

# Rehearsal Analysis of Finnissy's Third String Quartet

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## Introduction

This research (funded by a British Academy research grant) is a development of previous work Bayley has undertaken with Michael Finnissy and the Kreutzer Quartet relating to the composition, rehearsal and performance of Finnissy's Second String Quartet. The overall aims of our rehearsal analysis of the Third Quartet are:

- to develop new procedures and methodologies for studying rehearsal processes through the analysis of 'discourse communities'
- to develop a model to represent ways in which professional musicians communicate during rehearsal
- to discover how the playing is indicative of the transformation of talk into play

This paper focuses on the first of these aims regarding discourse analysis.

Rehearsal talk is one of the most significant areas demanding further research which emerged from studying the Kreutzers rehearsing Finnissy's Second String Quartet (2007). One methodology being explored throughout this research is the creation of hyperlinks between multimedia materials using NVivo software. In addition to the scores and sketches of the Third Quartet, the accompanying handout lists the interviews with the composer, and rehearsals and performances of the piece, which exist in audio or video format. The importance of these diverse materials is to recognize the different perspectives that they each bring to the piece. For example, meaning and explanations from discussions in rehearsal are often expanded upon during interviews with the composer. Links between these resources will ultimately connect discourse analysis with observations of body language, gestural communication and musical coordination, resulting in combined anthropological, linguistic and music analyses of musicians' working practices. All the examples presented here are taken from the second rehearsal which took place on 3 April 2009.

This research is different from most other studies of co-performer communication by virtue of the fact that the string quartet is made up of professional performers rather than students. Unlike most research involving ensemble playing this study looks at the composer-performer collaboration as well as co-performer communication. Of the three types of relationships identified by Sam Hayden and Luke Windsor, the relationship between Finnissy and the Kreutzer Quartet is best described as 'directive' rather than 'interactive' because the composer is generally very clear in his

notation about what he wants (Hayden and Windsor 2007, 33). However, as we will see, there are interesting examples that emerge where some compositional decisions are more 'collaborative'.

Although research into music ensembles has concluded that much of the exchange between musicians is *unspoken* there is still plenty to discover about verbal behaviour and the discursive content of rehearsals. As other research has already demonstrated, talk about music is an important element in the production of music and musical identities. And as R. Keith Sawyer concludes in his essay, 'Music and Conversation', 'Musical communication is an emergent property of social groups in complex interaction' for which, he argues, 'we need a theory of communication as a fundamentally social and collaborative activity' (2005, 57). Our research aims to get closer towards establishing a theory of communication in ensemble playing but at the moment it is in its early stages.

Jane Davidson has already identified five categories for analysing video recordings of a student string quartet rehearsal:

- Social conversation (general topics related to friendship, jokes, etc.).
- Nonverbal social interaction (related to non-musical issues, and including physical contact, gestures, degree of proximity, looking behaviors, etc.).
- Musical conversations (discussions about technical or expressive points in the music).
- Nonverbal musical interactions (gestures demonstrating a musical purpose: passages, etc.).
- Musical interactions (dynamics, timing profiles, and when the music starts and stops). (Davidson 2004, 68)

The first and third of these categories are concerned with discourse which we will examine in further detail.

Our examples from Finnissy and the Kreutzer Quartet follow MacDonald's, Meill's and Wilson's social constructionist model of communication in which talk is seen as a tool of social action. Adopting Steven Feld's rationale for analysing speech about music generally, 'Talk locates emergent processes of making meanings, and it is as social engagement and accomplishment that talk must be studied' (Feld 2005 (reprinted from 1984), 93).

For studying music performance generally, Eric Clarke has argued for a more integrated and complementary relationship between quantitative and qualitative approaches (Clarke and Cook 2004, 99). Both are used here in order to discover more about how professional musicians use their rehearsal time, what they spend that time doing, and how they approach Finnissy's piece.

### **Methodologies** [slide 6]

An ethnographic approach is employed to examine co-performer interaction and composer-performer collaboration which involves collecting data from field observations of rehearsals and interviews. An approach based on anthropological analysis focuses on the:

- setting
- use of time
- discourses presented
- insight into social relations that becomes apparent in discourse
- insight into musical culture that discourse provides

An analysis takes the empirical material as its starting point. It is grounded in the actions and communication that take place between musicians and composer. The theoretical inspiration comes from social anthropology in the empirical and interpretative science of Clifford Geertz and Johannes Fabian but also from the phenomenological everyday sociology of Alfred Schutz. Analysis of communication has been inspired by the discourse analysis of Benwell and Stockoe as well as critical discourse analysis by Norman Fairclough.

Central to the analysis are the participants' meaning making, or semiosis, which is meaning making in practice between social agents. In musical culture – as in other cultures – participants communicate their thoughts to each other through a 'vocabulary' and a grammar within the models of expression and interpretation they share and which, as Schutz writes, is defined through a collective set of ground rules. Musicians belong to a community of practice.

### **The setting** [slide 7]

The informants consist of the quartet and the composer, who is placed as they say, in the 'hot seat' to the right. The static picture is rather misleading as they sometimes move around as well as sit on chairs.

### **The flow of the rehearsal** [slide 8]

The players arrive first, followed by the composer. The rehearsal is started by a general conversation, before it flows into the rehearsal, which consists of alternating periods of playing and discussing playing. The rehearsal ends with leave-taking. The flow of the rehearsal is never discussed and seems to follow an already established pattern.

### **Use of rehearsal time** [slide 9]

Fifteen minutes is devoted to small talk before playing starts, and the rest of the time is divided almost equally between playing and discussing the playing.

### **Talk quantified** [slide 10]

Some participants talk more than others. Here it is three participants who do 80% of the talking, probably because they have worked together for a longer time and know each other better.

### **Ways of talk** [slide 11]

Discourse analysis is concerned with the ways that language is used, and is therefore concerned with patterns of use. Language is used to create concepts, categories and express meanings. In the rehearsal it is possible to identify several types of discourse that are used in different places creating variation in the flow of the rehearsal and it is possible for the informants to use several different discourses simultaneously.

### **Personal talk** [slide 12]

There is very little personal talk in the rehearsal, and it is the composer who talks personal talk. The players greet him and ask about his health, although he does not ask about theirs, which could indicate the social power expressed by language. Another kind of talk is small talk, which is predominantly used before they start playing. Through small talk the players talk about jobs, concerts, meetings with composers, etc. All these elements provide insight into the way musicians construct meaning (semiosis) in their professional lives. Small talk also reflects the culture of musicians to which they belong.

In this discourse the players describe their work outside the rehearsal room as well as the quality they individually set up in relation to their own work. This kind of information is given as a narrative of 'a difficult mission, well accomplished'.

Another conversational topic, among the musicians at this rehearsal is the work they have done or intend to do in other musical contexts.

**Small talk** [slide 13]

Part of the conversation is about the musicians' work with other composers and conductors.

**Small talk** [slide 14 – audio example 1]

The conversation just played is interesting because it describes the musicians' views of what makes a good conductor (i.e. qualities in a conductor), it is one who treats the musicians well and 'stops the rehearsals early'. They say it jokingly, but even jokes mirror cultural meanings.

Small talk can only be established through cooperation. It is often started by a sentence – a proffer – unconnected to the previous talk. If the offer that lies in the proffer is accepted and continued by another part in the conversation the topic gets changed and the conversation continues in relation to the new topic. If the proffer is not accepted and carried further by the other person, the topic falls to the ground. This kind of small talk functions to position the individual players in relation to each other, in relation to the work they are offered, and the work they do, as well as the pay they receive. The talk also creates knowledge among the musicians regarding the type of work available and its pay. Thus this kind of talk gives insight into the cultural world of music ground rules and creates a culturally defined space for the musician's working life.

In conversation small talk is often considered to be something that interrupts or is superfluous. Small talk is definitely not chit-chat and a waste of time. On the contrary, small talk is very important in the discourse. It functions in the rehearsal as a means for the musicians to tune in to each other, to paraphrase Schutz, just as they tune their instruments. They are in this way tuning the social meaning making in relation to each other as musicians, in relation to the rehearsal they are going to share and in relation to the composer. Reflecting on the more general musical culture, they are connecting their own rehearsal to this greater musical culture, and they do it through discourse and playing their instruments.

**Score talk** [slide 15 – audio example 2]

Score talk is quite a different kind of discourse from small talk. Score talk, or talk about the written music, is related to the score or the sheet music and only to that. It is a conversation about the playing and involves the players as well as the composer in a new way with a distinct discourse of its own. As the rehearsal flows, more discourses are brought into play, discourses that illustrate the ways the quartet members talk and establish meaning about music.

### **Reference talk [slide 16]**

We have identified the category of reference talk because the musicians use it like scientists use references: to refer to something that both parties know beforehand, a common point of reference. There are three categories:

1. Musicians and particular musical pieces [slide 17 – audio example 3]

Both players and composer refer to other composers or the works of other composers. They refer to other works of the present composer, when they talk about what is special about the composition they are rehearsing. Another aspect under the heading reference talk, are comments about other musicians, their playing and style. As is the case with small talk, reference talk relates to something collective, which the musicians tune in to, but it also illustrates how the culture of music, and musical history and its forbears are always present as a reflexive space, to the present day playing.

2. Musical genre [slide 18 – audio example 4]

Musical genre makes less specific reference to pieces or more general categories, but often includes some kind of interpretation. Here, 'baroque' is a classification and an interpretation, and not just a concept.

3. Musical language refers to shared linguistic categories either in Italian or German. The composer uses German indications in his score because he is referencing Bruckner who uses German in his.

### Musical language: dynamics [slide 19]

One aspect of musical language that crops up a lot in rehearsal concerns dynamics which are discussed in the following film extract: [FILM extract 1]

What is interesting here is that the composer invites the players to participate in deciding changes which demonstrate an element of collaboration on this particular compositional decision (as mentioned earlier).

Listening to the audio recordings or viewing the video makes it obvious that there is another very important discourse in the rehearsal: the playing. The players fiddle all the time. They play to themselves, they rehearse, they illustrate to others. They play

the piece of music they are rehearsing or something quite different, Brahms or jazz. They show off by playing a piece much faster than intended. And they play to get the composer's acceptance. Music is a different discourse from language because it is another kind of language, yet it is still a form of discourse which runs back and forth and communicates, as it may be heard by all present.

Through reference talk – and play – the musicians coordinate their evaluations and attitudes, a process that is repeated throughout the rehearsal. In many ways it resembles the creation of *communitas*, as described by Victor Turner in relation to *rites de passage*. A *communitas* refers to the common space and time in which the members of the group together establish a common culture or frame of reference, which separates them from the outside world. In this case the *communitas* also includes the composer. It is illustrated when the viola player says: 'the ones we all know really well', referring to compositions and the quartet. Doing this he underlines the special relation that this particular quartet has to this particular composer. They have played his previous compositions and he has composed music especially for them: his Second String Quartet.

#### **Quality talk** [slide 20 – audio example 5]

Quality talk refers to the ways in which the players talk about the quality of their work – their play – and also indicates the ways in which they obtain quality, through repeating sequences or by showing (most often the first violinist) how to play a specific part.

Often the quality of the playing is judged in relation to the binary opposites of 'right' and 'wrong', which are categories also found in ordinary language. But quality is not only about right or wrong, it also relates to what is possible in relation to technique.

The rehearsal is serious, but it is also laughter and making fun. Laughter is a predominant element in all the discussions, as is mutual praise.

#### **'Social relations'** [slide 21]

There are three types of social relation in this rehearsal:

1. Composer/player interaction

The composer has a special role in the rehearsal. He has written the music and is responsible for the score and the parts. The composer asks the question that only he can ask, regarding what the players think of the composition. The question asked to

all is answered with praise. Similar to the performers, the composer may illustrate how he wants it to sound, not by playing but by commenting on the notes in the score or by singing. The relation between the players and the composer is mutually listening and communicating but at the same time the composer has prerogatives to comment, demonstrate and correct.

### 2. Composer/first violinist interaction

It is apparent from the observations and the discourse that the first violinist has a special role in the rehearsal. He is also the only player who talks personal talk with the composer: just as the composer asks the quartet about their view on the composition, the first violinist engages the composer in an evaluation of the music's quality. In conversation with other musicians the first violinist may pose probing questions to the composer, but the composer has the power to be inattentive. However, the first violinist also has other more social obligations in relation to the quartet. He takes care to organise their work in relation to this concert, in this particular case the organization of their next rehearsal.

### 3. Quartet member interaction

As described earlier it is the first violinist who takes the initiative in the majority of the discussions between the players, a job which goes with his status as first violin. But at the same time there is a conversation back and forth between all members of the quartet, even though they do not all contribute equally to the conversation.

### **'I' and 'we'** [slide 22 – audio example 6]

The categories of 'I' and 'we' are used to exclude or include participants, and indicate the way participants establish social groups through language.

The composer talks in an exclusive 'I', which is indicative of his special status (and power). The musicians use both 'I' and 'we', where 'we' means the quartet.

### **Challenges** [slide 23 – audio example 7]

The challenge for the players lies in their good craftsmanship: to be able to play something really difficult.

### **Innovations** [slide 24]

This analytical category is set up in response to our perception of music as culture and culture as being dynamic. In a cultural world, culture is not static but changes continually, often in small rather than large ways. To paraphrase Schutz, changes have to be of a sort that alter the culture that is taken for granted, while at the same time making the world remain as something familiar. One example of innovation in



the rehearsal is the use of birdsong. Even though birdsong has influenced composers for centuries, the innovation here lies in the way excerpts of birdsong recorded in the composer's garden intersect with the composed instrumental parts. It demands some juggling for the first violinist to get it played correctly, by stopping and starting the CD via a remote control. [Film extract 2]

The second film extract puts the discussions into practice, showing how the birdsong is integrated into the playing, with the first violinist operating the remote control. [Film extract 3]

### **Conclusion**

The rehearsal session is part of the unreflected world of music. A rehearsal follows a given structure that is not discussed. The musicians use several different and distinct discourses in their communication. During the flow of the rehearsal the musicians establish a social community through their small talk, whereas their conversations between the playing are focused on the playing.

The above examples have shown how social relations, communication, playing and reflections all work together to prepare a new composition for public performance.

Rehearsal talk is therefore a way into a deeper understanding of musicians' working lives and meaning making. It is important because it works to create a musical performance in which the communications and reflections during rehearsal may be understood in relation to how they have made an impact on the playing, whereas the social relations and the discourses so constitutive of the musical performance can only be heard during the actual rehearsal.