Jane W. Davidson (ed.),
The Music Practitioner: Research for the Music Performer, Teacher and Listener

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This book includes 25 rather short chapters. Most of it is the result of the presentations, given by the authors during an international conference on ‘Research Relevant to Music Conservatoires and High Schools’, held at the Lucerne Conservatoire in Switzerland. Other authors were selected because of their excellence in practice-based research in music. In many chapters the reader still can feel that it was originally a text made for a speech, which makes the book rather easy to read; the ideas are explained in a very clear way.

In the introduction the editor stresses the fact that many of the contributors are ‘practioners’ in music. This is considered as a very important criterion for the value of the research projects as practice-based research: the researcher is an artist. On the other hand, the conference mentioned above was organised in cooperation with the ESCOM, the European Society for the Cognitive Sciences of Music, which explains the great importance given to music psychology in the research projects. A second important criterion for the value of the research projects mentioned is the relationship between the researcher and the musician.

The book is divided in five main sections. The first section examines practitioners’ uses of research to assist their practice, and the ways in which they might train to become systematic researchers. Part 2 explores research centred on perception and cognition, whereas Part 3 looks at the ways practitioners have explored their everyday work and what this reveals about the creative process. Part 4 focuses on how being a musician affects an individual’s sense of self and how he or she is perceived by others. The essays in Part 5 outline the new types of data that creative researchers can provide for analysis and interpretation. Because the starting point of the book is music psychology, it ends with a concluding chapter discussing the key question: what makes music affect us in the way it does?

Many of the research projects presented are situated in a restricted number of musical disciplines: singing and string instruments are favoured; further, music pedagogy and teaching problems such as student evaluation, comparing the behaviour of professionals and amateurs, and there is also much attention for the link between the study of music and the entrance in the professional field. Concerning the transition from student to professional, attention is given to the ‘great expectations’ of musicians in becoming a soloist and the hard reality to end on the fifth row in an orchestra, or the use of the voice and the power a voice needs to be heard in large halls, in opera singing with a great orchestra.

The book presents a lot of interesting figures, schemas and tables, realized by the intensive use of computer programs. Richard Parncutt, for example, considers the ‘Enrichment of Music Theory Pedagogy by Computer-based Repertoire Analysis and Perceptual-cognitive Theory’. He presents a good overview of the research development and possibilities, putting it in this way:

‘In recent decades, rapid developments in computer technology and psychological research methods have enabled advances in both perceptual theory relevant to music and the application of statistical procedures to the analysis of musical scores. Computers are routinely used to run psycho-acoustical experiments (including digital sound synthesis and analysis), to analyse large historical databases of musical scores, and (in both cases) to carry out statistical analyses. With relatively few exceptions, music theorists have been slow to take advantage of these developments...’ (p. 101-2).
Most of the authors show that they know the possibilities of the use of the computer in their research, and are aware of the large number of recently developed applications of analytical methods for music. Some of them, such as Stefanie Stadler Elmer and Franz-Josef Elmer in their contribution ‘A New Method for Analysing and Representing Singing’, go as far as to play the ‘Limitations of the Traditional Methods’ off against ‘The Advantage of Computers: The Elimination of the Musical Mind’ (p. 267-8). For them, the computer is a most reliable ‘analyst’ because of its objectivity – although the computer can only do what a human being asks him to do, with the input of the human being, and the ‘objectivity’ of the computer analysis therefore always will be influenced by the ‘subjectivity’ of the input. What Elmer & Elmer try to achieve is explained by them as follows:

‘But in our view, it is the shared cultural background, that is, the musical mind, that coins conceptual hearing and comprehension. Thus, we see the primary advantage of computer tools as being their function as an extern control on the basis of acoustical criteria to conceptualize singing. Apart from this, this tool permits researchers to achieve reliable and valid data without interference from the musical mind, since analysis no longer relies on hearing only’ (p. 269).

The opposite of objective computer-based analysis is the inquiry in the form of an open questionnaire, that is still used by some researchers. Strange enough, it is the editor of the book herself, Jane W. Davidson, who in the description of her project insists on this very subjective method, of course being aware of the fact that this stays ‘conventional’ research: ‘Making a Reflexive Turn: Practical Music-making Becomes Conventional Research’. Questions are asked to singers during the rehearsals of an opera production, such as ‘What was the best/worst about the rehearsal today?’, ‘If you could change two things about the production process, what would they be?’ For years, many theatre makers have been creating new performances in this way: starting from zero with discussions, actions, considerations, changes in the actions, new considerations, etc. To put it as a reflexive turn that makes that practice becomes research, is a very general consideration, because each musician has to consider and reflect on his playing or making music to improve it. This seems a very small base to ‘declare’ that practice becomes research, and the danger is that it opens the door to the ‘critical fiends’ of practice-based research and allows them to conclude too easily that ‘everything is research’ or ‘making music is of course research’. The aim of a research project must always be the answer to a research question; the aim of music making still is a music performance. To consider the making of a musical project as a research process seems too easy. I know that this is obvious to a lot of researchers, but it is necessary to convince all potential researchers, musicians who are interested in research but still are very suspicious about it, by putting things clearly. Only when during a musical project there are well defined research questions, one can talk about practice-based research. In fact, Jane W. Davidson asks the question ‘So What is Research?’ In her conclusion, she says:

‘For me, the process of documentation and then critical reflection re-enforces the research element of the rehearsal process. It cannot be denied that when we worked on that opera we were researching what the music and movement were for us, moment-by-moment’ (p. 146).

Most of the projects start from a very precise research question. Mostly this is a practical question, such as:

- How is the musician imagining a ‘shape’ of the piece he will perform, and on which elements is this grande ligne based (John Rink, ‘The State of Play in Performance Studies’)
- Perception of pitch (Andrzej Rakowski, ‘From Acoustics to Psychology: Pitch Strength of Sounds’)
- Perception of rhythm (George Papadelis and George Papanikolaou, ‘The Perceptual Space Between and Within Musical Rhythm Categories’)
- Problems of intonation (Peter Johnson, ‘Expressive Intonation’ in String Performance: Problems of Analysis and Interpretation)
• Problems for singers: memorization, power and quality of the voice in large halls (Jane Ginsborg, ‘Singing by Heart: Memorization Strategies for the Words and Music of Songs; Allan Vurma and Jaan Ross, ‘Priorities in Voice Training: Carrying Power or Tone Quality’)

That practice-based research in music is still in a starting phase is shown by the small number of cases studied in most of the research projects. Although the computer has unlimited possibilities, the statistical results have to be questioned. How can you get reliable information if your inquiry of a specific progression of two chords in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music is based on the very small number of 251 cases? The reader has to believe that the inquiry is ‘based on a representative sample of scores composed between 1700 and 1850 by J.S. Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven and Mendelssohn’ (Parncutt, referring to Eberlein’s study ‘Die Entstehung der tonalen Klangsyntax’, p. 107). And mentioning first ‘eighteenth- and nineteenth-century’, changing it a bit further in ‘composed between 1700 and 1850’, and reducing it a third time to five composers (Mendelssohn, the youngest of the group died in 1847!) makes a critical reader very sceptical about the value of the results of this inquiry.

Another aspect of the use of the computer for statistical analysis is the inevitable necessity of generalization and simplification. The omission of details, the exclusion of certain parameters in the analysis to allow a focus on only one item for inquiry is not without risk for possible deformations of the musical ‘reality’. What is the ‘correct’ pitch of a violin sound with small/great and little/much vibrato? In the above mentioned chapter by Elmer & Elmer, they write concerning a new method for the representation of singing:

‘For most research questions, the amount of information provided is too rich. Hence, the researcher has to choose a useful reduction of the information to a limited set of categories of pitch curves that is relevant to the research question’ (p. 269).

If ‘of pitch curves’ in the last sentence is omitted, the statement becomes very general and true for many research projects. However, what is more: it seems to me that there is a certain contradiction between the last quotation and what Elmer & Elmer stated before (see above, p. 267-8), when they discussed the advantage of the computer in the elimination of the musical mind of the researcher. Here they ask again that the researcher interferes, by choosing and reducing in such a way that the result is useful information.

A music researcher/practitioner can only be very careful, with or without statistic analysis, with or without computer. If the reader is aware of this, The Music Practitioner is a very interesting book, not only for the description of the outcomes and results of research projects, but also for the study of research methods and the actual state of development of the research possibilities.