THE PERFORMER-RESEARCHER: ELEMENT OR COMPOUND?

Dr Mine Doğantan -Dack
Middlesex University
CMPCP Associate

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For purposes of conceptual clarity, and in order to situate the experiences that I will talk about in this presentation, I shall start by commenting on the first part of the title: 'The Performer-Researcher'. In the scholarly literature on musical performance, the term 'the performer' is used to speak anonymously about all those musicians who produce the sounding music; yet there are different kinds of performance-making and by implication different kinds of performers, and how their experiences as musicians vary is a largely neglected area in research. For example, we have not yet theorized how the experiences of performing music, say, on a flute and on a concert grand piano differ. While there are various similarities – for example, both instrumentalists would parse the musical surface through similar cognitive operations - there are, nevertheless, very important differences related, for example, to the entirely different kinds of physical interactions the two instruments require: the meanings of *performing music* – and *of being a performer* – would display significant dissimilarities when one can hold and lift – even with one hand - one's instrument, perhaps tuck it under one's arm and carry it around close to one's body, creating a myriad of affective sensations and significations, as opposed to playing an instrument that is hard to move from its place, and impossible to physically hold

or embrace, and carry around. My intuition is that such dissimilarities regarding the nature of the performer's embodied relationship with his or her instrument have implications for the ways we conceive practice-as-research. Furthermore, there are significant differences between the life-worlds of, say, a concert pianist whose performance activities consist solely of solo public appearances, and a double-bass player, whose career unfolds only in the environment of an orchestra. Hence, it is important to always specify the conditions and nature of the performing activities defining the particular kind of performer we wish to talk about: for the purposes of this talk, the term 'the performer' will refer to a professional classical pianist, i.e. myself – working in a chamber music context established for the purposes of the particular research project that I will talk about.

There is also the tendency to use the term 'performance' to cover a whole range of activities that involve practicing, rehearsing and live music-making for the public: while all three activities can be understood to be part of 'performance practice' in general, it is, nevertheless, important to specify precisely which activity we mean when we use the term 'performance', otherwise one can easily assume or jump to the conclusion that explanations and arguments that apply to *the processes of performance preparation* equally apply to *processes that shape the live event*, which – as I will argue during my presentation – is not always the case: hence, I will use the term 'performance' to refer strictly to 'live public music-making'.

I should also note that my concern is with the performance of Western classical music repertoire, where there is a notated score: performances that involve a substantial degree of improvisation

present a very different epistemology and phenomenology of performing, and would require a different set of explanatory tools. And finally 'the performer-researcher' in the title of my presentation refers to the coming together of the two identities in one and the same persona and project.

The AHRC-funded, practice-based research project that is the subject of my presentation today is titled *Alchemy in the Spotlight: Qualitative Transformations in Chamber Music Performance.* Although the project has officially been completed, there is an on-going exploration of the investigations I undertook as part of it. Briefly, the Alchemy project is about exploring the cognitive, affective and social processes involved in live performance in the context of a piano trio, and exploring how performer continue to learn on stage. To set the context for the project, it will be useful to define the motivation behind it and explain how it came about in the first place. Although I have always been aware of the peculiarities of performing live as a solo performer, the unique phenomenological and existential qualities of live music-making became clearer to me as I got more regularly involved in chamber music over the last several years. Couple of years before the *Alchemy* project, I attempted my very first practice-based project in collaboration with cellist Ferenc Szücs, who is currently the Head of Strings at the Irish World Academy of Dance and Music in Limerick, Ireland. Until that point, I pursued my activities as a performer and as a music theorist separately. My first practice-based project was about researching how performers come to know a new piece of music in a collaborative context, i.e. in the context of chamber music. What I came to notice was that *sometimes*, during one of our live performances, totally unplanned and therefore

unpredictable interpretative choices would be made, resulting in expressively enhanced playing, and highly enhanced affective involvement with the piece. One of the pieces we learned as part of the project was Rachmaninoff's Sonata for Cello-Piano in G minor, Op.19; neither of us had played the piece before, and we learned it over an extended period of time, rehearsing it once every while. Some of the research events and findings related to this project can be viewed online at the PRIMO website (http://primo.sas.ac.uk). I would like to show an excerpt from one of the rehearsals followed by an excerpt, showing the way we played the very same passage during the first live performance of the Sonata. During the live event, the cellist, rather unexpectedly and in an unplanned manner, plays the passage in question much slower than we had ever rehearsed it, and a certain qualitative transformation in the interpretation of the music takes place – perhaps something that could ultimately lead to what we would call 'performance magic'.

VIDEO EXAMPLE 1

The other incident, which further motivated me to think about processes of live performance, happened during a workshop I gave at Middlesex University with the Allegri String Quartet on Mozart's Piano Concerto K.413, one of his so-called 'chamber concertos'. During the workshop, I experienced a sense of increased expressive freedom, heightened affective involvement, and once again something akin to performance magic took place. But in this case, the conditions of the performance were very different: I had never worked with the Allegri Quartet before, we never rehearsed together – not even once – before the workshop, and we did not know the piece well at all; they were sight reading it and I had received the

score only a few days before the workshop. So, what puzzled me was the possibility of being inspired and experiencing something that begins to resemble the magical in performance when there was no ensemble familiarity, and minimum musical preparation.

VIDEO EXAMPLE 2

Hence, I decided that processes of live performance, which represented a big research gap in the discipline, require in depth exploration from the performer's perspective – and the *Alchemy* project was thus conceived. The choice of a piano trio – as opposed to a project for solo piano - had to do with the relative ease of documenting the processes of preparation (due to the necessity of verbal and gestural exchanges between the group members), and my desire to counterbalance the overwhelming emphasis on solo keyboard studies in contemporary Performance Studies.

During the project, I confronted several major challenges: these had to do with issues of discourse, identity and methodology. The three issues are in fact related and implicate each other, since discourse is a powerful tool that is used in constructing identities and also in defining the nature of research methodologies. The first problem had to do with discourse at the immediate, practical level: in order to attain performance expertise in the Western classical tradition, musicians starts acquiring the necessary technical skills and knowledge at a very young age, and develop these through intense practice over a long period of time, typically in the context of a master-apprentice relationship with an expert performer. The expert knowledge that is passed on from the teacher to the student is couched in a kind of discourse that relies heavily on metaphors, imagery, and subjective value judgments. This way of

communicating meanings continues to define the interactions between co-performers throughout their performance careers. As such, the performer's discourse stands in stark opposition to the objectivist discourse that is the standard means of representing scientific knowledge in the Western research tradition.

Furthermore, the practice of these two kinds of discourses engages very different material conditions and aims: the performer's discourse aims to make something, or affect a change – frequently an immediate change - in the sounding music; it remains mostly spoken and in that sense forms an oral tradition (although, of course, there are many texts – historical and contemporary - written by instrumental pedagogues); and it is acquired from a very early age onwards, becoming a natural language for the performer. By contrast, the acquisition of the researcher's discourse happens mostly through the reading of texts – although there is, of course, some face-to-face dialogue with colleagues in academic contexts; its aim is to put forward discursive knowledge and importantly, it is learned much later in a performer-researcher's career. The performer-researcher is expected to be able to go back and forth the discourse that she engages in when working with his or her co-performers and the researcher's discourse, and negotiate ways of representing his or her subjective, value-driven experiences as a performer in objective terms.

The necessity of dealing with two separate discourses poses further problems when the performer-researcher has to contextualize his or her research project (its questions, aims and findings), which means that he or she needs to be familiar and conversant with the existing research literature in Performance

Studies on musical performance: it is important to remember that discourses actively construct the objects (as well as the subjects) which they then proceed to explain, and some dominant discourses within a discipline become so entrenched that it becomes difficult to see how they can be challenged at all. Hence, as the performer gets familiar with the current research literature on performance, it is quite possible that he or she will adopt the concepts, theoretical tools as well as the jargon of the dominant discourse and also accept its explanatory authority. Nevertheless, one needs to be cautious in adopting non-critically a discourse that at times fails to represent one's experiences and intuitions as a performer: let me give an example.

In the scholarly literature, processes of performance preparation are frequently explained in terms of problem solving activities, with references to the cognitive operations taking place while solving problems in mathematics, physics and sometimes chess. This conceptualization is then assumed to explain processes of live (or recorded) performances. For example, when attempting to understand the artistic principles behind an interpretation that we hear on a recorded performance, Nicholas Cook talks about 'the problem' the pianist attempts to solve; he proceeds to argue - based on the sounds of the performance (or, to be precise, on the measurements of the sounds of the performance) - for 'a consciously pursued strategy'[1] employed by the pianist to solve a performance problem. While some of the processes of performance preparation can certainly be conceived in terms of problem solving, live

[1] Cook, N. (2007) 'Performance analysis and Chopin's mazurkas', *Musicae Scientiae* XI/2: 187.

performance itself is anything but a problem solving activity in the mathematical, physics- or even chess-related senses. The challenge for the performer-researcher is to put forward alternative ways of conceptualizing a live performance rather than accepting and working with what the existing research discourse has to offer.

The second issue that came about during the *Alchemy* project concerns methodology: as a practice-based investigation about live performance and the qualitative transformations it involves, the artistic practice of chamber music performance is an integral part of the project and its research methodology. For instance, investigating the transformations in question is contingent upon making them happen in the first place and in this sense, the artistic practice of live performance is the only kind of valid method for exploring the conditions of emergence of such transformations. One of the performances we gave as part of the project at Middlesex University was introduced as a research event: before the concert, the audience was told that they were about to witness not only a musical performance but also a research activity. The identity relation thus established between a live public performance and research was both puzzling and troubling for me as I intended and wanted the artistic practice to be part of the project as artistic practice and not something else. Intuitively, even before I start to critically scrutinize it, such an identity relation does not seem to hold: while the relevant pre- and post-performance processes can be conceived as research activities, I fail to see how a live performance can be a research activity. When I make this claim, I am frequently asked: does the live performance produce new knowledge? Is there creativity involved? Are you making decision while performing? Are you experimenting?

If you answer 'yes' to these questions, then the live performance is indeed research. It is important to note here that other processes that are part of the totality of musical performance practice, such as the preparatory processes that take place in practice sessions and rehearsals, can indeed be identified as research activities since the temporal structuring of these processes allows the performer to interrupt the unidirectional flow of the music, to stop and reflect on what he or she has just played, and to experiment with the music.

My resistance to accepting live performance as a research activity status is related to several factors: first of all, I am not convinced that experimenting – when it's part of a certain activity - by itself qualifies that activity as research. We surely are not involved in research whenever we think, reflect, and make choices in our daily lives. Secondly, performing music does not – indeed cannot - involve any reflective component by the performer, at least not in the way we understand it to be a crucial aspect of any research activity: as a defining feature of research, reflection always offers the researcher the possibility to change, improve, transform, expand, and rework his or her ideas and their manner of presentation *before* the research outcome is made publicly available. This possibility is simply not present for the performer during the making of a live public performance. Furthermore, the decision-making processes the performer is involved in during a live performance do not, in my view, suffice to render the event a research activity, as their nature is very different from the *decision-making-cum-problem-solving* processes of research. During a live performance decisions are made by exercising *wisdom* supported by *belief* (as in 'belief in something'): both concepts are quite foreign to research as we standardly

understand it, but are totally fitting for explaining the practice of live performance. The performer makes decisions during a live event based on his/her belief in a phenomenon that does not yet exit, that s/he hopes to bring about by surpassing what s/he has achieved in the practice room, by sometimes taking risks and acting wisely enough just at the right moment following the subjective evaluation of the expressive potentials of a given moment. If new knowledge emerges, this happens through made decisions made wisely, or unwisely, during the live event. There is thus a definite teleological dimension to performance ontology, and a definite leap of faith in performance epistemology. What I have portrayed here is surely not the model of knowledge acquisition or production in the Western tradition of research.

Even when the performance takes place as part of an ongoing research activity, *while it happens* it is bracketed as an artistic undertaking that is continually striving towards singularity and is concerned not with the creation, representation, dissemination of new insight, understanding or knowledge, but rather with the making of an affectively charged, hopefully magical, and transformational experience. While performing music, the performer's devotion is to the music and not to any research questions. Musical performance in the Western classical tradition as a real-time, embodied, unidirectional phenomenon can be integrated into a research activity only as artistic practice, and I find it important to resist the pressure in Higher Education contexts to represent artistic practice as something else, and to allow a space within the practitioner's research project where the practice can exist as it is and be valued for what it is, namely as artistic practice.

All these considerations introduce a further issue that I experienced during the *Alchemy* project as a performer-researcher working in a Higher Education context: this is the issue of identity. Identities emerge and are sometimes even actively constructed through the social spaces one moves in, the kinds of groups one mixes with, etc. and the identity-building practices and material conditions of a performer and researcher are quite distinct: in the formation of the performer's identity, for example, regular encounters with the public in concert venues, the daily exercise of musical value judgments, daily physical contact with the instrument, and even the time of the day when one has to perform, all play a significant part. These identity-forming features and the value system they imply still have not found their way into the dominant discourse, which in my view is essential for the discipline to advance. While Higher Education institutions encourage and support the entrance of professional performers into academic contexts to pursue research projects, it seems to me that performers are implicitly pressured to present themselves first as researchers, at least on the surface; this means that they often produce accounts of their own work that are over-determined by a single identity position, that of the researcher. And this is why a live performance given in an academic context can in fact be introduced as a research activity. Hence, regarding the question I posed as the second part of my title – 'Element of Compound?' – it seems to me that each performer-researcher would have to decide for himself or herself whether the two identities merge so strongly as to become indivisible or remain separate yet connected.

The current dominant disciplinary discourse in Performance Studies does not allow the performer a *subject position*, i.e. a discursive location from which to speak and act *as a performer* (in contrast to prescribing a role or part to be adopted and acted out). Establishing a discourse that represents the performer's identity is not an easy task. Discourses are not simply ways of speaking and writing; they are closely bound up with practices (often institutionalized practices), which means that they are connected to ways of organizing, regulating and administering practices: even those of us who are thoroughly committed to advancing the discipline may unconsciously resort to ideological prejudices when representing the identity of the performer in the discipline.

At the risk of provoking controversy, but only with the intention of initiating a debate about the representation of the performer's voice in the discipline, may I point out that the title of today's event, for example, as an instance of discourse, implicitly supports an ideological stance that is susceptible to a negative interpretation, particularly when the term 'practitioners' means performers or even composers? The title 'Stepping out of the Shadows' does seem to emerge from the assumption that performers have somehow been in the shadow – even if not the musicologists' shadow, at least a shadow in the abstract; yet, are they not the ones in fact who are continuously in the spotlight from an early age onwards? Furthermore, the title also seems to imply that they step out of this presumed shadow by becoming researchers. One reason I find this troubling is that it calls to mind the image of the prisoners in Plato's famous *Allegory of the Cave*, dwelling in semi-darkness until they somehow break away from their chains of ignorance. In this

sense, it seems to be a title that continues to see the performer as 'the other' of the researcher. Moreover, the Call for Papers for today's event mentioned an exploration of 'empowering ways of being/existing in the discipline' for practitioners, the implication being that research somehow empowers the performer. The Call for Papers also asked participants to talk about how engaging in research helped to improve practice, the assumption being that research does indeed improve practice: my personal position in this regard is that research about live performance does not necessarily make one a better performer; indeed, such an expectation would be the wrong reason for undertaking a research project. What does improve practice, in my view, is the cultivation of our innate human desire to learn, and to know the world, and ourselves, which of course is the very foundation of research. The desire to know is in turn rooted, I believe, in our affective experiences of wonderment and awe in contemplating existence. If we remind ourselves Glenn Gould's wonderful words that 'the purpose of art is not the release of a momentary ejection of adrenalin but is, rather, the gradual, lifelong construction of a state of wonder and serenity'[2], it is not difficult to see that artistic practice and research actually meet in these kinds of deeply affective beginnings, which are the very forces that have drive each of here today to become practitioners of art, researchers or practitioner-researchers. Even though we are only at the beginning of the journey towards a true integration of the epistemological principles and aesthetic values of the artistic practice of musical

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[2] Gould, G. (1984) *The Glenn Gould Reader*, ed. Tim Page. New York: Vintage, 246.

performance within contemporary Performance Studies, the participants in today's event here have made it clear that it promises to be an exciting journey we can all look forward to.