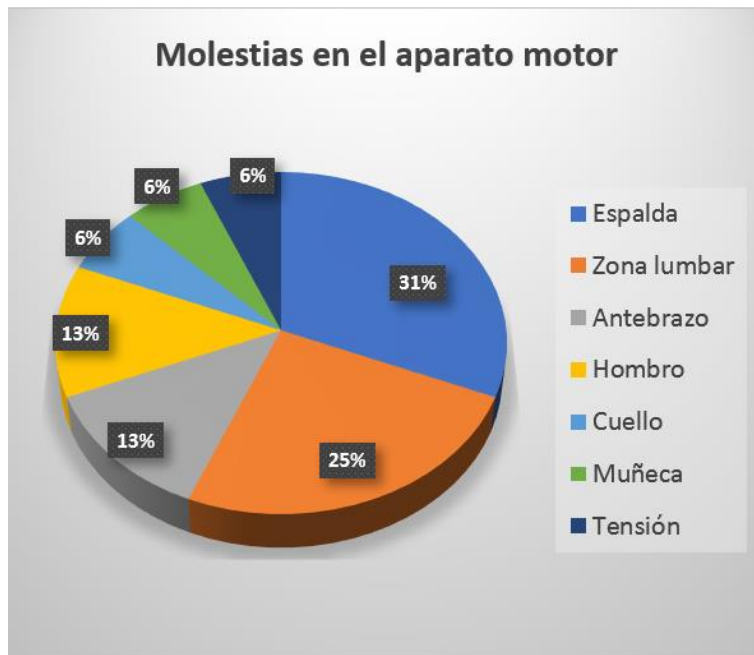
Participantes	Total (27)	Sí (52% del total)
Alumnos	33.3 %	67 % (de alumnos)
Maestros	22.2 %	16 % (de maestros)
Egresados	44.4 %	58 % (de egresados)

Fuente: Elaboración propia

The most affected body parts that were reported were the back, lower back, forearm and shoulder (Figure 3).⁵ The participants mentioned that their discomfort could be attributed to various factors, including the position at the piano and the crossing of hands in virtuosic passages.

⁵ Algunos participantes mencionaron varias zonas afectadas.

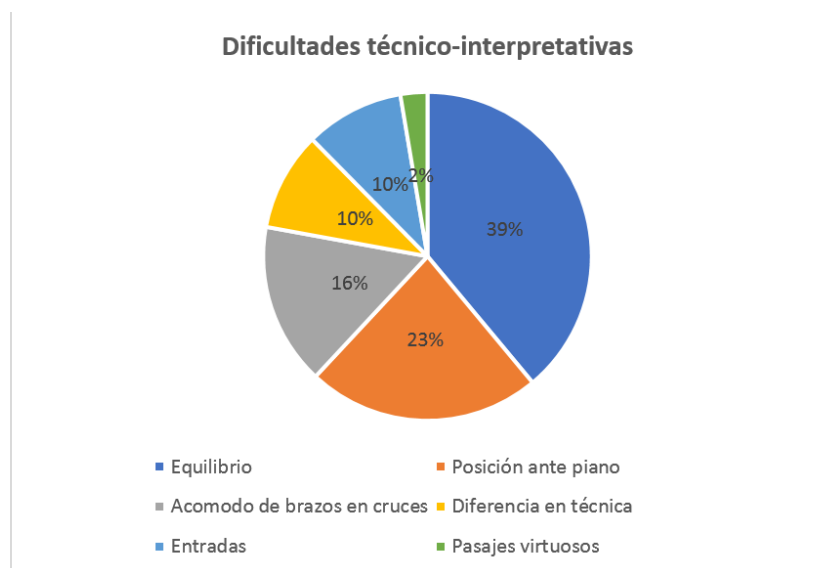
Figura 3. Molestias en el aparato motor



Fuente: Elaboración propia

Regarding other technical-interpretative difficulties, what most worries the interpreters are the balance between the four hands, the difference in technique and the timing of the inputs (Figure 4).

Figura 4. Dificultades técnico-interpretativas



Fuente: Elaboración propia

To master this last challenge—timing inputs—the majority of participants (85%) confirmed that they use a special technique (Table 2).

Tabla 2. Uso de una técnica especial para entradas⁶

Sí		No
85.1 %		14.8 %
Respiración	15 (65 %)	---
Movimiento de cabeza	7 (30.4 %)	
Señas o gestos	2 (8.6 %)	
Visualización	7 (30.4 %)	
Estudio con metrónomo	2 (8.6 %)	
Levantamiento de manos	3 (13 %)	
Grabación (audio y video) de las entradas	1 (4 %)	
Análisis de la obra a estudiar	1 (4 %)	

Fuente: Elaboración propia

Regarding the choice of the parties, prima or secunda, the majority of those interviewed (52%) commented that they were guided by taste; also many (40%) cared about the difficulty of the parts. Among other factors that influenced their choice were comfort (30%) and shift alternation (11%). It is worth mentioning that some informants mentioned more than one factor (Table 3), so the percentage is calculated in relation to the total number of participants (100%).

Tabla 3. Elección de las partes

Por gusto	14	52 %
Por dificultad (nivel)	11	40 %
Por comodidad	10	37 %
Por turno	3	11 %

Fuente: Elaboración propia

⁶ Algunos participantes mencionaron el uso de varios tipos de señales acordados. El porcentaje de cada tipo de estas señales se calcula en relación con el total de los participantes.

The criteria for choosing the repertoire that was used by most of the musicians interviewed was the technical level appropriate to their abilities (55%) and taste (40%). The type of audience, suggestions from concert organizers and the importance of the works are also taken into account (Table 4).

Tabla 4. Criterio de selección del repertorio

Por el nivel técnico (adecuado)	15	55 %
Por gusto	11	40 %
Por el tipo de público	1	3 %
Importancia de las obras	2	7 %
Sugerencias de organizadores de conciertos	2	7 %
Repertorio para el examen	1	3 %
Repertorio que tiene vinculación con alguna obra literaria, para explicar al público sobre esta obra en conciertos didácticos	1	3 %

Fuente: Elaboración propia

Among the works for piano four hands or piano duo, the most preferred are the originals for this type of ensemble, although arrangements and transcriptions are also used. Only 11% of the interviewees were willing at the time of the survey to play all types of repertoire (Table 5).

Tabla 5. Tipo de repertorio preferido

Obras originales para piano dúo	22	81 %
Arreglos	9	33 %
Transcripciones	5	18 %
Todo tipo de repertorio	3	11 %

Fuente: Elaboración propia

The results of the survey also highlight that 33% of the concerts mentioned were managed by the organizing institutions, while 22% were carried out by their own management. Most of the students reported that they participated in academic auditions organized by the Department of Music and Performing Arts (Table 6).

Tabla 6. Gestión de conciertos

Institución organizadora	9	33.3%
Audiciones académicas	10	37%
Gestión por cuenta propia	6	22%
Convocatorias	2	7%

Fuente: Elaboración propia

Of course, these data should not be considered conclusive, since they are only a sample of some elements that influence the interpretive result of the four-hand piano. A deeper and more detailed study would be required to develop and consolidate a favorable strategy for musicians.

Discussion

Given the above, it is worth asking how is it that pianists inclined towards this type of repertoire and artistic execution manage to combine technique, phrasing, articulation, intensity, that is, interpretation? Rebecca Cypess (2017) says the following:

Keyboard duos were often played by members of a single family, or by teachers and students together, a practice that allowed for the construction of a sense of “sympathy” —mutual understanding through shared experience and sentiment— between the players. These players shared common physical gestures at the instruments, which reinforced the emotional content of the music; this fostered the formation of a sympathetic connection even as players retained their individual identities (p. 191).⁷

To the exposed question, musicians could say that in the same way as chamber music is made (excluding, of course, the four-hand group that concerns us), for example; or in the same way that a soloist is accompanied by a pianist, however, this does not seem to be the same case. In chamber music, or in the case of a soloist, each instrumentalist or singer has their own instrument (obviously the singer), they do not share it with each other, much less play it simultaneously. In music for four hands, the pianists do share the same piano, the

⁷ Traducción: Los dúos para teclado fueron frecuentemente tocados por miembros de una familia, o por maestros y estudiantes, una práctica que permitió la construcción de un sentido de “simpatía” —entendimiento mutuo a través de compartir experiencia y sentimiento— entre los ejecutantes. Estos ejecutantes compartieron gestos comunes en los instrumentos, lo cual reforzó el contenido emocional de la música; esto fomentó la formación de una conexión empática incluso cuando los ejecutantes mantenían una identidad propia.

same keys and sometimes even the same bench, and although the part that each one of them will play is clearly indicated in the score —sometimes indicated as primo or secondo, parte prima or parte seconda, or even simply as I or II—, does not mean that the range or the notes to be played by each of them are within the “comfortable” space from the physical and posture point of view of the players. performers; in fact, it is very common to face entire passages or sections where it is necessary to stretch, lean, crouch, move backwards or forwards, turning that into a true dance or musical choreography.

In the case of the duet piano, where each of the pianists has an entire piano at her disposal, it would seem simpler, but in reality it is far from it. It is true that at least the position in front of the instrument is totally more comfortable —there is no “the one next door” elbowing or scratching, or wanting to put his foot on the pedal “in your place”—, however, the timbral confusion generated by two instruments of the same nature can lead to great problems of coordination, articulation, speed and intensity, in the face of which, in order to overcome them, clear and precise communication between the participants is essential.

It is widely known that slow study guarantees a correct reading of the notes, favors long-term memory and provides great rhythmic and fingering security. For example, if we were to assemble in allegro the “Spring” of the Buenos Aires Seasons by Astor Piazzolla in transcription by Giannantonio Mutto, as the score says, the rhythmic precision of the four hands could be at risk, something similar would also happen in the “ Duo concertante” of Leonardo Velázquez's Humoresca, where the first measure already represents and requires an impulse and rhythmic rigor from the “attack”.

Conclusions

In the results of the study, it was observed that in the distribution of the roles there is a clear combination of preferences: on the one hand, determined by the taste of each performer, and on the other, by the difficulty of the works. It is also noted that most use a specific technique to coordinate inputs, such as breathing or a head movement..⁸

Regarding the choice of the repertoire, it was identified that there is no tendency towards any type of specific works or authors; on the contrary, there is a great variety of

⁸ Una estrategia que puede facilitar la coordinación de las entradas es la aplicación de la técnica *Auftakt*. La palabra *Auftakt* viene del latín *tactus* (‘tocar’) y la función de esta señal (ampliamente utilizada por los directores de orquesta) consiste en indicar el punto de inicio y la velocidad. Normalmente, el intérprete que toca la parte I da el *Auftakt*.

styles and genres that range from classical compositions to those of the 21st century, also considering arrangements and transcriptions, without omitting the original works for this organic.

Speaking of technical-interpretative difficulties, it is notorious that almost 40% of those surveyed take special care to maintain a balance between the parts, while 23% pay attention to the way they sit in front of the piano to avoid elbow bumps, arms, etc., and 16% consider it significant to feel comfortable in passages that require the crossing of arms or hands.

Regarding the management of concerts, since a third of the population surveyed were students, their events were organized by the same academic unit. Others were managed by organizing institutions, private or governmental, and some more by self-management.

From another perspective, the results show that about 50% of the respondents reported musculoskeletal problems (mostly students) and a general tendency to discomfort in the lower back and back, probably caused by excessive study, by an awkward posture and, in some cases, due to a technical difficulty greater than the capabilities of the performer of a given work.

It is more than well known that in order to avoid these inconveniences, deep concentration is required, the technical mastery corresponding to each level of execution, a slow and detailed study that allows us to reflect and listen to what a score tells us, as well as communication constant between the parties involved.

It is considered necessary to delve into the musical and non-musical strategies that are used to improve the execution and quality of the ensemble, in addition to proposing new technical-interpretative resources that facilitate or favor the experience of playing four hands or piano duet.

Future lines of research

Through this research, a proposal for an analytical method of the problems inherent in the execution of works for piano four hands is given rise; In this way, it seeks to provide technical and interpretative tools to the challenges that the repertoire for said group implies.

Another topic that could be interesting for future research is the management of stage fright in each of the performers and as a whole, since it also influences the levels of interpretative quality.



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⁹ La línea de generación y aplicación del conocimiento es "Musicología histórica, sistemática y aplicada".

¹⁰ La contribución individual de cada autora en este texto es la siguiente: Alejandra Béjar Bartolo es la responsable de la sección Introducción y Conclusiones, mientras que Elena Podzharova es la responsable de la sección *Resultados*. Las dos autoras son responsables de la impostación general del artículo, así como de los párrafos Materiales y métodos y Discusión.



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