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Editorial

The 'I' in Research: On subjectivity and objectivity in practice and performance

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There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective 'knowing'; and the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity', be.

Friedrich Nietzsche

In her article published in the present issue of *Music & Practice*, Jean Penny asks about her approach to creation: 'How can this generate an objective, distanced appraisal?' Her question reveals a concern we probably all share. When practice, performance or creative processes are studied, how can we turn our grounded experience, observation, activity, participation and competence into something more than notes and reflections in a log? No matter how developed these notes and reflections are, we suspect, probably rightly, that they will not meet the standards of objectivity of conventional academic research.¹ So what status has the 'I' of the practitioner in the research on artistic practices and musical performances?

Arguably, no concepts have had more influence on how we conceive research and knowledge than the pair 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity'. This binary opposition not only organizes our conceptual understanding of research, it also attributes different value and

¹ And this suspicion may be nurtured by a widespread and popular concept of what is supposedly the 'real' research, the research that is blind to the subject's particular experience and sensations, the research that confirms system. The standard of objectivity has held a dominant place in music research since the beginning of musicology as a discipline in the nineteenth century. What is certain is that 'hard' musicology, in its use of analysis, theory, historiography and classification, still proffers the ideal of objectivity or even objectivism, not least when it turns a musical score into complex and impressive graphs or tables, as if the matter and method belonged to the natural sciences.

importance; and it can create a feeling of inferiority when we cannot meet the standards of objectivity. As two opposite poles these two concepts magnetize and order our fields of research.

And yet, when we turn to the study of practice and performance, the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity easily becomes irrelevant. Why? The researcher as *homo practicus* is already mastering, acting and ‘thinking’ within a practice. Through lengthy processes of formation and appropriation, the researcher (as practitioner in the field of study) has obtained ‘the right to practice’. The researcher is already inscribed and conditioned by practice, already conditioned by a mode of practical knowledge. Thus, the knowledge and competence of the practitioner is not subjective, it is practical. And even when the researcher is not a practitioner of the practice in question, the research is not fundamentally changed, since the constituting acts of the practice must still be determined and studied immanently, that is, in the practice itself. The main difference is that the researcher now must do without the embodied competence and ‘knowing-how’ of the practitioner. Still, and somehow paradoxically, this is not always a disadvantage. Being a practitioner is no guarantee for being able to turn the embodied competence and knowing-how into research. It is an often-repeated assertion in the research literature on practice that practitioners are incapable of explaining their own practical knowledge.

So, why is not objectivism a relevant mode of knowledge in practice? Let us first challenge the epistemological status of objectivity in relation to music research. In fact, what is the status of objective knowledge in music research? What we consider as objectivity in music research would frequently be the adherence to some strict procedures of ordering ‘things’, most likely, notated signs, written words or other forms of static data. Thus, already in defining what is to be studied or analysed objectively, there is an ontological reduction of what music is. But more importantly, the use of dominant methods, well-defined terminology or analytical means, do not imply that the outcome, even when it is verified by peers, is true or relevant in regard to what is the matter at hand – e.g., a musical work.² Objectivity gives no assurance of the musical or aesthetic value of research, only of the relevant use of a scientific musicological method. The question is then what kind of knowledge is then produced and to what use.

Objective knowledge is knowledge about something. Ideally, the knowing subject is dissociated from what is known, and the knowledge is not dependent on any particular subject. Any person using the same method of extracting knowledge will, in principle, reach the same result, the same knowledge about the ‘thing’ in question. The ‘centre’ of knowledge is outside the ‘thing’ that is studied. Knowledge in practice is not about something, but rather, a

² The attraction of objectivity quickly loses its grip when there is no solid ground or point zero, no given standard for method, measurement or description that can be applied more or less automatically and through which we can fixate the subject-matter. The use of the program ‘Sonic Visualizer’ that the CHARM-project favoured, was indeed an attempt to build into the research process on musical performance one stable constant, or should we say, one black box. See <https://charm.rhul.ac.uk/about/about.html>.

knowledge in and through the acts that constitute practice. The ‘centre’ of knowledge is in the ‘thing’ that is studied. In fact, you cannot take the practical knowledge out of the ‘thing’, the practice.

Objectivism is not a mode of knowledge relevant for the study of practice and performance, as it can deal neither with dynamic elements that constitute practice and performance – the acts – nor with this ‘dislocation’ of the ‘centre’ of knowledge. And this is even less the case when it is the artist as researcher who actually creates the ‘objects’ he or she studies.[3] Clearly, these ‘objects’ should neither be studied objectively nor subjectively, but rather as instantiations of an artistic or creative practice.

In *Logic of Practice*, Pierre Bourdieu states his ambition ‘[t]o move beyond the antagonism between these two modes of knowledge [i.e. subjectivism and objectivism], while preserving the gains from each of them’. But what are the gains that can be preserved from this antagonism in relation to practice? My answer is to consider these ‘opposites’ neither as ‘modes of knowledge’, nor as mutually contradictory, but rather as perspectives that may combinatorially be present in any research on practice and performance. Accordingly, we might say that the advantage of subjectivism is to stress the fact that all knowledge is situated, and there is ‘only a perspective seeing, only a perspective ‘knowing’.

Moreover, the sensual, tactile and tacit experience of the practitioner is frequently the point of departure for the study of artistic practices. It is a way to embrace the fragile empiric nature of the materiality of acts. ‘Subjectivism’ is thus a perspective or tactic, a way to be in sync with the material aspects through which practice is ‘articulated’.

On the other hand, the advantage of objectivism is to stress the argument that all research must communicate, participate in something outside the scope and interest of the individual or its limited group of peers. Objectivism is thus a perspective or tactic that insists on seeking a link to the ‘world outside’, that insists on asking how the research may contribute to the totality of our knowledge of and competence in art. It is for these reasons that the study of practice and performance can rejuvenate musicology by adding new insights that refigure and challenge its concept of music.

Thus, we must move away from seeing objectivism and subjectivism as descriptive of a normativity. They are rather perspectives and tactics that can be constructively co-present in all research in and on practice and performance. As such, these concepts are useful reminders of the risks involved in any research in art. Either the neglect of the particular and the detail, proffering a top-down approach, or the ‘temptation’ to rest in the self-centred and incommunicative modus, incapable of adding context or relevance to the findings. But, it must be stressed, the purpose of studies of artistic practices and performances cannot be to accommodate itself to subjectivism and objectivism. These are not the defining modes of knowledge for us. The real challenge is to develop the knowledge and competence that are in artistic practices and performances. Now, what will that mean?

As argued, practices cannot be defined by the rigid and blind ordering of objectivity. Nor

are practices habits, private or subjective. They are communing dynamic systems of production and preservation of knowledge, competence, meaning and value in and through acts. The pronoun in research on practice is neither 'I' nor 'it' but 'we'. Yet, this 'we' is not the empirical or conscious we, as this would quickly reduce the study of practice to a question what we know about practice. Rather, and methodically speaking, our task it is to study the non-individual, dynamic, knowing and competent 'we' in which the internal order of, and possible partaking in, a practice is actualized. Without this 'we' there is no practice. Thus, the research questions may be: What and how does this 'we' know? And how does this knowledge reflect, or manifest itself in, the subject-matter of our research (e.g., the particular performance or creative process). Or to slightly reshape the question; how can the research of a particular case better explain – and be explained by – the 'we' of practice? How can the particular case contribute to our knowledge of artistic practices and processes?

To sum up: the practitioner's 'I' in research is an 'I' of embodied competence and knowing-how, who can use this competence and knowing to develop, examine and understand processes in art. The 'scientific' challenge is to employ the privileged situated and embodied perspective of the 'I' in order to comprehend the collective 'we', the 'we' of knowledge in practice and art. Let us remember that practices are not organized or organizable from a position outside the practice in question, nor that they have a physical reality as such, that is, an existence independent from the constituting physical and mental acts of practitioners. The 'we' in practice is what matters, it is the matter.