

Performance and Context: A Research in Music Performance Platform

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Introduction

THE MAIN GOAL OF THIS TEXT is to discuss new ways of approaching and presenting research on musical performance. Through creative and systematic musical activity, and departing from the application or incorporation of new knowledge (for example in terms of interpretation, historically informed performative practice or technical innovation), it is intended to stimulate not only musical performance, but also theoretical, aesthetic and philosophical debate on artistic practice, thus integrating procedural and declarative knowledge (TULVING 1985; ROEDIGER 1990; SCHACTER 1987; COOK 2014). As Nicholas Cook points out, if ‘performers’ choices constitute an essential dimension of the creativity of musical culture’, it is important to ask why ‘performance has always been the elephant in the musicological room’ (COOK 2014, 23).

Even though it is fundamental to reflect on the methods and procedures that frame the conception, design and development of artistic research projects, it is also critical to discuss and foster new ideas on possible outcomes of research on performance.

This discussion culminated in the publication of an online platform dedicated to housing musical performance artistic projects, including video recordings of performances and written essays on particular historical, aesthetical, technical, philosophical and procedural aspects of the musical presentations.¹

¹ <<https://perf.esml.ipl.pt>>.

Theoretical Discussion

In this project musical performance was the starting point for the choice of and reflection on the theoretical issues to be discussed. Contemporary artistic practice plays a fundamental role shaping the context in which research is relevant, and musical practice (interpreting, composing) is also a constituent part of the methods and means from which new perspectives and products emerge. Research results are preferably new practices, approaches, and/or artistic products.

Contrary to purely theoretical approaches to the study of music, in this project reflection and contextualization are intended to accompany the presentation of an artistic product, and should serve to elucidate the results of the artistic process.

Although it has been widely discussed and developed since the 1990s, the concept of artistic practice as research has undergone a relatively recent boost. In fact, a few decades ago, music practice and creation were separate from scientific research, and were not considered to deserve to be labelled as ‘true research’. Several authors, such as BORGDORFF (2006; 2008; 2012), indicate that there has been a recent emancipation of artistic research from the scientific paradigm that establishes the problematic notion of scientific objectivity as a final goal in research. According to the author: ‘We knew we would face tough resistance, and although that may dampen our spirits from time to time, it is a challenge we can meet.’ (BORGDORFF 2006, 20)

According to the ‘Research Assessment Exercise 5’ (2001): ‘[...] performance will be accepted as research where it applies or embodies new or improved knowledge or insights, for instance in terms of interpretation, historical performance practice, or technical innovation. Performance is understood to include conducting [...] as well as instrumental or vocal execution [...]’ (RAE 2001).

In terms of practice and musical creation, four levels of reflective depth can be identified. The first has to do with the act of performing, improvising and creating music. The second level concerns the collection of contextual information to inform the creation and practice of music. This is informed musical practice. The third comprises reflection on musical practice and the contextual information collected, in order to deepen perspective on and understanding of the creative and artistic phenomenon. This is research for the art. The last step consists of the process of framing musical practice and creation, contextual information and reflection and discussion within a rigorous methodological system. This last stage can be named research through art (FRAYLING 1993-4; CRISPIN 2016).

It is therefore crucial to ask questions about artistic experience, in order to deepen knowledge about music and performance, as well as the main theoretical and contextual assumptions that frame them.

On account of current requirements for research excellence in academia, artistic research projects, especially those developed in higher education environments, are too often restricted to

traditional research structures and output formats that emphasize the authoritative role of texts as the main vehicle for validating ‘true academic research’. On the other hand, and in accordance with our experience of teaching and advising research in an institution where performance is the main focus, performers see conventional music research as ‘artificial’ and too formal. The difficulties in bringing together articulately declarative and procedural knowledge is manifest in the problems that arise from the discussion of musical performance as a meaningful creating process in real time and, at the same time, from the fact that musicology has been a discipline primarily concerned with text (literature or written music), thus separating it from the act of performing. According to Nicholas Cook, ‘texts do not *determine* performances or the meanings they embody, they create a potential for the generation of certain meanings or kinds of meaning’ (COOK 2014, 7).

It is thus crucial not only to ‘create a broader musicology in which writing and playing are both understood as integral dimensions of music’s existence and meaning’ (COOK 2014, 7), but also to develop ways of reflecting this principle in the way research in music is presented.

The Project and Its Output Format

This research project has as its main goal the performance, audiovisual recording and academic reflection on artistic objects in the field of musical performance, through the articulation of procedural and declarative systematic knowledge.

The research output includes the design and construction of an online platform that integrates, in a user-friendly navigation experience, video recordings of music performances from diverse aesthetic realms with essays on the context and processes that frame the performances, in order to deepen discussion on collection, archiving, interpretation, explanation and research methods, as well as the motivations, inspirations, and discussions that underlie the process of formulating research questions, from the conception to the implementation, publication, and evaluation of an artistic object. The essays are varied in terms of construction and format: some adopt the more traditional configuration of a scientific paper, while others have a more descriptive and even phenomenological nature. One of the performances is accompanied not by a text, but by an interview.

By means of this online platform it is intended to illustrate the natural and essential connection between practice and theoretical discussion in music, in order to deepen fully the understanding of historical, aesthetical, technical, philosophical and procedural implications of music making and academic writing on music.

The Performances and (Con)texts

The contents of the online platform in one sense can be looked at as a collection of different and sometimes contrasting views on music, either from a performative or theoretical point of view. However, it is the complementary character of these heterogeneous approaches which in our opinion contribute to fostering the development of new dialogues and perspectives in music studies.

Pedro Couto Soares performs twentieth-century pieces on a Baroque instrument—the recorder—whose construction did not follow the transformations of musical language. While on the one hand this is an obvious but assumed anachronism, on the other, it can be looked upon as the logical continuation of a process of rediscovery and reinvention of the capabilities of an ‘obsolete instrument’. Couto Soares selected two works dedicated to Frans Brüggen, *Gesti* (1966) by Luciano Berio and *Fragmentos* (1968) by Makoto Shinohara, and a 1994 piece, *Ausser Atem* by Moritz Eggert. Pedro Couto Soares describes the processes of addressing the challenges posed by these pieces, which, though the deconstruction of technique acquired over the years, allowed the performer to review and regain a technique based on the principle of least effort and a more accurate proprioceptive awareness. Performing this repertoire made possible testing, refining and developing conventional and more innovative study techniques, as well as highlighting the dialectic and interchange between analysis and integration and between conscious and automatic control, in which the attribution of musical meaning often contributed decisively to the solution of mere psycho-motor problems.

Ana Telles interprets Christopher Bochmann’s *Essay VIII*, composed in 1991. According to Telles, this piece reveals the composer’s permeability to a neoclassical sensitivity, probably stimulated by the contact with Nadia Boulanger in his formative period, that has been sustained over the years and is punctually manifested both in the use of techniques, genres and forms of the past, but also more in a constant search for balance and proportionality, transversal to all his works. As Ana Telles demonstrates, the significant consistency of Bochmann’s ‘instrumental idiom’ results largely from the synthesis of elements previously explored through the composition of *Essay VIII*.

Iñaki Sandoval discusses and develops the process of improvising in the context of a solo setting, exploring musically and in terms of artistic and philosophical reflection the circumstances behind the improvisational process of solo piano performance.

Paulo Pacheco, over the course of several months, directed a chamber music ensemble—violin, cello and piano—that worked on the second movement of Władysław Żeleński’s Trio op. 22 (‘Mortuos plango (Andante sostenuto)’) and the first and second movements of Lili Boulanger’s Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano (‘D’un soir triste’ and ‘D’un matin de printemps’). The pieces performed by the ensemble were chosen according to the titles given by the composers. During the group rehearsal process, these titles served as the motto for the exploration of the pieces as an

interpretative guide, leading to a common performance ‘narrative’. In the context of instrumental chamber music, the absence of a text and/or textual inscription places the interpreter in a territory of significant complexity in terms of ‘reading’ the work and, consequently, the perception of the acoustic and aesthetic outcome.

Tiago Mourão explores the main features of Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen’s (NHOP) three-finger pizzicato technique, and how its practise can contribute to musical performance on the electric and the upright bass in jazz. Through this innovative technique, NHOP contributed to highlighting the role of the double bassist in jazz, namely in terms of establishing a standard for sound, accompaniment and improvisation. Mourão interprets NHOP’s solo transcriptions, as well as a repertoire in which it is appropriate to improvise using the three-finger technique.

Rui Vieira, in addition to analysing the role of the countertenor voice in contemporary music specifically in Portugal, also looked at its path from the Middle Ages to the twenty-first century. Only a few contemporary composers write for this voice, and in Portugal this repertoire is practically non-existent. Given this fact, and starting from a collaboration with composers Pedro Finisterra, Miguel Diniz and Diogo da Costa Ferreira, and the librettist Nuno Cruz, Rui Vieira performed the original piece *Multidão: Monodrama para contratenor e ensemble instrumental* for singer and instrumental ensemble. In addition to the compositional work, production and artistic interpretation, Rui Vieira also critically examined the difficulties faced during the creation process, focusing the relations between performer, composer and librettist.

Acknowledging the increasing importance of the voice’s role in the context of improvised instrumental music, Sónia Oliveira addresses the phenomenon of the use of voice as an instrument—without the use of text—in the context of jazz. Combining contemporary composition and singing, Oliveira deepens the discussion of topics such as the development of specific processes of communication of musical ideas and interpretation of music without lyrics, or the problem of how singers think and act when improvising, combining intuition with theoretical and technical knowledge.

Javier Plaza performs *Kinderszenen* op.15, one of the most celebrated piano cycles by Robert Schumann. Being important in the context of romantic piano music, and considered one of Schumann’s most representative compositions—this piano cycle has stimulated many composers to write music inspired by children, including Bizet, Debussy, Ravel, Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Mussorgsky, Bartók, Granados and Mompou—it becomes crucial to explore how this work reflects a particular combination of music and poetry. Javier Plaza examines how the composer provides an adult conception of childhood memories which call for a meticulous musical approach in performing them.

Finally, Bárbara Costa interprets Paul Hindemith's Sonata no. 3 and Beethoven's Sonata no. 32, op. 111, focusing on various aspects related not only to the composers and their works, but also their historical and social contexts, in order to understand better the aesthetic principles implied in the compositional process that inform the performance. Starting from historical inquiry, Costa explores the impact of events, discoveries, philosophical and political thinking, and technological development on the way of life of society. Similarly, understanding the artistic currents of painting and literature, especially in the twentieth century, was crucial in shaping the recorded performance.

Conclusion

Studying music as a performative art implies looking at it as a process of creating meaning in performance. This research project aims at narrowing the gap between 'locating meaning in the authored text' (COOK 2014) and locating meaning in performance. As Cook points out, 'the bias towards written language and against the performative' in musicology reflects a certain authority of writing over playing. Thus, it is crucial to ask how and why different meanings are created in diverse performative settings and occasions, what are the relationships between performers, audiences, texts and traditions, and how these are created and maintained.

We hope to contribute not only in bringing together explicit and tacit knowledge in the study of music, but also to stimulate a search for new methods, and the creation and development of new ways of presenting music performance research.

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