ART AND RIGOUR: CREATING METHODOLOGIES FOR ARTISTIC RESEARCH IN MUSIC

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the construction of a methodology for artistic researchers, in particular practising musicians. Artistic research is a steadily growing field, gaining increasing relevance in academic discourse and flourishing in universities and music academies. Due to its relatively recent history there is still a lack of standardized widespread research methods, and the advice to be creative and borrow from other disciplines, though reasonable, can be confusing for young researchers. The adaptation process can be problematic, with the need to mediate between the rigour of academic research and the openness and creativity of the artistic side.

How can methods from different disciplines be adapted to the needs of artistic research, without hindering creative practice? In this paper I will present, in meta-research terms, the personal adaptation of three qualitative methods: autobiographical design, borrowed from human computer interaction; thematic analysis, borrowed from psychology; and autoethnography, borrowed from social sciences. These were used to design an accountable research process to investigate differences and similarities in the musical affordances of the 13-keyed period clarinet and the modern clarinet. The three methods intertwine to form a complete methodology that could be applied by other researchers investigating similar topics. Adapting methods proved to be a fruitful process, bearing in mind that the goal is not objectivity, unreachable in the arts, but accountability and organization.

Keywords: *artistic research, methodology, qualitative methods, artistic practice*.

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CULTURE CROSSROADS

Introduction

Artistic Research has been gaining more and more relevance in the international academic context, coming a long way since its first steps [Busch 2009, Mäkelä et al. 2011]. Nowadays an increasing number of higher education institutions open doctoral programmes or incorporate artistic research in their master's programmes, and artistic research seems to have found its place in the academic context as a "self-reflective and self-critical process to produce new knowledge" [Hannula et al. 2005: 10] in the arts. To conduct such a research process accountably and meaningfully, differentiating it from artistic practice, it is necessary to have a solid methodology.

Owing to the brief history of Artistic Research, the discipline still lacks a standardized set of methods. It relies on what Hannula defines as "methodological anarchy" [2005: 14] or "methodological pluralism" [2005: 67], where different and sometimes even conflicting approaches, methods, and paradigms can coexist. This may entail borrowing and adapting qualitative methods from other disciplines. Maggi Savin-Baden and Katherine Wimpenny made a remarkable effort to give a practical guide to arts-related methods [Savin-Baden & Wimpenny 2014], with the openly stated aim of supporting those new to artistic research to develop an appropriate methodology. The anthology curated by Darla Crispin and Bob Gilmore also represents a valuable resource of different approaches to artistic research, framing the specific experience of the Orpheus Institute for Research in Music without marking it as archetypal of the field [Crispin & Gilmore 2014], as does another anthology edited by Jonathan Impett concerning different experiences with artistic research in music [2017], while Paulo De Assis, in his "Logics of Experimentation", explores paths of redefinition of music performance and performers [2018].

This paper aims to provide an example of how these theorizations and guidelines can be put into practice in an actual research project, tailoring a methodology that supports equally the two aspects of artistic research: on the one hand, the academic, experimental, rigorous approach; and, on the other, the creative and artistic side. In the first section I will briefly outline my doctoral project, based on my own clarinet practice, to show what is the practical scope of the designed methodology, in particular in the initial phases of a research project. In the second part I will present the three methodologies that I borrowed and adapted, with their specific challenges and advantages: autobiographical design, thematic analysis, and autoethnography. In the concluding remarks I will discuss the balancing of research and art in the case of my own artistic research project. Despite the temptation to follow a strictly dualistic subdivision, I will explain how I overcame the binary vision to integrate the two sides, giving rigour to my art and creativity to my research.

My research

The project for which the methodology was built consists of practice-based research designed to compare the musical affordances of modern and period clarinets. My research aims to answer the question of how period clarinet affordances differ from those of the modern instrument, and how period clarinet practice influences my playing and performance.

The concept of affordance was first formulated in ecological psychology by James J. Gibson [1979/1986] as a means to overcome the three-way theorization of perception: subject, external object, internal representation of the object. Gibson argued for a direct relationship between the subject and its surrounding environment, where affordances represent what the environment offers to the (human) animal experiencing it. Musical instruments offer affordances to the player who approaches them, and these vary with the player: a clarinet will offer different affordances to a jazz artist, for example, than to a classically trained musician. The application of this concept to musical research is not new: from Folkstead [1996] to the more recent Tullberg [2021] the use of affordances as a concept to investigate musical instruments has proved fruitful.

In my research I argue that the use of a period clarinet as an integrated practice tool, with its own particular musical affordances, can strengthen the flexibility of the musician, break stale performance patterns, and help to reframe the musician's approach to repertoire, virtuosity and technical difficulties. The period clarinet that I use is the thirteen-keyed Müller system instrument, developed by Iwan Müller in 1812 in Paris. This clarinet had many technical improvements in the keys, the pads and the tone holes in comparison with its predecessor, the classical clarinet, and it represented a crucial milestone in the history and development of the instrument. Specifically, I use an east-European period clarinet from the 1870s, when the new Boehm system clarinets already existed but previous models were still being produced for amateur players, military bands, and in general for less affluent customers. The modern clarinet that I use is a French system Yamaha instrument.

When Müller's instrument started to spread through Europe it indeed afforded new possibilities to performers and composers alike in a historical moment when stretching the boundaries of instruments through technical virtuosity was the norm [Harlow 2006]. Scholars such as Albert Rice [Rice 2003a, Rice 2003b], Nicholas Shackleton [Shackleton & Rice 1999], Pamela Weston [1971], and David Charlton [1988] have studied the development of the clarinet and the contributions of Iwan Müller extensively. Renowned performers including Jack Brymer [1984] and Eric Hoeprich [2008] also made important contributions to the literature on the history of the instrument, paired with their perspectives as active clarinettists.

Starting from the historical background, I took the period clarinet from its time and brought it here to the present, in my practice room, to investigate what it can do for me now. I was initially not formally trained as a period instrument performer, but when I started practising on the Müller clarinet to conduct this research I found that it afforded me different possibilities from the modern instrument. My relationship with it was very particular, less structured, with fewer boundaries than I had with the modern instrument. It was not *my* instrument; it was *an* instrument to explore. And by exploring its affordances, I began to find new ones on the modern clarinet too, expanding my palette of musical skills.

The connection between practice on period instruments and beneficial effects on modern playing is not an entirely new concept, but it is one that has been spreading through the clarinet community: Charles Neidich[1] and Tommaso Lonquich[2] are the two most notable players advocating for this approach in their lectures and masterclasses. Their understanding of this relationship comes "from the field", from their day-to-day artistic practice. My own project differentiates itself from the artistic practice of Neidich and Lonquich owing to its academic nature: my observations come from the same source of practical experience as those of the other artists, but they are placed in a theoretical framework and ongoing academic discourse, documented, and organized, with the aim of producing new knowledge through accountable means, building a bridge between the animated but conservative world of clarinet players and the deep but distant academic world.

There has been an ongoing, fertile debate about the boundaries of artistic research, around questions such as whether a practising musician is already doing artistic research through their normal activities, and what distinguishes the artistic researcher from the practising artist. Delving deeply into this debate is beyond the scope of this paper, but more information can be found in De Assis [2018: 19–37], Hannula et al. [2005: 9–22], and Mäkelä et al. [2011].

Methodology construction

In this section I will present the three methods I adapted, in the order I encountered them and applied them in my research. The process can be a loose model for other research, bearing in mind that the very individual nature of artistic research requires that each artist-researcher devises their specific *modus operandi* from any model.

[1] Internationally renowned artist, faculty member at the The Juilliard School, the Manhattan School of Music, and the Mannes College of Music. For more information visit: https://www.charlesneidich.net/ (last accessed 31/05/2022.)

[2] Solo Clarinettist with Ensemble MidtVest, the international full-time chamber ensemble based in Denmark, and Artist of the Chamber Music Society of the Lincoln Center in New York. For more information visit: https://www.lonquich.com/ (last accessed 31/05/2022.)

The first method is autobiographical design, born in the field of human computer interaction. This method, informally used by designers, has been codified and framed by Carman Neustaedter and Phoebe Sengers [2012], who defined it as "design research drawing on extensive, genuine usage by those creating or building the system" [2012: 514]. In its field of origin, the method is used to design systems and software for virtual assistance, navigation, chat, or media space, with the designer using the system themselves over a prolonged period of time, learning from their own genuine user experience.

In my case, the "object" that I wanted to design was an organized practice process to document my playing on two different instruments. In the initial phases of my doctoral research having a reliable structure was crucial: so many aspects of the work were not yet stable, the methodology was under construction, the focus of the work under question. Although I was not new to journaling and practice planning for other purposes (e. g., auditions, exams, concerts), I felt that my regular skills alone were not sufficient. I thus realized that I would benefit from the support of an external framework such as autobiographical design. Through this method I was able to give the necessary boundaries and systematization to my practice, without constraining the unexpected and the flexibility fundamental for an artist: I designed a practice schedule for the following two months, establishing the days, times, repertoire to be practised and musical parameters to focus on in each session, but always having the chance to evolve the design over the course of its use, improving its efficacy. The five characteristics of autobiographical design [Neustaedter & Sengers 2012: 516–518] are suitable for these requirements:

1) Fast tinkering: it was possible to modify the design of the practice sessions immediately if I found any issue or critical point without compromising the validity of the process. One example was the duration of the use of each instrument: in the first three sessions I kept very strictly to the schedule of half time with the period instrument and the other half with the modern instrument. But I realized that this mode of practice was hindering the direct comparison of affordances such as articulation and intonation, and therefore I allowed switching between the instruments at need in the following sessions.

2) Real systems for immediate usage: autobiographical design allowed me to start using the designed system rapidly, test it, and perfect it through use, as described in the previous point.

3) Genuine need: the necessity to create a practice process was genuinely crucial for me at that stage of research so as to avoid wasting time in undocumented and purposeless practice.

4) Long-term use: in the HCI field, this translates to more than one year. My doctoral studies will take four years.

5) Unusual data collection methods: the data was collected through journal entries and audio recordings of my playing. Occasionally I refer also to WhatsApp and Messenger chats with colleagues to whom I sent recordings and impressions.

The method is not meant for theorizing generalization [Neustaedter & Sengers 2012: 518] and presents some critical aspects, in particular in terms of how to define a "genuine" need, the inclusion of other users during the "self" usage time, and ethical matters of privacy and intimacy [Desjardins & Ball 2018]. These issues arise because autobiographical design is used mainly in intimate and private spheres such as the home, therefore touching the lives of family members [Desjardins & Ball 2018: 753]. These potentially problematic aspects were obviated in the artistic research context of my experience: practice being a solitary process, I did not encounter issues of ethically including other users or of privacy. In actual fact, researching by means of "intimate, long-term, and personal relations between computers and humans" [ibid.] – when rather than computers we have a practice system and musical instruments – is the daily life of a practising musician.

The application of autobiographical design was crucial in the starting phases of the research. It provided me with a solid framework to formulate my research question and obtain data and preliminary results, without depriving me of the chance to improvise and adapt my practice as it seemed appropriate. It remains a valid tool for organization and grounding throughout the research process.

The second method involved, which I used to extract meaning from the data gathered in the practice sessions, is thematic analysis, borrowed from the field of psychology. It is defined by Braun and Clarke as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data" [Braun & Clarke 2006: 79]. The attractiveness of thematic analysis for artistic research lies in its inherent flexibility: Braun and Clarke themselves acknowledge and value this characteristic of the method while striving for more defined guidelines for the method in their field [Braun & Clarke 2006: 78].

In its conventional use, thematic analysis is applied to a set of data gathered from external sources by a researcher (or a group of researchers). In the case of my data, however, I both produce and code it myself, which could be problematic in terms of reliability: how do I know, for example, that I see a theme because it is actually there in the data rather than because I know what I was thinking while typing that entry? This issue can be tackled from different angles:

1) Time and memory: the four years of doctoral studies afford me the possibility to let time pass between the collection of the data and its categorization. With this approach, I am able to "forget" about the data, gain distance from it, and approach it with new eyes when the moment of coding arrives. This was confirmed for the 2020/2021 data that I coded in 2022.

2) Inspiration: thematic analysis can be used as an inspiration, a conceptual tool to organize data, as Boyatzis [Boyatzis 1988] does, for example. This approach does not negate the principles and qualities of thematic analysis. The researcher can present the method in its original form, and subsequently present their application and interpretation clearly in the specific context.

Thematic analysis thus becomes a valuable tool for organizing data, obtaining results and formulating a preliminary theory from the practice on the clarinets, without claiming to use the method in its purest and truest form, but as a functional means to an end. It should be noted that themes are not pre-existing entities embedded in the data waiting passively for a palaeontology-scholar to dig them out, but are the result of the choices and perspective of the researcher [Braun & Clarke 2006: 80; Wolcott 1994: 12–17]. Through colour-coded categorization I pinpointed eight main preliminary themes, each referring to a musical affordance or a musical aspect that was influenced by my double practice regime: trills, technique, sound production, articulation, intonation, mental imagery, interpretation, period clarinet specificity.

Once again, the themes do not speak for themselves. Another layer of interpretation is required in order to create a discourse that could integrate the research with my life as a clarinettist, my cultural and educational background, and my artistic and professional journey. Moreover, I wanted to take the chance to reflect on, and possibly problematize, some aspects of the classical music culture I grew up in. My way of approaching period instruments, clarinet practice and music in general was not generated from a void but came from my personal background. Observing myself could be a way to consequently reflect on the culture and subcultures I originated from and still live in.

The third method I employed enabled me to achieve these goals. Autoethnography is a method borrowed from sociology and cultural anthropology that considers the researcher as an integral part of the research rather than merely as an external observer; it allows researchers to take into account their own experiences, and in particular their cultural background; and it supports the use of storytelling techniques in writing, creating a narrative from the data [Chang 2008, Ellis 2004, Holman-Jones et al. 2013]. The value of this method in the musical field is undeniable, as can be seen in the different research experiences reported in "Music Autoethnographies" [Bartlett & Ellis 2009], which range from composition to performance, from pedagogy to ethnomusicology.

I was drawn to autoethnography because in this enquiry **I myself** am one of the examined objects: the two clarinets cannot function without me holding them, using my lungs, my fingers, my tongue, my thoughts. Regarding this last element, the way I approach the practice and the instruments is deeply related to the subculture

of classical music and clarinet playing, my "specific, perspectival and limited vantage point" [Holman Jones 2005]. This is not a weakness in art-based research. Autoethnography uses individual experience not to generalize, but rather to place one's identity in a wider cultural context and reflect on it. My personal experience cannot – and should not – be turned off. Instead of unrealistic objectivity, I strive for accountability, presenting my journaling, reflections, and observations transparently in my research accounts. Having biases or preconceptions is not necessarily a negative occurrence that should be removed. They usually come from our culture, our education, our upbringing, and if we succeed in acknowledging some of them it can add more layers of depth to the interpretation of the research experience.

An example of acknowledged bias in this research is the evaluation of the period clarinet: in the very first draft of the project, the premiss from which everything started was that the modern clarinet was much "better" than the period clarinet. The research aimed to investigate where and how. After a few practice sessions, however, I had to face the fact that this premiss was not born from an "objective" inferiority of the period instrument, but simply from instilled assumptions [Haynes 2007]. Instead of clinging to those assumptions, I decided to expose and question them, re-wiring the project and exploring my artistic identity through the unique affordances of a period clarinet.

Conclusion

The combination of the three methods here described formed the methodology for the designing of a practice-based artistic research project into clarinet affordances. All three play their own significant role: autobiographical design was fundamental to starting the project and making the practice sessions efficient. Thematic analysis shaped my way of dealing with the data, providing me with a framework to categorize my journal notes. Finally, autoethnography allowed me to use my own emotions, background, and experiences accountably, reflect on my cultural context, and occasionally exploit narrative techniques in my research accounts. The framework they create mirrors to some extent Wolcott's "research formula" of Description – in this case the raw data obtained through autobiographically designed practice sessions –, Analysis, or the thematic analysis informed categorization, and Interpretation, carried out through autoethnographic lenses [Wolcott 1994: 48–51].

Artistic practice in general benefits from organization. Any music student is (or should be) encouraged to learn how to design their practice with structure, sets of goals, or the help of a journal. The point where standard artistic practice becomes research is when the main overall goal is not just self-improvement, but the production of new knowledge, which cannot happen without a method that harnesses the data collection, analysis and reporting. The method, on the other hand,

must accommodate the special needs of the field of art, where every research project is a unique experience [Hannula et al. 2005: 19]. The loan of qualitative methods from other disciplines or projects should not be a mindless calque, in much the same way as the movie adaptation of a book should not simply copy the original. Different media, or here different disciplines, call for different solutions using creativity and critical thinking. At the end of the process, art and rigour can melt into each other to overcome the apparent binary nature of artistic research in favour of a diversity of intertwined artistic and academic experiences.

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