

## **Guelph Colloquium - September 3, 2008**

### **Getting the Music Off the Page: Practice-based research and the construction of the Practitioner-Theorist**

#### **I**

This presentation is the result of a continuing identity crisis born of a privileged situation. The foundation of my predicament is that my musical and academic work for most of my life has been as a bassist and composer, yet now I find myself three years into a PhD in ethnomusicology, a discipline that employs the written word as the primary mode of knowledge communication and research documentation. The tension I have experienced while learning to work in the literary medium has led me to look for ways of incorporating my musical practice into the evaluative expectations of an ethnomusicology degree. This search has resulted in my questioning the boundaries of my discipline, the value of the skills and knowledge I have acquired as a musician to the academic context in which I am working, and indeed whether or not it is possible to satisfactorily balance and maintain the dual roles of performer and researcher. I don't have answers to these questions, yet it is my intention, following George Lewis' recommendation and example, to "produce and disseminate" both recorded performances and textual documentation towards "redressing the apparent imbalance between literature and orature in the society at large."

My academic research pursues responses to the basic question: How do improvising musicians generate their performances within the current field of cultural production? I hope by developing and collecting responses to this question that I can provide some insight into the global field of music known loosely as free improvisation through investigating the local practices of a small group of musicians. So far in my

work I have followed a loose research program that includes participant observation, historical research, literature review, critical self-reflection, ethnographic interviews, and the pursuit of embodied knowledge through performance on the double bass. With the goal of integrating these distinct yet interdependent modes of inquiry, I have been exploring the models of Performance Studies and the emerging field of Practice-based research, both of which so far have had little application in the presentation of music research. A fundamental issue raised by the study of improvisation is the hierarchy of knowledge within academic discourse, otherwise formulated as the binary opposition between theory and practice. On the problem of integrating practical knowledge into the academic field, Performance scholar Dwight Conquergood states:

The dominant way of knowing in the academy is that of empirical observation and critical analysis from a distanced perspective... This propositional knowledge is shadowed by knowledge that is anchored in practice and circulated within a performance community, but is ephemeral.

In response to the epistemological issues raised by Performance Studies, the concept of Practice-based Research represents the search for a practical solution to the problems of presenting research that is conducted through artistic practice. As the most significant contribution of practice-based research is to addressing issues of documentation, I will explore the challenges in documenting improvisatory musical practices, towards a proposal for the use of alternative media for the re-evaluation of traditional hierarchies of knowledge.

## II

To date, there is little literature about practice-based research in music, and the majority of the writings I have found are from the disciplines of theatre, visual art, film

and dance. I became aware of the potentials of this initiative at a seminar in London, England, where out of approximately 50 fine arts students I was the only musician. Based on a survey of various practice-based research projects, I understand PbR as a collection of methodologies developed by artists who have attempted to get the particular research practices they employ in their creative work recognized as a credible mode of scholarly research by academic institutions. This is part of the continuing movement of artists (such as myself) into the academy, as the economic climate makes it more difficult to pursue art in the marketplace. On a less pragmatic note, the ideas represented by PbR reflect changing philosophies about knowledge itself, as phenomenological studies in a variety of fields have attempted to address the mind-body split that Conquergood alludes to in his description of academic discourse. As a relevant example of this trend in music studies, John Baily suggests that learning to play an instrument allows for the experience of the “ergonomics of the music”, as the “human sensori-motor system and the instruments morphology” are as important to understanding the music as an intellectual understanding of the materials and aesthetics behind it (1995, 94). On a more theoretical level, PbR also reflects changing ideas about grand narratives and universal structures, as it encourages a move away from top-down theories about practices and scenes towards a more localized investigation into the smaller parts that together constitute the larger field of artistic production. On this development, Clarke suggests that (2004, 14):

A paradigm shift can be perceived to have occurred in the relationship of the performance theorist to practices. A movement has occurred away from the distanced and ‘status-imposing power knowledge’ of Structuralist analysis towards the subjective and ‘experiential approach... *from within*’ the frame of

practice. This constitutes a strategic move, down from the theoretical tower into the tactical space of practices.

My thinking about the study of improvisation has been shaped by Nicholas Cook's suggestion that what is needed in the discipline of musicology is "... a performative approach to performance" which stresses the "inseparability of intellectual and bodily knowledge... [and] the ways in which one informs the other" (1999, 248). In recognition of the need to work productively with the binary of theory and practice, Phillip Clarke proposes the term "practitioner-theorist" to describe the liminal position occupied by artistic practitioners in the academic field. This term, along with George Lewis' more specific "scholar-improviser", is relevant to my work, as it contains the tension between subjectivity and objectivity (or practice and theory) demanded by the practical and the academic fields, respectively.

By far the most challenging issue confronted by PbR is that of documentation, as knowledges gained through practice tend to resist translation to the written word. This perpetual problem in fine arts scholarship has resulted in institutional debates around the acceptability of "mixed-mode" dissertations; in other words, research presentations which include both written commentary and a representation of the artistic practice or product which is the subject and/or genesis of the research (Melrose 2002, 1). A government study into the issue in the UK resulted in a set of proposed "best practice" guidelines on "Practice as Research" PhDs for academic institutions (Andrews and Nelson 2003). The writers of this study address "... PhDs on the premise that research questions in the performing arts can be rigorously worked through in a range of practices (of which writing is only one) to produce new knowledge or substantial new

insights equivalent to the requirements of PhDs as traditionally established.” As improvised music features a constantly shifting set of practices and sonic materials, and as more musicians bring their ephemeral knowledge into the academic field, it seems that a non-written presentation of the experiential research conducted in the field (in other words, playing), is a necessary addition to a conventional written analysis.

Within the discipline of musicology, writers Nicolas Cook and Deborah Wong attest to the need to broaden ideas of acceptable documentation, and both suggest pursuing an engagement with recent developments in technology to do so. Cook’s comments on Ingrid Monson’s text *Saying Something* (1996), point to the shortcomings of traditional notation and transcription in conveying the complexity of a performance event (2001, 12):

The main limitation in Monson’s presentation is the distance between sound and transcription: a musicology of performance really demands the integration of sound, word, and image achievable through current hypermedia technology, though inhibited by copyright and implementation costs, distribution, and the criteria of academic accreditation.

Even a cursory observation of an improvised music performance reveals that the physicality, if not to say theatricality, of improvised music cannot be wholly described through words or conventional musical notation, so some form of audio-visual documentation seems a useful tool for analyzing the practice. Deborah Wong provides a variation on Cook’s theme by suggesting that academic accreditation should be expanded to include a valuation of the embodied musical knowledge gained by ethnomusicologists in the field. She states (unpublished, 11):

[The] radical expansion of possible media through which ethnographic reflection might take place offers much, but of course the devil is in the details and

ethnomusicologists haven't gotten 'credit' for musicking about ethnomusicology because many of us don't do it, haven't thought about it that way, and haven't theorized how, exactly, we could operationalize alternative media.

As a practitioner who does 'music' about ethnomusicology, the issues raised by Wong are relevant to my research project, not only because improvisatory practices are resistant to written interpretation, but also because I spend much of my time trying to understand the generative processes of improvisation through making music myself.

These two brief quotes both point to the potential of recent changes in ideas of literacy; video games, text messaging, and the Internet are all part of what a librarian friend of mine tells me is called the 'new literacy'. The idea that technologically driven changes in literacy may be able to disrupt knowledge hierarchies is fundamental to practice-based research. Several writers, most notably Caroline Rye (2002), have suggested that DVD technology offers compelling possibilities in documenting PbR PhDs, as this format allows for text, video and audio documents to be included in one place. She argues that the ability to move back and forth between written and audio/visual forms of documentation makes these forms equally accessible, yet the process of shifting between them calls attention to the different knowledges they represent. By placing musical and literary forms of documentation on a single piece of media the hierarchy of knowledge is called into question, as one form is not prioritized over the other. Issues of research documentation are important in music scholarship, for while Lewis (2000) contends that both literature and orature are important to understanding musical meaning, academic music study has tended to privilege, or at least compartmentalize, one form of knowledge over the other across its disciplinary

divisions. The debate about acceptable documentation is most likely just beginning in the academic field, for as media technologies, including audio and video editing, are becoming more accessible to researchers, we are finding ourselves in a moment where the changes suggested by Cook and Wong are possible.

With all of this in mind, I turn now to a brief example of the documentary form I'm developing for my PhD research project. I'll begin by playing two short clips from bassist Barre Phillips. The first is drawn from an interview I conducted with him in 2007, and the second is an excerpt from a trio performance with Swiss musicians Urs Leimgruber on saxophone and Jacques Demierre on piano.

This brief quote tells us much about Phillips' approach to performance, and offers points to be questioned and theorized using the tools at play in academic written discourse. Drawing from these statements, potential lines of theoretical inquiry include, among others, Phillips' ideas about the role of the individual within collective music making and his formulation of the musician as a worker. By placing words in close proximity to musical practice, it becomes possible to both make connections and enjoy the differences between intellectual and ephemeral modes of knowledge.

The aim of practice-based research, and the role of the practitioner-theorist, is not to romanticize or fetishize embodied knowledge in the presentation of music research, but to work towards a more balanced representation of theory and practice in the academic field. Given the focus up to this point on theoretical models and literature-based analysis, I would like to conclude with a performance excerpt from my own trio, where we are attempting to understand and work through Phillips' ideas about ways of

listening in improvised music. The trio is Mark Laver on saxophone, Tania Gill on piano, and myself at the bass.

In closing, the inherent tension between my experience as a practitioner and the need to place myself at “a distance from which to speculate” about the practices of others through writing can be productive, if the research can be presented in such a way as to open the space between musical practice and critical theory.