

Reflections on Practice-led Research Methods and their Application in Music Performance Research

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Abstract

*The inspiration for this report comes from moves that are taking place in Malaysian research, in particular an expansion of official acceptance of practice-led and based research methods by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. Consequently, academics across the country are beginning to embrace approaches that have, from my personal observations, been previously unexplored and, indeed, often discouraged. Changes are afoot, however, as music performance and research departments are recognising the values as well as the creative and professional potentials of this research. While practice-led research has been increasing exponentially worldwide for decades now, some still struggle to define and support it because of its open and flexible nature, and the implicit questioning of standard research conventions, including the incorporation of creative and descriptive materials. I suggest here that this flexibility is precisely why it is a method that has great benefits for artistic application, and that the deepest knowledge of performance comes from within the practice itself and the insider/outsider perspectives that can be articulated through this method. In *Developing a Method*, I argue for a dialectic approach, connecting theory and praxis via the researcher/practitioner in the development of rigorous documentation, contextualisation, analysis and reflexivity. Of paramount importance is this connection of theory and practice, of innovation, of reflexivity and the interrogation of defined questions, ideas or concepts emerging from one's own practice. In this article, I present some thoughts on what artistic practice-led research in performance might be, discuss applications and outcomes, ideas on theory and practice, and some performance research exemplars. The objective here is to articulate approaches and to provoke discussion of what has become a critical part of artistic academia.*

Keywords *Practice-led research, music performance, research methods, higher education, artistic research*

The artist moves in a realm of shifting meanings, imaginings and interpretations: on the one hand, exploring new possibilities and suggesting new subjectivities; on the other, ambiguously constrained—as well as sustained—by social, political and historical contexts and attitudes. Artistic endeavor is embedded in situation and inter-relationships, confronted with power and vulnerability rather than with rules and information. It takes place in exchanges between the subject and the world, interrogating both the social and the natural worlds, intertwining the human condition with transcendence, reality with the imaginary ... The artist must, in some sense, project the illusion of being a physical, intellectual, aesthetic and embodied hero. (Coessens, Crispin & Douglas, 2008, p.139)

Background

Practice-led research emerged more than 30 years ago with the recognition of the value of knowledge obtained through action via the participator/observer. It began to become part of higher education communities as a result of the desire to recognise the value of practice in education and research. In Australia, practice-based PhDs were first introduced in 1984, when “the University of Wollongong and the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) introduced Doctorates in Creative Writing” (Candy, 2006, p.4). In the UK, Polytechnic institutions paved the way for this progression, and

Higher education was no longer to be seen as the centre of new understanding, of knowledge that described the world, but as the centre of new ways of doing things, of knowledge that improved our ability to act in the world. (ibid, p.4)

This approach has been adopted with enthusiasm by many researchers who have found the traditional scientific forms of research inadequate for studies of practice, and it has developed into a flourishing and critical paradigm for artistic research. For some time now, universities and funding bodies have supported research employing this method, and the Ministry of Education has now accepted it in Malaysia. The advancement towards the inclusion of creative and performance work as research outcomes and settings for investigation has, in many cases, been a long and determined one, driven by passion and a conviction that certain highly valuable types of knowledge can only be discovered through such practice-led methods.

Practice-led research is an inclusive approach that may use a mix of methods chosen by the researcher, and it will almost always include reflective critique. One of the earliest sources expounding the value of reflexivity in research, or self-reflection in action, is Donald Schön’s *The Reflective Practitioner – How Professionals Think in Action* (1983), which presents two kinds of reflection: reflection on action and reflection in action. Both of these are crucial in music practice: reflections after the performance / rehearsal / studio session that inform and incite understandings of what was done, and reflection in the midst of performance, where unexpected elements may arise, triggering on-the-spot responses (Penny, 2009, p.17). Schön (1930-97), himself a well-regarded musician, states that it is when the reflective practitioner does something in their practice and considers it afterwards that insight is forthcoming. He calls it “knowing in action” - thinking about what you are doing as you do it. This will normally consist of the documentation of process – of actions (which may be performative), of the creation of materials or data (which may be performances, performative experiences or other performance related activities) and analysis of that data.

Performative experience is based on information and practice accumulated across a broad spectrum of professional activity, including what Huib Schippers terms as the “aural library” – memories of sounds accumulated by a mature musician, conservatively estimated to be “20,000 to 50,000 hours of listening, practicing and performing” (Schippers & Flenady, 2009, p.37). This experience, or “Arts-informed research” includes what the artist knows how to do, a fusion of qualitative research

and the expression of qualitative theories with artistic forms of expression (Colwell & Richardson, 2002). Trends in qualitative research appear to welcome a pluralist, post-modernist and post-positivist approach, accepting a broad taxonomy of research styles – such as music rehearsals – as highly informant and as settings for deep enquiry.

Multidimensional enquiries in artistic research have pushed the boundaries of the musicological methodologies of the past and reflexive, holistic approaches are now well established. The acceptance and establishment of these advancements of practice-led research methods in Malaysia suggest that we are on the verge of an enlightened transformation of artistic research possibilities in this country.

Artistic research: What is it? Why do it?

The Bergen Academy of Arts defines artistic research as investigations that generate new artistic perspectives and contribute to the development of artistic fields; that contribute to reflection around content and context; contribute to the articulation of, and reflection on methodologies and ways of working; and promote critical dialogue (<http://www.khib.no/english/artistic-research/artistic-research-at-khib/>). Artistic research in a practice-led environment is enquiry through practice, as viewed from the inside, by the practitioner. It may be taking an idea or question that arises in performance and investigating approaches and possible solutions or responses. It may be an investigation of collaboration through intercultural music making connections, or performance styles taken from specific contexts such as free improvisation or technologically based performance. It will involve rigour in methodology and documentation, innovation and depth. The outcomes of these enquiries create new knowledge that adds to the field, assists others working in their own practice and has the potential to progress further enquiry.

Jeremy Cox (chief executive of the European association of conservatoires and past Dean of the Royal College of Music, London) states: “every act of creation results in an expansion of knowledge. The trajectory of the creative act is therefore essentially that of research . . . an act of testing out the intimations and speculations [of a creation] and determining how they stand up under rigorous scrutiny . . .” (Cox, in Coessens et al, 2008, p.8). The subject of this ‘scrutiny’ varies from place to place, sometimes applied to text, and sometimes to action. Practice *as* research, as a divergence from research *of* or *in* practice, has academic traction in a number of locations (especially in the USA), but is still under question in many universities. Primarily, our universities in Malaysia require a verbal or text component in all research projects to define and communicate the questions, the findings and the generation of new ideas. Notwithstanding this situation, practice *as* research is now better understood, and discussions of a variety of practice-led research methods are underway.

Within the artistic practitioner context, ethnography and auto-ethnography are additional tools that can add invaluable material and insight. Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, in *Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity*, state: “Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.739). It may contain cross narrative, from first to third person, personal

essays, journals or fragmented writing of reflections and analyses, in contrast to the passive voice of contextualisation of musical genres. If ethnography is in part “first hand interaction with people in their everyday lives” (Tedlock, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.456) and current shifts in emphasis include the validity of researchers’ influences, then the experience of performance as reported by others can also provide a rich field of ethnographic observation and pluralism to the research (Penny, 2009, p.21).

Empirical musicology studies also come under the banner of practice-led research, and work occurring at the Faculty of Music, University of Cambridge, UK is an example of this. Professor John Rink heads the Centre for Musical Performance as Creative Practice (<http://www.cmcp.ac.uk>) and projects located there include investigations of musical shaping, performer/composer collaborations, one-to-one teaching, and rehearsal and practice observations. These are studies which observe performers from the outside, where the musician is the object/subject of scrutiny, and the researcher is the observer/analyst.

Experiential knowledge of performance, which comes from inside the act of performance itself, is usually knowledge that is unattainable in any other way. It is research that “offers a kind of meta-practice, a research-practice that reflects on the artist’s own artistic practice with all the rigour and focus of the research mentality but from an interior, experientially-informed perspective” (Coessens, et al, p.94). It may lead to a deepening understanding of what occurs in a performance practice and the extrapolation of that out into a wider context. Research questions generated may pertain to the musician’s perception, cognition, emotion, gesture, intersections with score, ways of approaching sound, interpretations, interactions with technology or aspects of presentation – in fact any elements of enquiry that cast light on practice. Documentation will often, and most tellingly, be descriptive. As Dutch musicologist, Marc Leman states

Any engagement with music is a signified engagement in that it is about personal experiences, intuitive judgements, and interpretations, which are hardly accessible with scientific methods. What musicology can do is provide descriptions which are grounded in a subjective ontology of experienced musical intentions. (Leman 2008, p.11)

Practice-led research that provides insight into the act of performance, self-knowledge and shared knowledge of experience has the capacity to inform both practitioners and others. Being grounded in practice – the performance, the central sphere of the performer’s life and work – makes it an irresistible and rewarding place to explore. The research, in fact, becomes an extension of performance, a way to interrogate and explore new ideas and simultaneously to enrich one’s performative and scholarly work.

Developing a Method: Theory and Practice

Developing a ‘method’, particularly within a higher degree context, will typically be based on links between theory and practice – perhaps using theoretical frameworks

to investigate issues and concepts. Contextualisation of the research might suggest an array of theoretical bases (for example, philosophy and/or technology questions) for exploration and framework. In a recent project here in Malaysia (*The Imaginary Space: Developing Models for an Emergent Malaysian/Western Electroacoustic Music* 2012-14)¹ reference to the writings of a number of philosophers added both a structure for questioning, and the ability to articulate certain elusive concepts arising within this project. Exploring and evaluating new music and performance as intercultural exchange and connection was investigated in some parts of the project through the prism of ideas of Gadamer, Foucault, Bourriaud, Ingold and others as the researchers sought to create “contexts for understanding” (Gadamer, 1975), to explore the concept of “art as living reality” (Bourriaud, 1998 & 2009/11), and to develop the concept of heterotopia (Foucault, ND) in regard to performative spaces. The ideas were strengthened and enriched by this, the research became clearer, and the outcomes more valuable as ways of thought and practice intertwined through the text.

An excellent example the intersection of philosophy and arts practice research can be found in the work of Canadian dancer/academic Susan Kozel. Kozel’s research is at the very forefront of dance and technology creation and performance, and her insightful book, *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology* (2007), is a phenomenological enquiry based on the writings of French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in which she draws live performance practice, digital technologies and philosophy together to discover what technologies can reveal about performance and ourselves; how the concepts and subjective experiences – the lived experiences – can be extrapolated out, informing ourselves and others about our art and creating new knowledge about our interactions and artistic lives.

Each chapter is devoted to explaining a set of philosophical concepts embedded in the performative experience of particular configurations of technologies. The chapters are phenomenologies, and they contain phenomenologies: layers of reflection are enfolded in each chapter, and some passages directly describe sensations of being in a particular system, while others are devoted to extrapolating these through the philosophical concepts of a range of thinkers. (Kozel, 2007, p.xvii)

Developing a method of enquiry can be a lengthy process as different aspects of a research project in the arts is formulated. The starting point may be the formulation of initial research questions, or the identification of areas for investigation, a desire to solve a problem, to explore concepts, to argue interpretation, context, narrative or perspectives, and so on. It is the artist’s own experience and insight that are the point of departure, unlike research on the arts, which is based on looking in from the outside (Malterud, 2012, p.1). Over time, as the work begins and becomes informed, as questions are confronted, the methodology evolves. The investigation creates materials through the practice (such as performance experience, sonic and interpretational experiments) which are analysed and reflected upon. Music performance practices already involve many of these elements:

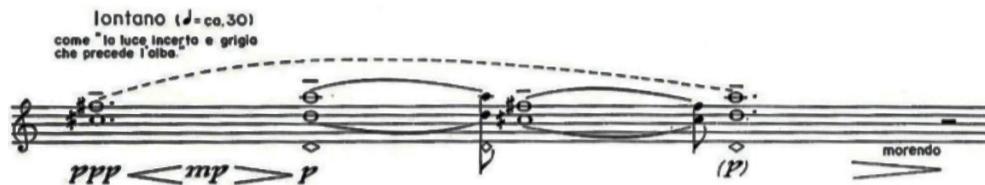
Exploring a rehearsal-performance metaphor for research establishes references across these startlingly similar disciplines. Processes common to both include projects and

program design, identifying areas or repertoire for investigation, developing sets of skills, studying the microcosm, trialing techniques or methods to discover solutions and insights, reflection and adaptation, and adding value to personal and broader performance/research practice through greater knowledge and understanding. (Penny, 2009)

A unique example of practice-led research that incorporates a multitude of elements and perspectives is a project undertaken by Australian pianist, Dr Stephen Emmerson, at the Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University in 2007. *Around a Rondo - preparing Mozart's Rondo in A minor, K. 511 for performance* is a DVD-ROM that includes seven performances of the rondo on both fortepiano and grand piano, thirty videos of interviews and recording sessions. In addition, Emmerson created an interactive score, including Mozart's facsimile, a printable score, structural analyses, quotations from the literature and Mozart's letters. One section of the DVD, 'Interpreting the rondo', is an investigation of the interpretation, including extensive discussion, analysis and video of the performances. Emmerson traces his journey through rehearsals, the notation, technical demands, historic and contemporary literature, and recordings by other artists. Research questions posed by Emmerson include: What aspects of interpretation change as one practices, reflects, listens, practices again, thinks about, reads about, talks about, and ponders a work over a period of time? Which characteristics are there from the beginning and which ones transform? How profound or subtle are the changes? Are there stages that can be discerned in the process? How does negotiating the different instrument alter the approach to the piece, its interpretation, even its meaning? How does a performer adapt to those differences? To what extent does the instrument require a different playing technique? (Emmerson 2007, The Project).

A DVD-Rom format such as this can be most effective for practice-led projects due to its capacity for presenting "many of the tangential relationships and crosscurrents characteristic of artistic processes in a non-linear form." (Schippers et al, 2009, p.86). Webpages work equally as well, and are now accepted as legitimate research documentation and format.

A smaller scale performance analysis can be seen in an example from my own work on a piece for solo flute by Mexican composer Mario Lavista – *Canto del alba* (1980) (Penny, 2009). I performed this piece in a recital exploring spatialisation of sound, and the analysis takes the form of a running commentary of performance and thoughts that occur about each phrase (see Figure 1). It is a powerful example of artistic practice as research, with the performance embedded in the presentation and, as it is played, the insider knowledge – reflections on the practice and performance – projected for the viewer. It is as if the performance is occurring, but yet there is a mirror being held up, which reflects what is going on in the performer's head, but from the outside looking in. In this analysis we can see the performance (artistic-practice) being interrogated, the "lived experience" being articulated, and the articulation of reflections on interpretation, techniques and presentation – essential elements of this kind of research. The aim of this analysis is to take the reader/listener right inside the music with the performer as it focuses on the flute playing *in situ*.



With the addition of amplification, the first example of revelation occurs: the discovery of micro components, the impacts of slight shifts in breath or muscles, the degree or levels of flexibility available, the muscular control required for fragile techniques, the potentials of expression and projection. The intent of the amplification here seems to articulate and emphasize the sonic aura, to facilitate the projection of sounds that tilt towards fragmentation.

Physical gestures develop expressive connections: embouchure, throat, mouth, fingers, and arms work in tandem with tongue positions, breath lightness or intensity, and rhythmic energy. The tempo is extremely slow: this phrase is 41 seconds long. The challenge of sustained breath, of stamina, of entrainment is already present in the first phrase.

Figure 1 Performance analysis excerpt: Mario Lavista *Canto del alba* for amplified flute (opening). Score and text digitally projected with sound. (Penny, 2009)

The simultaneity of performer/researcher engagement as represented here brings aspects of method and examination of process to the fore. Each of the examples in this section involve self-observation and reflection on performance by the performer, and close interrogation of the meta and micro-processes that evolve. Inevitably, and opportunely, this will include a particular stance or bias. “Locating the self in the research necessitates a somewhat disarming openness, a preparedness to share inner thoughts and feelings. The process feeds on ... curiosity, the need to acquire knowledge and self-understanding, and creates a strong bias in emphasis” (Penny, 2009, p.22). The duality of roles has the capacity to bring out untold information, an unfolding of temporal realisation of music from inside, and also to represent preferences and choices in the shaping of responses and arguments.

Andreas Georg Stasheit (in de Assis, Brooks & Coessens, 2014, p.44) discusses the “simultaneity of actor and spectator” in relation to observations of music practising. The spectator’s act of observation, described as the “committed disengagement ... [of] ... reflecting upon oneself during the process of performing”, creates a certain distance, and a space to unveil “what is given”. This disengagement with self can never be total, as this would destroy the intrinsic spontaneity of performance – “the ability to act and react in a differentiating way”. A modified “reflective attitude” is constructed that might shape and style the reflection in which “what is perceived” is also the perceiving activity itself (ibid.).

Conclusions

But is there a danger that the artist-researcher him- or herself will become vulnerable to criticism, and controlled by official power structures? Will he or she not be criticized by

academia and artistic audiences for intellectual *bricolage*, for browsing in other territories of knowledge and explanation and making impudent incursions across the boundaries of different languages? (Coessens, et al, 2009, p.162)

Artists have probably always grappled with the questions and priorities of official research, particularly within university communities. Deiter Lesage (2009) gives an amusing but deadly serious account of these conflicts and frustrations, indicating how much they can stir up passions and question identities of self. Notwithstanding those hindrances, it is now up to the practitioner/researchers in conjunction with the academy to come up with appropriate structures and criteria. At higher degree levels, these might consist of portfolio submissions including elements of creative practice including performances, combinations of multimedia outputs, as well as text-based documentation. Evaluation and articulation of the relationships of these materials in the formation of theory or new knowledge is essential to these submissions.

It is clear that there is not just one way to accomplish practice-led research in the arts. The researcher may be both participant and observer, the insider and the outsider; and the artistic process examined as the researcher moves back and forth between intensive engagement and reflection, creating the material and data for analysis. Each researcher is charged with developing a research design appropriate for specific modes and investigations; formats can vary from pure text to combinations of performance and text, audio and digital materials; an assemblage of methods may include a mix of ethnography, auto-ethnography, musicology, narrative, empirical, qualitative and elements of quantitative methods. Connections of theory and praxis might create a framework for discussion, or suggest ways of looking at performative questions. Most important is the articulation of original ideas or perspectives within an artistic context that actively feeds the field with new perspectives.

Creating the context for recognition of the artist/performer's work, of analytical practice-led thinking and reflection, and making the connection to erudition in the research community validates both scholarly and artistic contributions. The findings of these projects transcend personal development as they draw the intimate, internal world of the performer out into the public domain, generating knowledge, inciting new ways of thinking and provoking further discussion and exploration. It is encouraging to see Malaysian research cohorts now exploring, embracing and approving this work.

Endnotes

¹ *The Imaginary Space: Developing Models for an Emergent Malaysian/Western Electroacoustic Music* 2012-14, Fundamental Research Grant Scheme project based at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris

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Biography

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