

'From Body to Body, on the Hither Side of Words or Concepts'

Transferability in, and following, an Artistic Experiment in Practice-as-Research

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Introduction

Henk Borgdorff has recently indicated the following question as pivotal to a consideration of artistic research in relation to more traditional modes of research practice: 'Is it possible to achieve a linguistic-conceptual articulation of the embedded, enacted and embodied content of artistic research?' (2011 p. 60). In my view, as expressed in this article, the answer is in the negative, although discourse can be utilised to indicate that deficiency and point toward where one should be directing one's attention in order to engage with that artistic research content, which operates in another mode of communication to words and concepts. For Borgdorff, this other mode of communication invites the act of thought, of 'unfinished reflection' (2011 p. 61). However, I prefer to argue for an engagement by senses other than that involved in cognition: expert sensing processes at the level of *feelings*, beyond discourse and the discursivisable.

This article is concerned with the question of transferability, in terms of the dissemination of the outcomes of practice-as-research in the wider music-research community, and also with regard to the project-to-project trajectories of such research undertakings. Specifically, it is focused on my recent doctoral enquiry in jazz, investigating the emergence and elaboration of a method of experimenting with the performance practice of the standard repertoire, with a series of different bands.

In setting up each new project in my practice-as-research, I repeatedly faced the problem of how best to convey, to each of the musicians concerned, details I considered to be most pertinent about the work already undertaken, while permitting enough flexibility to enable the further elaboration of the experimental method at the centre of the research trajectory itself. In this way, the issue of discursivising research undertaken in music-making became a central, and ongoing, research question in my doctoral enquiry,

rather than a problem of thetic presentation arising only in the final, writing-up stage of the PhD.

Drawing on the work of Merleau-Ponty (2002), Bourdieu (1977), and Knorr Cetina (2001), I argue that there is an ineffability inherent in all art practice that is resistant to discursivisation. I provide audio excerpts from performances involving my development of a means of encouraging my fellow musicians to enter into the experiment (rather than being, simply, interpreters of a fixed method of practising jazz standards) – my experimental *modus operandi* of communicating beyond the level of the verbal or the conceptual. I argue that that communication took place on the level of an expert *sensing* of the potential future trajectories of the developing method (on both my behalf, and that of my fellow practitioners), with implications for our understandings of music-making and music-research in terms of knowledge practices (an issue of the epistemic over the epistemological), and the discursive practices of the musicologist (*musicologist*) as opposed to the expert musician-as-researcher. To conclude, I speculate as to the appropriateness of the mode of conveyance (and elaboration) of the performance-practice method as a means of research dissemination in the research context, more generally.

Experimenting with the performance practice of jazz standards: an overview of my doctoral research

I am a professional musician, and have worked in jazz as a pianist, bandleader, and composer since the late 1990s. Since 2009, I have also been undertaking doctoral research in, and into, performance practice of the standard repertoire in jazz. In the course of that research, I have initiated a series of practice-as-research projects, beginning in 2010 and leading up to earlier this year. Each project involved a different instrumental line-up, beginning with a solo piano performance, followed by a piano and drums duo, a sax/piano/bass/drums quartet, and, most recently, a trio of voice, bass clarinet, and piano (only the first two projects are featured in this article).

My practice-as-research began with a performance solution that emerged during the solo piano concert. I had been giving a performance at a bookstore in Paris, on the venue's in-house piano. The instrument wasn't in particularly good condition, and its tuning was deficient in regard to the generic concert-standard equal temperament one finds, and expects, at more conventional performance venues. However, I was fascinated by the sonic particularities of the bookstore's upright, and found myself employing a tremolo technique, in combination with an unbroken use of the damper pedal, in order to 'sound-out' its microtonal inflections.

I began the performance with Vernon Duke's *Autumn in New York*, a piece originally published in 1934, and which has been part of the standard repertoire in jazz since at

least the 1950s. Until the concert in Paris, my performance practice of *Autumn in New York* had never involved the extended use of tremolo and sustain, and the use of those techniques was initially triggered by my keenness to explore the sonic properties of the bookstore's piano.

An excerpt from the beginning of the piece is available online:

<http://soundcloud.com/stevetromans/autumn-in-new-york-paris>

Outside of being a response to the particularities of a given instrument, in a given venue, for a specific event of performance, I found that my use of tremolo in that one jazz standard suggested an extended artistic-research project. The tremolo technique had enabled me to transcend, effectively, the boundaries of a more fixed temporality, as originally indicated by the bar lines and formal structure printed in the lead sheet of *Autumn in New York*. A certain rubato is generally accepted in performance practice of ballad-tempo standards, but the tremolo effect in Paris resulted, in my estimation, in a more profound change to the temporality of Vernon Duke's piece. It is well known that one of the functions of tremolo, in music-making, is to convey a sense of timelessness. That timeless quality (clearly audible in the extract above), imposed on a piece that I had previously tended to play with a fairly regular tempo, gave me the idea to pursue a research project investigating the temporal complexities of our experiences of music-making in performance. That project would be grounded in experiments into the performance practice of jazz standards – and this leads me to the research problems expressly pertinent to the concerns of this article.

Firstly, I wondered how that investigation into temporal complexity could be elaborated in the performance of jazz standards – elaborated, that is, without the mere duplication of the use of a tremolo technique in a host of other ballad-tempo pieces. In other words, I was looking for other music-making techniques that would 'free-up' the more rigid aspects of a given standard's performance practice – but in line with the initial practice-as-research experiment in Paris, where that elaboration of the experimental 'method' would emerge in the process of performance itself, rather than being pre-determined. Secondly, I was faced with the problem of how best to convey the central topic of my research enquiry – i.e., investigating temporality and temporal experience through expert music-making – to my fellow musicians, without risking limiting their creativity and the possibility of the method being elaborated in a direction I had not considered in advance. This is a matter to which I return in the second section of the article.

The second practice-as-research investigation emerged during a studio session by myself and the drummer J. J. Wheeler in the summer of 2011. In my experience of his play-

ing, Wheeler tends to use rhythm metrically – i.e., in metre, as opposed to a free-tempo, free-jazz approach to performance practice on the drumkit. This presented something of a challenge, in terms of how to go about staging the experiment in temporality. I decided not to tell Wheeler about the solo piano concert in Paris, and the emergence of the tremolo method of transcending fixed temporality in *Autumn in New York*. I was mindful of a desire to find a means of elaborating the method through the specificities of my fellow performers' playing styles, and didn't want to force a change in Wheeler's performing attitude – at least, that is, a change that didn't emerge from the music-making experiment itself.

The fourth piece we recorded during the session was John Klenner's and Sam Lewis's *Just Friends*, originally published in 1931, and whose place in the jazz canon is owed, in no small part, to Charlie Parker's rendering in the 1949 sessions for his album *Charlie Parker with Strings*. The duo performance of *Just Friends* marked the point at which the desired elaboration of the experimental method took place. Without any discussion beforehand, or plan on my part as to how to play the piece, I initiated the music-making with a series of asymmetrical ostinati – utilising the melody of Klenner and Lewis's piece, but jettisoning the notated rhythms and much of the indicated harmony. I began the performance with the last eight bars of the notated part, moving through the melodic material gradually, and with no set metre. The temporal grounding was, instead, a crotchet pulse that continued throughout the performance. After a period of around a half minute, Wheeler responded to my opening phrases, reciprocating with his own variant of asymmetrical ostinati, articulated on the snare, bass drum, and hi-hat.

An excerpt from the beginning of the piece is available online:
<http://soundcloud.com/stevetromans/just-friends-2m-excerpt>

Beyond words: conveying research trajectories, and outcomes, without the explicit need for the discursive

The ostinato technique, articulated differently, though simultaneously and with a steady crotchet pulse by both myself and Wheeler, had initiated what I retrospectively recognised as an instance of elaboration of the method of investigating temporality in experience of music-making. However, to reiterate an important point: at no time in the preparations for the recording session (and practice-as-research experiment), or during the session itself, did myself and Wheeler engage in any kind of verbal discourse as to the desired elaboration of the method of temporal investigation in music-making – or, indeed, any mention of there being a method in the process of being elaborated. This fact leads to some interesting observations, concerning the use of verbal discourse in

music research – specifically, in the ongoing series of practice-as-research projects, but also, more generally, with regard to the dissemination of research in the research community at large.

As the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty argued in the mid-twentieth century: 'We think that language is more transparent than music because [...] in our definitions we are content, like the dictionary, to explain meanings in terms of each other' (Merleau-Ponty 2002 p. 218-219). On the subject of musical meaning, he wrote: 'In music, on the other hand, no vocabulary is presupposed, the meaning appears as linked to the empirical presence of the sounds', adding that language is 'uncommunicative of anything other than itself, that its meaning is inseparable from it' (Merleau-Ponty 2002 p. 218-219). Merleau-Ponty's research concerns, despite their mid-twentieth-century historical and philosophical grounding, have major implications for our notions of how best to transfer artistic research in the medium of music-making. In what follows, I elucidate the pertinent aspects of the quotes just given.

Plainly, the modes of communication of music performance and verbal discourse are not equivalent. After all, in contrast to the conceptual models of the wide-ranging paradigm of the so-called linguistic turn, or the textual turn, which dominated academia in the twentieth century (of which the concept of music-as-language, or there being such a thing as a musical text that could be 'read' and analysed in terms of a written one, are exemplar), music-making in events of performance involves a complex set of multi-dimensional, and multi-sensorial, processes. Whereas verbal discourse is couched in terms of a grammar, and relies on a shared foreknowledge of conventions particular to a given discursive context, the creative processes of expert musicians in the act of making involves other means of communication.

The performance theorist Susan Melrose recently summed up this conflicting disparity between music practice and research models as follows: 'Expert performance-making laughs in the face of those who might still want to claim that it is "structured like a language"' (Melrose 2007). Music-makers in events of performance, such as improvisers, in the case of my doctoral research, are skilled at existing in the domain of the half-sensed, or the felt. It is important that, in our research enquiries in (and into) creative processes in music-making, we consider these sensorial faculties as constituting dominant modes of musical operation. Clearly, there is a disciplinary rigour, and music-research validity, to expert performers' processes of making in the moment – after all, such musicians are not simply interpreters of extant musical works, as older research models have tended to assume (i.e., composer as creator, performer as interpreter), they are, rather, expertly involved in the creation of new music in the world.

This creative aspect of expert improvising practice in performance brings in the question of the knowledge particular to such music practice, and of how that knowledge might stand up in relation to received ideas of knowledge about music, in the research community more generally. Given its predominance in music research of the last hundred years or so, the disciplinary field of musicology looms large in relation to the research work undertaken by expert music-makers. The etymological significance of the term 'musicology' differentiates a set of practices to those of the expert practitioner-as-researcher – a differentiation I am at odds to stress here. It is my assertion that the various activities of musicologists are grounded, more or less explicitly, in the *logos* – the realm of the word and of the rational and the logical. In distinction, I argue that expert musicians are, and always have been, involved in disseminating their research through music-making *itself*. This assertion has implications for the question of what constitutes 'knowledge' in research outputs.

Two schools of thought offer different conceptualisations of what constitutes knowledge. The better-known school is centred on the *epistemological*. As with the '-ology' in musicology, epistemology is concerned with the logicalisation of its object of study – in the case of epistemology, knowledge. In other words, it is focused on the ideal that our conception of what constitutes knowledge can be rationalised, and categorised, in the registers of the discursive. It is, of course, true that the written component of this article is epistemological in nature, as are all discursive outputs. However – and this is an important point – the music-making aspect is not. The school of thought most pertinent to the knowledge in evidence in music-making in events of performance (and other art-making activities like it) is that of the *epistemic*. The term 'epistemic' refers to the *practice* of knowledge – knowledge practices in action – rather than the logicalising of knowledge in words and concepts.

The practice theorist Karin Knorr Cetina has recently used a notion of epistemics in her investigations into expert research practice. Knorr Cetina has written of epistemic practice that it occurs 'when problems arise, or when work is new to a researcher', in situations involving the construction of what she has called 'ill-defined, problematic, nonroutine and perhaps innovative' (Knorr Cetina 2001 p. 179f). To word my practice-as-research in Knorr Cetina's terms, then, I would argue that the sensorially-grounded elaboration of the method of experimenting with performance practice of jazz standards emerged in a 'nonroutine' situation. Further, that that elaboration was born from a given 'problem' (the problem of how to elaborate the method further) that was necessarily (not negatively) 'ill-defined', since it was not couched in discursive terms. Finally, with regard to the criteria for successful doctoral research, I would hope that the elaboration could be considered 'innovative'. Knorr Cetina's research has further implications, in line with

the problem of dissemination of research outcomes, and I will turn to that very matter in what follows.

In her definition of what she has named 'objects of knowledge' particular to the pursuit of epistemic practices, Knorr Cetina argued for 'a lack of completeness of being' (ibid. p. 181). Objects of knowledge, she continued, 'appear to have the capacity to unfold indefinitely'; they 'are always in the process of being materially defined [...] continually acquir[ing] new properties and chang[ing] the one they have' (ibid.) – 'frequently exist[ing] simultaneously in a variety of forms' (ibid. p. 182), and being non-identical 'with themselves' (ibid. p. 184). In terms of finding a potential solution to the issue of how best to disseminate research outcomes in artistic research, Knorr Cetina's notion that, through the pursuit of epistemics (or knowledge-centred practices), 'current practice often gets constructively extended into new strands' (ibid. p. 183) is certainly indicative. But what would such constructive extension consist of, and in? What would it sound like, feel like?

A pointer in this direction can, in my view, be found in Bourdieu's critique from the early 1970s of the (then) dominant research methods and modes of documentation in structuralist anthropology. Bourdieu was interested in researching the nature and theory of the practical, and argued, in his 1972 *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, that there is an *ineffability* inherent in all art practice that is resistant to discursivisation. As Bourdieu wrote, that ineffable quality 'communicates [...] on the hither side of words or concepts' (Bourdieu 1977 p. 1-2). This is the important implication for the communication of artistic-research outcomes. In my experiments in elaborating the performance practice of a series of jazz standards, I pursued a method of communicating with my fellow performers that, plainly, operated on the 'hither side' of words and concepts. The communication of research imperatives took place in the act of music-making itself, rather than in word or concept, and I finish with the notion that such musically-grounded communication could very well illuminate the issue of artistic-research dissemination.

If, as Knorr Cetina would have us accept, the important thing about epistemic research is to constructively extend that research into new practices, then the key to disseminating artistic research lies in the explicit creation of new artistic practice – either carried out in public by the expert, epistemically-motivated artist-researcher him- or herself, or in the encouraging of others to become involved in following through the implications of that research. In this way, the essential character of expert artistic practice *per se* can be productively and creatively utilised in the knowledge-practical grounding of epistemic pursuits in artistic research. I do not accept, as recently put forward by Biggs and Büchler, the idea that practitioners and practitioner-researchers represent two different categories of community (2011 p. 98). This type of demarcation I find to be detrimental

to the former category, the practitioner, who becomes negatively defined as practically-grounded without a research-active component. Instead, I would press for a recognition of expert artistic practice as operating in epistemic research terms. And further, that such a fusing of our understandings of artistic research and expert art-making practice could be a useful equation in our ongoing exploration and definition of artistic research and the role of the artist in the disciplinary field of research.

However, the remaining issue is one of disciplinary specificity with regard to artistic research enquiry and output. If art-making in the expert register is to be accepted as pursuing epistemic research, who, other than fellow experts in the field, are capable of engaging with it? Despite the promise of discourse to make knowledge available to the reader, the lack of equivalence between the modes of language and art-practice means that what is presented is not adequate to that which it assumes to be capable of discursivising. If the epistemic enquiry of expert practice-as-research is to be communicated, on the hither side of words or concepts, as the title of this article and the quote from Bourdieu would have it, I speculate that that communication can occur most effectively between those with similar art-making expertise. To my mind, this disciplinary grounding is key to such wordless, conceptless dissemination of research. Such a dissemination is realised through the transfer of one artist's research to another's – ineffable, yet communicative in the registers of a shared access to, and capability in, the practices pertinent to a given disciplinary field.

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Abstract

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This article is concerned with the question of transferability, in terms of the dissemination of the outcomes of practice-as-research in the wider music-research community, and also with regard to the project-to-project trajectories of such research undertakings. Specifically, it is focused on my recent doctoral enquiry in jazz, investigating the emergence and elaboration of a method of experimenting with the performance practice of the standard repertoire.

Drawing on the work of Merleau-Ponty (2002), Bourdieu (1977), and Knorr Cetina (2001), I argue that there is an ineffability inherent in all art practice that is resistant to discursivisation. I demonstrate aspects of my development of a means of encouraging my fellow musicians to enter into the experiment (rather than being, simply, interpreters of a fixed method of practising jazz standards). I argue that such encouragement took place on the level of an expert *sensing* of the potential future trajectories of the developing method, with implications for our understandings of expert music-making and music-research in terms of knowledge practices. To conclude, I speculate as to the usefulness of the mode of conveyance (and elaboration) of the performance-practice method as a means of research dissemination in the music-research context, more generally.

Keywords

Practice-as-research, research dissemination, transferability of research outcomes.

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