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The informed performer : towards a bio-culturally informed performers' practice

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Introduction

Playing a musical instrument is generally considered to be a very complex human behaviour involving the integration and coordination of a broad range of human functions such as perception, imagination, memory, information processing, emotion, communication, and dexterity.¹ From this perspective, it seems only reasonable to assume that, in an age of informational and communicational abundance, this intrinsic multifacetedness manifests itself in numerous and systematic informational contact-points between musical practice and a variety of academic and para-academic fields which zoom in on these specific elements of musical activity. Such is not the case today. Scientists and clinical therapists have shown a special and increasing interest in music and musicians in terms of phenomena such as neural plasticity, coordination, expressiveness, memory, attention, perception, cooperation, and creativity but the informational outcomes of these investigations have barely reached the doings and sayings of music practitioners. A look at contemporary conservatoire-curricula, as primary indicators of what counts as valid knowledge in a field², indicates that the theory-side of music performance programmes is primarily concerned with intra-disciplinary elements (harmony, counterpoint, analysis), complemented with a few humanities-oriented disciplines (history, philosophy, liberal arts); only in a few instances, explicit reference is made to more positivist oriented branches of academia (psychology, sociology, physiology)³ and para-academia (Alexander technique, Feldenkrais method). Why is that? And how would an artistic and epistemic environment that promotes an inclusive and more broadly informed musicianship look like?

These are the questions that will guide us throughout this inquiry, eventually leading to the construction of a conceptual framework, being denoted and introduced here as a bio-cultural approach to musical performership. To be clear, a *Bio-Culturally informed Performers' Practice* is at present not one of the received concepts among which a 'historical approach to music performance' (Butt, 2002) is probably the most prominent and familiar one. Thinking of music as a bio-cultural phenomenon, and not merely as a historically or personally contingent one, is to consider the wide variety of musical activities not as phenomena *sui generis* but rather as cultural instances or personal particularisations of the human capacity to meaningfully and intentionally generate and react to

¹ In technical terms (and mainly related to the motor component of playing an instrument): "performing music at a professional level is one of the most complex human accomplishments. Playing an instrument requires the integration of multimodal sensory and motor information, the generation of appropriate action plans, the selection and retrieval of highly refined movement patterns from procedural motor memory, and the initiation of movement" (Altenmüller, Ioannou, & Lee, 2015, p. 90).

² See Bernstein (1971/2003, p. 156) for the role of curricula in the field knowledge production.

³ The results of a sample survey containing 10 conservatoire-curricula are summarized in Appendix 11 (Vanmaele, 2014).

temporally patterned sounds (Cross, 2003a). The *ratio legis* for preferring *performers' practice* over *performance practice* relates to the fact that throughout the dissertation it will be argued that the proximal target domain of information is not the performance but rather the performer. To aspire to a state of bio-culturally informedness as a musician then implies an emphatic interest in universal and systematic characteristics of music making and their relation to the socio-cultural contexts that encircle particular musical acts and decisions. Such an informational attitude does not come without its challenges: the sheer abundance of information is always in need of systematic streamlining, assessment, and transpersonal support and the weighed and delicate balance between information, imagination, experience, freedom, artistry and action is a keystone to informational success in an environment which has its roots in centuries-old traditions of genius and individual and hyper-subjective accomplishment.

Retrospectively, the proto-ideas for developing a generic framework in support of extending the informational scope of musicians emerged as an explicit response to a cascade of unanswered questions that followed the personal confrontation with a partial and chronic motor deficit. These questions naturally and gradually acquired a more generic and formal status within the context of this doctoral research project. The chronicle leading up to this undertaking can be ordered in three overlapping phases of inquiry that to this day leave a clear and implicit imprint on the structure and contents of the dissertation.

An initial cluster of questions ensued from the impact of a pervasive neuro-muscular pathology that engendered a new physical and artistic situation some twenty years ago.⁴ Mentioning explicitly the physical as well as the artistic aspect points to the fact that, from the early start, a strong and unexpected link between degenerative motor functions and artistic transformation became apparent. Not only the body showed signs of automatically induced compensations with regard to muscle activation and fingerings, also the interpretative and artistic choices indicated the search for a new equilibrium. The physical context of altered capacities quasi-automatically led to selecting suitable repertoire and to staying in the realm of the possible as far as technique was concerned. This first phase prompted a logical and primary interest into the mechanics and characteristics of musical movement and, more specifically, their relation to artistic identity. Frustrated by the inadequacy of existing models and expertise (both within and outside the field of artistic practice) to account for the

⁴ Within the study, no further explicit referencing will be made to the personal medical condition that initiated this study since the investigation aims exceeding the personal sphere by extrapolating certain insights into a more general framework. It can be mentioned here that it concerns a pathology called *Multifocal Motor Neuropathy* [MMN] which affects the peripheral motor pathways, gives rise to local conduction blocks [deficits in neuronal signal-transmission] and clinically results in the multifocal [in multiple places] and gradually decrease of muscle strength (Nowacek & Teener, 2013).

complexity and non-linearity of certain bodily and artistic phenomena, the need and ambition arose for creating (no less than) a practical and ecologically valid model of music performance. Based on the initial insights related to my own practice as a performer, the model gradually broadened its scope within the context of my work as a piano-teacher and through the extra-disciplinary⁵ exploration of the scholarly work which is often only distally related to these issues.

Parallel to an initial focus on what will be discussed in the final chapters under the heading of 'action', a new set of questions surfaced when it became clear that an isolated understanding of musical action was inadequate when separated from the context in which such an action produces its effects. The triangular relation between composer, performer and audience came in view and required an orientation towards the notion 'inter-activity', implying some basic properties of music making such as perception, action-effect coupling, communication, entrainment, and narration. This interactive turn constituted a second phase in the inquiry and brought about new insights into the characteristic properties of performing Western Art Music and its relation to other forms of 'musicking' (Small, 1998). Finally, an important meta-question came to the fore, rooted in the expertise acquired throughout the previous phases, and giving a final and meta-practical impetus to the investigation before us. Digging into the fields of 'action' and 'interaction' led to a multitude of disciplinary directions going from psychology, philosophy, neurology, musicology and sociology and resulted in a personal information base containing more than 7000 items (books, articles, essays, presentations, summaries, reviews). This hunter-gatherer strategy only offered limited support to the quest for a more systematic and pragmatic understanding of music performance; the Gutenberg Galaxy of information (McLuhan, 1962), related to the topics action and interaction was simply too vast and too fragmented to be digested by a solitary informavorous fox⁶ (Berlin, 1953/1997; Miller, 1983). The bottom-up diet of the hunter-gatherer was set to be supplemented with the structural systematics of a sedentary lifestyle grounded within the permeable boundaries of artistic practice.

The following question arose: how can artistic expertise relate meaningfully and pragmatically to information and understandings that have their origins in the traditional sciences and the humanities, realizing moreover that the latter two parties have been struggling for centuries with issues of coherence of their own (Bendegem, 2009; Berlin, 1980; Snow, 1961)? This meta-question brought to mind cognitive scientist Mark Turner's observation in his prologue to *The Artful Mind*:

⁵ Extra-disciplinary information is information that does not originate from one's own field of expertise. In the context of this dissertation, by 'extra-disciplinary' is meant information that does not originate from the field of musical practice but from other branches of learning or knowledge production. Musical practice is here considered as a discipline or as "a branch of learning or knowledge; a field of study or expertise; a subject" [OED, 'discipline', def. 7.a.].

⁶ Isaiah Berlin discusses in this essay 'the fox and the hedgehog' two types of researchers and quotes thereby Aeschylus: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing" (Berlin, 1953/1997, p. 436).

The individual human being, in form and movement, in thought and action, is a seamless intersection of powerful histories—phylogenetic history, individual development, and social and cultural history—all profoundly influential. A human being is a unified agency of biology, psychology, and social, environmental, and cultural patterns. And yet, the academic study of human beings is fragmented into scattered disciplines. How can science overcome this academic incoherence to launch a tradition of research in which neuroscientists, cognitive and developmental psychologists, archaeologists, vision scientists, evolutionary theorists, artists, art historians, semioticians, sociologists, and cultural historians join to explain the artful mind and its expression in cultures? How, in short, can inquisitive twenty-six-year-olds inspired to explain the artful mind discover a unified intellectual framework and institutional setting in which to begin thinking about it? (Turner, 2006, p. xvi)

Turner does not explicitly provide an answer to these questions in his book – not even in the epilogue – but seems to sympathize with a direction leading to what will be introduced further in this study as a bio-cultural and dialogical approach. That is, a perspective that does not advocate a deterministic integration of all knowledge and information but rather the pragmatic connection or linkage (consilience) of disciplinary-based information in new contexts whereby each unit of information allows for new practical and dispositional orientations. The image came to mind of a framework that enables musical practitioners to organize their shared and often unsystematic, tacit expertise around some well-chosen and explicit attractors or *topoi*, and, serves as a base of operations for a guided dialogue with the cross-disciplinary world of which it is a part.

With the formulation of this meta-practical⁷ objective we are coming to the end of an archaeological exploration into the circumstances that led to the work that will be presented hereafter. We can therefore switch to the present tense now and focus on the journey that lies ahead. This dissertation is an attempt to carefully and systematically evaluate the state of musicianship in an age of informative abundance and connectedness, to consider ways of re-balancing its epistemic grounds and attuning its information systems, with a view to artistic development, enrichment and/or liberation, and to put these contextual re-arrangements to the test in practical situations. Thirteen chapters, organized into three ‘PARTS’ will actualize this ambition.

The aim of PART I is to arrive at delineating the essential contours of an *Informed Performership*. To that aim, the concept of information, which is pivotal in this investigation (but underdetermined in musical practice), is approached from three different angles: the presence of an informational vocabulary in musical discourse, the role of information in the history of words and ideas, and the generic dispositional presence of informational elements in human behaviour. Chapter 1 ignites the enquiry by setting the scene and anticipating a dialogical conversation between the semantic spectrum

⁷ The practice of reflecting on a practice. Meta-practice provides meanings (formal and informal) by which practitioners understand the work that they do (Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 2003, p. 390).

that surrounds information and the one that is attached to its alleged counter-term, imagination. The *pas-de-deux* between these two conceptual fields will be a *Leitmotiv* throughout the investigation in PART I. Following these initial observations and field delineations, Chapter 2 is concerned with tracing the practical meaning and use of information in discourses related to three selected performance backgrounds: Historically Informed Performance [HIP], Scientifically Informed Performers' Practices [SIPP], and the field of Main Stream Performance [MSP]. These practice-specific understandings will provide basic insights with regard to the varied use, the mechanics and the practical implications of information in the context of score-based performance. Chapter 3 aims at opening the conceptual horizon by revisiting the conceptual duality between information and imagination and extensively spading into the history of words and ideas for perspectives that challenge the *status quo* and align with the concerns of musicians. From the extended investigation into a manifold of possible configurations between information and imagination, the keystones will be selected for modelling the role of information in an artistic context.

Chapter 4 is evolutionary, developmentally, and behaviourally oriented. An excursus into the evolution and ontogenetic development of information and imagination has the objective of finding trans-cultural features which relate to the affiliation between these particular human capacities. The study on information behaviour is a relatively new strand of enquiry but shares the objective of finding common ground that ties the variety of cultural approaches together. The three perspectives on information (practical, historical, behavioural) will be taken into account when proposing a tailor-made and operational understanding of information in a musical environment in the final chapter of PART I which concludes by prompting the next question: is it conceivable to extend the projects of SIPP and HIP into a more Generally Informed Musicianship [GIM] where the information-base of musical performers is broadened into the direction of extra-disciplinary fields such as sociology, psychology, biology, physics?

The three chapters in PART II are contextual and assess the viability of such an inclusive musicianship by presenting three contemporary contexts that seem to be conducive to such a shift. At a *macro*-level the *Information Age*, in all its theoretical, technological, and socio-economical aspects, has led to an explosion in the fields of information and communication and affords new epistemic configurations. The essential tenets and affordances of an *Information Age* will be systematically analysed, and two corollaries ('scientification' and 'information overload') will be touched upon to achieve a more elaborate discussion in PART III.

At a *meso*-level, the project of a European Higher Education Area [EHEA] ushered in new prospects for the integration of professional and academic expertise. It will be argued that this institutional upheaval allows and stimulates a confluence and re-arrangement of three main historical currents in music –

music as theory, music as education and music as craft – and thereby opens the possibility for supra-disciplinary integration.

Finally: at a relative *micro*-level, the concept of Artistic Research will be identified as a facilitating and stimulating context, allowing for reflective, experimental and informational developments within musical practice.

In PART III the tone of optimism, present in the foregoing section, is counterbalanced by reviewing and analysing three bottlenecks that seem to hamper the development of an integrated musicianship. The time-honoured gap between theory and practice is a usual suspect in this domain, and will be situated both historically and behaviourally. A pragmatic way out of the apparent deadlock situation is proposed by positing an extended understanding of the concept of *Performance Practice* into a *Performers' Practice* – a socio-cultural practice where performers instead of performances are the intentional objects – and by introducing a third and mediating party: *personal theory*.

The second bottleneck concerns the epistemic status of musical practice. The position of the performing musician has undergone several historical revolutions (paradigm-shifts) until it acquired the status of an autonomous field with a focus on composed works, traditions, and hermetic, transcendental categories. Treating music as a bio-cultural phenomenon offers an alternative platform which allows for intra-, inter-, trans- and supra-disciplinary dialogue and connections.

Finally, a very practical but essential element of concern, already raised in PART II, is revisited. Information in its free-floating and not yet meaningfully imbedded capacity creates systemic overload and often inhibits practical integration, both on an individual and collective level. A topical attractor model of musical performance based on 'action' and 'interaction' is presented in Chapter 11 as an open-ended prototype of an information system that identifies, prioritizes and links certain conceptual magnets/attractors within a chaotic field and can function both as an information reservoir and as a problem-solving utility.

In PART IV, the elements of a *Bio-Culturally informed Performers' Practice* are revisited with a view to activating and operationalizing the action-interaction model by means of two case studies. The first study zooms in on a punctual component of instrument-directed action: the basic stroke in piano-playing. Information units from a variety of research fields are linked and add to the construction of an informed theory on the possibilities of striking a note on the piano in an efficient and expressive way. The second example is situated in the sphere of performative analysis and imagination: 'feeling the score' builds on the framework of topic theory and communicative musicality to construct elements for an *Interactional* and *Bio-topical Performative Analysis* that takes different forms of vitality as a point of departure.

From the chapter-overview above it can be deduced that the investigative project presented in this dissertation is not atomistic in nature, that it is not directed at understanding a small unit of musical practice but, on the contrary, that it involves a holistic and meta-practical outlook on a vast field of interest, accompanied by a focal ambition with regard to creating the epistemic and practical conditions that allow musicians to integrate relevant information into their practice. This straddle – which is an intrinsic part of the undertaking – calls for a few preliminary elucidations and disclaimers:

- The coverage of a vast field of expertise is inherent to the inquiry. An exhaustive investigation into all the elements that pertain to these domains (consultation of all primary and secondary sources) evidently exceeds the scope of this dissertation and, above all, the processing capacities of a single researcher. Personal expertise in the field of musical performance will at times be invoked to justify certain choices and selected references. From an academic point of view this may seem to be an easy way out, but as it will be argued in the Chapter 9, personal theory and the unique view of someone who is doing it, is a crucial and indispensable element in pragmatically overcoming the theory-practice gap.
- (Re-)connecting musicianship with a broader field of study, and stimulate discussion on a supra-, inter-, intra-, cross-, and trans-disciplinary level requires next to the invocation of personal theory also dialogue. In support of that requisite, the text will be rather generous in providing quotations, footnotes and bibliographical references. The use of quotations is an indispensable and a performative part of such a dialogical outlook and recalls the methodology used by the pioneering authors of the Historically Informed Performance movement.
- Although certain elements and mechanisms in this study may be transferrable to a variety of musical activities (composing, improvising, performing) and musical styles, there is an ultimate focus on the performance of Western Art Music. The horizon will in some instances extend to musicianship in general, or narrow down to the performance of music for piano; the intention however is to keep with the bandwidth of score-based performance as far as the applicability of the framework is concerned. The focus on the tradition of Western Art Music implies a confinement of the research-perspective to the aesthetic realm and the ritual relationship between performer and audience rather than addressing larger social and political dimensions in artistic practice.
- The methodology that goes along with an enquiry of this nature and extent is (necessarily) eclectic, varied, tailor-made, and mainly driven and measured by the effectiveness of its outcomes in the practical field. Punctual methodological clarification will be provided throughout the investigation, but in general, a balance is envisioned between a bottom-up approach (literature review, collection, inventarisation, personal experience, primary sources)

and a top-down perspective (survey of existing theories, overviews, and categorisations in the field). The prominence of a literature review method rather than a more empirical or experimental approach – which is more common in practice-based research – resonates with the performative aspect of the dissertation and the general claim with regard to importing and relating to extra-disciplinary fields of enquiry.

- As far as the bottom-up track is concerned, there is a distinctive bias towards performing music that is written for piano solo; this focus relates to the specific expertise of the enquirer. The top-down approach is in most cases in synchrony with the epistemic orientation of the dissertation and holds on to a bio-cultural perspective, linking contemporary understandings to historical and behavioural (pre-historical) ones.
- Information systems and translations (heuristic devices, chronological overviews, models) will be used on a functional basis in order to enhance the digestibility of certain elements. There is awareness concerning their inherent limitations with representing an all-encompassing picture of discipline-specific discourses but as they are helpful mediators in introducing and navigating through proximal and distal fields of interest, their development and inclusion in the text is also vital element of the journey.
- This investigation does not offer definitive and clear-cut solutions. Some of the issues that will be discussed (e.g. theory-practice divide, information overload) have haunted mankind for centuries, and it would be more than presumptuous to claim that in the following pages a 'solution' to these 'problems' is presented. The enquiry only claims to create within the context of the twenty-first century an open-ended and effective framework that pragmatically addresses certain persistent challenges that have hitherto hampered fruitful contact with informational elements that are potentially relevant but out of reach to musicians.

The research presented hereafter is part of a larger programme that aims at creating contact-points between musical practice and extra-disciplinary expertise via the medium of information. The programme as such seems at first sight to be much like the 'projects' that *romancier* Daniel Defoe defines in *An Essay Upon Projects* (1697/1887) as "a vast undertaking, too big to be managed". It will be argued however that a bio-cultural approach to music performance can meet the managerial challenges if it is considered as a 21st-century-bound opportunity that is in need for facilitation in terms of epistemic and practical dispositions in order to fully emerge and develop. Within this larger context, the ambition of the contribution that is presented hereafter is to demonstrate that an information-strategy can be beneficial to performing musicians if information is well understood in its limitations and affordances and if it is accompanied by adequate information-systems. When these conditions are met, a *Bio-Culturally informed Performer's Practice* can legitimately situate itself alongside existing or

emerging socio-cultural, academic and artistic currents and is able to give direction to a number of practical questions that occupy the minds and bodies of performers. In that capacity, it holds an interesting potential as an inclusive and inspirational framework for future artistic and pedagogical work.