



TEACHING MUSIC  
PERFORMANCE IN  
HIGHER EDUCATION

EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF  
ARTISTIC RESEARCH

EDITED BY  
HELEN JULIA MINORS,  
STEFAN ÖSTERSJÖ,  
GILVANO DALAGNA, AND  
JORGE SALGADO CORREIA



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# 13. Conclusion: Probing, Positioning, (Re)Acting

*Helen Julia Minors and Stefan Östersjö*

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## Probing

How do we teach performance in higher music education? Or, should the question be how might we be teaching music performance in higher education if we were to base learning on artistic research rather than on skill acquisition in the traditional hierarchical European model of master-apprentice? Or, to rephrase, how might we teach performance according to a student-centred pedagogy—one which embeds employability skills, to ensure students have agency within and through their own learning, directed toward an authentic experience which is relevant to the student, to peers, and, also, for the global music industries now? The rephrasing of the question is necessary for our practices as artistic researchers and pedagogues because this book is about challenging how we teach performance to ensure we improve the student experience and that we share our own artistic practices with students and vice versa. An experiential basis to learning is vital. It situates the self and positions teaching as a sharing of practices. The balance of barriers and opportunities in HME is asserted by Heidi Westerlund and Helena Gaunt: ‘Contemporary societal changes can thus be experienced both in terms of intense challenges and limitless potential for music’.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, we give a proposition: music educators must reflect on their teaching and change their practices to ensure they are inclusive. These must truly engage students as co-producers of knowledge, enabling them to understand the contemporary music industries with a global outlook.

Throughout the book, we have encountered a number of musicians who have developed artistic research practices. They are grounded in different art worlds and different cultures: the country music harmonica playing of Mikael Bäckman, and his explorations of the licks of Charlie McCoy; the electric bass of Fausto Pizzol, and his explorations of its potential for harmonic playing; Mariam Kharatyan’s explorations

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1 Heidi Westerlund and Helena Gaunt, *Expanding Professionalism in Music and Higher Music Education: A Changing Game* (New York: Routledge, 2022), p. xvii.

of improvisation as a tool to enhance the performance of classical piano repertoire; Robert Sholl's demonstrations of how improvisation may be a path to learning music theory. Their writing is sometimes analytical, sometimes descriptive, but they share the commonality that the practices they have developed only obtain their full meaning when manifested in context and shared with listeners, other musicians, or with students. The varying methodologies are necessary to articulate both artistic embodied experience and reflective practice through the creative process, then, not least, to embed artistic research effectively into pedagogic practice.

These artistic research practices are not merely means for individual development but also methods for sharing with students. The artistic researcher brings authentic practices and recent artworks into the teaching situation in order to nurture students' own creative practice and to develop their own personal artistic voices, with a critical understanding of the context. Much as the REACT model shows (see the Introduction to this volume), the intersectional overlap of how we contextualise our artistic practice, while exploring that practice and then sharing the practice in some way, ensures we are considering learning which is grounded on artistic research. This enables us as pedagogues to bring an authentic and inclusive experience to students in our global classrooms while also challenging them, and ourselves, to develop new practices. On our own and with others, we negotiate tradition and innovation in such a way that we are aware of what novel aspects we are bringing in our own work and continually reflect on our work in order to reconfigure our practice in ways that are relevant and sustainable. As such, we align ourselves with the position advanced by Paul G. Woodford:

In [our] own field of music education, for example, curricula emphasise skills development, pedagogical methods, the acquisition of knowledge, national standards, and degree outcomes instead of teaching students how to research and develop arguments so they can think more critically about what they read, are told, see, hear, or do.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, education has become inherently political and, by readdressing the pedagogical ways in which we encourage students to develop their own critical voices in and through practice, we react to limiting factors in the pedagogical system to suggest ways in which we can revolutionise approaches to teaching music performance. The aim is to make our curricula and teaching more inclusive, more globally aware, more authentic in their practical creation to reflect the music industries, and, ultimately, to ensure we are encouraging students to work as artistic researcher right from the start of their creative journey.

Such close inquiries into specific artistic research practices embedded into a teaching and learning experience of performance are central to the book. In offering these varied case studies, the book shares some ways in which artistic research is becoming

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2 Paul G. Woodford, *Music Education in an Age of Virtuality and Post-Truth* (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 2.

central to performance learning in HME. It is, however, Euro-centric: the book builds on shared agreements from the Bologna process (detailed in the Introduction of this book), and authors were brought together through a European funded project. This is not to say that the examples cannot be applied globally, but we share this observation to draw attention to both the limitations of the book and the model and to clearly state our positionality (more on this below).

As can be seen in many chapters across this book, starting in Chapter 1, a defining factor of much artistic research in music is the use of recording technologies in the development of research methods. Such approaches also play a prominent role in the application of artistic research methods and practices in first- and second-cycle teaching. The use of audio and video recording enables both reflective practices as well as intersubjective learning, as is evident in Chapters 1 and 8. In artistic research, such practices have been employed to integrate artistic development with methods for documentation and analysis.

If scholarly institutions of knowledge are founded on particular relations with archives, rather than specifically on the medium of writing — by which I mean all forms of numerical, textual, and musical notation — then the advent of audiovisual research stands to radically transform the university and perhaps knowledge itself. At issue here is not only the forms that research can be understood to take, but also who can be recognized as conducting research and what can be counted as knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Recording technology has been proven to change our conception of musical listening and performance in ways that have led to the creation of entirely new institutional structures for music creation and novel ways of engaging with music in absolute solitude. But, recording technology also offers new opportunities for the teaching and learning of music performance. Further, it enables repeated listening, of listening reflectively, analytically, and, of course, ‘musicianly’.<sup>4</sup> All of these modes of listening also constitute possibilities that are embraced by artistic research and brought to HME as practices that may both challenge and empower students.

We are proposing not only that teaching be student-centred but also that the learning situation be designed from an intersubjective perspective so as to widen the reflexive practice beyond the reflection of the individual (see Chapter 8). If we point back to John Dewey, who said that teaching should be ‘one with the moral process’<sup>5</sup>, our role involves helping students to develop critical approaches to how we make value judgments. The proposed approach, shown in the REACT model (see Introduction), places the student’s voice at the heart of the pedagogic approach and collaborative artistic research.

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3 Ben Spatz, *Making A Laboratory. Dynamic Configurations with Transversal Video* (Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books, 2020), pp. 35–36.

4 Pierre Schaeffer, *Treatise on Musical Objects: An Essay Across Disciplines*, trans. by Christine North and John Dack (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017 [1966]).

5 John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Mentor Books, 1950), p. 145.

## Positioning

It is important to acknowledge how artistic research, when it was first introduced in Europe, was quite strongly characterised by a Eurocentric understanding of musical practice and, indeed, also, of artistic knowledge. The problem, therefore, has been that the positionality of reason has not previously identified its limited context, and now our context requires us to open our collective eyes to intersectionality, equality and diversity, and inclusive practices. As such, we need to address recent interventions which are challenging the Eurocentric, white-Western models which have dominated HME. It is imperative that we decolonise our curriculum, and work in many areas has begun with gusto to consider what this means in practice, how to do this work in a way which is co-created with students, and how it ensures genuine focus on intersectionality. The challenges are not merely individual, but also structural, as phrased by Darla Crispin:

Can inequality and oppression be challenged by those who gain advantages from those same systems? And, in this age where so much of education is in danger of being instrumentalised, is artistic research and its training not also in danger of being entrained in a series of manifesto-based false promises, thus neutralising its potential for trenchant critique? How is artistic research to be accessed by those outside its privileged areas?<sup>6</sup>

We return below to how artistic research has come to address these challenges, through individual projects, but will first consider the implications of a decolonising approach in relation to teaching practices in HME. For example, it is no longer acceptable for academics to merely update a reading list for a course and to claim the work is done; rather they must each consider their role and how they address the subject matter with their students. Rowena Arshad articulated ways to get started, in her call for change, when she stated that:

Decolonising is not about deleting knowledge or histories that have been developed in the West or colonial nations; rather it is to situate the histories and knowledges that do not originate from the West in the context of imperialism, colonialism and power and to consider why these have been marginalised and decentred.<sup>7</sup>

Within the UK in particular, work has begun to ensure that there is equality and equity in practices through two charter marks, which are assessed by Advance HE. This organisation gives Bronze, Silver, or Gold awards to reflect a university's work in relation to Athena Swan (gender equality) and Race Equality Charter (race, ethnicity). The decolonial work is one part of this effort.<sup>8</sup> For example, the EDI Music Studies Network (discussed in Chapter 12) has a working group looking to reimagine the curriculum to ensure it is both decolonised but also inclusive in all forms (considering

6 Darla Crispin, 'The Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization of Artistic Research', *ÍMPAR, Online Journal for Artistic Research*, 3(2019), 45–59 (p. 56).

7 Rowena Arshad, 'Decolonising the curriculum - how to get started?', *Times Higher Education*, 14 September 2021, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/decolonising-curriculum-how-do-i-get-started>

8 Race Equality Charter, <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/race-equality-charter>

accessibility, learning needs, and so on).<sup>9</sup> We must not, however, limit the work to one of a tick-box institutional exercise, as Paul Gilroy has warned. The work, when done effectively should be considered, careful, and thought-through:

decolonising the curriculum does not mean forsaking the archives of knowledge built up here over centuries. It asks us to approach those treasured and error-strewn forms of knowledge in a new way. We are required to read them even more carefully, always mindful of the historical factors that formed them and eager to supplement them with other perspectives and commentaries.<sup>10</sup>

In order to reflect, and to make informed changes, the work needs broad discussion. At York St John University, referred to in Chapters 11 and 12, the discussion is presently active. Laura Key reiterates the purpose of the initiative as she lays out the university's next series of seminars on decolonising the curriculum: to 'critically engage with the vital work that staff and students across the sector are undertaking to develop anti-racist and decolonial praxis in Higher Education'.<sup>11</sup>

More recently, an increasing number of critical artistic research practices have been developed. This can be seen in Luca Soudant's feminist and queer critique of sound art, which, quite importantly, looks also at human/non-human entanglements.<sup>12</sup> Similar perspectives are found in the work of violinist, composer, and sound artist Halla Steinunn Stefánsdóttir,<sup>13</sup> who has also developed experiences from her artistic research in courses for the preparation of the degree project in the Malmö Academy of Music, highlighting their impact on the creation of a more diverse and inclusive curriculum.<sup>14</sup> Combining research on diasporic identity with gender perspectives, Nguyễn Thanh Thủy, through an artistic PhD and continued postdoctoral research, has contributed to several perspectives in the pursuit of a decolonised approach to artistic research.<sup>15</sup> As argued in Chapter 11, to develop intercultural competence, we need methods that enable critical thinking. Artistic research, such as in the examples above, points to how a practice-based understanding of intercultural dialogue demands methods that go even further. What a decolonising approach to artistic research enables is the development of practices that strive beyond

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9 EDI Music Studies, <https://edims.network/>

10 Paul Gilroy, interviewed by Inho Park, 'Decolonising' Higher Education – An Interview With Professor Paul Gilroy', *RoarNews*, 27 November 2017, <https://roarnews.co.uk/2017/decolonising-higher-education-interview-professor-paul-gilroy/>

11 Laura Kay, 'Discussing Decolonisation: a mini-series at York St John University, 2023–24', <https://blog.yorks.ac.uk/tatblog/2023/10/11/discussing-decolonisation-a-mini-series-at-york-st-john-university-2023-24/>

12 Luca Soudant, 'Trans\*formative thinking through sound: Artistic research in gender and sound beyond the human', *Open Philosophy*, 4 (2021), 335–46, <https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2020-0189>

13 Halla Steinunn Stefánsdóttir, 'HÉR! An Exploration of Artistic Agency' (Lund: Lund University, 2023).

14 Halla Steinunn Stefánsdóttir, 'The Degree Project – evaluation from within' (forthcoming).

15 Nguyễn Thanh Thủy, 'Vietnamese Diasporic Voices: Exploring Yellow Music in a Liminal Space', *VIS - Nordic Journal for Artistic Research*, 8 (2022), <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1513023/1513024/0/0>

diversity, toward a fundamental reconsideration, and a widening of the foundations of knowledge within academia. This also implies that in music research, not only do theory and methods need to be decolonized but also the very foundations of our embodied practices, including our listening.<sup>16</sup>

The opportunity of a decolonised approach to artistic research and pedagogical practice in music therefore can afford us with a renewed self-awareness and a new critical understanding of the self within context. But, to achieve it, we need to rebuild our pedagogy afresh, recognising the need for institutional changes at every level.

### (Re)Acting and EnActing

The REACT project has responded to the need to develop novel ways to deliver higher music performance education. This is the case even in institutional settings where increasing government regulation and administration, along with financial belt-tightening, have developed more barriers to the delivery of the courses and change the duties of academics. This book, therefore, shares the findings that proactive research and pedagogic interventions are necessary to advance a critical curriculum which has an embodied approach to practice.

In thinking about the REACT project and how it was conceptualised, in comparison to the practices it activated, focus on the prefix is illuminating. If 're' is suggestive of reproducing, it may be doubted that merely re-acting is enough to create change. In fact, with the prefix cut out, a more active or activist approach seems to emerge. But, given the nature of the practices discussed across the book, we feel that 'acting' needs further conceptual development, through an ecological understanding, which encompasses also the cultural and pedagogical. An EnActive approach, therefore, further emphasises how practices are always relational and situated. It demands that we advocate for an embodied pedagogic approach, which expects everyone to address his or her own positionality and habitus. We therefore advocate for such an approach, which we claim would be more inclusive of individuals' experiences and educational needs in relation to the current global music industries.

Paul Craenen summarises much of the examples given throughout the book of how artistic research has emerged as an integrating factor in the new curricula being developed in HME. Rather than merely integrating a research perspective in our teaching practices, artistic research offers approaches for how to integrate a more diverse curriculum into the individual path each student develops across his or her studies. Artistic skills and outcomes form part of an individual's portfolio, enabling a professional career in the increasingly diverse art worlds of music in contemporary society:

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16 Stefan Östersjö, Nguyễn Thanh Thủy, David Hebert, and Henrik Frisk, *Shared Listeners: Methods for Transcultural Musicianship and Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p. 5.



The concept of artistic research offers a platform where elements of practice, theory, experimentation, and reflection can meet in a tailored, personal learning trajectory. The relevance of such a trajectory in the master curriculum depends not so much on its production of knowledge and innovation, but in *the learning experience* of creating connections between those elements through independent research: as an experience that is assumed to set a motivational example for processes of learning and adapting to different contexts in a future professional life or further education. From this viewpoint, the integrative potential of artistic research does not only aim at specialisation, but also at learning *how* to learn.<sup>17</sup>

Craenen's argument is, in our understanding, in agreement with the fundamental idea of the REACT model: it is necessary to put artistic research practice at the centre of the rethinking of the teaching and learning of music performance in HME.

Fundamentally, we see novel possibilities offered by artistic research in developing new ways of 'learning how to learn', as teachers share their artistic research practices and methods with students. Examples of such teaching formats are presented throughout the book, perhaps most prominently in the first section. For instance, in Chapter 3, Mikael Bäckman shares with students his experience as an artistic researcher, developing his own voice, in order to facilitate their journeys in the creation of their own performative style. In Chapter 1, a more comprehensive demonstration of the outcomes of student projects based on artistic research approaches, through an analysis of finished degree projects, is illustrated. Further, the book provides several examples of how improvisation can be introduced in unexpected contexts, as an enactive approach to learning both musical interpretation as well as music theory (see Chapter 5).

Chapter 8 advocates the use of reflection in intercultural musicking and Chapter 11 proposes dialogic approaches to co-creation across genres. Chapter 6 discusses the need to enable group agency and engage student voices in co-creating the curriculum through a critical response method. This is similar to Chapter 12, which posits the need to integrate students' habitus into the creative approaches, which are assessed. These approaches all resonate with the more overarching perspective of deep learning, as outlined and discussed in Chapter 9.

The challenge of decolonising practices is a long-term project for teacher and student alike. In the context of music performance, this will always entail a critical, dialogical, and embedded engagement with the habitus of each individual. Hence, when artistic research is enacted in HME, learning how to learn, may at times even become a matter of re-learning how to learn.

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17 Paul Craenen, 'Artistic Research as an Integrative Force. A Critical Look at the Role of Master's Research at Dutch Conservatoires', *FORUM+*, 27.1 (2020), unpaginated, emphasis in original, <https://doi.org/10.5117/FORUM2020.1.CRAE>

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