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2020-07
Arts Research Africa (ARA)
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/29243

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/GYNZC

ARTISTIC RESEARCH AND AFRICAN MUSICAL PERFORMANCE: LISTENING BEYOND EURO-AMERICAN CANONS

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Are certain forms of African music-making inherently advantaged or disadvantaged through engagement with artistic research? How does the quest to advance decoloniality factor into such efforts? What does such belated recognition mean for African musics and more general African arts practice outside academia?

Introduction

Recognition of artistic practice as research arrived later in scholarship concerned with music and has been taken up relatively slowly in relation to other arts disciplines.[1] One notable manifestation of this belated arrival has been a narrowing of the distance between scholarship and performance. While musical performance as research has, to date, been studied primarily regarding western art music (see, for example, the significant series of publications of the Orpheus Institute), several new collections in preparation indicate that the conversation is also impinging on fields of music scholarship beyond Euro-American canons. Scholars of music are, then, increasingly placing performance, as opposed to either the musical texts traditionally studied by musicologists *or* the sociocultural contexts conventionally prioritised by ethnomusicologists, more centrally in relation to their work. In the process, performance has emerged as an epistemological question in both disciplinary branches of musicology,[2] becoming a potentially unifying current concern.

Furthermore, *an expanded field of practices* associated with documenting, recording, or curating performance in contexts of music and sound has also come to be recognised as domains of practice in their own right—in older "analogue" as well as digital formats.[3] Examples of expanded understandings of performance extend beyond traditional concert practice and repertoires to include studies of the performative dimensions of social identities and public culture, including the performance of tradition and heritage, as well as inquiries into musicality in everyday life. This, in turn, includes music's mediation through proliferating technologies of reception, outside of contexts traditionally deemed to be overtly "artistic" nor necessarily those that would be deemed to be "professional."

The relevance of the professional, described by some as the "vocational," aspects of music adds another boundary to two I've already invoked, which exemplifies the way that performance- or practice-research questions conventional and academic boundaries. Alongside the ways in which performance potentially bridges the relationship between musicology and ethnomusicology, with their respective emphases on (mostly western art music) texts and (non-western traditional/popular) contexts, now simultaneously encompassing expanded fields of practice—which may exceed the traditional purviews of both subdisciplines—performance challenges us to think anew about the binary between musical professional practice and research. The questioning of such boundaries is particularly salient in such historically layered and contested cultural settings as contemporary South Africa, from where I am writing. I'm going to focus this questioning further by trying to listen beyond Euro-American canons, by considering how practice or artistic research could serve as a productive site of engagement for the many avowedly traditional and contemporary popular musics practised and/or listened to in Africa, many of which have yet to be addressed within music curricula and formal study programmes.

In the process, I want to consider what is implied when distinguishing between performance as research and performance on its own terms (thus performance as a site of knowledge, outside of asserting its value or equivalence as academic research).[4]

I proceed by briefly reviewing what I take to be the key arguments for considering the intersection of performance, practice, and research (in the Anglophone literature, at least). While there are both institutional and philosophical rationales for these developments, I'm going to focus on the latter (specifically the ontological and epistemological arguments) without intending to suggest that the institutional factors aren't equally relevant. Building on the formulation of a colleague at Wits—who was

central to the start of our university's recognition of artistic work as a valid component of research up to the doctoral level over a decade ago (something that I'm mindful is not yet universal across arts departments in this country, let alone elsewhere in Africa)—the institutional "entry into full citizenship of the academy for creative artists [entails clarifying, at the ontological level] whether artistic products *are* research or whether they *are the equivalent of research* or whether they *accompany, incorporate or inspire research* while at some level remaining something *different from* research."[5]

In the second part of the paper, I focus on how artistic research is coming to impinge on branches of music scholarship that are oriented beyond the western art music canon and fall mostly within the purview of ethnomusicology and popular music studies. I should point out though that, in South Africa, both disciplinary formations are quite fluidly defined, and often contested. By drawing on very recent writing from elsewhere, regarding how practice research involves "adjusting and *expanding* the notion of what ethnomusicology can offer,"[6] I'm advocating for an inter- or even post-disciplinary openness to any approach to intercultural music research that could be applied to the widest possible spectrum of musical and sound practices, in any context. I will also argue that adopting artistic research in the charged political contexts in which most of us currently work in South Africa, and many other places, requires attending to how the colonial legacies, with which the notion of "art" is freighted, further complicate its recognition as—and its equation with—research.

If the belated recognition of art as research at many universities potentially entails a welcome move beyond what I think of as the "decorative" or "civilising" effects it has historically been deemed to contribute to academic life, decolonial critiques of the very knowledge project of the traditional university require, I will argue, that we simultaneously address the coloniality of (much) art even as we recognise its affordances with regard to decolonial knowledge production. This necessitates a reflection on how the notion of artistic research in music might itself potentially be transformed through engaging with musics beyond the Euro-American canon. Simon McKerrell's attention to how "questions about intercultural aesthetics which are currently unaddressed in the largely western-centric debate about artistic research, which is dominated by art music and musicians" informs most of my concerns here.[7] In short, in my own ongoing engagement with artistic research as well as that in supervising the postgraduate work of my students, I am often prompted to consider several questions that I'm going to touch on in the space available: 1) whether certain forms of music-making are inherently advantaged or disadvantaged in the domain of artistic research and, if so, how; 2) how the quest to advance decoloniality factors into such efforts; and 3) what such belated recognition as a valued or even newly privileged form of knowledge potentially means for the relationship between art and music-making in academic contexts, and arts practices beyond academia.[7]

Conceptual underpinnings of the "performative turn" in academic research

Nicholas Cook has pointed out that, within musicology, contrary to the broader "performative turn" in the humanities and social sciences since the 1970s, the idea that music is, in essence, a form of writing—a text reproduced in performance—remained dominant into the 1990s.[8] This has much to do, to my mind, with musicology's traditional orientation towards western or, later non-western art music canons, including their avant-gardes, reinforcing Arnold Schoenberg's provocative adage that

> Music need not be performed any more than books need to be read aloud, for its logic is perfectly represented on the printed page; and the performer, for all his intolerable arrogance, is totally unnecessary except as his interpretations make the music understandable to an audience unfortunate enough not to be able to read it in print.[9]

Quite a different position has been arrived at more recently in which not the text but the act of creation has come to be recognised as a primary site of research. In his Preface to *The Artistic Turn* (2009), an important book for the present discussion that ends with a short self-avowed "manifesto" for artistic research, Jeremy Cox (who is a singer, conductor, former Dean of the Royal College of Music, London and later Chief Executive of the European Association of Music Conservatories),[10] offers an account of art-making that is evidently framed in terms that are intelligible as academic research, whether or not it is written down:

> [T]he act of creation itself is intrinsically an act of 'proving'—of testing out the intimations and speculations (in research, we would call them hypotheses) and determining how they stand up under rigorous scrutiny in the world of "real", made things; finally, the object or event created carries the results (the research data) of this proving encoded within it.[11]

Framing "the act of creation" within prevailing research discourse is one manifestation of the current performative turn but, conversely, much of the literature on artistic research entails what one might call epistemological critique, revealed in part as an impulse to resist the pervasive academic tendency to entextualise the world. Several South African colleagues are moreover invested in modes of artistic inquiry that are deeply sceptical of the institutional logics and politics of quantifiable research "outputs." Rather, they favour ways of knowing that are fundamentally doubtful, provisional, process- rather than product-based, often accentuating, through withholding, what Jay Pather referred to at a symposium hosted by our school in 2017 as "the elusive truth of our desire for certainties."[12] At its best, artistic research broadens the palette of what counts as knowledge, bringing into academic reflection distinctive, multimodal ways of knowing in their own right, rather than offering easy equivalences for funding unit-bearing research outputs or providing a vehicle for ready-made knowledge from other disciplines. Indeed, artistic research is widely viewed as a critique of instrumentalised, commodified knowledge, and it is celebrated for its capacity to foreground precisely what we *don't*—or even *can't*—know.

Cox would, I think, concur with these perspectives in that he recognises that the value of the kinds of tacit knowledge that the arts are often held to exemplify may reside on the other side of an epistemological boundary that has not traditionally been valued in many academic contexts:

> It is the invisibility—we would probably prefer to call it the "tacitness" or "embeddedness"—of the knowledge encoded in creation that causes problems and divides opinion … By stretching language to its limits, and moving outside the traditional vocabulary of research discourse, we may perhaps succeed in winning a few border skirmishes along the frontier between the explicit and the tacit, but what we put into words will always be less than what we are trying to describe.[13]

This is, then a kind of problem that could be viewed as an epistemological "Midas touch." As Cox points out, "To give verbal articulation to tacit knowledge is to make

it no longer tacit"[14] and artistic researchers are often cognizant of the contraction of understanding that this can entail.

Cox takes up a, perhaps unfortunate, spatial metaphor from the authors of the book he is prefacing to compare the entry of artistic research into the terrain of academic knowledge production with the settling of a territory to be colonised. While I prefer Kathleen Coessens's characterisation of advancing artistic research in terms of coping with what she calls an "already epistemized world,"[15] I do think that Cox makes a valuable point about the current moment as questions of artistic research are coming under renewed scrutiny in academia under conditions that he characterises as "enforced assimilation" (to quote him one last time),

> The territory of research is densely colonised; vested interests, whether individual or institutional, conscious or unconscious, carry a natural resistance to new settlers. If the first phase of this manifests itself in exclusion, the second, that of enforced assimilation, is no less dangerous for all that it may appear superficially more tolerant. Artistic research is currently at this second stage [he wrote over a decade ago]. Its presence is accepted, although often grudgingly, but it is under pressure to show its gratitude for this recognition by conforming to the dominant ideologies, criteria and methodologies of research culture. As long as it behaves itself, it is now allowed a modest place—decidedly "below the salt" in terms of funding—at the research table.[16]

Artistic research from a standpoint in the Global South

Contrary to normalising the colonial metaphor in the extract I've just quoted; I want to consider the promise of practice-oriented or artistic research as a key site for articulating the *de*-colonial and transformative affordances and capacities that multimodal conceptions of knowledge potentially entail. In the contexts in which most of us work, this requires a sober reckoning with both the limitations of artistic knowledge as well as its promise. I am arguing, then, for the salience of the turn towards performance as research in advancing, within the context of the ongoing decolonisation of the university, the ongoing decolonisation of art. Realising the transformative efficacy that the arts can bring to the academic project writ large rests on reckoning with the ways in which colonial reason posited (among other things) an ethnocentric, hierarchical, *a priori* distinction between what counts as art and what doesn't, and the ways in which this was mapped onto prevailing ideological structures. This hierarchy also mapped, of course, all too easily onto the binary between musical literacy and orality, privileging the notion that the music worth knowing through systematic study must be a form of writing. For all its own colonial baggage, ethnomusicology has, since its consolidation as a discipline in the mid-twentieth century, critiqued this narrow conception of music. Even while the discipline has struggled to cast off its own shadows (notably in weighing the import of the "ethno-" prefix), ethnomusicology has posited a potentially radical aesthetic relativism, according to which every practice merits equal consideration as an expression of human musicality. The (sub) discipline is now taking up of the notion of artistic research within its own disciplinary ambit, in an era in which reflexivity about its own colonial underpinnings should, moreover, be assumed.

At its best, the promise of artistic research appears to lie in embracing "not only *new knowledge* but also *new forms of knowledge.*"[17] Modes of research that recognise their own affordances as situated practices—as modes of action that resonate with the practices with which they are engaged—seem to be more closely aligned at an

ontological level than those which centre primarily on textualisation only, thus genuinely expanding epistemic horizons and advancing the proliferative potential of artistic knowledge. Significantly, in my academic context, such epistemic proliferation moreover has considerable potential to align with reimagining and realising what Achille Mbembe, Sarah Nuttall, and others have characterised as the decolonial "pluriversity."[18]

I'm of the view that despite postcolonial and decolonial critiques of ethnomusicology—indeed, because of them—intercultural music studies have much to offer the pursuit of such a pluriversity. If artistic research arrived late in musicology relative to other arts disciplines, it has arrived even later in ethnomusicology, and research in this subdiscipline is still largely in the process of being published.[19] In a yet-to-be-published article that I've found very instructive, McKerrell emphasises that in the discipline of ethnomusicology,

> musical performance has been constitutive in the research process, but not the central outcome ... historically, performance has not been an end in and of itself in ethnomusicology, but has always been a method used in the service of understanding more about human culture and society around the world ... That is to say, the real object of study is people, culture and society, and the subject is music.[20]

McKerrell argues that, despite this history, there is potential for practice research to emerge as both a more central method, and as the object of research in ethnomusicology,[21] in the process (as I have already mentioned) "adjusting and *expanding* the notion of what the subdiscipline can offer."[22] McKerrell highlights several pertinent respects in which practice research in ethnomusicology challenges the artistic research paradigm that has emerged in other domains of performing arts research.[23] These centre on the lack of a central canon of repertoire in ethnomusicology, as compared to other musicological disciplines who share a more or less accepted (or even continually negotiated) canon of works against which the novelty and originality of new music—a key criterion for artistic research—can be compared. Secondly, this is closely related to what McKerrell characterises as "the extreme relativism inherent in the training and professional outlook of ethnomusicologists that emphasises the local and particular over the universal and elite."[24] Taken together, both factors considerably complicate "the ontological understanding of 'new knowledge' in orally developed or transmitted repertoires from around the world,"[25] and how one demonstrates the kinds of "originality of practice" on which much artistic research is predicated.[26] What counts as original or as good, appropriate and meaningful research is not, I want to emphasise, neutral, but has to reflect the aesthetic and related priorities of each particular domain even as it attempts to relate that to the ways in which the world has already been epistemised.

Conclusion: towards research in/as performance

Navigating the challenges remains work in progress but, in conclusion, I want to underscore McKerrell's argument that apart from instances "where practice is used as a method to translate previously tacit or embodied knowledge into other modes of communication such as text for the benefit of comparative research on world musical traditions,"[27] a second, hitherto largely undeveloped opportunity lies in "primary performance research where the research consists of practice that demonstrates and communicates new knowledge in a particular field of performance."[28] In other words,

from whichever disciplinary address one might choose to undertake such intercultural research, there should be an opportunity to produce "research outcomes that are sited in original performative knowledge."[29] McKerrell's discussion is useful for highlighting how practice research in genres that fall outside existing canons always entails a crossing of registers and audiences. This calls for what he describes as an act of translation, through which a practice researcher explains "for outsiders what the advance in insiders' aesthetics means or demonstrates."[30] Whether researchers resort to what I have called "entextualisation" (what McKerrell calls translation), or to what he terms "research *in* musical performance" rather than "research *about* musical performance,"[31] reflexivity regarding the crossings involved becomes a key feature of both approaches, and stands, at its best, to be mutually reinforcing.

Practice research in music is likely, perhaps paradoxically, to entail some degree of recourse to the written word, given that "[m]usical sound is generally too semantically ambiguous to communicate with the level of … specificity needed for research when there is no central artistic tradition or canon."[32] And so, in closing, I want to re-materialise the word and place it back in the register of embodied practice. I'm going to close then, by invoking the way in which the renowned West African griot, Kele Monson Diabate, in conversation with linguist Charles Bird, responded to the suggestion that his words could be of help if written down, "You and your dry words. What are they to me? The meaning of my words is in the moisture of the breath that carries them."[33]

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Notes

1 Doğantan-Dack, *Artistic Practice as Research in Music*, 1.

2 I leave aside, for the moment, the question of which of the two branches of musicology should be regarded as a sub-branch, a debate which has assumed renewed salience in the light of decolonial activism.

3 Witzleben, 'Performing in the Shadows,' 137, makes a similar point concerning ethnomusicology in an important article discussed later, even though he also argues that "the physical acts of making and perceiving music must be distinguished from all other performance-like phenomena," 151.

4 This resonates with the notion of listening or knowing otherwise, a mode of avowed border thinking (see Mignolo, 'Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing') associated with contemporary decolonial theory.

5 Olivier, 'Formal Recognition for Creative Work: Some Critical Reflections,' 86. This is a published elaboration of the original internal document, which dates to 2007.

6 McKerrell, 'Towards Practice Research in Ethnomusicology (DRAFT) for Comment', 18.

7 McKerrell, 'Towards Practice Research in Ethnomusicology (DRAFT) for Comment', 8. McKerrell happens to be an accomplished musician and scholar of Scottish bagpipe music based in Newcastle in the UK, who identifies not as an ethnomusicologist but as a scholar of music policy and the social impact of music, who uses ethnographic fieldwork and survey data to explore musical micro-enterprises and their social capital in the rural creative economy.

8 Cook, 'Performing Research: Some Institutional Perspectives', 14. There are important precedents to the performative turn discussed here, which range widely across disciplines and geographies. A few examples include the broad, interdisciplinary formulation across several places in the Global South of participatory action research (PAR), which drew from the late 1970s on the work of Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, other new thinking on adult education research (e.g., Hall, 'Participatory Research: An Approach for Change'), the Civil Rights Movement in the United States (e.g., Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking*), and South Asian social movements such as those associated with the Participatory Research Network created in 1978 and based in New Delhi. The first explicitly named PAR conference was organised by Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda in Cartagena the previous year. In the context of music studies, see Samuel Araújo's extended work (e.g., 'From Neutrality to Praxis; limited, for now, to texts available in English). Another important precedent is the emergence of interdisciplinary Performance Studies (see e.g., Schechner, 'Foreword'), as well as aspects relating to Live or Performance Art within Fine Art movements. Yet another broad field relevant to this discussion entails the intersection of art and anthropology; for a recent articulation of the latter see Laine, *Practicing Art and Anthropology*; in the context of music, see especially Steven Feld's work since the early 1980s (notably *Sound and Sentiment* and 'Acoustemology').

9 Quoted in Newlin, *Schoenberg Remembered*, 164.

10 Association Européenne des Consevatoires, Académies de Musique et Musikhochschulen.

11 Cox, *The Artistic Turn*, 7.

12 Pather, Unpublished paper presented at ArtSearch symposium.

13 Cox, *The Artistic Turn*, 7.

14 Cox, *The Artistic Turn*, 7.

15 Coessens, 'The Human Being as a Cartographer'.

16 Cox, *The Artistic Turn*, 7–8.

17 Farber, *On Making*, back cover.

18 Mbembe invokes this notion in the face of "the exhaustion of the present academic model with its origins in the universalism of the Enlightenment" (Mbembe, 'Decolonizing the University', 36). He recognises the work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Enrique Dussel in invoking the notion of the pluriversity.

19 These would include panels and papers presented at the 45th world conference of the International Council of Traditional Music (ICTM), Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand, July 2019; the 1st International Symposium on Artistic Research, *Hands-On Research*, at the University of Aveiro, Portugal, November 2019; and the upcoming 7th Symposium of the ICTM Study Group on Applied Ethnomusicology, Lucerne, August 2020, as well as a special issue of the journal *Ethnomusicology Forum* in preparation (publication expected in 2021). Important precursors include Baily, 'Learning to Perform as a Research Technique in Ethnomusicology,' Witzleben, 'Performing in the Shadows,' Lemmens, 'The Learning Process in Fado through Artistic Research,' and McKerrell, 'Towards Practice Research in Ethnomusicology'.

20 McKerrell, 'Towards Practice Research in Ethnomusicology', 1–2.

21 McKerrell, 'Towards Practice Research in Ethnomusicology', 1.

22 McKerrell, 'Towards Practice Research in Ethnomusicology', 18.

23 McKerrell, 'Towards Practice Research in Ethnomusicology', 1–2.

24 McKerrell, 'Towards Practice Research in Ethnomusicology,' 2.

25 McKerrell, 'Towards Practice Research in Ethnomusicology,' 1–2.

26 McKerrell, 'Towards Practice Research in Ethnomusicology,' 11.

27 McKerrell, 'Towards Practice Research in Ethnomusicology,' 16.

28 McKerrell, 'Towards Practice Research in Ethnomusicology,' 16.

29 McKerrell, 'Towards Practice Research in Ethnomusicology,' 1.

30 McKerrell, 'Towards Practice Research in Ethnomusicology,' 13.

31 McKerrell, 'Towards Practice Research in Ethnomusicology,' 7.

32 McKerrell, 'Towards Practice Research in Ethnomusicology,' 15.

33 Quoted in Charry, *Mande Music*, 339.

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