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Statement for Panel on ‘What is the Space for Storytelling in Academia? Autoethnography, Critical Self-Reflection and Arts-Based Practice in Music Studies’, Royal Musical Association 2019 Conference, University of Manchester/RNCM, 12 September 2019.

Sensational Diaries, Creative Confessionals or Synthetic Exegeses? How 'Academic' Composers and Performers tell their Stories

Abstract: In the UK higher-education sector, composers and fine artists traditionally enjoyed a respected and relatively uncontested position in many institutions, expected for the most part simply to pursue their own practice. However, following reforms effective from the 1996 Research Assessment Exercise onwards, to allow submissions from other types of artistic practitioners, new criteria were applied to evaluate when practice can be considered as ‘research’. These criteria were also applied to these long-established practitioners. Commentators upon Practice-as-Research such as Robin Nelson have asserted the necessity of a written component, in the form of some type of contextual commentary upon the practice. This has also become a standard requirement for practice-based PhDs (although a few institutions do not require it), and in my view should be considered within the purview of autoethnographic documentation. While sceptical about any assumed primacy of written discourse over other outputs, I consider how and when writing about musical practice, whether self-standing or to be read alongside listening to the practical work, should be considered to achieve parity with other forms of scholarly writing. In particular, I consider critically some now-common approaches – compositional or performance diaries, descriptions of collaborations, poetic exegeses or statements of intention – and argue for the necessity of more incisive forms of analysis and contextualisation.

Statement

My statement concerns the ways in which musical practitioners working in academia produce verbal supplements to their practice, asking what is achieved through such activity, and setting down some categories which have become common in such a context.

One of the most fundamental questions in this context has to do with what is assumed to be the primary focus of music in education, at various levels: should the focus be on *making* music, or studying *about* it? A parallel distinction might be made between, say, the study of creative writing on one hand, and English Literature on the other. For a significant amount of time, the conservatoire and university department might have been thought to map onto the two categories at tertiary level. However, this distinction has always been somewhat blurred, and is more so today than ever. At primary and secondary level, I believe the blurring is even more acute, and may be shaped by wider public assumptions and demands. Here one might make wider comparisons with the visual arts, or at least in a UK context: making art, from what I know from experience and anecdotal evidence from others, has long tended to have a much more exalted role in schools than the independent study of art history, technique or aesthetics. At school, this was disappointing to me, as one with no perceptible graphic ability, but nonetheless fascinated by a wide range of visual art, which I had no opportunity to study. As I believe many of us who have been involved in recruitment will know, the term ‘musicology’ or even ‘academic music’ is mysterious to many outside of the sector, and it is assumed that the primary reason for studying for a degree in music, or for that matter studying it at secondary level, is to become some variety of practising musician. If we did not maintain this fiction, we might lose

many students – and I would suggest the distinction between student perception and reality is even more pronounced in the context of popular music.

I am not going to use the term ‘academic capital’ here, other than to disown it now because, as Paul Harper-Scott has pointed out, to use this type of Bourdieuan vocabulary serves to diminish attention on the real form of capital, in the form of economic wherewithal and the privileges this bestows. But musical practitioners working in academic are researchers as much so if not more than teachers, and as such are required to demonstrate their viability in this respect if they are to gain power and status.

This has created many difficulties and questions. Traditionally in many academic contexts, both composers and fine artists, at least of a certain type, were deemed to be engaged in, if not exactly research itself, certainly activity commensurate with research as more traditionally understood and practised by musicologists. This privilege was not traditionally extended to performers, except for a few who produce extensive autonomous written outputs as well as performing, or a few organists at elite institutions. In some other countries, to the best of my knowledge, this situation still applies, as in France, and to an extent in Germany and the USA, though there a few exceptional institutions

At heart here is the idea that composition is a *creative* act, while performance is a *re-creative* one. As you might imagine, I wholly dispute this formulation, including in the context of performance of highly complex notated scores. Elsewhere, I have detailed the many creative decisions required just in order to render a small notated passage in sound

Many of these assumptions changed in the UK at the time of the 1996 Research Assessment Exercise, the guidelines for which allowed outputs *in the form of* practice, including performances, to be submitted, and including compositions in this broad category. Similar processes have developed elsewhere around similar times, not least in Australia, and a good deal of scholarly writing about practice-as-research dates from around this time. It was no longer sufficient for composers simply to ‘write good music’ – they now must demonstrate that their work more widely generates knowledge in line with other types of research, which have cohered around three fundamental criteria: significance, originality and rigour.

Unsurprisingly, many composers were not happy about these new demands, as their status immediately shifted from that of members of an ‘academic practitioner aristocracy’ purely because of the nature of their outputs, to one in which they had, at least in theory, no higher status than other types of practitioner and were held to the same demands as them.

But how are such qualities to be ascertained in practice-based outputs? I believe that there is no reason why they cannot be discerned through intensive study of those outputs themselves, in the context of other related outputs and their history, but that is for another type of discussion. Certainly some commentators upon practice-as-research, such as one of the most prominent, Robin Nelson, and also some associated with the continental sub-discipline of Artistic Research, assert the necessity of a written component. This has become a standard requirement for practice-based PhDs (although I believe a few institutions still do not require it), and in my view should be considered within the purview of autoethnographic documentation.

I accept that written commentaries can have value, though not that they are always necessary. The question of ‘is composition/performance/installations/etc research?’ as repeatedly raised, not least in the recent ‘Croft debate’ in which I was involved, is ultimately one I find rather banal. It is not difficult to demonstrate how the majority of forms of creative practice involve some processes similar to those involved in other types of research; rather, the important question to me is how we discern the *quality* of such research. In many cases, I do believe this question has been answered on the basis of written components of research, judged by those who – even when musicologists – are more comfortable dealing with words and ideas expressed through that medium than with sounds and sonically-based experiences.

The response of practitioners to this has taken several stock forms, various of which I think are problematic. I want to outline three of these now, and believe I only parody very slightly.

The first is the ‘sensational diary’. Here the composer, performer or other practitioner supplies meticulously detailed accounts of their practice sessions, rehearsals, attempts at production of certain musical material, compositional processes, and so on.

Problems: washing dirty linen in public. Assumes that just because the practitioner did these things, they are of wider significance and relevance. A musicological equivalent might be if a scholar published all their early drafts, notes, unedited versions, corrections, and so on. There are cases of this, especially amongst ethnomusicologists and ethnographers, I would have to say, who present fieldnotes (which can be any types of vague notes made to oneself) as part of a final product, but I have rarely been convinced that these, in themselves, can play any significant role in the generation of wider knowledge except in certain methodological writings.

The second is the ‘creative confessional’. This can be where the practitioner speaks at length about the struggles involved in the creation of their practice, even drawing attention to the personal sacrifices they have made, or simply speak about the emotional trajectory they have experienced during the creative process. Another is the positionality statement, akin to a more traditional confessional, in which the practitioner – especially if engaging with forms of music or musical material from outside of the Western art music tradition – speaks at length to confess their privilege, tells us the guilt they feel as a result, and indulges in other forms of verbal self-flagellation in order to alleviate their conscience, often before going on to do what they would have done anyhow.

Problem: narcissistic. The positionality statement is often an alternative strategy for those who simply like talking about themselves. Above all, it displaces attention from the art to the artist, and assumes they have some special importance as a person, which is therefore worthy of wider attention. I do not accept this is true of practitioners, any more so than anyone else.

The third is the ‘strange meeting’. This deals with the so-called ‘collaborative process’, as many are keen to acknowledge their awareness of ‘distributed creativity’. A common form this takes is when a performer details their interactions with a composer, a composer with a theatre or film/TV director, and so on. Sometimes this will involve a plethora of rambling e-mails reprinted verbatim, long impressionistic descriptions of the journey made to the collaborator’s house, sometimes replete with details of the outfit they were wearing, the type of coffee drunk, the feelings of trepidation upon approaching their door, and so on. Usually we then discover that the two collaborators had some differing ideas on some or other artistic question, and that

they discussed these, went away and thought about them, and then arrived at some type of compromise, or sometimes one party convinced the other that their response was the better one.

Problems: relate to those in the other cases. Once again, this type of approach focuses attention on musicians rather than music, and the musical knowledge generated is often modest and unremarkable.

Towards synthetic exegeses: vital work can be produced through the above methods, but in no sense can they be said to guarantee very much. And so I would urge that practitioners exert a greater degree of self-discipline and humility, and concentrate not simply upon *documentation* but on *critical interpretation deriving from self-reflection and contextualisation of practice*. Simply laying out lots of data is insufficient, what matters is what one does with that data. And a practitioner's own 'story' is not necessarily important simply because they tell it.

Ultimately what matters most is the relationship between the verbal component and the artistic output itself, and the extent to which this interaction generates new knowledge and perceptions which have potential for relevance and application over and above the work of the particular practitioner(s) involved.