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Playing With the Viola da Gamba

Liam Byrne

Note to the reader of this version:

The original PhD thesis was submitted as a website, with fifty multimedia examples embedded in the text, in addition to self-referential hyperlinks within the work. It is the author's intention to permanently host that more ideal version of the thesis at http://www.liambyrne.net/PWTVDG (password: orlandogibbons). However, for library archival purposes, or in the event that the online version somehow ceases to exist, this current offline version is a collection of the nine pages of the website as nine rich-text PDF files. Some hyperlinks (only to external sources) and images have been retained in the body of this text, but the audio and video multimedia examples have been moved to a supplemental folder within this ZIP archive. At those points in the text where an audio or video file would have been embedded, the reader will find a bold, red text with an old-fashioned Example Number, which refers to a media file in the supplemental folder. The page numbers of the PDF files should serve as page numbers for reference purposes. The author also apologizes for the use of endnotes, but they were an irreversible artifact of the footnote system used in the original website version of the thesis.

Abstract

This thesis is the result of a practice-led research project that took place at the Victoria & Albert Museum from 2016 to 2019, under the auspices of a Collaborative Doctoral Partnership with the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. The work picks up the discussion about Historical Performance and authenticity as it stands at the beginning of the 21st century, and proposes a new model for the practice of playing a historical musical instrument, borrowing ideas from material culture studies and focusing on the instrument as an object central to musical experience, and suggesting a new model for creative interpretation called the expressive variable. This reframing becomes the jumping-off point for a series of three performance experiments conducted at the museum involving unaccompanied 17th-century viola da gamba music, each one devised to explore diverse relationships between listener, performer, repertoire, and space, and all three aiming to find ways of sharing the practice of music-making with museum audiences without putting on a traditional concert. The discussion of the performance experiments draws heavily from the techniques of autoethnography, combining analyses of recordings and field notes with reflective writing relating to the author's personal, psychological, and cultural history. The outcomes of these analyses focus themselves into four main sections: risk, time, presence, and agency. Over the course of the intertwined examination of these and other emergent topics, the writing becomes an increasingly self-reflective attempt to understand the friction between the author's self and the musical practice.

Introduction

Between July 2015 and December 2019, I undertook a series of practice-led research experiments at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. At the beginning, I didn't really have a specific research question; in fact I did not even consider what I was doing to be research, but performance. My aim from the outset was to share the historical practice of viola da gamba playing with museum visitors, not by putting on concerts, but through a series of performances designed to play with different ways of forming relationships between performer, listener, repertoire, and space.

Underpinning this performance design was the notion that 21st-century listeners experience music in an increasingly broad range of cultural contexts, both live and especially digital, which depart further and further from the 20th-century concert hall model. We hear music at sporting and political events to motivate us, in advertisements and in stores to make us desire things, at festivals and weekenders, in immersive theatre events, in concert livestreams, in restaurants, on social media, in offices, or on personal headphones to insulate us from public transit, to name just a very few. Music delineates space and experience in our society more now than ever before. My hypothesis was that this contemporary flexibility in listening contexts might somehow help people to vibe with the less direct and more intimate performativity of the viola da gamba's historical repertoire, in a way that would result—for all involved—in a richer musical experience than playing and listening to Baroque viol music in a concert hall.[1] Precisely what this richness would look like, I had no idea; the aim of the experiments was simply to see what happened.

Not long after things were underway with the first performances, the emergent musical, emotional, and philosophical issues were already expanding my artistic perspective in a fruitful variety of ways I had not anticipated, and it was while presenting on this work to the V&A Research Department in autumn 2015 (the initial experiments having been part of a 6-month artist residency at the museum in summer 2015) that I first came to understand these experiments as practice-led research, and it was then that the idea began to germinate of undertaking this PhD as a Collaborative Doctoral Partnership between the V&A and the Guildhall School.

One of the benefits of being able to conduct my practice-led research in a museum environment was that it allowed me to examine my artistic practice entirely outside the professional context of Early Music. I have been able to be idealistic and self-centred, and not limited by colleagues' or promoters' senses of the practicable. Most importantly, the museum has offered me a different way of building relationships with listeners. "Museums do not have the same legacies of hegemonic hearing subjects that one finds in concert halls or even office spaces. They begin from multiplicity."[2] This multiplicity allows both public and performer a heightened level of agency in the musical act, and it is an exploration of these agencies which shapes much of what is to follow.

I had set out on this project intending to examine the performance potential of the viola da gamba and its repertoire in a museum setting, but quite quickly the focus shifted toward examining my own personal relationship to performance. This research is a study of myself and my practice with the viol, and as such, the majority of my research outcomes necessarily remain within the relatively closed circuit between me and my instrument. Some of my findings will naturally come out in my performance, but the most significant work remains pre-lingual. This thesis is an attempt to document, analyse, and present my practical research in written/digital form as best I can.

In terms of its academic contribution, the chapter on the Early Music Problem presents my engagement with the waning debate about Historical Performance and

authenticity. Although this section mostly involves situating my own artistic practice somewhat outside the existing discussion, the shifting of focus to materiality as a starting point for music-making can hopefully be provocatively productive for a broad spectrum of critical and creative thinkers. And even though much of the later chapters focus on my own very personal experiences, it is hoped that this particular avenue of inquiry into a musical practice can be useful to other performers seeking ways to examine their artistic work in an academic context.

This document incorporates in-depth analyses of recordings, field notes, and journal entries from performance experiments, together with subjective reflection on my artistic practice in the context of my personal and professional history, psychotherapeutic journey, identity, and emotional landscapes. All of this is brought together in the form of an evolving autoethnographic narrative. Christopher Wiley describes autoethnography as "a specific methodology that draws upon the author's (autobiographical) experiences in order to yield an enhanced understanding of both the sociocultural context in which the autoethnographic subject is located, and his or her relationship to that context.[3] It is also an approach that "acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist.".[4]

During my performance work, or when reflecting upon it immediately afterwards, there were moments when a spark of idea or realisation occurred to me that brought a new perspective:

> *When researchers do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity.*[5]

These moments of epiphany are the through-lines of my artistic development over the course of this project, and they are what have helped me to re-form and re-articulate my relationship to music-making and performance.[6] It is my hope that

what follows will reflect the extent and the nature of my own artistic growth over the past five years, and that it might also offer the reader a few new perspectives on musical performance in and outside of the museum and Early Music contexts.

References

↑1	This concept of the viol's historical performativity and its problematic relationship to the modern concert hall will be examined in detail in the following section.
↑2	Sterne, J. and Luca, Z.D. (2019) 'In Museums, There is No Hearing Subject', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 62(3), p. 302.
↑3	Wiley, C. (2019) 'Autoethnography, Autobiography, and Creative Art as Academic Research in Music Studies: A Fugal Ethnodrama', *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*, 18(2), pp. 73–115.
↑4	Ellis, C., Adams, T.E. and Bochner, A.P. (2010) 'Autoethnography: An Overview', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1). p. 3.
↑5	Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2010), p. 8.
↑6	Although I realise the term epiphany does come across as a little overdramatic, I will use it throughout this work because of its context as a concept in the field of autoethnography as established by Robert Denzin. (Denzin, N.K. (2013) *Interpretive Autoethnography*.)