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

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Chapter 5: The contours of an informed performership

PART I of this dissertation is dedicated to creating a conceptual space for an informed performership. In the first chapter, we opened with substantial doubts and scepticism – expressed mainly by art scholars and philosophers – regarding the role of information in an artistic and imagination-oriented environment. In the three ensuing chapters, the focus was on collecting components and perspectives with the potential to cast a more differentiated and constructive light on the alleged opposition between information and imagination.

By sample-surveying texts from three distinctive performers' orientations (Chapter 2), we found that information is used by musicians in semantically flexible ways. Intra-disciplinary sources of information such as scores, teachers, iconic examples, as well sensorial information turned out to be valued informational elements in mainstream performance [MSP]. In the more specialised contexts of Historically Informed Performance [HIP] and Scientifically Informed Performers' Practice [SIPP], we observed that intentional contact with knowledge originating from extra-disciplinary fields of expertise holds the potential of innovating and transforming habits, performance traditions, and learning styles. We could also differentiate between HIP and SIPP in terms of information source and target domain, information processing mode and seminal status.

From the spadework into the history of words and ideas that focused in a discipline-specific way on the interaction between information and imagination (Chapter 3), an activity-based, psychological understanding of information came to the fore as an alternative to the seminal Form-image hierarchy as posited by Plato and as referred to in dualistic analyses (see Chapter 1). A genealogical analysis indicated that the ontological dualism between the field of information and the one of imagination is more of an intrinsic alliance than an opposing dualism. Moreover, by processualising information and interposing Boulding's *Image*[234] between information and imagination, an integrated framework was created where a variety of information sources, processes, and modes of imagination can be linked to. Finally, an exploration into the more generic traits of information in a behavioural context (chapter 4) pointed to: 1/ an inherent human resistance to new information; 2/ a central role for cognitive fluidity in un-locking task-specific information processes; 3/ a trade-off between information and imagination in ontogenetic development; and finally, 4/ more refined descriptors of information behaviour in terms of information need, information seeking, information use, and information systems.

The elements ensuing from this multi-perspective investigation have been presented in an informational way – information *on* information, without too much interpretative processing or critical

[234] 'Image' is capitalized and italicized here because of the explicit reference to Boulding's use of the term (see Chapter 3).

comments; the main objective was to scan the field of information and imagination from a performer's point of view and to build a discipline-specific information-base that allows for defining the conceptual space that can be attributed to the notion of an informed performer in this final chapter of PART I.

5.1 Creating a conceptual space for an informed performership

An information-*aficionado* might now conclude from the considerations in the previous chapters that information is not a counter-field but rather an inherent, constitutive element of musicianship: musicians use information in different contexts (feedback, score) and as a means to challenge the status quo in their practice; throughout history, the dialectic between information and imagination has been a central concern to conceptualizing artistic practice; this complementarity and alliance can also be traced to biological dispositions and generic behaviour.

If we take the musician's *Image* as a central element in her/his perspective on musicking, genetic information (DNA) would account for the relatively hard-wired natural layer of that *Image*, it transmits basic skills (dexterity), intuitions, reflexes, developmental changes, and certain modes of self-organization that humans phylogenetically acquired through interaction with pre-historical environments via a process of Darwinian selection. It is a part of the *Image* that can be linked to 'nature' or the notion of 'innate talent'.

Another layer would then be the cultural layer, one that develops in interaction with the actual environment one lives in. Within this cultural layer, a distinction might be made between various sources of information such as: 1/ information directly acquired and bodily sensed by personal contact/experience/experiment with the natural and sign-mediated environment (scores, practising at the instrument, performing concert hall, auditory impressions); 2/ information shared and transmitted by peers, teachers, and colleagues; and finally, 3/ extra-disciplinary fields of enquiry.

From this perspective, the concept of an 'informed performer' seems to be no more than a mere pleonasm: it is impossible to be 'uninformed'?

This question brings us back to Kivy who indirectly refers to this terminological redundancy in his criticism on Historically Informed Performance as presented in Chapter 1 (Kivy, 2002). Kivy's critique is that, based on the archaic meaning of 'to inform' as 'to imbue with' (see also Chapter 3), the notion of an informed performance needs to be rejected since, according to him, a situation can arise in which information does not survive the process of judgement and taste, and does not imbue the performance as such. Kivy's criticism can be elegantly addressed by replacing 'Historically Informed Performance' by 'Historically Informed Performers' and by referring to the activity-based concept of information as we developed it in Chapter 3. Kivy, however, seems to be unconvinced by such a subjective turn:

> No performer would reject the proposal that one might get good ideas about how to perform a work by finding out how it was performed in the composer's lifetime or what the composer's performing intentions were. Certainly the so-called mainstream performer would not reject it. (Kivy, 2002, p. 141)

An element that certainly counters Kivy's reluctance to explicitly link information to performership is the enquiry in Chapter 2, the Performer's Voice, which indicated distinctive attitudes with regard to the integration of extra-disciplinary information between MSP on the one hand and HIP and SIPP on the other: whereas MSP relies mainly on intra-practical information sources, such as a score, a teacher and own experience, thereby seldom referring to extra-disciplinary fields, it is only in HIP and SIPP that the channels to extra-disciplinary information are actively explored. Also in our behavioural analysis of information this situation was encountered: concepts such as confirmation and myside bias capture the intrinsic reluctance of humans to engage with potentially challenging and explosive information.

If we then look at conceptual spaces such as the 'reflective practitioner' (Schön, 1983), the 'intuitive practitioner' (Atkinson & Claxton, 2000), or the 'creative artist', we see that although these concepts potentially suffer from a pleonastic inclination akin to the one implicit in 'the informed performer', they have nevertheless proven to be valuable instruments in creating awareness and opening new avenues of thought and development. In the same vein 'historically informed' has added and highlighted a substantial quality to 'traditional' performership: 'historically informed performers' show a specific interest in historical information as a guide to their performances.

How could this work in the case of the 'informed performer' who does not limit her-/himself to historical sources?

Quasi-unintentionally, Kivy points to a crack in the wall when asserting that, once the step is taken to make performers and not performances the intentional object of information, it seems rather obvious that one would not limit oneself to historical information but would be eager to expand the informational field from history also into other domains.

> If the only reason for the performer's having historical knowledge is that it is a possible source of performance ideas, this does not in any way make historical knowledge a *favoured* source. It is just one of many possible sources of performance ideas, all of which are evaluated on the basis of the performer's musical judgement, taste, and creative intuitions. (Kivy, 2002, p. 141)

From the considerations in the previous chapters we learned that, in general terms, the information behaviour of musicians is primarily directed at intra-disciplinary sources of information such as the score, a teacher, iconic examples and proximally related fields such as music theory and history. Moreover, the activity of high level music making requires the development of reliable *Images*, habits and automatisms which then become part of a musician's identity and resist the confrontation with

potentially perturbing information. From this, it can be inferred that being informed in ways that surpass disciplinary borders is not a trivial characteristic of musicianship as suggested by Kivy.

Here, a meaningful differentiation imposes itself between 'mere' performership, 'historically (or otherwise) informed' performership and a performer's orientation whereby the intentional interest in extra-disciplinary knowledge-domains is not limited to proximally related fields such as history or philosophy. To that end, we propose to extend 'Informed Performership' into the notion of a 'Generally Informed Performership' [GIP] or a 'Generally Informed Musicianship' [GIM].

However, GIP is not solely characterized by its explicit and extended orientation towards a vast range of extra-disciplinary information; the investigations that we performed in the previous chapters lead to the implication of several adjoining attitudes, characteristics and attributes that come with the conceptual space now attributed to a 'Generally Informed Performership':

1. GIP is grounded in an orienting impulse (Dennett, 1991) which is intentional and requires active, prospective, and systematic information seeking (see Chapter 4).
2. GIP is not dogmatic. GIP includes 'standard' performership with all its valuable strategies of cognitive-gap-bridging, problem-solving and imaginative artistry such as intuition, tradition, habits, experimentation, and reflection (see Chapter 2).
3. Performers' minds constitute the primary target-domains of GIP. Actual performances are a secondary and only potential impact-domain (see Chapter 3).
4. GIP allows for a variety of information impacts: it holds the opportunity of dismantling existing knowledge perspectives and reconfiguring one's *Image* but it can also serve as a tool in closing cognitive gaps and enlightening existing expertise (see Chapter 3).
5. GIP is exploratory, innovating, and not restricted to mere problem-solving; here information becomes the intentional object of imagination and can be linked to various modes of imagination: mimetic, parodic, creative, pragmatic (see Chapter 2).
6. GIP involves new ways of learning and development which are not focused on a model (situational learning), or on direct contact with the environment (personal experience, ecological learning), but rather on written texts that act as informational currency between fields of expertise (see Chapter 2).
7. GIP favours (whenever possible) contact with pure, non-pre-filtered or non-pre-processed primary sources, leaving space for personal interpretation, actualization and imagination (see Chapter 2).
8. The *modus operandi* of GIP is close to Bacon's concept of the bee: "[GIP] takes material from the flowers of the garden and the field; but it has the ability to convert and digest them" [Bacon.Nov.Org.book 1, XCV] (Bacon, 1620/2000, p. 79).

Considering these attributes, we can now propose the following summarizing working-definition of GIP:

A Generally Informed Performership [GIP] is a mental space within the broader category of musicianship where a score-based performer (habitually) orients her/himself in an active, prospective, and systematic manner to information originating from extra-disciplinary fields as a complement to intra-disciplinary paths of artistic training, learning, and development, and allows this information to potentially make a difference to her/his *Image* of music-making and to the actions and imaginations that build upon that *Image*.

Definition 2: Generally Informed Performership [GIP].

5.2 Performing a Generally Informed Performership

Creating a conceptual space is one thing, implementing it is a different matter. In the introduction to PART I, we formulated a secondary research question which implicated the operational aspects of an informational strategy: how does an information galaxy behave when a musician is interrogating it? And what does it offer in terms of added value? In order to address these questions, we performed throughout the investigative process in PART I, in very general and structural terms, the concept of a Generally Informed Performership – *avant la lettre* – and situated it in a systematic, bio-cultural framework that negotiated between generic dispositions, and historically and culturally contingent practices. In view of the further development of the concept of GIP, we can now assess some of the opportunities and weaknesses that arise if a 21st century score-based musician seeks access to a discipline-transgressing galaxy of information.

On the opportunity-side, it can be inferred that basic information literacy skills and an inquisitive attitude do indeed allow fast and unprecedented access to an abundant amount of information coming from primary and secondary sources, intra- and extra-disciplinary. The digital forms in which most sources are available, the search-engines and the software that allow for purposefully scanning these texts contribute to a great extent to this situation of quasi-thresholdless access. Moreover, by bypassing the traditional information filters of disciplinary literature and by applying a practice-based outlook on things, perspectives and connections surface which allow for new and original configurations (see for instance the dialectic between information and imagination).

On the weakness-side, we must acknowledge that a systematic information search which aims at balancing and integrating overview, focus and detail is an effort-consuming and daunting enterprise that in 'normal' circumstances exceeds the attentional potential of individual action by a professional performer. There is not only the punctual research to be done, the exploration of boundary objects

such as information and imagination pre-supposes a general overview in relation to specific perspectives, awareness of the various parallel languages and keywords, and envisaging/imagining new links between the elements of information. Such an overview is not readily available and takes time to acquire via online explorations, conference participations and dedicated study-sessions.

Contra Lyotard (see 3.4.1.), it can be argued that 'perfect information' is an utopian dream and that experience, *Bildung,* and disciplinarity remain indispensable partners in this type of work: 1/ without focused and discipline-specific information-production, the notion of extra-disciplinarity is pointless; 2/ without discipline-specific questions and information-eagerness, the opportunity of a productive dialectic between various realms of imperfect information vanishes; and 3/ without *Bildung*-elements such as proficiency in foreign languages or basic epistemic awareness of the domain concerned, the information seeking process is limited *qua* depth, boundless *qua* volume and contingent *qua* selection. In our view, information literacy involves not only mere access to sources but also an epistemic compass, a general frame of reference[235], basic language skills and an orientation with regard to where information is situated.

From a more generic perspective, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi attests to the creative potential of crossing the boundaries of disciplinary domains but at the same time points to the scarcity of human attention as an important bottleneck. Csikszentmihalyi discerns two strategies in addressing this limitation: specialization (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 9) and selection. As far as the latter strategy is concerned, he observes that:

> We remember and recognize only a few of the works of art produced, we read only a few of the new books written, we buy only a few of the new appliances busily being invented. Usually it is the various fields that act as filters to help us select among the flood of new information those memes worth paying attention to. A field is made up of experts in a given domain whose job involves passing judgment on performance in that domain. Members of the field choose to be included in the canon. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 42)

Considering the inherent limits of attention and the ensuing strategies, Csikszentmihalyi further identifies several ways in which domains can help or hinder creativity via a cross-disciplinary information strategy. Three major dimensions are thereby relevant: the centrality of knowledge within a culture, the accessibility of knowledge to interested parties, and the clarity in which knowledge is structured. Csikszentmihalyi refers to the differential structure in the sciences and humanities to make

[235] Only recently (Dec. 11th 2016) a Guardian journalist demonstrated the weaknesses of merely information access. When she googled "did the holocaust happen?", she received top answers that deny its occurrence. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/11/google-frames-shapes-and-distorts-how-we-see-world

his point with regard to the conditions of structure that need to be in place in order to facilitate cross-disciplinary fertilization.[236]

> Mathematical genius peaks in the twenties, physics in the thirties, but great philosophical works are usually achieved later in life. The most likely explanation for these differences lies in the different ways these domains are structured. The symbolic system of mathematics is organized relatively tightly; the internal logic is strict; the system maximizes clarity and lack of redundancy. Therefore, it is easy for a young person to assimilate the rules quickly and jump to the cutting edge of the domain in a few years. […] By contrast, it takes decades for social scientists or philosophers to master their domains, and if they produce a new idea, it takes the field many years to assess whether it is an improvement worth adding to the knowledge base. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 38)

From these general considerations combined with personal observations, it can be inferred that, for a project such as GIP, creating a conceptual space is only a starting-point that is in need of a professional and supportive context in which the limits of human attention are respected and where it can effectuate its true accumulative potential. Such a context requires crucial elements such as:

1. A further assessment of new, 21st century opportunities within the larger framework of a knowledge-centred Information Age, where GIP can position its role as an innovative concept.
2. An educational project that fosters an informational attitude and information literacy in terms of epistemic horizon, information eagerness, awareness of boundary objects and disciplinary territories.
3. A research-space dedicated to GIP and to the integration of individual actions.
4. An understanding that allows for fruitful negotiation between practice and theory, between *Bildung* and information (akin to the space of convergence that we created between the field of imagination and information in this chapter).
5. A pragmatic musical ontology that is not structured in terms of metaphysical interventions and ineffable processes of genius but allows epistemic interaction with extra-disciplinary fields.
6. An information system grounded in artistic practice but oriented towards extra-disciplinary fields allowing for the storage, retrieval, and linkage of information.
7. Examples of GIP wherein musicians demonstrate how information works in their own practice.

It is believed that these conditions can be met in our time and that a renewed interest and explorative inquisitiveness should force itself on the agenda of musicians.

[236] See also sociologists Basil Bernstein and Karl Maton for their notions of horizontal and hierarchicial knowledge and knower structures (Bernstein, 1999; Maton, 2010).

In the next chapters, the requirements listed above will be examined sequentially and an attempt will be made at configuring an environment in which GIP or an actualised version of a *Gesamt-musiker* (Harnoncourt, 1982/2004) could thrive. In PART II the contextual elements 1 to 3 (mentioned above) will be addressed; PART III engages with the practical aspects 4 to 6; finally, in PART IV, examples of GIP will be presented.