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Musical practice in slow-motion Emerging directions for Australian research in music

Huib Schippers

In addition to the effects of the rise of pop, jazz and world music and the explosive development of music technology over the past five decades, the context for research in post-secondary music education has perhaps changed most significantly with the integration of conservatoires in university environments. Although some may regard the union of post-secondary music learning and academia as a marriage of convenience (the bride beautiful, artistic, but without means; the groom perhaps a little dull, but a stable provider), it has also created new and exciting avenues for research.

The possibilities to bring practice and research closer are evident in the research activities indicated by post-secondary institutions for music teaching and learning in general, and particularly by universities, where one would expect to find most research activity. Indeed, 79% of universities (56% of all respondents) indicate that they engage in practice-based research, action research scores 46% in the university sector, research into artistic practice 83%, and artistic practice as research 71%. In addition, 87% of the university sector respondents state they address contemporary phenomena such as popular music, cultural diversity and new insights into teaching and learning.

This paints a picture of a uniquely forward-looking university practice in terms of music research. On critical reflection, however, we see that the trends above are hardly reflected in the current academic output of music departments, the topics of presentations at major conferences such as the Symposium of the International Musicological Society in Melbourne (July 2005), and in music projects funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) over the past years. In each of these, traditional musicological research dominates, focusing mostly on analytical and historical aspects of music, rather than contemporary practice.

One way of interpreting this is that we are dealing with a very recent development, of which we will only see evidence in the coming years. But perhaps there is also some confusion as to what constitutes each of the categories of research mentioned above. Although Dennis Strand has made major inroads into this matter with his report Research in the Creative Arts (1998), it is useful to distinguish between *research into practice* on one side of the continuum, which implies an outsider's perspective, and on the other *practice as research*, where a reflective artistic practice is explored as a process akin to experimental forms of research.

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Although much music making involves research, the latter does not necessarily qualify all music making as research. Not every rehearsal is a research project, and not all performances are research outcomes. If we follow the OECD definition that research and experimental development comprises “creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including the knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications,” (quoted in Strand, 1998, p. 32) then much of what musicians do is certainly high-level professional practice, but not necessarily research.

Exploring the depths of musical creativity by mapping out the tangible and intangible elements of various musical practices is a very profound and specific pursuit. It is difficult, exciting, relevant, and long overdue. By making strategic choices of research foci with regards to this area, it is possible to set up research programs within the context of post-secondary music education that are not at the margin, but at the core of musical life in an academic context, with pro-active links to students, staff, management, other faculties and the outside world through curriculum development, creative practice, community activities and performance. They also open the road to engagement with a greater diversity of musical practices than European-based art music.

In this context, a conservatoire is one of the greatest resources for research in music. Musicians in the process of learning, teaching, performing and creating music provide a unique opportunity to study the essence of the art. That which flashes before our ears in performance as the end-result of complex physiological, technical, conceptual, aesthetic and social processes is laid out in all of its component parts in the learning process at a conservatoire, as *musical practice in slow-motion*.

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Here may lay one of Australia’s most significant chances for international excellence. While traditional musicology in this country is inevitably hindered by language barriers and distance to key sources in European libraries, Australian music research is not necessarily weighed down by centuries of tradition. Moreover, Australia has a vibrant practice in concert halls, festivals, conservatoires, studios and recordings. Linking this to academic activity by fulfilling the promise of the AMC survey responses can put Australia on the map as a leader in contemporary research in music. That is an exciting perspective.

Associate Professor Huib Schippers is Director of the Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre at Griffith University. He has run major action-research projects in music and music education, lectured and published across the world, and served in a variety of capacities on numerous forums, boards and commissions, including the Netherlands National Arts Council and the International Society for Music Education.

Reference:

Strand, Dennis (1998), Research in the Creative Arts. Canberra: The Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs.