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Musical Performances are (not) Artistic Research

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[1] Disclaimer

This text is a slightly reworked version of a keynote speech I gave in Aveiro (Portugal) during the PERFORMA 2015 Conference on Musical Performance, organized by the University of Aveiro, the Institute of Ethnomusicology (INET-MD), and the Brazilian Association of Musical Performance (ABRAPEM).

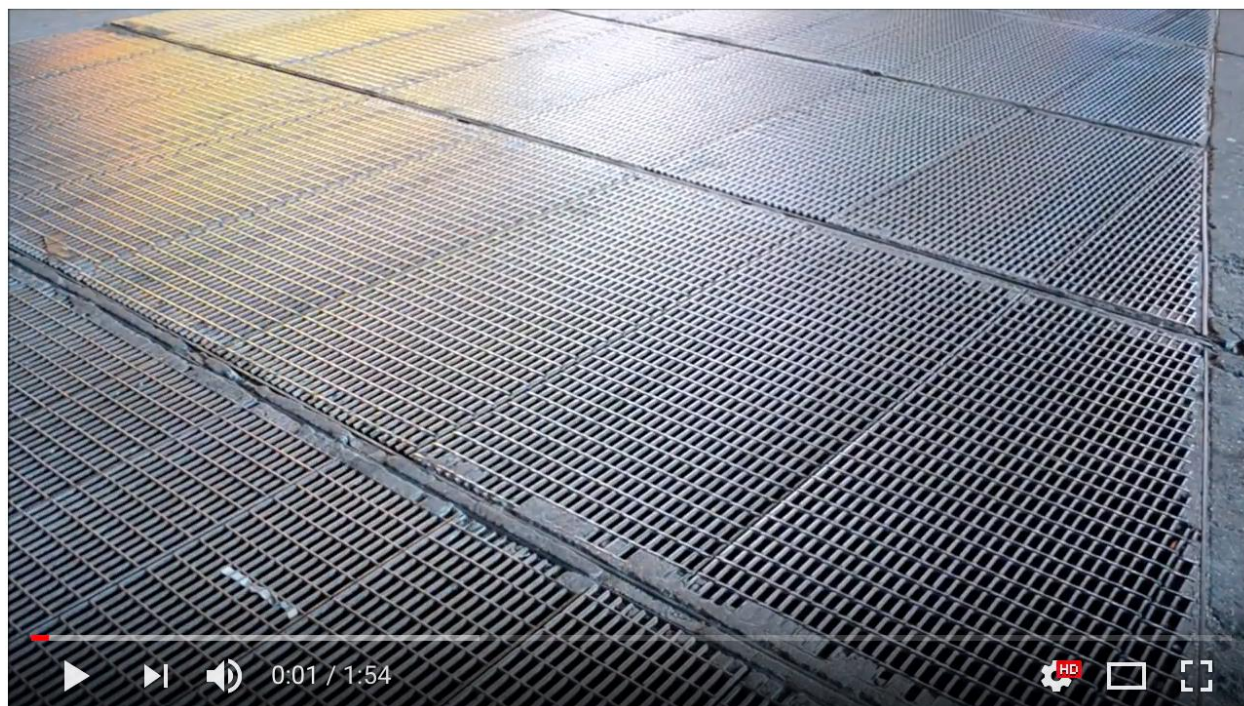
My verbal presentations are usually organized quite differently from my writings, for the simple reason that listening is a different activity from reading. Here, however, I make an exception and stay as close as possible to the spoken text from 2015. Hence, the statements and arguments I make here are not thoroughly elaborated upon or underpinned by references to existing sources.

[2] Clarification of the Title

What does it mean when I say that musical performances both are and are *not* artistic research? What I intended to express with this title is that musical performances *can be* the result of artistic research, but I am certainly not claiming that every musical performance is by definition (the result of) artistic research, even when the musicians are (rightfully) claiming that they have done research prior to and in preparation for performing the music.

Of course, defending this statement implies in the first place that the difference between a “regular” performance and a performance resulting from or forming part of an artistic research cannot (always) be heard. Second, it raises questions concerning the definition of artistic research: when can an event, an action, a process, or a project be called artistic research? Endless discussions, disagreements, and misunderstandings are looming as, of course, there is not one, true definition; there are many. In addition, and to complicate things even more, I think it is also necessary to make a difference between artistic research in general and artistic research which should, for example, lead to an academic degree. To give just one simple example: I would certainly consider Max Neuhaus an artistic researcher; however, to grant him with an academic title would involve different criteria and critical approach. Listen for a moment to Neuhaus’ *Times Square*.

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Video Example 1: Max Neuhaus: Times Square. Excerpt from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gahUMGmKzIA>

In my opinion, this work presents as an exemplary bit of artistic research. In and through this work Neuhaus investigates the role and position of sound in space instead of time; the perception of and through sound draws attention to the material presence of space. Besides conveying the evidence of *sonological* research, without which this work would not have been possible, *Times Square* also provides insights into socio-political issues: engaging with this work is also an act of critically positioning one's own listening.

However, if the question was raised as to whether Neuhaus could be granted an academic degree on the basis of this work, things might change. The point I am trying to make is that artistic research within an academic setting and leading to an academic title would require more emphasis on a clear and explicit formulation of specific research questions as well as the presentation of a convincing methodology, evidence, contextualization, etc. In this presentation, I will focus on artistic research performed within an "academic" context, with the aim of receiving an academic degree. In order to do so, I will present in the next section a "working definition" of artistic research, although, as I will explain, I am quite hesitant to use definitions: instead of trying to describe what things *are*, I focus instead on how things *work* – hence my recourse to concrete examples later on.

[3] Artistic Research – A Fluid and Porous (Institutional) Frame

The institute at which I am working, the Academy of Creative and Performing Arts at Leiden University (the Netherlands), uses the following definition as a point of departure or working definition to think about artistic research in an academic context. (The definition comes from the book *The Conflict of Faculties*, written by the institute's current academic director, Professor Henk Borgdorff. However, I have slightly modified it for use here.)

Art practice qualifies as research if its purpose is to **expand our knowledge and understanding** by conducting an **original investigation in and through art** objects and creative processes. Art research begins by addressing **questions** that are pertinent in the research context and in the art world. Researchers employ **multiple methods** that reveal and articulate the **specific knowledge** that is situated and embodied in (their) artworks and artistic processes. Research processes and outcomes are **documented and disseminated** in an appropriate manner to peers, the research community, and the wider public.

Before elaborating upon this description, specifically focusing on the parts marked purple, I first need to add three brief remarks:

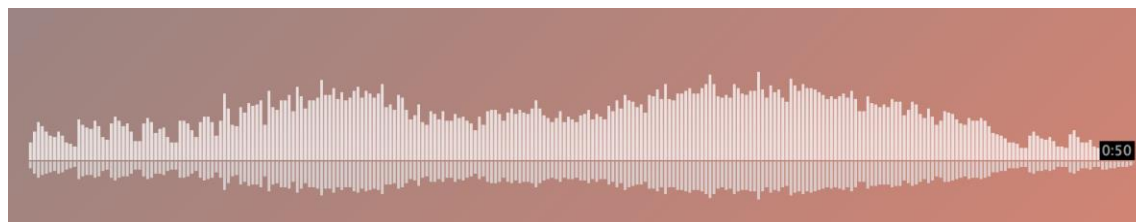
First, as already stated in section two, as far as I am concerned this definition should be open for perpetual discussion, hence my introducing it as a “working definition” or a “point of departure.” Once again, the boundaries of artistic research cannot (and should not) be clearly demarcated. What artistic research *is* cannot be decided once and for all. Within our institute artistic research is constantly (re)negotiated as interesting new PhD applications often force us to rethink its borders. These borders should, therefore, be regarded as fluid and porous; they are constantly stretched and accessible for new input.

Second, for me artistic research only makes sense – it is only useful and worth fighting for – if it really contributes something significant to already existing (artistic and/or academic) knowledge, knowledge that cannot be discovered or revealed in any other way except through art or by anyone besides an artist.

Three, instead of ending up in a theoretical, institutional, formal, and/or ideal typical discussion of what should be in- and excluded from artistic research, I’d rather take a look at some concrete examples. So, in the next sections I will discuss three concrete examples and investigate if and how they relate to the above definition of artistic research and thus qualify as artistic research that would lead to an academic title. (And, to emphasize this point once more, a mutual dependence exists between the examples and the definition: the process of framing the idea of artistic research has made these projects possible, and, conversely, through these examples, the definition could be formulated and reformulated.)

[4] Anna Scott – Revisiting Brahms for the First Time

This is the opening of Brahms’ “Intermezzo in E minor, Opus 116 No.5” as played by the famous Russian pianist Sviatoslav Richter.

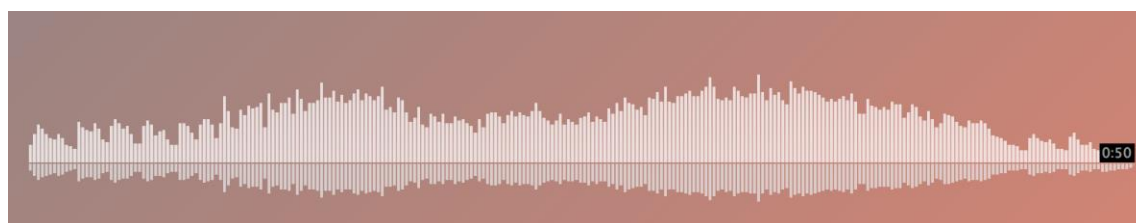


Audio Example 1: Sviatoslav Richter playing Brahms’ “Intermezzo in E minor, Opus 116 No.5”. Excerpt from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSsobHfa37A>, published by Yoshikatsu Kato on December 25, 2009

Richter has undoubtedly contributed significantly to the existing performance practice and the twentieth-century music world. Most likely Richter has studied Brahms’ score extensively;

most likely he has tried out and practiced different interpretations; most likely he has analyzed other performances before developing his own technical and artistic path; perhaps he has also explored various instruments on which he could perform and record this piece; etc. In light of this, one could defend the theory that Richter's as well as almost every musician's performance is somehow rooted in research. However, if one were to present this performance as research, retrospectively, one would need to ask questions such as "Is there a clearly formulated research question?" "What is the research method?" "What did the performer say about the context within which the research took place?" "Is there any justification for the aesthetic choices being made?" Etc.

As a counterpoint to Richter's work, let me present a different interpretation of the same piece by the Canadian pianist Anna Scott.



Audio Example 2: Anna Scott playing Brahms' "Intermezzo in E minor, Opus 116 No.5".

Excerpt <https://soundcloud.com/user-609310445/brahms-intermezzo-e-minor-scott/s-lbxwM>

Is this the result of artistic research? Of course, as in the previous examples of Neuhaus and Richter, this is difficult, if not impossible, to hear if one is only able to refer to the audio file or performance alone. More information is needed. In other words, while a musical performance might be a *necessary* condition through which the results of artistic research (in music) are disseminated, it is not a *sufficient* condition. So, let me briefly outline the background against which Scott's performance came into existence.

Next to her recordings of various piano pieces by Brahms, Scott submitted a written dissertation titled "Romanticizing Brahms: Early Recordings and the Reconstruction of Brahmsian Identity." The thesis has a very clear, tripartite structure.

The first part consists mainly of analyses of current performance practices of Brahmsian piano music, summarized by Scott under the denominator "the aesthetic ideology of control." According to her, the performance practice of the twentieth century is to a large extent characterized by attention for details; structure; temporal and tonal measurements; and expressive and technical control. This can be heard, Scott claims, in Richter's playing as well.

In the second part of her text, she offers an overview of how this same piano music would have been performed in the time of Brahms. Based on early recordings by, for example, Ilona Eibenschütz, Adelina de Lara, and Fannie Davies, Scott shows how the performance practice back then deviated considerably from what was notated in the score: musical details were altered; there was extensive use of *arpeggiation*; left and right hands were often desynchronized; many rhythmic adaptations as well as tempo modifications were applied – all of this leading to a more or less blurred structure. In short, Scott proves that there is

actually no historical evidence for the current and still dominant performance practice, dictated by precision, respect for the score, and control.

Part three, the final part, deals with the way Scott has reworked the information offered in Part Two into her own performance practice. She calls this “experimental extrapolation,” influenced by the historical recordings. The term “experimental extrapolation” is justified here, as there is certainly no one-to-one mapping of the early recording analyses to Scott’s own interpretations; this is simply impossible because those early performers all played Brahms’ music very differently. Scott experimented with the variety of performative possibilities she heard in the early recordings, extrapolating a set of “techniques” that she then applied to other pieces by Brahms. In other words, her work cannot be called historically correct (in the usual HIPP sense of the term); it would be more accurate to regard it as a performance of historical *corrections* based on historical research but, even more importantly, also based on experimentation, participation, and concrete musical engagement.

[5] Falk Hübner – Theatrical Reduction



Video Example 3: Falk Hübner – “Thespian Play.” Excerpt from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GwoE6ppvswu> published by Falk Hübner on March 11, 2010

To be able to answer the question as to whether the invention and composition of this work might be considered a (good) example of artistic research, it is helpful to understand how it came into existence. Hübner composes and produces music theater. For him, music theater is interesting because it made him rethink the parameters of what a musician *is*, thus opening space for (research) questions concerning a musician’s identity. Initially, when watching and analyzing other music theater productions, Hübner often felt dissatisfied with the actions that musicians were asked to perform on stage, actions that were often too difficult for non-trained actors, actions so far removed from the musician’s musical practice and training they often ended up looking quite amateurish.

In short, Hübner's analysis of what often takes place in contemporary music theater is what he eventually labeled as "a strategy of extension or expansion" – the musicians need to do more than simply playing music – and he noticed and reflected on the problems they have with this approach. This led him to investigate the possibilities of a radically opposite approach to the one described above: instead of extension or expansion, Hübner aimed for a strategy of *reduction*, the taking away of specific qualities or abilities of the musician's profession without replacing it with other theatrical interventions. His research question developed into something like this: How can a musician become theatrical without the necessity of becoming an actor?

The methodology Hübner used to investigate this question can be described as a constant feedback loop between three elements: (a) extensive experimentation within several close collaborations with musicians in a theater setting; (b) gathering information about other music theater makers, especially those who also worked with elements of reduction, such as Heiner Goebbels and Kris Verdonck; (c) reflecting on the artistic experiments ("what works well and what doesn't?") as well as on extant knowledge regarding music theater ("what can I learn from existing literature on music theater?").

The dissemination of his research project, its development, context, and results took place primarily through public performances and their presentation on the Internet as well as a book/PhD dissertation entitled *Shifting Identities*.

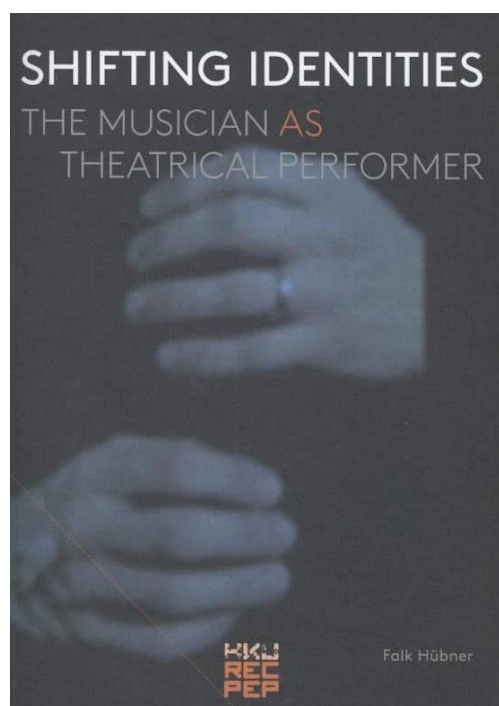
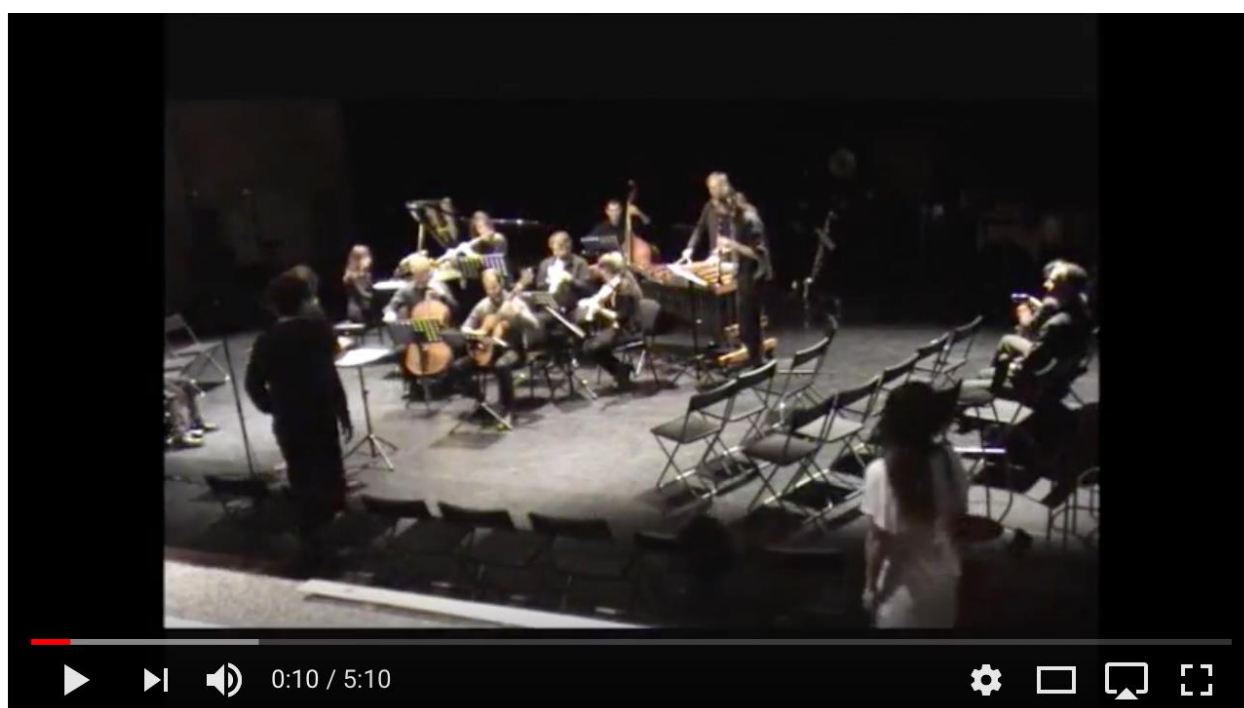


Figure 1. Falk Hübner – *Shifting Identities* (front cover)

To what new knowledge did Hübner's project lead? First of all, he developed a rather innovative theoretical and conceptual model of extension versus reduction in relation to the stipulated actions of musicians on stage during music theater productions. The concept of reduction obviously received the strongest focus, as scarcely any literature is available regarding this approach. Second, Hübner contributed significant practical knowledge

concerning the reductive model in music theater to this artistic field, especially useful to musicians, stage directors, and theater makers. Third, through his research he was able to rethink the delineating parameters of a musician's professional identity. Through the production of new art in combination with literature research, this identity could be redefined: Which and how many actions can you eradicate from a musician's performance and still maintain her/his identity as a musician on stage? What exactly turns someone into a musician? In the example presented above, a short excerpt of *Thespian Play*, the performer is devoid of his instrument; however, it is evident that a rather skilled sax player is needed to perform this piece. Does this lead to the conclusion that in order to be qualified as a musician, actively playing an instrument is not necessarily a requirement?

[6] Miguelangel Clerc – Recomposing Immersion



Video Example 4: Miguelangel Clerc – “A Bao A Qu”. Excerpt

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_5ElzcdE2I&feature=youtu.be

Persons watching the beginning of this recording of “A Bao A Qu” might first notice that their attention is drawn to all the gradual transitions taking place. The audience, still conversing and enjoying their drinks, slowly moves from the entrance hall to the space where the concert will take place. This is of course not only a physical or tactile act but also a sonic event: in this short clip one can hear the talking, the chairs moving, and other random background noises blending with the sounds produced by the musicians. This confuses the audience: are they already performing music? Or not yet? Are they still rehearsing? Tuning their instruments? If you watch the conductor, you will see that only at 3’57” does he for the first time move his hand, ostensibly giving a cue to the performers.

“A Bao A Qu” is a composition that became part of the artistic research project of Miguelangel Clerc, a Chilean composer interested in and investigating the concept of

“immersion.” Immersion is not only a popular concept in the art world these days, but it also often pops up in theories about virtual reality, computer games, installation art, and film (e.g. in relation to surround sound, 3D, and moving seats to enhance the experience).

What connects these theories and practices surrounding immersion is that they often emphasize a clear separation from “normal” reality in order to create a new virtual reality. This virtual reality is experienced as becoming more successful the more the audience is immersed in it, that is, disengaged from their “normal” reality. In his research, Clerc searches for another form and another idea of immersion, and in order to do so, he turns toward discourses on everyday music listening. In these discourses one can find that music is often – consciously or unconsciously – used for transitions: listening to music on one’s mobile phone while commuting or traversing public spaces; using *Muzak* in shops, shopping malls or while on hold on the telephone; playing music to accompany physical exercises; listening to music to pull out of negative thoughts or moments; etc. In all these cases music is used as a vital tool to change one’s mood. In the situations described above, the listener is not really entering a new or virtual reality; rather, several different realities are occurring simultaneously, next to or on top of each other. Instead of experiencing a clear switch to a situation of being completely immersed in a new environment – as is the case with, and aim of, most computer games or films – in everyday music listening one frequently and quickly switches from one reality to another. Here, immersion is experienced and can thus be understood as being in more than one reality at the same time, turning into a kind of dissociation.

Clerc not only poses the question of what the implications of this kind of thinking could be for musicians and composers; he came to this reorientation of his thoughts on immersion through his own composing – the act of composing “A Bao A Qu” – as this work is a good example of how different realities operate at the same time: the reality of the composition being performed and the reality of the audience entering the venue created a slightly askew experience in which the two different realities mutually, yet not totally, permeated each other. While being immersed, e.g. in the music, “normal” reality remained present, affecting the (experience of) the music.

Thus, in his PhD project, Clerc not only produced new art, but through this new composition he was able to readdress the meaning and working of immersion, a theme so prevalent in current art discourse. In and through his art Clerc offered this concept new meaning, or at least his music gave him the opportunity to investigate alternative ideas concerning immersion; through “A Bao A Qu” and other compositions, Clerc was able to tell another story about immersion. In short, in his research project, a constant interplay occurred between theory and art: while music influenced the conceptualization of immersion, the theoretical discourse on immersion had a direct impact on Clerc’s compositional practice.

[7] John Croft – Against Artistic Research

What I have presented in the previous sections are three examples of artistic research, successful to the extent that artistic as well as academic peers agreed to grant these people the title of PhD. As I have shown, all three projects started from a clear research question; all three musicians applied distinct research methods; the research was based on their artistic practices; the outcomes were disseminated in and through written and musical materials; and in all three cases, new knowledge was acquired. Not only the academic world can

benefit from artistic research, it also affects the art world, opening up ways of thinking and doing which were previously less obvious, less fashionable.

However, the increase of artistic research also gives rise to counternarratives, to oppositional forces, to substantial criticism. Precisely while in the process of preparing the verbal presentation of this paper in 2015 (see the disclaimer), I read an article by John Croft entitled "[Composition is not Research](#)". In the article, which attracted quite some attention on social media, Croft claimed – and I quote only from the abstract here – that

composers in academic institutions are increasingly required to describe their activities in terms of ‘research’ – formulating ‘research questions’, ‘research narratives’, ‘aims’ and ‘outcomes’. Research plans and funding applications require one to specify the nature of the original contribution that will be made by a piece of music, even before it is composed [...] Yet the very idea that musical composition is a form of research is a category error: music is a domain of thought whose cognitive dimension lies in embodiment, revelation or presentation, but not in investigation and description [...] composition as research is not only objectively false but inimical to genuine musical originality. (Croft, 2016, p. 6)

As Croft’s article almost diametrically opposes my ideas on artistic research, as presented above, I felt the need to elaborate a bit on the adamant statements he made.

First, it is remarkable that the title of Croft’s “pamphlet” almost resembles the title of this short presentation/essay, “Musical Performances are (not) Artistic Research”, although I seem to be slightly more hesitant and cautious: musical performances cannot *by definition* be qualified as (artistic) research, and, of course, the same applies to compositions. However, as I have tried to argue through the three examples described above, they *can*, without a doubt, contribute something new to already existing knowledge, to the understanding and further elaboration of certain topics and should, thus, be subsumed under the denominator “research.”

Why do I make this claim? For me the most convincing and solid answer is that musicians ask different questions than music theorists, musicologists, and music historians, for example. Their questions stem, more or less directly, from their (own) artistic practice, that is, from certain issues with which they are confronted each time they make music.

Systematically investigating these issues in and through their artistic practice, presenting (temporary) “solutions,” and/or reflecting on these investigations and possible solutions may lead to new knowledge from which others, usually peers, can benefit. The fact that this new knowledge is often embodied or tacit and difficult, if not impossible, to articulate in and through words only proves the necessity and rationale of artistic research’s existence; this type of research would simply be superfluous if other discourses around music could express the outcomes better than the music itself. Perhaps one could even claim that the main contribution of artistic research is to develop knowledge which is primarily practical, which generally manifests itself in the process of making art; this knowledge is disclosed in and through art and cannot be easily, if at all, generated in any other way. The artwork – be it a composition, a performance, a recording, an installation or otherwise – is thus not merely a practical aid added as an afterthought to support linguistically-articulated conclusions; rather, it is itself statement and conclusion.

Also, in terms of methodology, I am convinced that artistic research has something to contribute. Composing and performing, *musicking* in general, can become a kind of experimentation in which different solutions to practical problems are tested. Again, the results may not only help other musicians, leading to new insights for other professionals in the music world, but they can also inform and inspire people (e.g. researchers) outside the strictly musical domain. Artistic research is a field in which knowledge is gained through the experience of making art. In other words, it is a field in which thinking and doing coalesce, in which making art and doing research naturally and organically merge.

[8] Conclusion

As seemed to occur in 2015, and still evident in 2017, higher professional education in several (European) countries made a turn towards “academization.” Students as well as teachers at these institutes, including conservatories and art schools, are more and more encouraged to enter a PhD trajectory in order to increase the level of professionalization. This inevitably implies that university conventions and standards are entering into and being applied within higher professional education: the research being done at these institutes is often measured according to the rules and norms developed at universities. However, this is not exclusively a one-way traffic. The appearance of artistic research within the universities also changes their academic traditions and conventions. What universities receive from, for example, artistic researchers is other knowledge, other research topics, other ways of gaining and presenting knowledge, other ways of documenting and disseminating knowledge, alternative research methods, new types of scholars or students, new areas where those scholars and students can carry out and share their research. I find it justifiable to call this a classical win-win situation, with perhaps only one victim: traditional musicology. Of course, this discipline will not (and should not) disappear, but it will most likely be shifted toward the periphery of research on music in the (near) future.

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Cobussen is author of several books, among them *The Field of Musical Improvisation* (LUP 2017), *Music and Ethics* (Ashgate 2012/Routledge 2017, co-author Nanette Nielsen), and *Thresholds. Rethinking Spirituality Through Music* (Ashgate 2008). He is editor of *The Routledge Companion to Sounding Art* (Routledge 2016, co-editors Barry Truax and Vincent Meelberg) and *Resonanties. Verkenningen tussen kunsten en wetenschappen* (LUP 2011). He is editor-in-chief of the open access online *Journal of Sonic Studies* (www.sonicstudies.org). His PhD dissertation *Deconstruction in Music* (Erasmus University Rotterdam 2002) is presented as an online website located at www.deconstruction-in-music.com.