

Composition and Performance as Research: some wider responses to John Croft and others

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Originally blogged on December 9, 2015, at <https://ianpace.wordpress.com/2015/12/09/video-of-research-seminar-on-composition-and-performance-as-research-and-some-wider-responses-to-john-croft-and-others/>

Here (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vo1FqhbqVCI>) is the video of the research seminar which took place on November 25th, 2015, on the subject of ‘Can Composition and Performance be Research?’, which featured a panel made up of Christopher Fox (Professor of Composition at Brunel University and editor of *Tempo*), myself (pianist and Head of Performance at City University), Miguel Mera (composer and Head of the Department of Music at City University), Annie Yim (pianist and DMA student at City University), and Camden Reeves (composer and Head of Music, University of Manchester). Christine Dysers (PhD student in Music at City University) was unable to be present due to illness, but a statement by here was read out by Sam MacKay (PhD student in Music at City University and organiser of the seminar). The session was chaired by Alexander Lingas (Undergraduate Programme Director and Reader in Music, City University). Greatest of thanks are also due to Bruno Mathez for making and editing the video.

A short article in response to the occasion has been posted at the City University Music Department has been posted by PhD student in music Roya Arab.

The panellists were responding to two key articles: **John Croft’s ‘Composition is Not Research’**, *Tempo* 69/272 (April 2015), pp. 6-11, and my own **‘Composition and Performance can be, and often have been, Research’**, *Tempo* 70/275 (January 2016), pp. 60-70. As of this week, Camden Reeves’ article ‘Composition, Research and Pseudo-Science: A Response to John Croft’, *Tempo* 70/275 (January 2016), pp. 50-59, and Croft’s reply to Reeves and myself, ‘Composition, Research and Ways of Talking’, *Tempo* 70/275 (January 2016), pp. 71-77, have been published – these are not yet available via open access, but can be downloaded from **Tempo** for those with access to this.

Here I wanted to summarise the arguments I presented at the forum, and also respond to some of Croft’s response. Some of my thinking has moved on a little from the positions I outlined in my *Tempo* article (which I acknowledge may contain some inner contradictions or inconsistencies), but the majority of positions presented there are ones I continue to uphold.

The debate has been dominated by the issue of whether *composition* can be research, with much less attention given to performance; I would like to redress that balance. I believe that it is tacitly accepted that a musical composition is likely to qualify as some type of research much more than is the case for musical performances and recordings. This is reflected in the relative numbers of composers and performers employed in academic positions in universities. I have compiled some approximate

figures for the situation as it exists in autumn 2015, in large measure using data derived from departments' own websites. These figures are slightly modified and checked from those given at the seminar – if anyone notices any other omissions or major errors, do let me know and I will make the appropriate corrections.

There are 53 departments offering various types of music or music-related degree [*Edit: Some other departments could also be included, which I will add when editing this post at some point in the near future*], excluding the ten UK conservatoires, in which the status of composition and performance is of a different nature. These are as follows:

Russell Group (19): King's College and Queen Mary, University of London; Birmingham; Bristol; Cambridge; Durham; Leeds; Liverpool; Manchester; Newcastle; Nottingham; Oxford; Sheffield; Southampton; York; Cardiff; Edinburgh; Glasgow; Queen's University, Belfast.

Mid-ranking Institutions ('Other') (13): Royal Holloway and Goldsmith's Colleges, and School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London; City University; Brunel; Hull; Keele; Open University; Salford; Surrey; Sussex; Bangor; Aberdeen.

Post-1992 Institutions (received university status after 1992) (21): West London; East London; London Metropolitan; Westminster; Middlesex; Kingston; Anglia Ruskin; Bath Spa; Brighton; Canterbury Christ Church; Chichester; De Montfort; Falmouth; Hertfordshire; Huddersfield; Liverpool Hope; Oxford Brookes; Winchester; Wolverhampton; Edinburgh Napier; Ulster.

I have looked only at composers and performers employed in *academic* positions (i.e. integrated into the academic career structure from Lecturer to Professor) at these institutions. On the basis of research outputs, I have counted those composers and/or performers who have also produced a fair number of written outputs as being '0.5's for the purposes of counting. I have counted only university (not college) appointments at Oxford and Cambridge. By this method, I arrive at the following figures:

All		Universities
Total	Staff:	691
Composers:	198	(28.7%)
Performers:	76	(11%)
Practitioners: 274 (39.7%)		
Russell		Group
Total	Staff:	318
Composers:	89.5	(28.1%)
Performers:	21	(6.6%)
Practitioners: 110.5 (34.7%)		
Mid-Ranking		Institutions
Total	Staff:	160
Composers:	45.5	(28.4%)
Performers:	13	(8.1%)
Practitioners: 58.5 (36.5%)		

Post-1992		Institutions
Total	Staff:	213
Composers:	63	(29.6%)
Performers:	42	(19.7%)
Practitioners: 105 (49.3%)		

Thus there is a ratio of around 4.3:1 of composers to performers at Russell Group institutions, 3.5:1 at mid-ranking institutions, but 3:2 for post-1992 institutions. Performance is clearly less regularly valued as an academic field of study in the more prestige institutions, compared to composition (where the representation is very similar across the sector).

There is a highly sophisticated debate (and concomitant outputs) on practice-as-research in fields such as theatre and dance (my own former institution, Dartington College of Arts, was at the forefront of this). The apparently clear distinction between ‘creative’ and ‘professional’ practice mentioned by Mera in the seminar is however far from clear-cut; it is widely debated and problematized in critical literature, rarely defined clearly, and some departments elide the distinction by using concepts such as ‘Creative Professional Practice’. In comparison to all of this, the debate in music has been rather elementary. Composition has been an accepted academic field for a long time, like fine art and drama; but changes in the RAE/REF in the mid-1990s, allowing the submission of practice-based outputs, forced a re-thinking of this. It is in this context that more fundamental questions about the status of composition and performance in academia have come to the fore, as they have had to consider the types of issues and paradigms developed in other practice-centered disciplines.

I believe that practically all composition and performance are research in some sense; in the case of musical performance the following would be some of the types of research questions that any performer has to answer in order to play a piece of music:

- *Which tempi should be used for various large-scale sections of the score in question?*
- *How much flexibility should be employed within these broad tempi?*
- *On a smaller scale, what forms of stylisation and elasticity would be most appropriate for playing various types of rhythms?*
- *Through various combinations of accentuation, articulation and rhythm, to what extent, and where, should one tend towards continuity of line, or more angular approaches?*
- *In polyphonic or contrapuntal textures, to what extent should one be aiming to project a singular voice which is foregrounded above others, or a greater degree of dynamic equilibrium between parts*
- *Should one aim for a singular prominent climactic point within a movement, or can there be several of roughly equal prominence?*

I could continue with many more; what is important is that by articulating them in this fashion I am not simply making explicit what might as well remain implicit in the acts of musical preparation and performance, but also underlining the fact of their being *choices* in various respects, not necessarily something which all performers acknowledge (inwardly or outwardly) or act upon. ‘Gigging’ performers, or those who value primarily ‘intuitive’ approaches, might be amongst those less likely to be concerned about the possibilities of rational choices in the process of preparing a performance or recording.

But even if most practice is a type of research, there remain different *levels* of which such research is conducted – though this is equally true of written work. The question

of ‘is X research?’ is banal and inconsequential; what matters is how we determine equivalence of *quality* between different manifestations of research. We should be wary of over-rating either practice-based or written work which entails a fraction of the thought, prior skills, time and rigour of the most intensive types of research, and ensure a critical research culture exists amongst practitioners if musical institutions are to be more than dressed-up low level conservatoires.

The possibilities for peer review of work whose output is in the form of practice have not been sufficiently explored, and I propose we need a ‘space’, equivalent to a journal, for reviewing and then either publishing (where outputs can be placed online), or simply detailing and drawing attention to (where outputs are copyrighted elsewhere) creative work. I would welcome any communications from others who might be interested in trying to set such a thing up.

Various participants in the seminar appeared to assume that I did not believe that practice could be research unless accompanied by a written component. This is by no means my belief; rather I have questioned whether some relatively unreflective practice should be considered equivalent to more traditional forms of research, but would again emphasise that these questions also apply to some types of written output. Mera pointed out my comments on popular and cultural studies, in which fields I find great variety of quality, and suggested this is true of much work on contemporary music too: I would wholeheartedly agree, and have **argued as much on this blog**, as well as in various book reviews and review-articles which have appeared recently (as in my **extended study of critical reception of Brian Ferneyhough**, in which I have given a harsh view of hagiographical writing).

I wish to add a few comments on some points made by Croft in his response to my article. There are many problems with this response and ways in which I believe he misrepresents various of the figures he critiques, but I will limit myself here to his responses to my article. Croft writes the following:

The distinction at work here, loosely put, is between discovery and invention. Before my critics leap on this statement with accusations of essentialism or definition-mania, let me repeat that an attempt to characterise something is not an essentialising move – it is, however, an attempt to get at a fundamental difference between two types of activity: describing and presenting; making and finding out; or, in Aristotelian terms, poiēsis and epistēmē. It’s hardly a new idea, and deserves more than the breezy dismissal it receives, both from Reeves and from Ian Pace in his response. Einstein was not just ‘making something’. He was describing the world. A composer, on the other hand, is making an addition to the world that is not primarily descriptive. (And no, not like a smartphone or a blancmange.)

Smartphones and blancmanges aside (why are they so fundamentally different to musical composition in terms of their relationship to description?), I do not accept that either Reeves’ response nor my own entail a ‘breezy dismissal’; in my own case I dispute how clear-cut is the dichotomy presented by Croft. He goes on to locate cases within literature on practice-as-research which themselves frame the concept of research so as to include creative practice, with which I would agree. The following is **the definition of research supplied by the REF**:

- 1. For the purposes of the REF, research is defined as a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared.*
- 2. It includes work of direct relevance to the needs of commerce, industry, and to the public and voluntary sectors; scholarship; the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances, artefacts*

including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights; and the use of existing knowledge in experimental development to produce new or substantially improved materials, devices, products and processes, including design and construction. It excludes routine testing and routine analysis of materials, components and processes such as for the maintenance of national standards, as distinct from the development of new analytical techniques. It also excludes the development of teaching materials that do not embody original research. 3. It includes research that is published, disseminated or made publicly available in the form of assessable research outputs, and confidential reports (as defined at paragraph 115 in Part 3, Section 2). (p. 48)

I do not know why Croft is resistant to this type of highly inclusive definition, though suspect (as indicated in my *Tempo* article) that this reflects an analytical/positivist philosophical bent rather than the more synthetic and idealistic attitude which I find more enlightening. Research does not merely describe the world, but can create new forms of perception and experience, such as are fundamental to artistic creation. One does not have to be a postmodern relativist (I am certainly not) to see that research can shape rather than merely identify reality. Composition does not come from nowhere, and all music is produced and heard in relation to other music and sonic phenomena; to treat musical creation independently of reference (whether or not willed by the composer) is in my view simplistic. Croft goes on to conclude:

This is not the place to launch a critique of STS [Science and Technology Studies], but I do think practice-as-research is in trouble if it depends on a view of science that confuses ideas and things so profoundly. However, Pace seems to espouse a version of this view in his suggestion that, if Einstein had not come up with relativity, someone else might have come up with an 'entirely different paradigm' instead. Most physicists would find this idea absurd. (p. 75)

The above relies on a flagrant misquotation; in my *Tempo* article I wrote the following:

It is by no means necessarily true that, as Croft says 'if Einstein had not existed, someone else would have come up with Relativity'; someone might have come up with a quite different, but equally influential paradigm. (p. 68)

Nowhere here or elsewhere in the article do I use the phrase 'entirely different paradigm'. The point is that 'Relativity' is not itself the phenomena being identified, but a scientific model used to give shape to external phenomena. I will leave it to others to debate whether this was the only possible model which could have been used, or for that matter whether this model will always remain undisputed in the future.

Croft also writes:

Pace, at one point, agrees that composition is 'not intrinsically research', but that it might entail various activities that are research. If this is his view, we do not disagree; this is exactly what I said in my original article. But at another point he states that 'research' is just a word for what composers have always been doing, except for the additional requirement of supporting text. One interpretation of this might be that composition is research, and the text simply points out how – but this would contradict the earlier statement that composition is not intrinsically research. Another would be that composition is not research until turned into research by the text. This certainly doesn't square with our usual use of the word 'research'. You could, in principle, do scientific, literary or historical research without writing anything down. Moreover, if documentation can turn non-research into research, this undermines the 'material thinking' justification for practice-as-research: if we take this line seriously, then compositional knowledge-how would not be amenable to translation into knowledge-that. This is a far cry from Pace's insistence on 'explicit articulation to facilitate integration into academic structures'. (p. 76)

And furthermore:

Pace seems to think that without such an accompanying text, composing becomes merely a matter of composers composing 'in the way they always have done'. This points, perhaps, to a tendency to dismiss any idea of a domain of irreducible non-conceptual thought as some kind of romantic fantasy of ineffability. I have no problem with 'opening a window' on the compositional process, but when this is anything but superficial, it is often poetic and rarely in the language of aims and objectives; nor is it a matter of 'making explicit' for the purposes of 'integration', as Pace puts it. Amenity to such language does not turn something into research, as we have seen; but in any case, much of what makes music meaningful is generally resistant to such 'integration'. (p. 77)

Here is what I wrote:

Croft's basic formulation that composition is not intrinsically research is one I accept in this naked form, and I would say the same about performance. But both are outputs, which can entail a good deal of research. A new type of blancmange or smartphone may not themselves be intrinsically research either (nor, as Lauren Redhead vitally points out, is writing), but few would have a problem seeing them as valid research-based outputs. (p. 64)

All I am arguing there is that an output is not itself research but the product of research. Croft could as easily read the above as saying that writing is not research, and dismiss all attempts to produce written articles and books, as he uses it to suggest that I am supporting his position. Another passage to which he refers is:

Unlike Croft, I believe that composition-as-research, and performance-as-research (and performance-based research) are real activities; the terms themselves are just new ways to describe what has gone on earlier, with the addition of a demand for explicit articulation to facilitate integration into academic structures. (p. 70)

This needs to be read in the context of these previous statements:

Ultimately his [Croft's] model of research seems to require a particular type of conceptually based knowledge which can be communicated verbally, which I find too narrow. (p. 64)

What is being asked, not unfairly, of a composer employed in a research-intensive university is that at the least they verbally articulate the questions, issues, aims and objectives, and stages of compositional activity, to open a window onto the process and offer the potential of use to others. As a performer I am happy to do this (and wish more performers would do so) and I do not see why it should be a problem for composers too (the argument that this is unnecessary, as all of this can be communicated solely through the work itself, is one I find too utopian). (p. 67)

Nor does musical practice become research simply by virtue of being accompanied by a programme note, which funding and other committees can look at while ignoring the practical work. (p. 69)

I am a bit more reticent about the second of these statements now than when I wrote the article. The point here was a pragmatic one, which might be somewhat at odds with the sentiments elsewhere. Documenting process can surely do no harm, and indeed do a lot of good in terms of clarifying and facilitating the dissemination of research, but on the other hand one should not necessarily privilege written outputs in this respect, as I said in the talk. But this does not contradict my basic view that practice can be research independently of any written element, in strong distinction to the position Croft (and at first Mera) appear to attribute to me. Documentation does not *make* something research, just help a little with making research more accessible. 300 word statements hardly seem a huge price to pay, though I remain somewhat in two minds about this point.

I also wrote:

Composers may wish to be paid a salary to compose or perform in the way they always have done, but perhaps they would then be better employed on a teaching contract for composition with the recognition and remuneration for their composition or performance coming from elsewhere. (p. 67)

All I am saying here is that composers should not automatically assume they are high-level academics, any more than should those who write articles and book chapters. It hardly seems so unfair that they are held to research standards just like other types of academics.

Croft takes further exception to my arguments here:

Pace's suggestion that composition is somehow a less demanding activity for an academic to undertake, and that it needs the words to make up the difference, hardly warrants a response and has no bearing on the question at hand. (pp. 76-7)

I wrote:

I have some doubts as to whether some composition- and performance- based PhDs, especially those not even requiring a written component, are really equivalent in terms of effort, depth and rigour with the more conventional types. (p. 69)

This is the same point as I made about composers expecting to have to put in no extra effort when working in universities. But Croft neglects my qualifier 'some'. I have certainly seen some other PhDs which are absolutely on a par with more conventional types, just believe these are not always typical.

I end with my fundamental point: trying to provide very exclusive definitions of 'research' is fruitless; what is needed is to find equitable ways of assessing composition, performance, written and other types of outputs in ways which do not put any work at a disadvantage simply because of the form of the output.