

Performer and research (in: Dutch Journal of Music Theory Vol.12, 2007)

1. Introduction

In 1999 twenty nine European countries signed the so-called Bologna Declaration, thereby committing themselves to a harmonization of their higher education as of 2010. The universal adoption of the Anglo-Saxon system of Bachelor and Master degrees is thought to facilitate the comparison of curricula and to enhance the mobility of students in Europe. In Anglo-Saxon countries there is no formal distinction between Higher Professional education and University education as this is found in the Netherlands and a few other European countries. Schools of Higher Professional education have been quick to redefine their position vis-à-vis the Universities. In numerous instances direct collaboration with universities has been initiated. Research - until recently the exclusive domain of the University – must, in the new scheme of things, also form a part of the Master's curriculum at an institute for Higher Professional education. Government funding was provided to initiate lectorates in Higher Professional education and the institutes are now expected to draw up a policy with respect to research.

What form can research take in a curriculum that is largely focused on the professional practice? The question will be relatively simple to answer for a course with a technical component, for instance 'Innovation, Industry and ICT' at the 'Hogeschool van Utrecht'¹. Research here is necessary as a monitoring process of outside developments.

But what is research supposed to mean for the pianist, the violinist or the jazz saxophonist enrolled in the Master's course (currently the **post graduate** course) at a Conservatory? In general: how can research be meaningfully incorporated in the training of a performer who is focused on achieving as high as possible a standard in his prospective career?

Two stereotyped reactions are discernible when music students are asked to submit a research plan during their **post graduate** course:

The first reaction is one of dismissal or even emotional aversion: one does not study music to ply through books but to play!

The second reaction is of a pseudo-scientific nature: the musician should not try to fill the shoes of the musicologist.

There is nothing inherently wrong with a performer displaying scientific interest. However we should not automatically assume that the frame of reference should be that of the university. We must ask ourselves whether the specific properties of the schools for Higher Education can facilitate a type of research in which theory and practice influence each other naturally.

In a few paragraphs I wish to point out the framework within which research can find for itself an effective role at a conservatory.

First I will state that concepts like research and knowledge are too often viewed in light of the verifiable knowledge sought after by the exact sciences. Other forms of knowledge are underappreciated.

¹ See the website of the Hogeschool van Utrecht: www.hu.nl

Secondly a new vision on our research object – music – can enable us to devise forms of research in which the performer has an important role.

Finally I will supply a theoretical framework that does justice to that vision. This is important as I feel that our thoughts about music are still excessively influenced by concepts from the nineteenth century.

2. Practical Wisdom.

A definition of relevant knowledge is essential for answering the question as to what constitutes meaningful research for a performer.

During an “expert meeting seminar” at the Utrecht School of the Arts the issue was formulated as follows:

“Can a performer improve his creative process and product by reflecting on his product and his actions and may we then speak of research?”²

A performer might point out that he is continually improving his creative product and that reflection is an important and natural ingredient in this process. However it is doubtful whether he is inclined to make this process of reflection explicit and objective. The word research conjures up images of objective knowledge as supplied by the exact sciences. But subjective experiences can give rise to intersubjectivity and as such be acceptable as a source of scientific knowledge. A broader concept of knowledge may lead to a specific type of research for the performer.

The Utrecht professor of education Fred Korthagen cites Aristoteles’ Ethics to distinguish between conceptual knowledge or *Episteme* – that which we normally consider to be scientific knowledge – and practical wisdom or *Phronesis*.³

Practical wisdom⁴ is dependent on context, **exceptional**, specific, variable and infinite and momentary, direct perception always plays a vital role. Korthagen asserts that this form of knowledge is essentially perceptual instead of conceptual. The value of this form of knowledge is determined in the practical application by the adequate response to a given situation and not by general, objective validity: this form of knowledge has moral implications for Aristoteles. Proper and effective action does after all fall within the domain of ethics.

According to Korthagen both forms of knowledge – *Phronesis* and *Episteme* - are generally applied unconsciously. He therefore groups them together under the term tacit knowledge.⁵ Reflection is the procedure needed to explicitate tacit knowledge. This explicitation can lead to a conscious awareness of actions, to the development of new concepts, but also to the awareness of hitherto unconsciously wielded concepts.

The reluctance of many artists to reflect on their practice – except in terms of mystification – may be partly explained by the emphasis that science places on objective conceptual knowledge.

² Expert meeting organized by the Education Bureau of the Utrecht School of the Arts on 23-02-2005.

³ Fred A.J. Korthagen, *Linking Practice and Theory*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., London 2001

⁴ **Overleg JS**

⁵ among others: Polanyi, M. *The Tacit Dimension*, New York: Doubleday (1961)

In taking perceptual knowledge and tacit knowledge seriously we are at the same time taking the performer seriously. Research is then not exclusively focused on generalization, on abstract, objective knowledge but: - I quote Korthagen – “first and foremost, concrete situations to be perceived, experiences to be had, persons to be met, plans to be exerted, and their consequences to be reflected on”.⁶

Here the musician can distinguish himself from the musicologist who will concentrate more on conceptual knowledge. By stressing perceptual knowledge the performer acquires an own framework to reflect on his actions and product. This reflection is not only “on action” but also “in action”. He conducts the process “in action” and can afterwards evaluate his actions.⁷

The performer should not restrict this reflection to his own actions, but should consider the influence on his environment: foremost of course an audience, but also givers of commissions, representatives of the music business, students etc. In this connection it is important to note the moral dimension of practical wisdom.

In my opinion it is justifiable to speak of research if the performer is willing to explicitate and share the process of reflection.

Ultimately we must concede that the distinction between conceptual knowledge and practical wisdom is of a hypothetical nature. Our conceptual knowledge influences our perception and performers inevitably make use of concepts.⁸ He will use long standing ideas that are applied unconsciously as tacit knowledge. In this context current terminology refers to ‘the cognitive unconscious’.⁹

Instead of creating an opposition between *Episteme* and *Phronesis* it seems more meaningful to examine the nature of the dialectics between both forms of knowledge. This offers the opportunity to enhance the attunement between theory and practice. Modern researchers state that concepts are not as abstract as we are inclined to believe and are directly linked to our bodily functioning, i.e. our “being embodied”. I quote from *Philosophy in the Flesh: the embodied mind and its challenge to western thought* by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson: “Perception has always been accepted as bodily in nature, just as movement is, *conception* as purely mental – the formation and use of concepts, but this picture is false: The body is not merely somehow involved in conceptualization but is shaping its very nature.”¹⁰

In this current view on knowledge and acquisition of knowledge the conceptual knowledge and practical wisdom are closely intertwined. In the words of Lakoff and Johnson: “Meaning has to do with the way in which we function meaningfully in the world and make sense of it via bodily and imaginative structures. This stands in contrast with the view that meaning is only an abstract relation among symbols or between symbols and states of affair in the world.”¹¹

⁶ id. page 29

⁷ Constantijn Koopman, *Onderwijs en het meester-gezelmodel in: Opleiding in/ter discussie*, publication of the Royal Conservatory in The Hague, 2004

⁸ See also under note 2

⁹ G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: the embodied mind and its challenge to western thought*, Basic Books, New York, 1999, pages 9-15

¹⁰ *ibid.*, page 37

¹¹ *ibid.*, page 78

Hereby we are handed an epistemological framework which is of particular interest for musicians – who habitually combine bodily and mental activity – and which offers a starting point for integrating theory and practice.

We may speak of research if the performer explicitates or shares his practical wisdom and is prepared to systematically ask himself which prior concepts have guided his actions. In this way his practical wisdom may have a forming influence on theory.

3. Music as Performance.

A broader view on the nature of knowledge can broaden the scope of research: By giving centre stage to practical wisdom and the interrelatedness with conceptual knowledge the Performer and the Performance may become subject and goal for research.

There are however other grounds for emphasizing the position of the performer and the performance in the research into music.

I contend that our are fundamental changes in our notions about music and that we are in need of a view of music that does justice to the current state of affairs. Ideas on music that stem partly from the nineteenth century restrict our view on new developments.¹² It is good practice to question the “object of research” and a new view on the phenomenon of music will lead to a broadening or adaptation of the field of research.

The ever influential concept of music that we have inherited from the nineteenth century is its autonomy and in relation to this the uniqueness and authenticity of the work of art. The work of art is awarded an absolute value of almost metaphysical proportions.¹³ Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony is autonomous, and its only reference is to itself: Music becomes a glorious Object to be studied, and which has an existence in the score, distinct from any performance. In this view the performer is an intermediary who revives the spirit of the composer. To such an intermediary can be ascribed the extraordinary ability to communicate at a supernatural level with the composer, thus assigning him the status of a high priest.

In the twentieth century Stravinsky was foremost in insisting that music can express nothing except itself and that a performer should make himself subservient of the score: “The secret of perfection lies above all in [the performer’s] consciousness of the law imposed on him by the work he is performing”, so that music should not be interpreted but merely executed.”¹⁴ The high priest is reduced to a mere puppet. The cult surrounding the composer genius and the absolute status of the score has led to a powerful emphasis on repertoire. The term “Standard repertoire” seems symptomatic of a degree of rigidity.

From this perspective research consists of the study of scores and the history of composer and style and serves to underline the uniqueness of the work of art. Originally these two fields constituted the ground covered by musicology: historical

¹² For example the acceptance by musicologists of Jazz and Pop as worthy objects of research was slow in coming, partly due to the opposition between high and low art, partly because of the lack of written scores in improvised music.

¹³ Carl Dahlhaus, *Die Idee der absoluten Musik*, Bärenreiter- Verlag 178, Kassel

¹⁴ Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons*, London: Oxford University Press, 1947, page 127

research and subsequent philographic¹⁵ investigation into the “correct text”: the publication of a so-called Urtext, with the purpose of establishing a definitive version of the score. The performer must render the Urtext as “authentically” as possible.

In the twentieth century the ascendance of means of recording sound have played a large part in “tying down” the repertoire. Because works of music can be regarded as objects they are saleable commodities: the recording industry has turned music more than ever before into a “product”.

By now the idea of the autonomous work of art has become shaky. The English musicologist Nicolas Cook sums up a number of causes¹⁶:

- Increasing globalization accompanied by knowledge of other musical cultures.
- The rise of multicultural societies in Europe.
- Revolutionary developments in musicology, ethnomusicology and music semiotics that point out the untenability of the view concerning the autonomy of music.
- The blurring of the distinction between “High” and “Low” culture.
- The authentic performance movement which- paradoxically – has given rise to the questioning of the attainability of authenticity.
- Music *as* Performance instead of Music *and* Performance.

By commenting on these items I wish to demonstrate why they give cause for the growing interest in the manner in which music functions in practice.

Globalization’s tremendous effects are not easily summarized in a few paragraphs and we are still caught up in the process. It has become clear that in other cultures totally different views on the phenomenon of music exist and also other ways of making music. The absolute value of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony has been affected: many do not share the values that classical aficionados attribute to the symphony, and the restrictions of a musical culture that is focused on reproduction are becoming more and more obvious: The “masterwork” has been disengaged from time and place and is in danger of finding itself in a vacuum. The listener is assigned a passive role, the repertoire is in a process of petrification and hardly renews itself.

Already in the thirties the composer Colin McPhee observed wistfully how music on the divine island of Bali pervades all aspects of life and is remarkably functional¹⁷.

Nowadays everyone who so wishes can discover for himself the extraordinary virtuosity and complexity of the music of Bali, without recourse to a score or conductor.

In other words, we have all the modern means to seek for the “exotic”, but the “exotic” has also sought us out: multicultural society has led to an urban population that by and large does not know or share our musical values.

It was the ethnomusicological discipline, among others, that concluded from research results from a variety of musical cultures that music is not autonomous, but that it is socially, regionally and historically defined. Music does not only react to the surrounding society, but forms an integral part of it. The fact that the classical performance practice insists on bringing compositions dating back centuries tells us

¹⁵ Philography: the collecting and study of autographs, **Van Dale Dictionary**

¹⁶ Nicolas Cook, *A very Short Introduction to Music*, Oxford University Press, 1998

¹⁷ Colin McPhee, *Music in Bali: A Study in Form and Instrumental Organization*, Yale University Press, 1966

something about our culture: The nineteenth century created an acute historic awareness and a view on the work of art as being unique and eternal. In the twentieth century this tendency was reinforced by the commercialization of the work of art: An unique object is a saleable commodity. This development had unexpected consequences: so-called popular music proved to be much more saleable than classical music. The market did what it is supposed to do and displayed no interest in the distinction between “High” and “Low” musical culture. The “market” has involuntarily put the value of the classical masterpieces up for debate.

The “Authentic” performance movement has tried in an extraordinary way to revive the repertoire but by now it is clear that a performance can never be an exact copy of a performance in the eighteenth century. This endeavour to blow the dust from the autonomous work of art by means of manuscript and Urtexts did also not lead to the “Truth”. The statement by a young Frans Brüggen that every performance of a Mozart symphony by the Concertgebouw Orchestra was a lie suggested that an authentic performance was feasible. But now it is evident that a Mozart performance by Harnoncourt differs from one by Gardiner or Brüggen. In other words: the influence of the performer is much greater than Stravinsky would have liked: the performer is more than a puppet in the hands of a composer or a score: a score is a dead letter if it is not constantly rejuvenated in a vital exchange between composer, performer and listener. In a certain sense the score is – however precisely the composer tries to lay down his views – primarily a inducement to act¹⁸.

Our research should therefore not limit itself to the score but we should be prepared to see the act itself as object of research! Not only the product is an autonomous object of research but also the context of activity and the process that, using the score as a “script”, leads to a performance.

Research by a performer can thus be much more than the analysis of a score or historical research into the place of composer and piece: The performance itself, one’s own musical actions and the context of the performance become object of research¹⁹.

4. Music Theory

It is obvious that a view on music has an influence on music theory. As long as the score of the autonomous work of art takes centre stage music theory can concentrate on an “object”. The assumed relationship between the notes is dissected, phrases are divided into opening and closing sections and the logic of chord progressions is determined.

Traditional music theory has concentrated especially on – in linguistic terms – the syntax of a composition.

This seemingly objective approach towards music was reinforced in the twentieth century by the prevailing positivistic scientific ideal. The objectivity of the score enables a form of control over “research data”. The score was even assigned a “**niveau neutre**”, allowing use of a computer programme to obtain objective “data”.

¹⁸ See note 12 : Nicolas Cook, *A very Short Introduction to Music*

¹⁹ *ibid.*, page 80: “ It assumes that to study music is to study your own participation in it – to study yourself.”

Musicians were initially content with the fact that music theory restricted itself to the “notes”. They are after all inclined to think that the real impact of music, the emotions evoked etc, are not susceptible to discussion. In the romantic tradition in which the performer has the status of a high priest the performance becomes a magical event, beyond words. At the same time the benefit of analysis is lost on the performer and music theory becomes a field for specialists. In the best case one suspects that a deeper understanding of the syntax of a composition, into chord changes *may* benefit the performance. But how and why are not investigated.

Comparison of music and language leads to insights that since the seventies of the last century have given rise to a new discipline in musicology, music semiotics²⁰. The use of language always involves not only a syntactic dimension, but a semantical and pragmatical one as well. Syntax, semantics and pragmatics are closely intertwined. If we analyze the sentence “Could you pass me the sugar?” we discern a predicate and an object, but next to this syntactical “well-formedness” of the sentence it also has a meaning: the semantic dimension. Only one who knows the language understands form and content of the question.

Ultimately the point is that whoever asks the questions receives the sugar> This constitutes the pragmatic dimension of language: the user of language knows the meaning of his message has been understood if and when he receives the sugar! By now linguists are convinced of the enormous role the pragmatic dimension plays in the acquisition and functioning of language.

Meaning – the semantic dimension – is not an image or a lemma in a dictionary. meaning arises in the use people make of language in specific situations. Identical words may be interpreted differently by members of different cultures but what is more: the same words will be interpreted differently within one and the same culture: Meaning cannot be separated from the users, even if some adherents the tradition of analytical philosophy believed in the possibility and necessity of isolating meaning from language participants.

According to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida the meaning of texts is to be found above all “ in between the words”. Derrida turns the tables on the notion of fixed meaning by asserting that the referential relationship of meaning has an open end and *that therefore no thing can exist unto itself for precisely that would qualify it as meaningless.*²¹

Music semiotics with its tripartite division of syntax, semantics and pragmatics offers a theoretical framework with which the study of music may regain its pragmatic dimension: Music acquires its meaning through its users: Music *as* Performance. Music theorists too easily assume that the syntactical study of a score is beneficial to the performer.²²

Impressive graphical representations of a ‘Sonata’ are assumed to lead towards an overview of and insight into a composition. The composition as a marvellous Object that is the layed out in time by the performer. But the relationship between this Object and that what happens in time and space during the performance is no point of

²⁰ J.J. Nattiez, *Fondements d’une sémiologie de la musique*, 1975

²¹ From: Ger Groot, *Vier ongemakkelijke Filosofen*, page 385, Publ. Sun, Amsterdam, 2003

²² I maintain that every approach to the study of music that does not recognize the interrelatedness of the three levels of meaning is essentially flawed.

inquiry. Neither the path the performer takes to reach his interpretation nor his goals in communicating with his audience (*which* audience?) are investigated.

Here lies an eminently suitable field for combined research by performers and theorists: How can we bring theory and practice closer together? By centring in the performance we centre in the performer. Earlier we demanded from the performer the willingness to reflect on his own actions. On the other side music theory should be willing to help assemble a theoretical framework that includes those aspects not readily found in a score as objects of theoretical examination.

5. Metaphor and Musical Thought

Such a theoretical framework in which the study of music is not limited to syntactical analysis is to be found in Michael Spitzer's "Metaphor and Musical Thought".²³ In recent developments in music semiotics the process of attribution of meaning centres on the concept of the metaphor as outlined by Lakoff and Johnson²⁴ in the context of cognitive psychology. Michael Spitzer applies their theories to music. A detailed discussion of Michael Spitzer's theory is not feasible here, but I wish to stress its importance for the role research can play at an institute for the study of music.

Spitzer asserts that the discussion on the meaning and function of music is at a dead end due to superseded theories of knowledge. He supplies a model that connects so-called extramusical and intramusical aspects that play a role in understanding music. Spitzer assumes that the autonomy of music is fictitious. The concept of metaphor must deliver a new perspective on the age-old debate on the relationship between musical and the so-called extramusical. **N.B: voetnoot hier overbodig!**

I shall explain the concept of metaphor that Spitzer uses and present briefly his model, thereby hoping to point the way towards a possible method of research of performer or performance.

The concept of metaphor is not used by Spitzer in the limited sense customary in daily use or classical rhetoric but rather as an epistemological concept.

In Lakoff's and Johnson's theory "metaphor" is the human capacity to construe relations between all domains of human thought and action: "We systematically use inference patterns from one domain to another domain and these 'mappings' are not purely abstract but they are shaped by our bodily experiences in the world."

Lakoff and Johnson propose that all our *experiential worlds* are interconnected and that they influence each other. That is what is meant by the assertion that there are continual inferences between our *experiential worlds*. This so-called process of "mapping" from one *experiential world* to another is defined by Lakoff and Johnson by the term metaphor. But "mapping" is only possible because different *experiential worlds* possess a common frame of reference that is ultimately reduceable to bodily

²³ Michael Spitzer, *Metaphor and Musical Thought*, University of Chicago Press, 2004

²⁴ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, University of Chicago Press, 1980

experiences. The projection from the domain of human experience to the domain of concepts is called “Metaphorical mapping” by Lakoff and Johnson.

This supplies us with a model that seeks to transcend the boundary between conceptual knowledge and practical wisdom.

How does “mapping” arise between the musical and the extramusical?

Spitzer asserts that we are capable of establishing a connection between the musical and the non-musical by way of *elementary experiential worlds*. Put more strongly: we establish such connections in a continuous and never-ending process of creative imagination. The most elementary experiential worlds or: “experiential image schemata” function in this context as a “hinge” between seemingly irreconcilable worlds.²⁵

This leads to the following basic model

intramusical/cross domain
experiential image schemata

Spitzer takes seriously metaphorical comparison in descriptions of music at all levels and says: “To comprehend a phrase as an image, an utterance, or an organism is to allow one’s hearing of musical structure to be shaped by a knowledge of different spheres of human activity: representation, language, life.”²⁶

In this way music is very effectively stripped of its autonomy and restored to its rightful domain: the human world in all its aspects.

An example of an elementary experience is the realization that our life follows a path: the road of life, with its beginning and end and a succession of important lifestages. The feeling that we are under way implies the concept of a processional structure. This basic metaphor of life as a pathway plays an important role in the dramatization of musical form in classical-romantic music.

Spitzer demonstrates very concretely how the metaphor ‘Music as Language’ has played an important role in the development of the classical style in the eighteenth century. He transcends the discussion concerning music as language: given the fact that composers and theorists in the Age of Enlightenment wanted music as language the outcome was the classical style with its clear phrase structure and narrative structure. Spitzer shows us that analyses – such as Schenker’s analysis of Beethoven’s *Eroica* – can be regarded as a metaphor of the score: the world of the score and the world of analysis are linked together, and the “aptness” depends upon the success with which this is achieved. The correctness of the analysis as a criterion is replaced by questions of application and usefulness. Every metaphor that helps us understand music better is worthy of serious consideration and research.

Spitzer elaborates on the aforementioned model²⁷:

²⁵ “A schema is a hinge between the dual aspects of musical material: the intramusical and the cross-domain. In other words, these aspects are isomorphic with each other on the basis of a common array of experiential image schemata” Spitzer page 55

²⁶ Spitzer, page 55

²⁷ Spitzer, page 59

analytical metaphor

cultural metaphor

metonymy²⁸

metaphor

intramusical

cross-domain

harmony rhythm melody

life language painting

path
part/whole
center/periphery

Metaphorical “mapping” includes all aspects of life and therefore offers a possibility of building bridges between approaches that have diverged: musicology, music theory and music psychology, between the history of music theory and current analytical approaches, between the hermeneutical and the technical approach towards musical structure.

Why do Spitzer’s theory and model offer us important starting points for the performer and performance practice?

Musicians tend to talk about music metaphorically during rehearsals and lesson situations and it is worthwhile to investigate that use of language and judge it on its merit.

But even more important is the fact that performers pervasively use metaphors as Tacit Knowledge during the course of a performance: we think in metaphors and make music in metaphors. These are analytical in nature and – according to Spitzer – culturally defined and both are founded on elementary experiential worlds. Spitzer’s model supplies a framework within which to analyze the metaphors in use. Besides – according to Lakoff and Johnson – body awareness plays a substantial role in the forming of concepts. This justifies the conclusion that the performer and the performance play an fundamental part in the understanding of music.

Practical wisdom and conceptual knowledge, the *Episteme* and *Phronesis of Aristoteles* come together in Spitzer’s model and performer and performance should be taken into consideration in the research into the meaning of music.

²⁸ metonymy: “the relationship being that of contiguity, substitution by adjuncts etc.”