

Researching performance, performing research

Through the lens of experimentation

ORPHEUS RESEARCH CENTRE IN MUSIC

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Background and introduction

In this session, we want to explore the relationship between research and performance through the lens of experimentation. These three elements — research, performance and experimentation — form the foci of the Orpheus Research Centre in Music (ORCiM) based at the Orpheus Institute in Ghent, Belgium. The research question underlying this proposal is ‘**How is musical performance creative?**’ We will argue by way of practice-led cases discussed in this panel of artists and artist-researchers that this is mainly **through processes of experimentation**. Starting with the premise that experimentation is inherent to artistic practice and to the processes of music making, we will define artistic experimentation broadly as encompassing the actions that an artist undertakes in developing and constantly renewing artistic identity and expertise. Exploring this field has the potential to give greater insight into how art unfolds, and it opens new possibilities for artistic practice and reception.

‘Researching performance, performing research’

The title ‘Researching performance, performing research’ refers to the complex and intricate relationship between artistic endeavor and artistic manifestation. At a metalevel, it also refers to the need for reflection and development of a discourse on these — often tacit — relationships.

‘**Researching performance**’ starts with the contention that no performance attains its full potential without a thorough investigation of the artistic act.

Using the gerund ‘researching’ implies a dynamic, it opens up a non-finished process of analysis of and reflection on the musician’s artistic act in public. Research in or of performance is but a timely fixed, state of the art, and can never attain a full understanding of a performance act. Each act of researching performance is decisively provisional, by the inherent fleeting nature of its subject. While based upon a contextualised situation, a historical agreement and ritualistic embeddedness in broader society, artistic performance only appears in its idiosyncratic realisations by an artist in the concert event.

This means that not only performance itself but research in and of performance is in need of a permanent re-evaluation, both by the artist as a performer and the artist as a researcher. And shouldn’t we suppose that, in these activities, both roles merge continuously. This links to the next part of the title: ‘**Performing research**’ meaning that the outcome of the artistic investigation is a manifestation based on critical and self-reflective evaluations and decisions. As such a performance conflates/coincides in a certain sense with ‘performing research’.

Adding the sub-title ‘**through the lens of experimentation**’ focuses on the essentials of both research and performance. Our hypothesis is that **experimentation is one important key to creative performance**.

Through the lens of experimentation

The **notion of experiment** plays an important role in scientific practice and in the development of modern science. It is a domain-specific practice of modeling, representation and manipulation of the world (Pickering 1995). An event is set up inside a controlled environment to enhance new, unexpected outcomes. Experiment has evolved into a methodological device, in which different variables can be altered to encounter new understandings. It has a long history in science.

The earliest accounts of experimenting entail simply **putting in place certain conditions** so that new things could happen and reveal themselves (Bazerman 1988, p67). Experimentation was here closely related to empirical investigation. Only later came the idea of **manipulation** for purposes of investigation. The history of scientific experimentation as such evolves following a line from a somewhat passive observational attitude towards active posing questions and systematic manipulation.

Already in 1620, Bacon noted that

“It would be unsound and self contradictory to expect things which have never been done can be done except by means which have never been tried”

(in Kostelanetz, 1972 - 78, p.245).

The defining characteristics of experimental research in modern and contemporary science remain **intervention** in or **manipulation** of and **control** of the **source data** (initial situation) by the researcher. But there exists no true or perfect experiment, nor an ideal set up or a move decided in advance that determines success or failure. There remains always an element of uncertainty and of trial and error. Again, total openness and unexpectedness are part of the myth of experimentation in science. We should not forget that experimentation is embedded in practices and ways/ worldviews of conceiving nature which determine beforehand the kind of output scientists can 'see' or 'interpret'.

What about experimentation in the arts?

There is a gap between the scientific gathering of knowledge by the method of experimentation and possible experimental processes in the arts, because of the **different communities and practices**. In the artistic world, the social and community driven **aim of knowledge gathering** is replaced by **creative and often idiosyncratic approaches** on a personal and aesthetic level. Having different **worldviews**, both communities still share the aim of experimentation as

*“an action or process undertaken to **discover something not yet known**”*

(Kostelanetz, 1972 - 78, p.244),

and both aim to **shift** in a conscious way the **boundary between the actual and the possible**.

But, the adoption of the model of the scientific experimental method, entrenched inside of the prevailing scientific paradigms, into the arts, cannot account of the many divergent approaches to artistic creation and leads to unfair accounts of artistic endeavor like this one:

EXPERIMENTATION IN THE ARTS

“What is generally called “experimentation” in the arts more nearly resembles my ignorant and youthful self-indulgent mess-making in high school chemistry. I was acting out a fantasy, not learning anything about chemistry, and while every smelly substance I concocted had to have been made according to chemistry’s laws, I did not know those laws, nor could I have learned them from anything I was doing. And how many botches have been excused by calling them the results

of the experimental spirit? We have to imagine an artist wondering what would happen if she were to do this, try that, perform a play in silence, omit the letter “E” in three pages of French prose, construct a world of clothes hanger wire, color walls with cow manure. Having found out, though, then what?” (Gass 1994)

As Henk Borgdorff mentions, such a view on experimentation only produces **myopic understanding** of what is really going on in the arts and I would add that this is the case in artistic practice as well as in artistic research. (http://www.konst.gu.se/digitalAssets/1322/1322712_the-conflict-of-the-faculties.pdf)

Different artists indeed consider **experimentation as a condition sine qua non** to engage with art. As Ezra Pound wrote:

“Willingness to experiment is not enough, but unwillingness to experiment is mere death.” (in Kostelanetz, 1972 – 78, p. 249)

In the beginning of the twentieth century, the notion of experimentation was embraced by the arts as an explicit method and a quite literal way of creating new art. Characteristics of scientific experimentation invaded the artistic domain. In music for example, artists experimented with the manipulation of sounds and instruments. The outcome, called '**Experimental music**', is a concise and historically situated activity. These kinds of experimentation in the arts encounter the challenge to convention and the search for innovation and originality — as in avant gardistic movements and modernism mainly in the first part of the 20th century — attracting worldwide attention.

While this was an important period of turmoil and sustained experimental movement in the arts, explicitly creating its own discourse, we do not want to bring these aspects of experimentation to the fore. Other more **subtle forms and acts of experimentation** have always existed in the arts, remaining tacit and most of the time unacknowledged and undocumented. These experimental practices are often individually led and part of small scale projects, inside limited and detailed environments of art practice. They **explore and enhance processes of comprehension and interpretation**, or lead towards creative interactions and results. They focus upon different aspects of the artistic realisation of an artistic product. Some aspects concern the art process itself. Others are concerned with materials and interactions. Still others challenge existing reflections and thoughts and question the embodied practices. Often these experiments can lead to a transformation of one's own skill and practices as well as of the creative processes and materials at hand.

Are performance and experimentation compatible notions?

From the point of view of the art and practice of **performance**, the horizon of experimental possibilities at first sight does not allow for radical innovation or originality, nor major challenges to conventions, but allows for small disturbing acts and thoughts, which are the foundations of the artistry and creativity of the performer. Music performance copes with **domains** which **constrain** the performer as an artist much more than other artistic disciplines like composition, visual arts or improvisation. The **first** of these domains concerns the **tactics and techniques** of the state of the art: the expertise and skill of the performer. This domain extends into the whole educational realm of music performance studies and continues into the hidden zone of exploration and training of the artist behind the stage. A **second** domain is **the ritual stage of the performance act**, which is both horizontally and vertically decided on beforehand. Time and place of the ritual in the moment as well as societal expectations and habits of the context mould the acts of the performer. **Thirdly**, the basic material of music performance is its codification in the form of a **music score**. The score steers the whole act following a narrative pattern that is both determined by an external person, the composer, and its surrounding cultural worldview. A **fourth** domain is indeed the broader **situated historical context** of the musical style, instrument, score, compositional as well as performance processes. It offers an enabling as well as constraining framework of the possible freedom of

interpretation, reflection and performance practice. A **fifth** domain is constituted by the other mediating materials which enhance in the moment of the performance act the transformation of graphic score into sound material. We can call this the **ecological environment**: technology, instruments, acoustic aspects of the space. And, last but not least, there is the **individual and personal artistic domain** of the own capabilities and understandings, be it on the level of social, aesthetic, emotional, physical or cognitive possibilities.

Is it then in between these domains, at their crossing points, in the conflation of or conflict between these domains that moments of experimentation can come to the fore, the performer exploring ways to cope with, to create, to enhance his or her practice and art?

We want to explore these processes from different perspectives in our discussion on experimentation in performance.

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