The Situation of Practice-Led Research around NIME, and Two Methodological Suggestions for Improved Communication

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ABSTRACT

This paper picks up where a presentation I shall be giving to the main conference on the subject of practice-led methods and NIME leaves off. I wish to present for discussion a set of proposals for possible practice-led methodologies for live electronic music research aimed at enhancing musical communication within the sub-discipline and based on activities that I take to be informally present in much musicianly conduct. By way of background, I first explain why I believe improving musical communication to be important in terms of its potential benefit to our disciplinary coherence and our collective ability to communicate fruitfully with researchers in allied disciplines and with funders.

Keywords

co-practice, communication, collectivity

1. INTRODUCTION

Without wishing to foreshadow too much my paper to the main conference on this topic, a sensible starting point is to very briefly outline my general position on practice-led research (PLR) in live electronic music.

First, I see part of PLR's greatest potential as lying in the holism with which it can engage with the scope of musical *practice* as something that goes beyond the punctuating quanta of works, instruments and performances to encompass the much wider lived texture of existing as an artistic practitioner in a given cultural context. In this sense I find persuasive Barbara Bolt's [1] argument that the particular knowledge claims of PLR can be situated specifically in the abandonment of controlled, reproducible conditions that differentiate it from scientific enquiry. That is, PLR sacrifices some generality of observation in order to contend with music in its socially-entangled, contentious, noisy complexity.

Second, I have found it most fruitful to regard the outcomes of my research as heterogeneous, yet coupled, *assemblages* [9] of performances, recordings, texts, instruments, code and so forth. Rather than promoting any particular modality as being of primary significance, this affords being able to attend to the relationships between them and also to being able to target certain parts of the assemblage

at particular potential audiences. This latter aspect is significant as it helps confront the knotty question for PLR of evaluation. We can cheerfully acknowledge that certain parts of the assemblage will be what Tomas Hellström [4] terms *club goods*—things of interest or appeal to a limited audience. The assemblage, then, could be viewed as a set of club goods whose potential audiences may well overlap, but can be tuned to address particular audiences with who a researcher may wish to communicate. So, the musical output may be of direct interest to fellow aficionados of a particular style, whilst the technical implementation details may be more interesting to NIME researchers, a reflective text to fellow practice-led researchers, and so on. Moreover, within this one can conceive of also producing accounts of various levels of technical or theoretical detail aimed at non-specialist audiences.

2. CONCERNS

Musical PLR, by this account, should be well placed to make valuable contributions to the wider endeavour of musical research and, in the specific case of live electronic PLR, to the activities around NIME. Furthermore, as musicians are liable to form collaborations that traverse the institutional boundary, PLR should also be well-placed to contribute significantly to knowledge exchange activities. However, this potential does not seem to be being fulfilled.

With respect to the wider endeavour of musical research, even as it is becoming orthodox to argue that this endeavour is intrinsically interdisciplinary and in need of diverse methods to grasp properly music's many aspects, the place of PLR within this seems undefined. For instance, a recent paper by Georgina Born that presents an interdisciplinary framework for musical research in considerable detail notes the roles of 'musicology, ethnomusicology, popular music studies, the sociology and psychology of music and so on'[2, pp. 205–6], but makes no explicit mention of practitioners in this collective effort.

Similarly, within NIME discussion has tended to focus on implementation issues—with some coverage of performance—but with very scant coverage of wider issues of practice. This is particularly unfortunate, as the accumulating proceedings of NIME represent the closest to a specialist literature on live electronics that is available. This, I would argue, has a distorting effect on the discourse *within* live electronics PLR, as a relative scarcity of wider ranging discussion means that there are few available models for neophyte researchers. Certainly, the preponderance of functional, technological discussion within the field is a documented source of frustration for some [5, 8].

Finally, whilst musical practice-led researchers may be traversing the institutional boundary quite frequently and,

indeed, may regard the locus of their practice as being quite separate from the institutional context of music making, the diversity of experiences and practical approaches that result are not correspondingly represented in our formal discourse where, within electronic music, the cultural priorities of the post-War avant-garde continue to dominate. This arises, in part, because the cultural horizon of much of the canonical literature remains bounded by that tradition. However it also reflects, I think, a collective failure on our part to respond more affirmatively to the dissolution of the last century's musical hierarchies by developing nimble ways to expand the cultural horizon of the institution.

Each of these issues can be ameliorated, it seems to me, by improving upon our sense of coherence as a sub-discipline, so as to be able to speak with greater certainty and confidence to allied colleagues about what we are able to contribute and how, and to enrich these offerings by making fuller reference to the full scope of our practical experience. I see developing a greater number of richer and more carefully specified methodologies and improved approaches to communication as a foundational aspect of this work.

3. TWO TENTATIVE METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSALS

I have two specific suggestions that I wish to present to the workshop for fuller discussion. Both are based on things that I take to be common features of ways that musicians 'in the wild' come to know each other whilst forming musical relationships. The questions are whether and how such things could be formalised as specialised methods for communication between researchers in the context of musical PLR, and how they might complement existing approaches.

3.1 Co-Practice

A particularly obvious thing that musicians do—and that I am surprised how little time is devoted to in institutional contexts—is simply playing together. I am thinking here less of collaboration on particular projects[1] and more of co-practice as an orientation towards communication and exploration, where outcomes in the form of works or public performances are of secondary concern. This is something that takes place informally, but that would merit being considered a more routine and formalised aspect of our scholarly exchange, as a complement to the processes of reflection involved in developing practice. In particular, I see routine co-practice as an opportunity for critical reflection on our ability to play with others by examining, for example:

- the kinds of accommodation we may need to make to give each other musical space

- how / if a mutual sense of musical coherence was arrived at

- the sorts of practical impediment or serendipity that our choices of materials and instruments gave rise to in a particular context

There could be various levels of formalism and collectivity. On the one hand, routine and relatively informal engagements could form a standard part of the process of developing new systems and approaches. On the other— and more radically—larger-scale co-practice could supplement our other forms of scholarly communication through practice-led symposia where researchers come together to

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[1]Although I believe more formal collaboration would be a good thing, and see this suggestion as supporting that.

learn about each other's work through play, rather than through presentations.

Some small steps in this latter direction have been taken already through a series of events that I have been involved in running with a group of postgraduate and early career researchers from the University of Edinburgh. These have been presented under the banner of the *Laboratory for Laptop and Electronic Audio Performance Practice*(LLEAPP), and have been held at the Universities of Edinburgh (2009, 2013), Newcastle (2010) and East Anglia (2011); funding is currently being sought to continue the initiative. The format of the first three of these was that small groups form to devise a performance together over the course of a couple of days, although at the fourth we all stayed in a single group and engaged a musical director to help us a devise a performance. This seems to be a promising approach, but still requires a degree of development. We were over-optimistic at first that it would be easy to self-organise and to devise space for regular critical reflection. However, it seems that some degree of workshop-style facilitation is still needed, at least in the early stages, and that a clearer sense of protocol and possible documentary tactics would help participants.

3.2 Musical Sharing

Another thing that musicians routinely do as part of coming to musically know each other is to share music as part of coming to understand each other's backgrounds and influences. This happens in a variety of ways: through playing together, and through the exchange of recommendations, mix tapes, scores, etc. Meanwhile, diverse approaches to traversing musical histories with words, in idiosyncratic, yet evocative and communicative ways, have been tried out, for instance, by Katharine Norman[7] and Kodwo Eshun[3]. If there were ways of integrating such exchange into the fabric of our communications, I believe it would go some way to addressing the extent to which the musical scope of our literature is incommensurate with the diversity of researcher's musical backgrounds

There are, I think, a range of possible tactics available that could combine or fall between the exchange of mixes or play-lists, the preparation of idiosyncratic textual traversals and the production of conventional linear histories as ways of improving the musical scope of our internal discourse. Some of these may be less formal and more ephemeral, as part of some larger documentary assemblages, or as part of the support dramaturgy for a work, performance or presentation. The point is to find ways of normalising the inclusion of broad musical sweeps into our communication, in order to improve our basis for being able to describe, think about and do such music, to provide a fuller accounting of the cultural situation of our work, and to incrementally un-erase those strands of practice that continue to be unaccounted for in established narratives[6].

A beneficial side-effect of this, in addition to a greatly improved sense of mutual understanding across the discipline, is that such presentations of musical history and influence in the context of research projects could aggregate to a valuable resource for fellow researchers interested in tracing the lines of contemporary practice and musical influence.

4. SUMMARY

I have suggested that musical PLR is not yet fulfilling the potentially rich contribution it could make to musical research, and that it finds itself in a marginal position vis-a-vis its disciplinary neighbours. My argument has been that a critical component of addressing this lies in improving our sense of coherence and confidence as a discipline by developing better methods and communication protocols,

and that this will facilitate improved contributions to the wider endeavours of general musical and NIME research.

I have sketched two speculative suggestions for activities that could possibly enrich our PLR. Insofar as these are things that I take to be already commonplace among musicians, they aren't especially radical, but nevertheless I believe that they would go some way to helping develop a sense of collective purpose and understanding. The first of these is simply to devote more time and attention to playing together, and to take this seriously as a routine means of communication through which we come to understand our practices and each other. The second complements this by suggesting that more formalised and explicit means of sharing musical histories and linkages can serve to help expand the cultural horizon of institutional musical practice and provide a richer contextualisation of work.

However, both rough proposals suffer from running against the grain of current political imperatives of academic research. By being orientated towards communication, not production, their value will not be immediately apparent from the perspective of institutional prioritisation of research that produces tangible, unambiguous outcomes (preferably with clear potential for commodification).

Similarly, these suggestions are both predicated upon a collective understanding of the research endeavour, rather than a competitive one where researchers themselves are commodities. Whilst this orientation is quite conscious, it does leave unanswered the question of what incentive there could be to adopt such practices, given the extent to which they may conflict with what some feel to be necessary attention to self-promotion and individual differentiation: I am pessimistic about the effectiveness of a group of competing individuals in challenging the current trend towards ever more hostile and alienating working and learning conditions, and in this sense see some form of collective discourse that can present a coherent and united alternative account of how music could be approached as an urgent matter.

Although my suggestions run against the hegemonic grain, my hope is that they do so in small enough ways, within our margin for manoeuvre, to be practicable and effective in developing the basis for a more cohering and co-hearing discipline in the future.

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