

Some final thoughts on composition, performance, the REF, and teaching

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Following the various discussions which have proceeded from **the debate at City University on ‘Can Composition and Performance be Research?’ on November 25th, 2015** – see responses **here** and **here**; and for various associated links, **here**), I have had a further few thoughts which I wanted to share here.

- The burden of ‘proving’ one’s work is research falls regularly upon practitioners, but not often upon musicologists, whose work frequently gains research credentials simply by resulting in a written output, especially if given an imprimatur of validity by being signed off by one or two people – often colleagues and friends for those working in narrow fields – as part of the process of peer review. I can think of many examples of written articles (not least in the field of new music) which I am told are ‘research’, which amount to rushed-out opinion pieces, for which I am unable to discern any sustained work done in preparation, i.e. any significant research at all. It is time for practitioners to turn the tables and ask those who produce such things why *their* work is research, just as those who produce written work do with practitioners.
- Composers and performers are not (necessarily) scholars, any more than scholars are composers or performers.
- This debate has been *far* too dominated by composers, but the reticence (or inability?) of many performers to contribute to it is a relevant factor. Performers do not have, and should not have, any more reason for complacency than any other practitioners, and should not expect that they can simply continue to do their own thing and never be expected to engage with wider academic discourses.
- Something almost entirely absent from this round of the debate has been teaching, and specifically undergraduate teaching. If one believes, as I do, that a university functions best when staff are engaged with both research and teaching, and the two feed off one another, then we need to ask about how certain research inclinations feed into teaching. Undergraduate degrees generally need to be quite broadly-based and provide a relatively wide range of offerings in the form of modules. Whilst some practitioners may certainly be engaged in research at a high level through their practice, this does not mean they are necessarily able to teach anything else which students may require, nor act as personal tutors towards students having to produce work in

various domains. This is part of a wider argument against too-narrow specialisation, which is a significant issue with respect to practitioner-scholars who have never produced any written outputs. As those who have watched the filmed debate will know, I contest strongly that view which accords supremacy to written outputs over and above over media. In university departments where written outputs are only a small part of requirements for students, it makes sense to employ those who do not produce written work. But at present, this is rarely the case, and as such there is every reason to wish for practitioners to have to demonstrate some prowess in this field as well. Otherwise, would it not make most sense for them to be employed as composition or instrumental/vocal teachers rather than academics?

Demands for diversification on the part of academics tend to constitute a type of one-way traffic, and usually in favour of certain types of subjects. For example, many of those with a background in Western art music can and do teach popular music, sometimes very well, but the reverse is rare. It is time for practice-centered researchers and others whose research lies exclusively in less traditional domains themselves to have to learn the values of diversity, just as those with a background in Western art music have had to do. Otherwise (as I will argue in a forthcoming article for the *Society of Music Analysis* newsletter), we are simply undermining the highly skilled nature of the musicological profession, which has traditionally drawn fruitfully upon highly refined and sophisticated skills gained over an extended period before entering university, by asking the one group of scholars who (on the whole) need to demonstrate these to shift in favour of other sub-disciplines, with no parallel shift from others. It should be noted in this context that some of these shifts in musicological emphasis, prominent in the English-speaking world but less so elsewhere (to my knowledge). British musicology, like so many other outpourings of post-imperial British society, frequently exhibits a haughty attitude of superiority combined with relative ignorance with respect to many developments within its continental disciplinary counterparts (whilst bowing down deferentially in the face of its American cousin). For this and other reasons, these types of shifts should not go unchallenged.

In conclusion to this, it is all right for practitioners to have full academic positions, and not have to develop any wider skills, where there are sufficient staff that they do not need to do anything beyond teaching something relating to their own practice. However, this type of 100% research-based teaching is rarely available to scholars producing written work, so why should it be the case for practitioners?

- As discussed in my previous post, in the debate it was argued by Mera that in other artistic disciplines there is a clear divide between creative and professional practice. I have problems understanding on what basis this claim is made, or what the distinction is supposed to mean. Should we hive off any practice for which the practitioners are paid, as that makes it 'professional', and discount it from qualifying as creative practice as a result? This is not a facetious question; I could see an argument for extracting practitioners in academia from commercialised arenas, as this could be seen to compromise the scholarly and creative independence of their work (see also **my earlier blog on whether commercial music can be research**). I suspect this is not

what was meant, however, by **the comment from the REF 2014 report that ‘the sector still has difficulty distinguishing excellent professional practice from practice with a clear research dimension’**. Considering how much debate there has been on the issue of how and when composition and performance might be research, are we to believe that all of those involved on REF panels have a clear set of definitions of these terms which would answer all these questions? If so, it would be good to hear these; if not, this raises serious questions about the basis upon which some individuals were empowered to pass judgement on the work of others.

- 300-word statements might seem innocuous, a simple aid for those judging large amounts of work, but I remain unconvinced that they do not become a substitute for grappling with that work. Having seen multiple external examiners at different institutions who hardly even bothered to look at the work provided to them, I by no means have faith in many academics to do their jobs scrupulously if they are not forced to. Much easier to make a judgement on the basis of a 300-word piece of spin than to discern specifics about an extended score, recording, or whatever. If people are not prepared or competent to judge the latter as research, they should not be on panels doing so.

[**Addendum:** I have written another piece giving the history of the 300-word statement [here](#)]