

Beauty or Brains? Negotiating the Tensions between Artistic Practice and Research in Music

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Seventy-five years ago, the influential philosopher Dewey asserted that “the odd notion that an artist does not think and a scientific enquirer does nothing else is the result of converting a difference of tempo and emphasis into a difference in kind.”¹ Like much of Dewey’s work, his views are strikingly relevant to contemporary discussions. Over the past two decades, artistic practice as research (hereafter APaR) has been the topic of fierce debate amongst practitioners and researchers in various areas of the creative and performing arts, from the visual arts to theatre and music. Defined by some as research *through* artistic practice (rather than *into* artistic practice), it often involves the perspective of the skilled practitioner, seeking to uncover the inner workings of the artistic process via a reflective methodology. This paper will examine some key issues concerning APaR at large, with specific reference to music. In doing so, it will frequently refer to the essays in the landmark 2007 themed issue of the *Dutch Journal of Music Theory* dedicated to this topic.² After addressing some rhetorical and philosophical issues, we will consider the practical implications of recognizing artistic practice as research in contemporary academic environments.

Artistic Practice and Research: “As” or “Is”?

Prominent in the literature concerning APaR is a line of thought which suggests that art practice shares many common elements with research on the level of

process, but that it should not therefore be unconditionally regarded as research in the traditional sense of the term. This is due to the complex nature of most art practices, and the format and means of communication of research outcomes in this context.

In 1998, Strand outlined two central reasons—as relevant now as then—why definitions of research in the context of the performing and creative arts should be rigorously examined: firstly, the controversial nature of “research in the creative arts” and a lack of common understanding and agreement; and secondly, the fact that its definition has a significant impact on funding and support of these practices.³ The latter has been an important driver of the discussions: as Borgdorff notes, research definitions enable bodies to set up eligibility criteria to assess research proposals.⁴ Each funding body and university constructs its definitions of research and operates accordingly. Consequently, many definitions are currently in use. However, it is possible to construct a set of definitions to operationalize research in this context.⁵

Two concepts are common to the definitions of research put forward by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), and the Australian Research Council (ARC).⁶ Firstly, they all describe research as an “original investigation.” Secondly, it must explicitly aim to increase humanity’s “stock of knowledge.” In addition, there are references to rigor (it must present a “systematic study”), and the condition that it should be replicable (which creates an interesting tension with the “uniqueness” often attributed to great artistic works). When the scope is broadened to include areas such as “applied research” or “experimental development,” we encounter descriptions like research as a form of “creative work,” and as having aims or objectives of direct practical relevance to a particular field.

On the basis of these some would suggest—and others even fervently argue—that all artistic practice *is* research, whether it is “intended” as research or not. Lawson

suggests the possibility of art practice standing alone as research: there may be times when a musician can communicate “wholly in sound.”⁷ He finds it easy to “argue that Christopher Hogwood’s project of 1978–83 to record the complete Mozart symphonies on period instruments was a kind of practice-based research.”⁸ Similarly, the very score of J.S. Bach’s *Die Kunst der Fuge* could well be regarded as an eloquent investigation into both the history and potential of the fugue form.

Brubaker also suggests that his performance *is* research:

My playing is my research. More simply, my playing is reading—
physicalized reading. And that close reading has led to some
thoughts which do not comprise fully realized analyses in the
conventional musicological sense, but do, it seems to me, offer
empirical evidence that performance—with its attendant reading,
hearing, and rereading, and rehearing—constitutes research....
Performing is at least a fact finding mission.⁹

The position expressed in this paragraph may not be altogether consistent; the idea that performing is “at least a fact finding mission” does not necessarily entail that performance is research. Data gathering, or “fact finding,” in itself does not constitute an original contribution to humanity’s stock of knowledge, and is only one component of any research process which must be conducted in conjunction with others such as summary, analysis, and reflection. So, even if performance is a
Sixty-five years ago, the influential philosopher Dewey asserted that “the odd notion that an artist does not think and a scientific enquirer does nothing else is the result of converting a difference of tempo and emphasis into a difference in kind” (Dewey, 1934, p. 15). Like much of Dewey’s work, his views are strikingly relevant to contemporary discussions. Over the past two decades, artistic practice as research (hereafter APaR) has been the topic of fierce debate amongst practitioners

and researchers in various areas of the creative and performing arts, from the visual arts to theatre and music. Defined by some as research *in* and *through* the arts, this emerging approach utilises the perspective of the skilled practitioner, and seeks to uncover the inner workings the artistic process via a reflective methodology. In attempting to give an overview of current thought on the matter, this paper will present a broad scope in dealing with issues concerning APaR in their entirety, but will do so through the lens of the specific problems confronting music.¹ After addressing the rhetorical and philosophical issues, this paper will consider the practical implications of recognising artistic practice as research in contemporary academic environments.

research.

Finley holds a “radical” side of the argument, arguing that art and research are, or can be, *identical*:

It is an act of political emancipation from the dominant paradigm of science for new paradigm researchers to say “I am doing art” and to mean “I am doing research”—or vice versa. In either utterance, that art and research are common acts makes a political statement.¹⁰

This rhetoric resonates strongly with Dewey’s opening statement in this paper, and is supported by Borgdorff’s suggestion that scientific research is much less rigid and predetermined (in terms of protocol and method) than many who argue on the side of *artistic research* would claim.¹¹

¹ This essay is indebted to the essays in the 2007 themed issue of the *Dutch Journal of Music Theory*, and constitutes a response to some key ideas put forward in that volume.

Research Process

The most obvious similarities between research and art practice lie in formal processes. As we have argued elsewhere,¹² in the development toward many musical performances, research methods and processes can be clearly identified: defining the concept; selection of material; reading history and criticism; analysis of scores; listening to and observing live, DVD, and CD performances—not to mention the musician’s “aural library” which could be conservatively estimated at twenty- to fifty-thousand hours of listening, learning, and playing informing the practice of any musician. Davidson is quite explicit in the rehearsal/performance distinction. She argues that while the process of rehearsal and preparation for performance is often the same as the process of research (i.e. is a form of research), performance “per se” is a far more problematic issue.¹³

The main problems facing APaR lie in its intended goals and outcomes and, perhaps most importantly, the presentation of its results, which concerns the epistemological status of both the art object itself and the self-reflection on process. McIntyre, among many others, sees the primary purpose of APaR as the “revelation of an ‘insider’ perspective” that is unattainable from other research methods and vital to our complete understanding of creative activity.¹⁴ Two questions arise from this: What is the nature of this “insider” knowledge, and how can this perspective be communicated both to other musicians and non-musicians?

Questions of Knowledge

Much of the 2007 issue of the *Dutch Journal of Music Theory* is dedicated to discussions of epistemology. Cobussen, Osa, Sligter, and Borgdorff each have different approaches to this issue,¹⁵ but they all center on the same core questions, which could be summarized as:

- What is the kind of knowledge embedded in the art process?
- How does this type of knowledge differ from more traditional academic knowledge?
- How might this conception of knowledge operate in APaR, and how is this knowledge communicated?

Each of these writers argues that, unlike the explicit knowledge of written discourse, knowledge embedded in an art practice may be tacit. It is a kind of “unarticulated” knowledge, a structured knowledge that is gathered throughout repeated experiences of art and makes the cognition and the creation of the art object possible but is never made explicit. Writers such as Osa and Cobussen mention the works of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein in connection with this tacit conception of knowledge. While these three thinkers each have quite different projects, they are all read in this context in support of a concept of art-knowledge that does not *re-present*, but instead *presents*: it is engendered by (repeated) experience and is necessary for art to function, or appear, as art, but is pre-reflective and non-discursive. However, problems arise when trying to relate this concept to the research process, and particularly to the means of disseminating this knowledge.

Murray and Lawrence note the importance in practitioner-based enquiry (hereafter PBE) of “the acquisition of a capacity to step in and out of two roles: teacher as teacher, teacher as researcher”; or, applied to this context: musician as musician, and musician as researcher.¹⁶ They argue that practitioners involved in PBE must recurrently hold their routine and everyday practice as problematic. One must “problematize” one’s practice in order to view and communicate it as a researcher. This seems to indicate that there is an immediacy to the practitioner-as-practitioner and that this is problematized in PBE, or APaR, and gives birth to the “practitioner-

as-researcher” perspective. However, many musicians would argue that this problematization of the artistic process is in fact an intrinsic part of the process itself, and not solely brought about by an “outsider” perspective. Taking these positions into consideration, along with the emphasis on “tacit” types of knowledge discussed above, it would follow that there is no single object or method of enquiry in APaR. In fact, there would be three:

1. The artwork or performance itself in its changing manifestations throughout the developmental process, which is surveyed from the perspective of both the “practitioner” and the “researcher” (who may be united in a single individual);
2. A *pre-reflective* and tacit knowledge embedded in art-practice (and perhaps art-objects) that can be studied and revealed from the perspective of the *researcher*, but is only properly known—according to Osa, Cobussen, and others—from the perspective of the *practitioner*;
3. A *reflective* knowledge embedded in the process of preparation and rehearsal for a concert (akin to the process of research), which problematizes its own process and assumptions, but that also remains to a degree tacit unless somehow made explicit in the course of the research.

Presenting Research Results

When disseminating outcomes of APaR, Kurkela warns that we must keep the concepts of “result” and “application” separate because a “practical application of research findings may not be enough as a result of research work itself.”¹⁷ The “results” of research would then be able to adequately *represent* the findings and the method of the research, while the “application” has

a purpose outside of articulating the precise insights and methods of the research. However, artists will often argue that their performance *is* the result or outcome of their research, not merely the “application.”

There is a practical problem to be resolved here that has perhaps been underestimated. Unlike conference presentations, journal articles, and academic books, *most artistic outputs are not produced with the sole purpose of disseminating research* (i.e. as vehicles for research outcomes). Performances, paintings, and buildings often have different primary functions (as may the work by those engaged in medicine or law). Consequently, the research component may not be obvious *prima facie*. Two very *similar* sculptures or opera performances may have very *dissimilar* research components: one may constitute a major innovation in terms of form or format or (re)interpretation, while the other may conform to well-established conventions. Either or both may represent high-level and critically acclaimed art, and it is even possible that the work that represents more successful research represents a less successful work of art.

Hence, despite the suggestion that the true result of the research is the performance itself, a discursive component may still be necessary. There are two main reasons, or two parts of the same reason, argued in the literature for the importance of such a component. Firstly, that a verbal explanation is a better way for the tacit insights embedded in the art object and gained in the **artistic-research** processes to be “verified” and “appraised” by peers and the broader community.¹⁸ And secondly, there are many who regard an exegesis necessary as a *contextualizing* device.¹⁹ The words, in this case, “frame” the multiple objects of research and position it in the field.

However, a physical separation of thesis and performance poses a problem. Osa argues that words become “meaningless” when stripped of the contextual proximity to their intended musical object.²⁰ To date, surprisingly little attention has been paid in the literature to the important role new media technologies could play in the act of “framing” the research. For example, DVD-ROMs are a particularly good medium for this task as they have the ability to capture many of the tangential relationships and crosscurrents characteristic of artistic processes in a non-linear format. A powerful example of this is *Around a Rondo: The Art of Interpretation*, a project by Stephen Emmerson and Angela Turner investigating the pathway to a performance of Mozart K511.²¹ The resulting DVD-ROM contains two dozen videos, twenty additional audio recordings, interactive scores, facsimiles, analyses, images, and some 100,000 words of text in over 5,000 interconnected files. This enables the research product to trace the simultaneously rigorous and inevitably “messy” process of preparing for a piano recital. While new media formats are slowly becoming accepted in various creative arts doctorates around Australia and elsewhere, consistency and rigor in their application still has some way to go.

Conclusion

Considering the argument overall, the challenge is not so much to determine *whether* artistic practice represents research in the sense of “the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way,”²² but *which aspects* of it qualify and how. This refers both to aspects that would traditionally be considered “research” (such as selection and editing of scores, and library research on historical performance practices), and other aspects of rigorous development of new knowledge that may be of a more “tacit” nature, for instance through work in the studio (the performer’s lab!) and group rehearsals. Finally, and perhaps most contentiously, the challenge is to determine whether the final artistic

output “merely” represents an aesthetic product, or whether a performance itself can be regarded as a “text” that eloquently expresses the outcomes of research in this domain.

With the great diversity in forms and nature of artistic processes and products, there is no one-size-fits-all answer to these questions. The most sensible position may be to embrace the idea of a *continuum* between emphasis on aesthetic and research components in each artwork. To make this functional in contexts where assessments of research quantity and quality are at stake, it is helpful to ask the artist/researcher to formulate succinctly which aspect of the work constitute research and how, providing a focused and minimally confusing basis for peer review.²³ This does not entirely eliminate the artificial divide between beauty and brains, but at least acknowledges and operationalizes their relationship with sensitivity to the nature of artistic practice in contemporary academic environments.

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¹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, New York, Capricorn, 1934 (1958 ed.), p. 15.

² Henk Borgdorff & Marcel Cobussen, *The Dutch Journal of Music Theory 12, no. 1 (February 2007)* [Special issue: Practice-Based Research in Music], Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press.

³ Dennis Strand, *Research in the Creative Arts*, Canberra: Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1998, p. 31.

⁴ Henk Borgdorff, "The Sixty-five years ago, the influential philosopher Dewey asserted that "the odd notion that an artist does not think and a scientific enquirer does nothing else is the result of converting a difference of tempo and emphasis into a difference in kind" (Dewey, 1934, p. 15). Like much of Dewey's work, his views are strikingly relevant to contemporary discussions. Over the past two

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⁴ [Debate on Research in the Arts](#),” *Dutch Journal of Music Theory* 12, no. 1 (February 2007), p. 7.

⁵ Colin Lawson, “Practicing [Research](#) – Researching [Practice](#)”, *Dutch Journal of Music Theory* 12, no. 1 (February 2007), p. 64.

⁶ Arts and Humanities Research Council, *Research Funding Guide*, 2008. Australian Research Council, *Physical, [Chemical](#) and Earth [Sciences](#) and [Humanities](#) and [Creative Arts Clusters: ERA Submission Guidelines](#)*, 2009. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Glossary of [Statistical Terms](#)*, 2007.

⁷ Lawson 2007, p. 64.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁹ Bruce Brubaker, “Questions not [Answers](#): The [Performer](#) as [Researcher](#)”, *Dutch Journal of Music Theory* 12, no. 1 (February 2007), p. 67.

¹⁰ Susan Finley, “[Arts-Based Inquiry](#): Performing [Revolutionary Pedagogy](#),” in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research: 3rd Ed.*, ed. N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, California, Sage, 2005, p. 685.

¹¹ Borgdorff 2007, p. 6.

¹² Huib Schippers, “The [Marriage](#) of [Art](#) and [Academia](#): Challenges and [Opportunities](#) for [Music Research](#) in [Practice-Based Environments](#)”, *Dutch Journal of Music Theory* 12, no. 1 (February 2007), pp. 35–36.

¹³ Davidson 2004, p. 134.

¹⁴ Philip McIntyre, "Creative [Practice](#) as [Research](#): 'Testing [Out](#)' the [Systems Model](#) of [Creativity](#) through [Practitioner Based Enquiry](#)", *Speculation and Innovation* conference proceedings, 2006, p. 9.

¹⁵ Osa 2007; Borgdorff 2007; Marcel Cobussen, "The Trojan [Horse](#): Epistemological [Explorations Concerning Practice-Based Research](#)", *Dutch Journal of Music Theory* [12, no. 1 \(February 2007\)](#); and Jurrien Sligter, "Performer and [Research](#)", *Dutch Journal of Music Theory* [12, no. 1 \(February 2007\)](#).

¹⁶ Louis Murray & Brenda Lawrence, *Practitioner-[Based Enquiry](#)*, London, Falmer, 2000, pp. 10–11.

¹⁷ Kari Kurkela, "A [Case Study](#) of a [Practical Research Environment](#): Sibelius Academy, Helsinki", in Jane Davidson (Ed.), *The music practitioner*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004, p. 60.

¹⁸ McIntyre 2006, p. 8.

¹⁹ Graeme Sullivan, *Art [Practice](#) as [Research](#): Inquiry in the [Visual Arts](#)*, California, Sage, 2005, p. 92.

²⁰ Osa 2007, p. 54.

²¹ Stephen Emmerson & Angela Turner, *Around a Rondo*, Brisbane, QCRC, 2006.

²² Australian Research Council 2009, p. 9.

²³ Australian Research Council 2009, pp. 11–13.