

## Practising Research – Researching Practice

Debates about the practicalities and philosophy of performance as research are currently a common feature of the institutional landscape. With the UK Research Assessment Exercise 2008 fast approaching, the Royal College of Music in London has recently been reflecting upon its research strengths, which are central to its overall mission; rigorous inquiry and innovation are evidently of profound significance to all those who seek to practise the art of music at its highest level. But, as the recent history of performance practice in Britain clearly illustrates, candidness about the nature and degree of originality of one's own research projects can sometimes prove a challenge in its own right.

Debates about the practicalities and philosophy of performance as research have become a feature of the institutional landscape, and London's Royal College of Music aspires to play a leading role. Since its foundation in 1882 the RCM has nurtured many talented composers and performers; at the same time it has amassed a large number of musical treasures, for example the autographs of Mozart's C minor Piano Concerto K. 491, and works by Haydn and Schubert. English music is richly represented, by Sullivan, Parry, Elgar, Howells and many others. The Centre for Performance History at the RCM is indeed a remarkable repository of old instruments, documents and portraits that are renowned throughout the world. And as the Haydn bicentenary approaches in 2009, it remains a privilege to be custodians of Thomas Hardy's magnificent 1791 portrait in the RCM Museum, which has become such a familiar image.

With the UK Research Assessment Exercise 2008<sup>1</sup> fast approaching the RCM has recently been reflecting upon its research strengths, which are central to the overall mission; rigorous inquiry and innovation are clearly of profound significance to all those who seek to practise the art of music at its highest level. A rich heritage lies at the heart of the research environment at the RCM, bringing a responsibility constantly to support and maintain them, whilst enhancing their accessibility. The RCM aims further to enrich the practice of music by enhancing knowledge and understanding of the psychological and physiological processes involved in its production. There is support for research that deepens our understanding of how the art and craft of music is learned and taught at all levels, including the very highest. A further aim is to cross traditional genre boundaries within music or discipline boundaries between music and the wider cultural environment.

Performance of course lies at the heart of all this and is the subject of a great deal of research activity. For example, Aaron Williamson's recent contributory volume *Musical Excellence* (Oxford, 2004) addresses the management of physical demands, measuring performance enhancement, strategies for individual and ensemble practice, memory, sight-reading, physical fitness, neuro-feedback, and so on. But this article is not primarily concerned with research about practice that has been undertaken by non-practitioners.

1 The primary purpose of the Research Assessment Exercise 2008 is to produce quality profiles for each submission of research activity made by institutions. The four UK higher education funding bodies intend to use the quality profiles to determine their grant for research to each institution which they fund with effect from 2009-10.

Within any conservatoire exists the challenge of facilitating good communication between practitioners and scholars. Although the level of recent philosophical debate relating to practice as research has been extremely high, there remain challenges of communication across different musical boundaries and of exploring ways of enthusing the next generations of students. Thirty or so years ago, active practitioners were unusual on the staff of British universities, especially away from the organ loft or the chapel choir. Academic music still bore the hallmarks of the Victorian attempts at Oxbridge to provide a rigorous infrastructure that would bear comparison with the study of Latin and Greek. Students settled down to pastiche six-part harmony and five-part fugues, but Oxbridge's approach to musical history at that time seemed to the author sometimes decidedly uncritical, however stimulating the overall experience of studying there. 'Write brief notes on Stravinsky' would not have been out of place in an examination paper from the early 1970s. Perhaps this was after all an effective way of differentiating mere recitation of facts from a truly critical approach. But it seemed significant that the final-year recital element appeared to be at one remove from the main academic agenda.

Then as now, playing an instrument was often at the centre of music students' lives. At the beginning of an academic career, even as a performer in the 1970s, it was manifestly important to mention the word 'research' in all conversations with the Head of Department. Over the past generation, performance has become ever more part of university life in Britain, while conservatoires themselves have taken an increasingly broad view of what it is to be a musician.

The separateness and overlap of performance and scholarship has recently become more of a focus of attention. It can be a challenge for university students suddenly to give alert communicative recitals, having spent a great deal of their week listening to lectures or sitting at the computer. Nevertheless, the combination of performance and scholarship can turn out to be a delicious cocktail of mutual nourishment, even if it can seem a long professional journey from library to concert hall, and a long way back. Musicologists and performers each grapple with their own sets of conventions and preoccupations. Is delivering a conference paper in any sense a performance? The deadpan manner in which many papers are read remains a huge barrier for some sectors of an audience, even when the content turns out to be utterly worthwhile.

In any case, whether at conferences or in print, what actually constitutes research in music? It might be useful to reflect upon that issue before venturing into the difficult territory of performance as research. In the UK the RAE 2008 definition begins by stating that research is 'to be understood as original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding...' In everyday academic life, what is labelled research in print and at conferences certainly encompasses new insights and philosophical thought, but often also interprets existing facts, as well as including material that might easily find a place in a publication marketed as a 'textbook'. Accessibility is important to many scholars, and much published musicology certainly has elements of research and 'textbook' in varying proportions. Many University Presses these days have an eye for sales figures and the marketplace, just as much as academic significance, originality and rigour.

A definition that is more sympathetic in this context claims that research is 'an activity which pushes forward the frontiers of knowledge' and 'may involve new discoveries and/or reinterpreting and developing fresh insights from existing knowledge.'<sup>2</sup> An example of this kind of work is the author's essay 'Performing through History' commissioned

2 Higher Education Funding Council, Publication 00/37 (2000), Review of Research, paragraph 47.

by editor John Rink as the opening chapter of a guide to musical performance.<sup>3</sup> The resulting far-reaching survey relies on previous histories, but attempts to offer some useful interpretations, for example in relation to the long-term influence of church music across the centuries. Does it have sufficient originality to be rated as research? The author's *Cambridge Companion to the Orchestra* falls into a similar category.<sup>4</sup> Much published written material contains a mix of elements that can be confidently defined as research, together with scholarship and sometimes even a bald restatement of accepted facts.

It is important to be honest and candid in addressing these issues. As for economy with the truth, historical performance provides a rich vein of evidence. The Hanover Band may well have believed in 1982 that its pioneering recording of Beethoven orchestral music was 'in a form he would recognise', a claim that was very much of its time. Some five years later this orchestra recorded Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, energetically conducted with a baton by Roy Goodman. Yet it was surprising to find in the booklet notes that the Band was directed either from the violin or the keyboard, 'as is in keeping with the period and according to the repertoire'.<sup>5</sup> It was at the beginning of the 1990s that Clive Brown spoilt the party by declaring that the pedigree of many of the period instruments in the now prevalent Beethoven cycles were of doubtful authenticity. The commercially-motivated rush to push period-instrument performance ever more rapidly into the 19th century did not offer much hope for the consolidation of historical playing styles, and 'the public was in danger of being offered attractively packaged but unripe fruit'.<sup>6</sup> Personal experience identified Norrington's recording of Brahms's First Symphony as an example of Brown's theory, since it was made after just two performances in the concert hall. The lack of assimilation of Norrington's non-vibrato, heavily phrased approach was bound to inhibit the research and innovation inherent within the project, though his liner notes were fairly bullish.

Little work has been attempted on the compromises and short-cuts in an attempt to ensure reliability of period instruments in the studio and elsewhere. Trevor Pinnock, celebrating twenty years of The English Concert, wrote in 1993: 'Some of the publicists' myths about 'authenticity' have been exploded, but for us the simple fact remains the same: we like to use the tools designed for the job in hand. Instruments good enough for Bach should surely be good enough for us.'<sup>7</sup> Yet Pinnock, like most period conductors, showed virtually no interest in the instruments of his players, dreading only that unacceptable sounds would be emitted, especially from the winds. 'Played on original instruments', however, has remained a ubiquitous label on CD covers.

The 'improvement' of old instruments is largely undocumented, but has a long and distinguished history. In 1932 Robert Donington praised the harpsichords of his teacher Arnold Dolmetsch, remarking that the old instruments had 'certain limitations [and produce] a jangle, slight in the treble but audible in the bass.... The new instruments, which remedy these historical oversights, have proved both purer and more sustained than any previous harpsichord'.<sup>8</sup> More recently, in 1998, Robert Barclay observed that

3 C. Lawson, 'Performing through History', in: J. Rink (ed), *Musical Performance: A Guide to Understanding*, Cambridge 2002, pp. 3-16.

4 C. Lawson (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to the Orchestra*. Cambridge 2003.

5 Nimbus NI5149 (1988).

6 C. Brown, 'Historical Performance, Metronome Marks and Tempo in Beethoven Symphonies', in: *Early Music* 19 (1992), pp. 247-58.

7 Trevor Pinnock in *Early Music News*, No. 174 (May, 1993), p. 1.

8 Cited from L. Dreyfus, 'Early Music defended against its devotees: a theory of historical performance in the

today's natural trumpet is often equipped with so many anachronistic features as a sop to modern sensitivity that the result is '... a trumpet which resembles its baroque counterpart only superficially, whose playing technique is quite different, and whose timbre is far removed from that expected for Baroque music.'<sup>9</sup>

Within the author's collections of clarinets is an instrument on which a great deal of Mozart has been recorded, with Pinnock and others. It is a copy of a Viennese instrument from 1790. Or is it? The ivory has been replaced with plastic and some double holes have been introduced from another contemporary clarinet. Furthermore, the mouthpiece has been given a nudge in the direction of twentieth-century design, and it has been manufactured in ebonite, a material first shown at the Great Exhibition in 1851, some sixty years after Mozart's death. To justify all of this, one might argue that the eighteenth century did not have to grapple with air travel or the microphone. How do such compromises relate to the evidence that Anton Stadler's clarinet was described as having so soft and lovely a sound that no one with a heart could resist it?<sup>10</sup> Listening to this instrument, for example, in the introduction for wind sextet to an aria from Haydn's incidental music to the play *Alfred, King of the Anglo-Saxons*, a number of questions come to mind.<sup>11</sup> Is this first recording 'research' in any sense? Or – a better question – could there be any research elements; is there an intended, original contribution to knowledge? Of course the first clarinet part is at best collaborative, which raises another set of issues.

On the subject of being honest and candid within a very particular funding environment, the author's submissions for the 2001 UK Research Assessment Exercise contained one piece of 'practice-based' research. This comprised a CD of English Clarinet Concertos with the Parley of Instruments and Peter Holman.<sup>12</sup> The author's supporting statement read:

'the solo instrument, a copy of an original clarinet, was designed and manufactured for the project, musical texts and booklet notes having been researched and prepared by Colin Lawson in association with Peter Holman. Appropriate musical style was researched in detail and these premières learnt and delivered on historical equipment.'<sup>13</sup>

Actually, the instrument was a second-hand yet appropriate replica; its acquisition prefaced a great deal of work to address the extreme technical demands of the James Hook Concerto. It was ultimately recorded with an instinct for classical style that had been ingrained from other projects. That last ingredient, 'intimate familiarity', is very important. Within the project were some important research elements, not all of them supplied by the author as soloist. But the mere use of period instruments is just the beginning; one can of course be unstylish and reactive on any instrument, historical or not. A broader issue is the degree of technical skill and musical personality required to bring the project to fruition.

The history of performance practice is full of interesting tales about the relative positions of the art and craft of music-making. At the heart of it all lies the observation

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twentieth century', in: *Musical Quarterly* 49 (1983), pp. 305-6

9 Robert Barclay, 'A new species of instrument: the vented trumpet in context', in: *Historic Brass Journal* 10 (1998), p. 1.

10 J.F. Schink, *Litterarische Fragmente* (Graz, 1785), p. 286.

11 Chandos CHAN 0633 (1998), Collegium Musicum 90, conducted by Richard Hickox.

12 Hyperion CDA66896 (1997).

13 RAE 2001, RA5 submission, Goldsmiths College, University of London.

in Türk's *Klavierschule* of 1789 that some musical effects cannot be described; they must be *heard*.<sup>14</sup> This reflects the balance of hard historical evidence. In Cambridge in the 1950s 'early musicians' were thanked for the 'voluntary restraint in the display of their artistic capabilities' when recreating an atmosphere of appropriate equanimity and tranquillity.<sup>15</sup> This approach, applied here to the baroque and earlier periods, reflects the broader context articulated by the French organist Marcel Dupré a generation earlier. He argued that a performer's own personality must be absolutely subdued in favour of the composer.<sup>16</sup> This viewpoint was of course famously articulated by Stravinsky and caused an irate Schoenberg to exclaim in 1948: 'why do you play the piano when you could show the same skill on a typewriter?'<sup>17</sup> It was Laurence Dreyfus who in 1983 highlighted the text-book rules for scientific method with a strictly empirical programme to verify historical practices; these are magically transformed into the composer's intentions. 'It is an irony that the puritan has implanted the civilised ban on the uninhibited expression of feelings directly into the art form whose purpose it was, in the first place, to sublimate it.'<sup>18</sup> This is not to forget that in addressing the broader topic of music in society, there are circumstances in which the individual may be of limited significance in comparison with the status and position of the musical activity as a whole.

It is not difficult 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. It was heralded in a stimulating article by Neal Zaslaw that dismissed the notion of unbroken tradition as a myth, surveying instruments and playing techniques, interpretative problems, orchestral placement, concert rooms, standards and personnel.<sup>19</sup> The celebrated Mannheim orchestra was to be an inspiration, as remembered in Burney's characterisation as '...an army of generals, equally fit to plan a battle as to fight it.'<sup>20</sup> And Daniel Schubart had written of it in 1784, 'Its *forte* is like thunder, its crescendo like a great waterfall, its diminuendo the splashing of a crystalline river disappearing into the distance, its *piano* a breath of spring.'<sup>21</sup> How ironic then, that the critic Eric van Tassel, after praising Hogwood's orchestral colours, intonation and vivid recording, should have continued:

'... the minimalist approach, which even in the last symphonies consists simply in getting the details right, need not prevent our penetrating the surface of the music if we are willing to make some imaginative effort.... A performance not merely 'under-interpreted' but un-interpreted offers potentially an experience of unequalled authenticity ... If the notes are all you hear ... you have to become a participant: you are invited to complete a realization of the music that begins in the playing.'<sup>22</sup>

14 D.G. Türk, *Klavierschule* (Leipzig and Halle, 1789), transl. by R.H. Haggh as *School of Clavier Playing*, University of Nebraska 1982, p. 337.

15 H.S. Slosberg, M.V. Ullman and I.K. Whiting (eds.), *Erwin Bodky: A Memorial Tribute*, Waltham, Mass. 1965, p. 141.

16 Marcel Dupré, *Philosophie de la Musique*, Tournai, n.d., p. 43.

17 Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein, London 1975, pp. 320-1.

18 Dreyfus, 'Early Music Defended Against its Devotees', p. 300.

19 N. Zaslaw, 'Toward the Revival of the Classical Orchestra', in: *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 103 (1976-7), pp. 158-87

20 C. Burney, *The Present State of Music in Germany, the Netherlands and United Provinces*, London 1773, Vol. 1, p. 93.

21 C.F.D. Schubart, *Ideen zu einer Aesthetik der Tonkunst*, Vienna 1806, p. 130.

22 *Early Music* 12 (1984), p. 125.

There is surely an element of nonsense here, though it was subsequently useful of Malcolm Bilson to link lack of rehearsal in Mozart's day with the ability of jazz musicians to play sophisticated idioms upon first meeting or for Viennese musicians to have a common understanding of waltz idioms.

The relationship of character and technique is likely to vary across repertoires and projects. It is also bound to reflect the cultural contemporary context. It can be all too easy for today's students to overlook Schnabel's exquisite approach to Schubert because of the plethora of inaccuracies on his recordings. Each individual, whether an academic examiner or a member of the concert-going public, is likely to have a slightly different view of the value of technical accuracy in the context of performance as a whole. The most extreme imbalance ever heard by the author in a student performance was where a soprano sang musically and with exemplary articulation, but a semitone flat throughout. Performance conferences are of course a happy hunting ground for reflecting upon the art and craft of music-making. An academic colleague violinist some years ago attempted to recreate the playing of Brahms's violinist friend Joachim, known for his spontaneous and unpredictable approach to tempo; as one of Joachim's quartet partners, wrote, 'to play with him is damned difficult. Always different tempi, different accents.'<sup>23</sup> He was also described as 'warm and temperamental, with spontaneous impulses, trusting always to the inspiration of the moment, but controlled always by a wonderful sense of style, and an almost uneasy mastery of the art of rubato playing.'<sup>24</sup> What was heard at the conference was an indifferent standard of violin playing, with lip service to restrained use of vibrato and liberal use of portamento.

That Brahms project and other recent conference experiences brings the discussion back to the question of communication strategies across the musical divide. For many players, technical challenges will always loom large, together with the importance of keeping instruments, accessories and reeds or strings in peak condition. Aside from the actual results, there is little stimulus in this for those in the performer's immediate circle, whether friends, family or attendant musicologists. Sheer immersion in the business of performing seems essential for innovative results, whether research-based, professional practice or a combination of the two. And how does it feel in the concert hall? As harpsichordist Gustav Leonhardt observed:

'When one is a student one does things consciously, but when one is more experienced one does not play intellectually any more. One doesn't *think*; one *has thought* ... things are done automatically, depending on what you intend to say'.<sup>25</sup>

This article has made a plea for honesty in appraising our own work. It is clear that both written and practice-based work may contain just elements of research. In the UK, RAE definitions seek to be inclusive and reluctant to exclude anything, by incorporating 'the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances, artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights.' Within performance, embodiment of new knowledge, enhancement of understanding/appreciation, enrichment of intellectual/creative infrastructure are all criteria. But it is highly significant that there is no mention of 'making a creative contribution.' The Royal College of Music is one of many institutions

23 J. Levin in *Die Musik* (1926), quoted by Josef Szigeti in 1969 and cited by R. Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style*, Cambridge 1992, p. 218.

24 *Cobbett's Cyclopaedic Survey of Chamber Music*, Vol. II, pp. 38-9.

25 B.D. Sherman, *Inside Early Music*, New York 1997, p. 198.

that seek not merely to be led by such definitions, but to take a leading role in the debate and to influence the agenda.

In the current funding climate, research (however defined) is an overstretched term, certainly on conservatoire websites. It seems often not to be understood at all by practitioners, and the terminology is not always helpful. What is categorically *not* research? This is one of the most fundamental questions that need to be answered. A member of the RCM Directorate recently drafted a definition of ‘not practice-based research’ that read as follows: ‘recordings, broadcasts, etc., which, however fine as performances, show no systematic approach, whether in terms of repertoire chosen or interpretative strategies adopted.’ But many of us would be insulted to feel that any solo performances fell within such a definition.

The 2003 Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) criteria seem helpful only up to a point, insisting that there is a distinction on the one hand between creative activities and practice in themselves and research on the other. We can probably all agree on the desirability of dissemination strategies. But the debate within practical music is complex when it comes to identifying research issues, methods and their context; the research process, according to the AHRC, needs to be presented as a written route map or at any rate record. Leaving aside the practical challenge of identifying for RAE purposes activities which have not originally been conceived as research, what is an appropriate response to all this? Are there circumstances in which the music itself can articulate research process?

As Quantz remarked in 1752, music is nothing other than an artificial language.<sup>26</sup> It has often been said of Haydn’s London concerts in the 1790s that never were performers, audience and critics in closer communication. But since then, as Nikolaus Harnoncourt claimed in the 1980s, a real knowledge and understanding of musical language has been all but lost, a development he attributes largely to the Paris Conservatoire and its widespread influence.<sup>27</sup> In 2006 it would be futile to send emails in Ancient Greek to most of one’s friends and colleagues, or indeed attempt to contact them by video-telephone. If the movers and shakers outside music have no real understanding of our art, it may be pointless to argue that we can communicate wholly in sound in an age that prizes reason and argument. This was certainly the view of London University in 1999 when the author introduced a PhD in performance practice. A central problem is that instrumentalists communicate naturally in a variety of ways; some are eloquent, some prefer to grunt at each other rather than verbalise in rehearsal, sometimes with great results; some constantly demonstrate in lessons whilst others find it natural to articulate their inspiration. In earlier philosophical discussions in this arena a crucial question of performance as research has already been identified: how can one convey intuitive decisions to the cultural community?

The author was recently invited by an Australian university to examine a portfolio of CDs by a horn-playing candidate for a higher doctorate. The submission was accompanied by a single paragraph of text, yet at the end of the exercise his research processes could largely be identified. In this particular and unusual case the examiner arguably had sufficient ‘knowledge and taste’, to cite out of context Joseph Haydn’s celebrated expression. Words really are inadequate to communicate some aspects of art, especially those tiny differences in emphases and timing that distinguish a great performance from a merely

26 J.J. Quantz, *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversière zu spielen* (Berlin 1752), trans. by E.R. Reilly as *On Playing the Flute*, London and New York 1966, p. 120.

27 N. Harnoncourt, ‘Music in our Lives’, in: *Baroque Music Today: Music as Speech*, Portland, Or. 1988, pp. 11-13.

good one. Can process articulated wholly in sound be understood by those with sufficient knowledge and taste? At a recent conference on the art of record production one scholar went so far as to plead that all compact discs should be accompanied by their discarded studio material, after the model of some DVDs. But that is surely to misunderstand the market, to say the very least.

Finally, is there anything to be learned from current documentation of musical assessment? We probably all agree that it is no longer enough to scream from the examiners' table, 'You were wonderful, darling!' But what is the alternative? The threshold requirements for a performing diploma from a London Examination Board list as criteria for success musical awareness, quality of sound, accuracy, communication and control of instrument – a mixture of art and craft, in other words.

Marks for the communication element are to be awarded as follows:

- 90% high honours: confident and effective capacity to engage an audience
- 80% honours: recognisable capacity to engage an audience
- 65% merit: recognisable but inconsistent evidence of some capacity to engage an audience
- 50% pass: some capacity to engage an audience
- below 50% fail: limited capacity to engage an audience

Does this actually signify anything meaningful, and what has happened to the wow factor in all of this? Words really are very limited in describing any of the senses, whether sound, vision, taste, smell or touch. Written criteria will sometimes do little more than keep the quality assurance agencies happy for a while. In research, as in assessment, we must constantly touch base with our own beliefs, reflect upon our relationship with non-musical paymasters and the recipients of our messages, and communicate inspirationally to our performing colleagues and students. Like most aspects of performance practice this is bound to make for a series of delicious challenges.