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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A SELF-REFLEXIVE PRACTITIONER?

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Sir John Manduell Research Forum Series, Royal Northern College of Music, 5 February 2020

Abstract (short version): The issue of self-reflexivity in musical practice is, I argue, fundamental to the concepts of practice-as-research, autoethnography, experimentation in musical practice, as well as a range of ideologies and practices existing within tertiary education institutions with music departments. In this paper I derive a meaning for self-reflexivity through interrogation of the other concepts, while drawing upon a range of experience and observation of others. I argue in conclusion that critically self-reflexive practice entails fundamentally an attitude rather than any one particular type of methodology, and give specific examples of its manifestation in my own work as performer, musicologist and composer.

Abstract (longer version): The issue of self-reflexivity in musical practice is, I argue, fundamental to the concepts of practice-as-research, autoethnography, experimentation in musical practice, as well as a range of ideologies and practices existing within tertiary education institutions with music departments. This paper constitutes my attempt to delineate the meaning of this term, drawing upon a range of personal experience and observation of the work of others. The long-debated question of ‘can musical practice be research?’, about which I have made public my view (in the context of the debate inaugurated by John Croft), will be addressed concisely, not least because I find the question somewhat banal. More vital is the question of the *level* at which research is conducted, leading to issues of *parity*: under which circumstances can the work of practitioners, whether in the form of their practice itself, or through associated outputs in written or other forms, be considered to be *equivalent* in its level to more well-established forms of academic research? Elsewhere in the paper, I gave concrete examples of questions which practitioners are regularly required to answer, and argue that these constitute research questions as much as any others conventionally labelled as such, but explore the different ways in which practitioners operating in different contexts (with different associated expectations upon them, especially with respect to valorisation of ‘intuitive’ or ‘instinctive’ approaches). I also look critically at some of the related views put forward by Nicholas Cook, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson and others who have dominated Performance Studies in the UK in recent decades, maintaining that some of their arguments are variously anti-intellectual, nostalgic or narrowly empirical. I present attempts at rigorous definitions of autoethnography and experimentation, and from this derive my view of critically self-reflexive practice, entailing most fundamentally an attitude rather than any one particular type of methodology. I conclude by giving a few examples of how this has manifested in my own work as performer, musicologist and composer.

Introduction

The title of this paper is ‘What Does it Mean to be a Self-Reflexive Practitioner?’ I give the paper this title, rather than one featuring such terms as practice-as-research, autoethnography, experimentation in musical practice, or others, in the search for a concept which encapsulates the common core of a range of different experiences, methods, aesthetic positions, attitudes. I mentioned the title to a colleague yesterday, who asked me ‘what type of practitioner is *not* self-reflexive?’ In one sense, this is a very good question, as I would find it hard to imagine an approach to musical practice which is entirely void of even a modicum of self-reflection, for reasons I will detail later. But then I do believe there are approaches for which critical self-reflexion is relatively minimal, and more importantly, I think there are plenty of practitioners who engage in such self-reflexion but may be less self-aware about the nature of the process.

Increasingly, a large number of musical practitioners, especially composers but also a number of performers including myself, and some others, are seeking and/or finding steady employment in research-oriented academic institutions. In the UK for sure, and to varying degrees in some other countries, those in such positions are required to articulate their practical activities *as research*, in a manner commensurate with other more conventional interpretations of the term in the arts, humanities, sciences and beyond. Such activities might include composing, producing sonic art or installations, performing music old or new, discovering old manuscripts and bringing them to life, exploring new instrumental or vocal techniques, rendering unusual notational practice, improvisation, production of recordings or DVD-ROMs or web outputs, or for that matter curating festivals or sound art venues. It is generally not viewed as sufficient for such practitioners’ work simply to be judged according to more conventional notions of its ‘quality’ – though I believe we should resist any situation in which this concept is bracketed out altogether – but as research generating new forms of knowledge, which have relevance and application to others as well as the practitioner, and in this country are judged according to three key criteria, as articulated by the Research Excellence Framework or REF – significance, originality, and rigour.

There are thus obvious reasons why musical practitioners who seek academic employment should think about these. For reasons I will argue, I believe critical self-reflection to be a core concept to understand in order to do so in a cogent manner. But I would not for a moment mean to imply from this that such self-reflection, and self-awareness thereupon, are merely means for navigating an economy of academic prestige, a rather cynical way to spin one’s activities purely in order to gain power, influence and financial rewards. Far from it – I genuinely believe that this is a positive and productive attitude for all types of musical practitioners (and those in other artistic fields) and should be disentangled from common negative stereotypes of dry and dusty ‘academic composers’ and the like. In reality, I believe critical self-reflection is an intrinsic aspect of *creativity* – an over-used and somewhat hackneyed term, but appropriate in this context – which enhances and facilitates an artistic practitioner’s capacity to make the widest range of creative decisions.

Practice-as-Research

So, first a little on institutions and terminology. Once there was a relatively clear distinction between universities and conservatoires. Universities were places for those who wished to undertake written study of music, while conservatoires were about learning to *make* music. Composers were the one group who bridged the divide, and could obtain full positions in either. In universities, their situation was mirrored only by that of fine artists, who could obtain positions in both universities and art colleges.

In recent decades, this situation has changed, especially in the English-speaking world, though increasingly in other countries as well. Many types of artistic practitioners, including musical performers, are now able to obtain full academic positions in some universities. However, they may encounter varying degrees of acceptance and respect for their work.

Some traditional academics are reluctant to consider as research the work of practitioners, especially when it is manifested in the form of practice itself, rather than writing about practice. This can cause practitioner-scholars to encounter difficulties when applying for research grants, promotion, and so on. In at least two music departments in the UK which have recently cut back on staff, performers in senior positions were the first to be made redundant.

Some also attempt to distinguish between ‘creative’ and ‘professional’ practice. This dichotomy has rarely been defined meaningfully, but the former is considered to constitute research, unlike the latter. Performers playing notated music are considered by some simply to be executors of scores, not creative practitioners. Nonetheless, such a distinction has sometimes been applied to composers as well, who are forced to justify the status of their work as research.

It is for these reasons that it is important for practitioners entering academia to understand the different conceptions which relate to their work. In 1993, the writer Christopher Frayling (1993-4) presented a model which encompasses most of the relevant categories. He wrote about research *into*, *through*, and *for* practice. The conventional jargon for these are *practice-based research*, generally written research about a variety of practice; *practice-as-research*, in which the research is embodied through the practice; and *research-based practice*, in which a separable piece of research informs some practice. *Artistic research* is then a particular manifestation of practice-based research in which the researcher is also the practitioner (which need not necessarily be the case otherwise). This latter concept is more common in continental Europe than the UK.

The most contested of these terms is generally practice-as-research. Even one of the most prominent writers on the subject, Robin Nelson, insists that a written component is required for something to qualify as research. On the other hand, the composer Lauren Redhead argues that writing is just one medium amongst many, and should

not be given any privileged status. Others have noted that some assessing practice-related work can base their judgements entirely on written components and not engage with the actual practice.

As I mentioned earlier, practitioners in the UK have found themselves fully integrated into academic career structures. This has always been the case for composers (and also fine artists), but more recently this has also been true of performers and some of those producing other types of outputs, though the bias towards composers, especially in the most highly-esteemed institutions, remains palpable. All UK academics based in institutions are now required to submit a certain number of their outputs roughly every 7 years, which are assessed by a central body, which determines the amount of research funding their department receives from government. As non-composer musical practitioners have been able to submit to this, a convention has emerged (not strictly applied on paper, but which in practice has become an expectation) whereby a 300-word statement should be included with a practice-based output in order to outline the ways in which this work constitutes research. Now, I do believe there are a number of occasions when such documentation does function essentially as *spin*: often involving the appropriation of a handful of ideas and theoretical models from musicology and other disciplines in order to legitimise and flatter one's own practice, rather than supplementing and enhancing any wider critical discourse such as might have other applications.

By contrast, artistic research, which I identify as a continental European phenomenon, stresses more lengthy written contributions, which themselves constitute the most vital outputs, though which are undertaken by practitioners. So a 'pure' academic writing about some composer's working processes would not be undertaking artistic research, but a composer writing about their own working processes would.

In France, composers can receive full academic positions, not performers generally not. In the US, there are some performers in full academic positions, but the informal and anecdotal evidence I have seen (I have not yet undertaken research into precise numbers) suggests the numbers are fewer than in the UK. More often in the US, performers work in adjunct music schools attached to academic music departments. To be sure, the majority of those who take care of instrumental and vocal teaching in UK music departments are not part of the full academic structure either, and such teaching generally has a low academic status. This is despite its being a highly skilled activity, which is recognised in the case of composition. However, what performers do as a matter of course appears to require special justification in order to be considered research, whereas composers' outputs are viewed differently, creating what is in my view an unjust academic hierarchy.

The question of whether musical composition, or performance or other practice-based output (and in other creative fields) 'are' research is to me banal, as I argued in my response to a notorious 2015 article by John Croft, which argued the contrary, entitled simply 'Composition is not Research'.¹ My response was entitled simply 'Composition – and Performance – can be, and often have been, Research'. Croft's article shook up any complacency I might have had about such questions, and

¹ John Croft, 'Composition is not Research', *TEMPO* 69/272 (2015), pp. 6-11; Ian Pace, 'Composition and Performance can be, and often have been, Research', *TEMPO* 70/275 (2015), pp. 60-70.

stimulated me to become involved in the debate, yet I was infuriated by the narrowness of his conception of research, a positivist conception relying on a particular view of scientific research which, for sure, I have seen reiterated in various parts of musical academia. Any type of activity which involves some investigation in order to answer questions germane to that activity can be considered a type of research. Rather I ask about the quality of such research, and when and whether it can be considered equivalent to other more well-established forms of research in arts disciplines in terms of depth of thought, rigour of application, scope, ambition, contextual sophistication, critical and self-critical awareness, and so on.

As a way of considering how I believe such research can indeed fulfil such criteria, I offer to you the following argument in support of my position that what performers do should be considered research, by reference to the use of research *questions*. Every musician playing a notated piece of music has no choice but to answer a wide range of such questions, which are not so fundamentally different in their nature from those involved in more conventional understandings of scholarship. Examples of these would be:

- Which tempi should be used for various large-scale sections of the score in question?
- How much flexibility should be employed within these broad tempi?
- On a smaller scale, what forms of stylisation and elasticity would be most appropriate for playing various types of rhythms?
- In music with a relatively stable metre, should one at least slightly stress notes which fall on strong beats, and play those on weak beats less?
- Should dissonant pitches receive special emphasis, and if so, how much?
- When might the dynamic envelope for a line serve to emphasise its contours, or be otherwise?
- What is the dynamic range desired for the piece (e.g. how quiet are dynamics such as *ppp* and how loud *fff*)?
- Through various combinations of accentuation, articulation and rhythm, to what extent, and where, should one tend towards continuity of line, or more angular approaches?
- In polyphonic or contrapuntal textures, to what extent should one be aiming to project a singular voice which is foregrounded above others, or a greater degree of dynamic equilibrium between parts?
- How exact should synchronisation between hands or parts be? Are there occasions where staggering of different pitches and lines can be fruitfully employed?
- In a piano work, where should one employ the right pedal? Should the 'basic sound' in legato passages be pedalled, or might it be used more selectively? Should pedalling be allowed to carry across changes in harmonies, and if so, when?
- For stringed instruments, when and how might one apply vibrato or portamento? How might this relate to other aspects of the music being played?
- What sort of technical approach to one's instrument is appropriate for this music (it may be several)? In the case of the piano, might one tend towards higher fingers and a clear, well-articulated sound, or play closer to the keys?

- Should one aim for a singular prominent climactic point within a movement, or can there be several of roughly equal prominence?

I could continue with more – by articulating them in this fashion I am not simply making explicit what might as well remain implicit in the acts of musical preparation and performance, but also underlining the fact of their being *choices* in various respects.

Nonetheless, whilst all practitioners must answer these types of questions, some are more aware of and open to the fact of choices and the possibility of creative attitudes and approaches to these. The opposite tendency might be represented by the ‘gigging’ performer, to use the informal English term, one who simply ‘plays the notes’ perhaps with the added qualification of ‘making a good sound’, or a type of performer or pedagogue with whom many will be familiar, who disdains any approach which might seem even remotely ‘intellectual’ and favours instead ‘instinct’ and ‘intuition’.

Now I do recognise some potential objections to the model of performance I favour above: it might seem over-analytical, studied, or incompatible with the instantaneous realities of live performance, in which one might respond instantly to the mood and ambience of the place and ambience, or any number of other complex factors which are more complex as to be reducible simply to basic questions like this.

I am *not* advocating an approach which turns the act of performance simply into the application of academic study, nor one which requires every significant detail to be pre-planned before a concert. Study prior to performance can at best serve the purpose not so much of delivering plans for performance as increasing the reservoir of possibilities available to the spontaneous mind at the point of delivery. There is no way that I could say clearly what each performance I would give will be like (a recording may be a different matter) – there are so many factors contingent upon the moment. But the mind which responds to that moment can itself be nurtured and tutored so as to be able to enhance the range of responses.

To get round the objections, I would put it to you that all the above types of questions are never really answerable without first asking a more fundamental question:

- What are one’s primary motivations and objectives when performing (or recording) this musical score?

There are numerous different ways this question might be answered. A certain type of historically-informed performer from several decades ago (and not only them) might have maintained that the primary aim was to recreate something akin to the first performance or other performances from around that time, especially those given, directed or supervised by the composer. An advocate of a particular type of ‘analytical’ approach would say the performer should foreground those features of the music which are deemed most significant by a particular school of analysis (rarely allowing that the performer might be able to teach the analyst something too); this approach has been sharply criticised by more recent scholars in the field of Performance Studies, not least Nicholas Cook.

There might be other primary motivations, such as for the player approaching a competition who needs to decide what approach is most likely to win favour with the judges – or at least which types of approaches definitively to avoid if one does not want to be instantly eliminated. Others might consider the type of audience anticipated; with a lay audience not likely to contain a large number of people with a high degree of musical literacy, or not likely to be familiar with the repertoire played or similar music, some strategies might be adopted to increase comprehensibility and cut down on the degree of what I would call ‘active experiential participation’ on their part – one way to cut down on this type of participatory requirement can be to strive for a high degree of continuity and unity within a performance. Or conversely, if playing to a more expert audience, one might take the opposite approach. There is some evidence, though still far more research to be done on the subject, of something of the former attitude informing Soviet schools of performance from the 1920s and 1930s onwards, influenced directly or indirectly by some of the early post-revolutionary cultural and musical organisations and their ideals of music-making for a mass proletarian audience, requiring exaggerated expressivity, rhetoric, dynamics, and so on; this type of performing aesthetic would become familiar from at least a sub-section of Soviet competitors in major international competitions from this point onwards.

But I approach the process somewhat differently, in terms of a two-way interplay between overall conception and approach to musical details, so that the overall motivation is to settle upon some desired ideal for the former in line with explorations and awareness of possibilities for the latter. Then the objective is to create a performance out of this which is coherent, imaginative and distinctive. To decide upon approaches to individual details in a performance of a musical work, one needs some type of even loose conception of what one is trying to achieve, unless one is simply doing things unquestioningly according to a set of ‘rules’ with no other creative input. But conversely, as one approaches the individual details and becomes more intimately acquainted with them and the possibilities for their execution, the conception can change. As I have said on various occasions, I may want to learn more about *fin-de-siècle* Paris in order to gain wider insight into how to play the Dukas Sonata, but conversely I might play the Dukas Sonata in order to learn more about *fin-de-siècle* Paris, as it is a not-insignificant part of this cultural history. On the other hand, were I to play the work without further knowledge, the performance might reflect a crude stereotypical view of what the period and its cultural products entailed.

So I look at both (and other contextual and analytical dimensions) *concurrently*. It is not a case of never setting a finger on a piano key before having done one’s homework as scrupulously as possible from written sources and recordings. Rather, I would start simply taking a work to the piano, trying out passages to get a general feel, playing them in a variety of ways, trying some fingerings, tempi, voicings, rhythms, and so on, often allowing myself to be guided by what the aural and kinetic experience of practising reveals. Of course, this is no ‘blank sheet’ approach – no-one who has even a modicum of musical knowledge and experience could pretend to that. I start the music with some basic ideas about stylistic and other parameters, sometimes find that the particularities of the score suggest a re-think of those initial assumptions.

Historical conditions of performance can be studied not slavishly, but as a guide to a deeper understanding of a score in terms of aspects which might be taken for granted and unquestioned at the time of its creation, but would seem quite different today. Gaining some sense of what the music might have meant and been heard *in its own time* may facilitate the creation of a performance in a contemporary context which is informed by that ‘enhanced conception’ provided not only by the score, but information which helps one to *read* it more acutely.

Auto-Ethnography

At the most basic level, *Ethnography* is the study of peoples (*ethno*-) and their social and cultural practices, values and environments, in the form of writing (*-graphy*). *Autoethnography* turns the lens on the researcher themselves and their own cultural milieu, practices, values and ideologies. Auto-ethnography is sometimes conceived primarily as a *method*, which in a musical context can take the form of practice or rehearsal diaries, narrative accounts of collaborations with other musicians, blow-by-blow accounts of the compositional process, and so on.

Ethnography more generally is obviously a common method employed by ethnomusicologists, whether or not working on musical traditions and cultures from outside the Western world. Classic ethnographies emerged from a long process of immersion within the cultural environment being investigated by the ethnographer, and then very detailed analysis of the data gleaned in the process. Nowadays I believe the term has become somewhat degraded, and is used to denote practically any type of research which entails sourcing data from living participants with whom the researcher has direct contact. As I argued in a debate two years ago on ethnomusicology,

I wish to quote the view of one senior musicologist (sourced anonymously) on some ethnomusicological work:

The best ethnomusicologists I have worked with have strong critiques of authenticity narratives, skepticism about the general way the ethnographic method is conducted, read books (including historical writing and writing about history) and use various kinds of theory that pervade other kinds of humanities scholarship. The worst simply show what look like lovely holiday snaps, give a pseudo-literary, ‘atmospheric’ narrative about their trip, and quote their interlocutors at length, nodding sagely.²

It is understandable that Western ethnomusicologists and anthropologists might feel a post-colonial reticence about engaging critically with non-Western music and culture. But when this attitude is carried over into the study of Western art music, it leads to a type of musicology-on-the-cheap, padded out with texts or documentaries with quotations, often from not very articulate participants, without much commentary, critique or analysis. And a similar situation can occur with auto-ethnography. The historian Richard J. Evans has argued that there is a difference between being a *historian* and a *chronicler*, and has even gone so far as to suggest some of the work of

² Cited in Ian Pace, ‘Ethnographically sourced experience of Ethnomusicology – a further response to the debate’ (August 14, 2016), at <https://ianpace.wordpress.com/2016/08/14/ethnographically-sourced-experiences-of-ethnomusicology-a-further-response-to-the-debate/> .

the late Martin Gilbert (one of his own teachers) might fall into the latter category.³ I would suggest a similar divide separates some of the work in these domains from critical scholarship.

I offer as a definition of autoethnography *critical self-reflection and contextualisation of one's own practices and experiences*. It can involve data collected in various ways: through diaries, interviews, sketches, recordings, videos, questionnaires, e-mails, phone texts or social media interactions. The results of processing such data can be presented as traditional scholarly articles, web publications, CD- or DVD-ROMs or even new artistic creations.

But I believe the major mistake frequently made is to the simple employment of such techniques of data collection, or even presentation of outputs in certain form, as being a sufficient condition for something to be considered autoethnography. The inclusion of footnotes is far from a sufficient condition for an article to be considered scholarly, nor should method be fetishized for autoethnography. At stake is not simply the question of how data is collected or presented, but the attitudes and approaches employed to analysing and contextualising it. By asking critical research questions about one's experiences, and examining their relationship to wider issues and contexts, one can produce research with relevance and significance for others. This corresponds with the definition of practice-as-research by Bart Vanhecke in the volume *Artistic Experimentation in Music*, of which Darla was one of the two editors –as *critically self-reflexive practice*.

Experimentation

A conception of musical practice as a type of *experiment* has been explored in some detail by a range of scholars associated with the Orpheus Institute in Ghent, with many of their contributions detailed in the aforementioned *Artistic Experimentation in Music*. The foremost contributor here is Michael Schwab, who draws upon the ideas of philosopher of science Hans-Jörg Rheinberg. The model here involves three key terms:

Experimental systems: the smallest units of empirical research, designed 'to given unknown answers to questions that the experimenters themselves are not yet able to ask'. Schwab argues that the outcomes of these matter more than the means by which they are arrived at.

Technical objects: fixed and accessible objects, sometimes the results of previous experimentation, which condition and limit experimental systems and 'embody the knowledge of a given research field at a given time'.

Epistemic things: the results of experimental systems.

The problem with this system is the lack of anything specific to music. Schwab attempted to remedy this lack by issuing questionnaires to practitioners associated with the Orpheus Institute. Technical objects in the responses included scores,

³ In a talk entitled 'Meet the historian' at Australian National University, July 25, 2015, online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HMmtZVRSAHM> (accessed September 5, 2016).

musical instruments and hardware, as well as habits of performance and institutional contexts. Epistemic things were conceived more in terms of processes than definitive outcomes, with the practitioners valuing the ongoing development of knowledge through practice, though must were also happy with the production of further outputs in the forms of lectures, papers and texts. This latter response might not necessarily be mirrored at other institutions.

I think this model is productive as far as it goes, but does not go far enough in terms of defining what might be satisfactory types of experimental systems. Some such systems may amount simply to ways of asking simply pragmatic questions, such as ‘which fingerings should I use in order to execute this range of microtones and multiphonics?’, ‘how do I execute these rhythms accurately?’, or as I heard in a composer’s presentation recently, ‘how do I ensure every note I compose is the result of systematic process?’

These questions may be important for performers, for sure, but only go so far. I would suggest that the following questions involve a greater degree of critical self-reflexivity: ‘how might the results of using certain types of fingerings or other technical approach when performing a piece of music affect the conception as understood by myself as a performer, the composer, or potentially by listeners?’; ‘what does it mean to perform a rhythm ‘accurately’ in music past and present? How is this question conditioned by the particular case in question?’; ‘what are the implications of employing systematic or more intuitive (or other) approaches to composition, in terms of the possibilities inherent in the compositional process, or the potential impact upon a listener?’

Now I would like to give you a couple of examples from my own work involving what I believe to be a fair degree of critical self-reflection.

Notation

In an article published in 2009 in the Orpheus Institution collection *Unfolding Time*, I outlined what I described as a structuralist model of notation.⁴ In essence, this was an attempt on my part to reject what I characterise as a ‘positivistic’ model of notation which I felt to be prevalent in a good deal of thinking and writing on the subject. By the positivistic model, the score specifies an essentially singular type of result, with stylised rhythms, rubato, tempo modifications, phrasing, etc., as a type of added extra on top of this. This model continues to inform a good deal of empirical musicology, not least work which assesses performances of rhythmically detailed contemporary music by measurements of the positioning of attacks, to be gauged against a particular quantifiable view of what the notation supposedly tells the performer to do.⁵

In contrast to this, I argued that notation does not imply a singular result, especially with respect to rhythm. A metronomically even interpretation of a periodic rhythm is just one of many ways of *reading* that rhythm, which at least historically may have

⁴ Ian Pace, ‘Notation, Time and the Performer’s Relationship to the Score in Contemporary Music’, in Darla Crispin (ed.), *Unfolding Time: Studies in Temporality in Twentieth-Century Music* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009), pp. 151-92.

⁵ Examples: Roger Marsh and others on Ferneyhough. Nicholas Cook’s comments in *Beyond the Score*.

had limited utility. Some of you may be familiar with the views of fortepianist Malcolm Bilson on *reading* a historical score, which have certainly informed this model I am presenting. Many forms of musical notation have been interpreted in a variety of stylised ways, which can be very difficult to codify in a failsafe manner, as those who have attempted to reconstruct historical performance styles simply by following a set of ‘rules’ will know. Even given a basic stylistic non-metronomic basic stylistic framework, there is often huge scope for individual variation. A similar model can be applied to phrasing, voicing, pedalling, employment and type of vibrato, and most other musical parameters.

I theorised this model in a manner influenced by structuralist and post-structuralist models of language: the symbols of musical notation do not imply singular sounding results, but rather delineate a range of possible practices on the part of the interpreter. However, this is not simply some free-for-all, but rather a range of correspondences which are *bounded* by the notation. Just because the notation can imply multiple possibilities does not mean it can mean anything; instead the delineation works by means of *excluding* some interpretations, and thus defining the range of possible results in terms of *difference*. While there is no obvious answer to what a ‘correct’ way might be to play a notated triplet, there are some things which clearly lay beyond the boundaries of what could be reasonably considered as such. By indicating three triplet quavers, the notation negates the possibility of, say, a metronomic dotted crotchet followed by two quavers, or a clear syncopated rhythm. Precisely where the boundaries are to be drawn is not always easy to discern (there are, for example, accounts of Chopin playing music in three such that some believed it to be in four), but they do exist. Exactly where, within a spectrum from black to white, one decides black ends and grey begins, or grey ends and white begins, will always be a subjective decision, but one can fairly say that jet black or other hues nearby could never be classified as white. On a non-discretely-tuned instrument, there might be various ways of tuning an A-flat, depending upon the tuning system used, its harmonic function, the possibilities of expressive notation, and so on, but at some point it would cease to be a plausible A-flat and become categorizable as a G or A, or possible G quarter-sharp or A quarter-flat.

If I emphasise rhythm, it is because I arrived at this model as the result of long-term attempt to theorise the performance of rhythm in so-called ‘complex’ music characterised by a large degree of notated detail in this respect. Here what already existed, as for example in the writings of Roger Marsh or Roger Heaton, was heavily reliant upon the positivistic model. Heaton described as ‘faking’ a common practice, which I myself continue to use especially in music involving other players. This involves indicating where the positions of beats in an extended passage with complex rhythms. But the result is only a ‘fake’ if contrasted with a supposedly ‘authentic’ alternative, presumably involving an attempt to measure where each attack should come, or perhaps as others have advocated, have a computer or other mechanical device execute it, with a human player simply trying to best approximate the aural result. Similarly, a common demand made by some freelance performers of composers that they ‘hear what they write’ also assumes some singularity of what the composers are supposed to ‘hear’ in each case.

I have many problems with this attitude. It renders the performer as little more than a second-best machine, and denies many possibilities of flexibility, spontaneity and

creativity of interpretation. Ultimately, I cannot see much of a positive role for human performers when such a model is maintained, and as such it appears to me emblematic of the jaded and disenchanted freelance performance culture which I encountered from the beginning of my career, especially amongst British musicians. In the mid-1920s a young Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt published a range of polemics advocating in a somewhat fundamentalist manner the replacement of human performers with machines so as to eliminate human imperfection, vulnerability and so on. I do not personally see these necessarily as negative qualities by any means, and never accepted that, as some might maintain, the best sort of performer is one who suppresses all such things – which is not by any means to say that one should not learn control, self-discipline, and means of channelling these non-machinic human qualities to best effect.

But let me give a relatively straightforward example of how I would apply this notational model to a passage from Brian Ferneyhough's piano piece *Lemma-Icon-Epigram*. Look at the gestures on both staves encompassed by the first crotchet or quarter-note duration. The dynamic indication is *ffff* accompanied by *tutta la forza*, whilst all the notes of chords in either hand or accented except for the A5/E-flat6 dyad in the right hand, which is also the conclusion of a slur, and the two grace notes, one of which is indicated *sffz* instead. Because this is written for a discretely-tuned instrument, the pitches are unambiguous and do indeed indicate a singular result (which is why a 'wrong note' is a clearly discernible category on the piano). The dynamics however certainly exclude any approaches which would not seem to involve the performer using a degree of physical force somewhere in the upper limits – though the indication of *fffff* on the following system certainly implies some flexibility in what *tutta la forza* means. Between the first three right hand chords, there are plethora of relative dynamics possible, all very loud, but with varying differences between them – I would question whether there is an easy way of discerning whether they are played at a common dynamic because of how the aural result is conditioned by harmony, tessitura, register and so on. It would not be unreasonable to treat the G-flat7/B-flat7 as a peak of a phrase, from which the next chords descend, or to stress to the maximum the initial F#6/G7, not least so it sounds clearly above the bass with which it coincides. Another approach would be to treat the final right hand G4/C#5/F#5 as the most forceful, to avoid a sense of any slacking of dynamic as the chord sequence descends and also give an impetus for the following right hand diminuendo. The A5/E-flat6 dyad is certainly *not* indicated at quite as forceful a dynamic as the other chords, but the precise way of playing this can take various forms.

groups. The principle is the same: discovering a space for interpretation by excluding more familiar or habituated responses which the notation negates.

When I first started learning *Lemma-Icon-Epigram*, when I was a student in New York City, I did try calculating exact durations for some sections, and even time points, but quickly abandoned this approach. For one thing, the results were just numbers, with no wider musical sense, and in the circumstances of live performance, it was hard to see how any performer would be likely to be able to render them into sound. And I came gradually to see how this was to neglect the question of *why* the composer has chosen to notate in this manner. Ferneyhough has been clear in interview about how notation is a way of channelling the performer away from more habituated practices, especially those established at conservatory level. I see no reason to dispute Ferneyhough's model here, and it provided part of the foundations for my own. Ultimately, this model of notation provides a way of making such music *playable* without disregarding its nuances.

In a piece of my own, *Das hat Rrrrasss* for speaker and piano, which I premiered with Alwynne Pritchard on Tuesday, there are some polyrhythms here which might seem challenging to perform, but I don't believe they necessarily are. The 16:11 tuplet in the left hand of bar 60 is simply a way to contain the pair of anacruses and tremolo chords within the allocated space, relative to a right hand which should be played quite steadily (as I indicate in the score). All that really matters is that the two halves of the bar for the left hand are roughly equal in duration, and that the attacks occur around the positions indicated, so as not to coincide with those in the right hand.

59 momentarily synchronised with piano 11

you are quite ri dic - u - lous

f poco a poco cresc.

f poco a poco cresc

60

16:11

Similar principles apply to a somewhat more complex passage like that in bar 95.

95 19

dep - u - ty played a - long.

f (upper part) *mf* (upper part)

p (lower part)

(L.H.) 7:4 L.H. 9:8

16 17

As I indicated before, my approach to notation grew in part from disillusionment with the axiomatic strictures which I found operative within a performance culture which I inhabited. Adhering to such strictures was seen as a badge of membership within the realms of 'professional' performers. To question them would only attract dismissal or

even ridicule, not to mention disparaging charges of over-intellectualism. But the positivistic model never really explained how two players could play what they thought of as ‘just the notes’ or ‘just what is written’, yet the results would be very different. The only performance parameter in which some degree of latitude was acknowledged was timbre, so that differences could be attributed almost exclusively to a performer’s ‘individual sound’.

At the same time, I also encountered a different set of attitudes within a conservative critical culture around new music performance in the UK. This tended to assign most positive value to those performances which exhibited normative stylistic practices such as were generally associated with more mainstream repertoire. On the piano, these included clear hierarchies of parts in contrapuntal textures, top-voicing of chords, the avoidance of staccato playing with a too-clear attack, a further avoidance of extremely loud or extremely quiet dynamics, and especially of the risks associated with splitting notes or their not sounding in this regions, continuity of line and minimal fragmentation, and so on. At one point, frustration with these homogenising attitudes, and a lack of interest in more strongly individuated musical possibilities from either composers or performers, led me towards a more belligerent approach to interpretation which could consciously try and avoid much such practices. Indeed, even back in 2009, the examples I give of contemporary repertoire are framed in a somewhat more dogmatic fashion than that I would advocate today. But I continue to stand by the essentials of the notational model I presented then. It does not exclude more traditionally-rooted approaches to interpretation by any means, but nor does it disregard the particularities of each notated score. It provides an alternative, perhaps even a sublation, of the dichotomy between ‘playing something like a real piece of music’, or ‘just playing the notes’ against which I fought for some years as a performer. It can also be applied to very different scores including those in graphic or text form. Scores like the following, from Sylvano Bussotti’s *Five Piano Pieces for David Tudor*, certainly involve a high degree of performer input as affects the result, but they can be defined in terms of how they demarcate a range of possibilities much more specifically than any type of wholly free improvisation.

V_b) piano piece for David Tudor 1

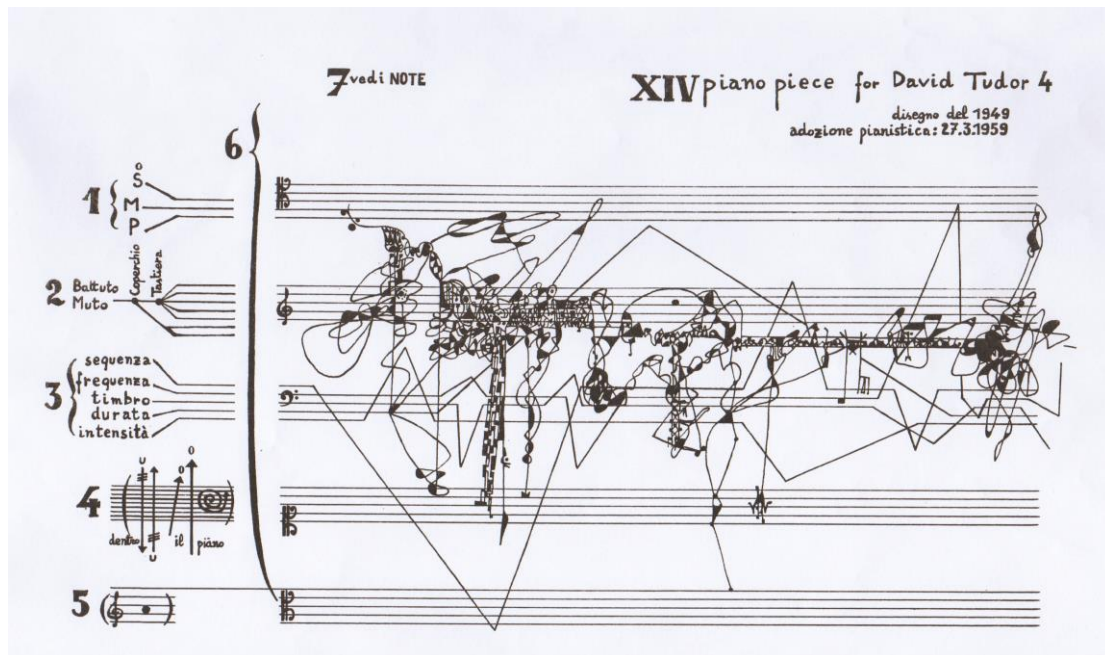
(Tutto nell'orbita del pp, sempre)

1 MD MS 30''

2 MS MD 15''

3 MS (gliss.) 45''

1.5.1959



I first performed the two books of Michael Finnissy's *Gershwin Arrangements* in 1996 in London, as part of a series of the complete piano music to celebrate the composer's then 50th birthday. Two years later, I made the first complete recording of the pieces, which was released the following year by the Metier label.

Those familiar with Finnissy's large body of work based upon the music of others may know that in these works, compared in particular to his *Verdi Transcriptions* (at least those of these which had been written by that time), the original Gershwin melodies are generally clearly identifiable. Furthermore, while the accompaniments of other configurations can be highly chromatic and fragmented in comparison to functional harmony, also featuring irregularities and discontinuities of rhythm, nonetheless these are still clearly rooted in certain tonal and popular idioms – sometimes simply those used in the composer's published arrangements. As such, they have sometimes gained performers and listeners who might not be so well-disposed towards other parts of Finnissy's output, especially not what might be considered his more 'high modernist' compositions from the 1970s.

Now, at the time of presenting my 1996 series, I had encountered a lot of scepticism about Finnissy's work from 'modernist' quarters in both the UK and abroad – some of that scepticism certainly still exists – including from some other composers with whom he had been categorised as part of the 'New Complexity'. Such scepticism was fuelled in particular by various works from the early 1990s engaging with religious themes, sustained modality and plainchant, seen by some as an aesthetic retreat or even capitulation. I also recall a view expressed by one 'New Complexity' composer by which Finnissy was a type of latter-day Percy Grainger, an Anglophone eccentric composer dabbling in various areas, but without wider historical or aesthetic significance. Similar comparisons were made with the likes of Leopold Godowsky or Kaikshoru Shapurij Sorabji, again apparently an interesting contextualisation, but ultimately a strategy for portraying relative marginality, especially from a continental European perspective.

For this reason, I was at this time hostile to these musical and aesthetic contextualisations of Finnissey, and to concomitant interpretive strategies which I felt served to reinforce them. I believed strongly that Finnissey was as important an international figure as, say, Brian Ferneyhough or James Dillon or Richard Barrett, the first two of whom in particular at this stage were more readily accepted in this respect. And I felt the Gershwin Arrangements to be just as significant a component of Finnissey's output in this respect as most of his other works. But I could see at the same time that the elements of the music which inhabited more traditional or familiar idioms (or simply constituted known melodies) would for this reason generate an immediacy for listeners which might not be the case for those other more obscure aspects – an issue pertinent to any music involving clearly perceptible quotation or stylistic allusion. In these works, as in the example shown on the slide, especially the *marcato* bass line on the second system, I saw how the inner parts served not simply to decorate or enrich the melodies, but actually created new dissonances or contrapuntal conflict which either offset or otherwise transform those melodies.

Faster ($\text{♩} = 76$) (and rubato), but still rather gloomily to start with

The image displays three systems of musical notation for piano. The first system features a treble and bass staff with complex chords and triplets, marked 'p' and 'marcato'. The second system continues with similar complexity, marked '(marcato)', 'rall.', and 'a tempo'. The third system shows further rhythmic variation, marked 'poco accel.', 'poco rall.', and 'a tempo'.

Similarly, rhythmic irregularities disrupted a sense of a steady pulse, and thus created a destabilising effect, as shown in this example.



I understood all of these things in terms of modernist ideas of fragmentation, non-reconciliation and non-resolution of inner force fields (to use Adornian language!), and in general resistance to what I would then have portrayed as nineteenth-century ideals of organicism and totality.

So, in performances from that time, I made a conscious decision to *downplay* the Gershwin melodies, most definitely not to play them as a type of *Hauptstimme*, but rather as just one voice within fundamentally polyphonic textures, given no priority and even played less prominently than other voices. I saw this as a way of foregrounding the elements which I thought to be most particular to Finnissey, rather than those inherited from Gershwin. Similarly, I aimed for clarity and precision of rhythmic disjunctions, in no sense playing them as certain types of written-out *rubati* which might expand or contract, but not break, a continuous line. To do this, I would avoid pre-empting the shifts in the surrounding material, so the breaks would be more abrupt. I included a ‘Performance Note’ with the CD attempting to explain these and other aspects of what I was trying to do, perhaps as an attempt to pre-empt and forestall potential criticism from what might be more conservatively-minded critics. I had in mind performance notes included in some historically-informed recordings.

But nowadays, I am dissatisfied with the results from then. The lack of a *Hauptstimme* in many places created flat and rather monochrome textures (something I have heard criticised in Walter Giesecking’s recordings of the Bach 48 Preludes and Fugues – I am not for a moment trying to compare my work with Giesecking’s, but certainly this type of playing was an influence). The disjunct rhythms – and some sharp dynamic contrasts – sounded overly didactic, while the bleaker or at least bittersweet potential of the music felt too all-encompassing. In general, a set of pieces filled with many

possible expressive, emotive, evocative qualities were being appropriated in the name of a rather dogmatic aesthetic-political statement.

With hindsight, I can see there was another motivation fuelling a wider anti-romantic aesthetic of performance – perhaps subliminally - which I can relate back to my time studying at Chetham's School of Music from 1978 to 1986. This was a deeply unhappy period at what was then a toxic institution at which musical life was directed by Michael Brewer, an unctuous but somewhat charismatic individual whose affected musical 'taste' – allied to what I now see was a rather unthinking blanket tame late romantic aesthetic – served to mask and even fuel a pattern of exploitation, bullying and sexual abuse, for which he later received a six-year jail sentence. Brewer was responsible for assembling a range of other staff often in his own image, and to cut a long story short, I can see how I – in some ways unfairly – associated a whole species of 'musicality' with this corroded place, and also with associated class politics (automatic equations made between 'musicality' and individuals' class background) and so on. After several years from 2013 working as an activist and researcher looking at abusive practices in UK specialist music schools (about which I am currently writing a monograph), and other wider institutions, I was able to establish a more measured perspective upon an aesthetic world which I had vehemently rejected.

As time went on, and especially when I played the complete cycles again in my 70th birthday series of Finnissey's complete piano music in 2016-17, I did not wholly abandon these approaches, but tried to become less doctrinaire in approach, as well as aiming for more varied forms of contrapuntal textures, with various inner parts and the Gershwin melodies weaving in and out of the foreground.

Critically Self-Reflexive Practice

To return to this crucial concept, which I believe is entailed in my modified question: I would say that this entails the researcher dealing with the 'why', not just the 'what', which mirrors the self-critical attitude which defines the humanities at their best.

To answer interpretive research questions simply by asking 'what did the composer intend' is not a critically self-reflexive approach, in my view. Nor is an approach to composition which is fundamentally about 'which techniques or systems should I employ in order to bring about a certain type of musical result?' Nor 'how did I undertake this collaboration with a composer', especially when such an endeavour takes the form primarily of a mixture of an extremely average travelogue and an equally unremarkable autobiographical narrative. This is not in any sense to claim that either travel writing or autobiographical writing cannot constitute high-level research, far from it. Again, this is a question of the degree of sophisticated critical reflection involved.

So I would urge you all to conceive of critical self-reflection fundamentally in terms of an *attitude* derived from and reflecting back upon one's practice. It is not simply about describing it in words, keeping a diary, or name-checking a few vogueish theorists. It is about keeping in mind more fundamental questions about the nature of practice, especially as manifested in the type of practice one does oneself.

