Conference on 'Understanding Offence: Delimiting the (Un)sayable', Institute of Advanced Study, Durham University, 21-23 March 2024

Critical Independence and the Interaction with Practice: Redefining Collegiality when working with Living Practitioners

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Abstract

In the context of higher education, a range of disciplines involve a combination of independent academic study of the subject and some practical training, especially for more vocationally-oriented disciplines or courses. At best these activities complement and enhance each other, but there is equally a good deal of potential for conflicts of interest and method. In this paper, I will outline the areas for conflict in terms of academic independence and freedom in such a context, drawing upon knowledge of the field of music as a case study. I will give a brief overview of the development of the music HE sector in the United Kingdom since 1945 in terms of the relationship between academic study and practice, since in this country a dissolving of the boundaries between the two is arguably more advanced than almost anywhere else in the developed world.

From this perspective, I identify some of the major issues informing questions of critical independence and academic freedom for scholars collaborating with or working alongside living practitioners, and also for those (including myself) who inhabit both roles, which I maintain are distinct in their requirements and should not be confused. In particular, I identify the difficulties of causing offence when working alongside practitioners but wishing to do more than simply replicate their own priorities and assumptions. The growth of realms of academic activity such as practice-research (most common in the UK), artistic research (more common in continental Europe) and autoethnography of practice can all be viewed as responses to these complications, but equally as means for ensuring the research credentials of certain types of practitioner in ways which deserve greater scrutiny.

For specific examples of these issues, I will discuss my own work with composer Michael Finnissy, as both regular performer/collaborator but also the most prolific writer in his output, and also my attempts at autoethnographic reflection on my own practice as a pianist. I will also cite a few counter-examples, in particular involving ethnographic work, in which I believe critical thinking is compromised. In particular, I argue that certain rhetoric relating to *heteroglossia* can too easily result in the padding out of scholarly work with unmediated quotations as a substitute for genuine critical interpretation.

Paper

In this fascinating conference, there have been various different contexts presented in which the question of offence arises, which can be offence to other academics, offence to members of certain groups, offence to a wider public, and so on. In this paper, I wish to consider what I hope will be a different consideration – the issue of

offence relating to external partners with whom academics engage, and specifically that of artistic practitioners, operating in external fields with their own cultures and conventions. This includes the situation when such practitioners are working within academia, or for those who have a foot in both camps, in which category I would include myself, as an active professional performer as well as a musicologist and wider academic.

For a wide range of reasons, many of them positive, academics frequently need to engage with external partners, individuals, organisations, and with governments and cultures around the world. A failure to do so often give rise to criticisms of 'ivory-towerism'. Various disciplines – most obviously law, medicine, psychology, social work, business and the arts – link very directly, sometimes vocationally, with realms of activity which exist outside of academia. My own university, City, University of London, has the tag line 'The University for Business, Practice and the Professions'. The current President, Sir Anthony Finkelstein, is clear and explicit about both the importance of this focus on external engagement, but also about how the relationship can and often should be disruptive and critical rather than merely supportive or even subservient. But this is by no means always necessarily the case.

Let me start with an example, David C.H. Wright's 2020 book *The Royal College of Music and Its Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). Now I want to start by saying I think this is an excellent book in many ways. But I would also note that David Wright is a Professor at the RCM, and was at the time of writing this.

If one looks at the last three chapters of this, which cover the RCM from 1982 to the present day, a period which sees abortive discussions and a major commissioned report looking into the possibility of a merger with the Royal Academy of Music, and preparation of new reports for new government inspection and quality auditing bodies in the 1990s, Wright does acknowledge some prior lacks on the part of the institution, but consistently in order to demonstrate how positive were the changes brought about by the two most recent directors, Janet Ritterman and Colin Lawson. There is no consideration of such thorny issues as the shift from diplomas to degrees and how this might have changed the student experience, the relationship between the performance and academic wings of the institution, the darker side of the institution which had come to light before his book, involving sexual exploitation of students by some teachers (as at other secondary and tertiary music-focused institutions), of which the case of pianist Ian Lake was one of the most prominently reported, the many issues resulting from the new strategy to recruit more East Asian students, including possible racial tensions, and so on. Nothing comes through which would suggest anything other than a sterling record for the institution over the last three decades. To some extent this may be warranted, but it is hard to see this as the complete picture. Nothing in Wright's book might 'offend' the directors or other senior figures associated with the institution, and I have to conclude that his professional affiliation created a conflict of interests.

Some similar issues come up in Natasha Loges and Colin Lawson chapter on 'The teaching of musical performance' in *The Cambridge History of Musical Performance*, edited Colin Lawson and Robin Stowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 135-168. This traces briefly the history in particular of the conservatoire, focusing in particular on the examples of Leipzig and the controversy which

surrounded the founding of the conservatoires in St Petersburg and Moscow. But the end features the case study of the Royal College of Music, at which at the time of writing Lawson was director, and Loges was an academic. This section is little more than a list of all the offerings at the RCM, without any more critical questioning such as the authors do apply to other cases. I could make similar comments about various books written about specialist music schools in the UK written by those working at them.

I am deeply involved in campaigning for *academic freedom* through work with both Academics for Academic Freedom and the London Universities' Council for Academic Freedom, and am concerned about ways in which pressure not to antagonise or offend institutions or external partners can compromise this.

Academic freedom has been through various overlapping definitions, in the modern age dating back to those put forward by Wilhelm von Humboldt in 1809-10. I have listed a range of these at https://ianpace.wordpress.com/2022/09/27/academic-freedom-definitions-and-risks/ but there are various common concerns:

- Full freedom for academics in research and publication of results, including the freedom to put forward new or controversial ideas and opinions, and question received wisdom, without interference or censorship.
- Wider freedom of thought, conscience, religion, expression, assembly and association for academics.
- Freedom for academics in how they teach their subjects.
- Freedom from institutional censorship and discipline, but with a need to ensure accuracy, restraint, and clarity.

In several writings on this, I identify a series of threats to this:

- External pressures from industries and institutions.
- The complex relationship between research and external practice.
- Top-down demands by institutions.
- Departmental 'branding'.
- Need to concentrate work in particular fields.
- Social justice (in the sense of requiring conformity to a particular political agenda).
- The student-as-consumer.

The first two of these are my concerns here. But I also want to consider the distinct but related concept of *artistic freedom*. There are fewer clear definitions of this, and even the excellent new UK organisation, Freedom in the Arts do not provide a clear definition. The UNESCO definition from 2017 is as good as any, I believe:

Artistic freedom is the freedom to imagine, create and distribute diverse cultural expressions free of governmental censorship, political interference or the pressures of non-state actors. It includes the right of all citizens to have access to these works and is essential for the well-being of societies.

Artistic freedom embodies a bundle of rights protected under international law. These include:

- The right to create without censorship or intimidation;
- The right to have artistic work supported, distributed and remunerated;
- The right to freedom of movement;
- The right to freedom of association;
- The right to the protection of social and economic rights;
- The right to participate in cultural life

Cited in Council for Europe, *Free to Create: Artistic Freedom in Europe* (2023), at https://rm.coe.int/free-to-create-council-of-europe-report-on-the-freedom-of-artistic-exp/1680aa2dc0 (accessed 22 March 2024).

Now, I would say that artistic freedom is considerably more precarious than academic freedom. Academic institutions are generally subject to a fair amount of public regulation and accountability, which can be summoned if academics perceive their freedom is being impinged. The process is far from perfect, for sure, but measures such as the UK Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) 2023 Act, and the creation of new statutory processes and a director working at the Office for Students to implement these, are a real step forward.

For artists, the situation is quite different. Artistic organisations are much less obviously regulated, and a lot of power is put in the hands of gallery directors, festival directors, and others with institutional roles. Furthermore, there are wider pressures in terms of keeping audiences happy, stronger than the imperatives for student satisfaction. This makes artists especially vulnerable to being 'cancelled', simply frozen out from exposure and entry to institutions, if their work is politically unacceptable, if they have said something elsewhere which causes offence, and so on. In other parts of my activity, I have considered how this applies often to those who take forward cases of sexual assault and the like, then found themselves blacklisted, and there is no reason to think it is different here.

What happens when the two worlds meet? Specifically, when some working within academia are also practitioners operating in a particular culture and economy external to academia, or when academics are involved in collaborations with external practitioners who themselves have no other investment in academic and scholarly values? Here I believe the issues are serious, and the need to avoid 'offence' can create significant brakes on academic freedom and thus constrain the scope of scholarship.

My own original field is Music, and my examples are drawn from this, as I know it best, but there are many ways in which what I have to say is applicable in various contexts. Indeed, a conference in 2017 at the University of Surrey, of which I was co-convenor, revealed – perhaps for the first time – how many common concerns were shared between academics working on music, literature, theatre, film, dance, visual art and more.

I gave an extended lecture in Oxford in April last year, 'Academic Music in the United Kingdom and the Dalliance with Practice'. The full text and hand-outs from which are freely available online on my City Research Online page -

https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/30326/ . I just want to summarise a few findings from this relatively data-intensive study. Academic music at tertiary level largely grew in the UK after 1945, but from this point up until around about the 1970s, practice played a central part - compositional technique, orchestration, score playing, and in a few places performance. Music history was a general rather than central concern, there was only very selective focus on literature on music, and little interest in more systematic approaches to theory and analysis, compared to in Germany or the US. A lot of research was focused upon textual editing or texts about composers for a general audience, for example those in the *Master Musicians* series. There are exceptions, but this was the general tendency. Not all of the outputs would likely be submitted for the Research Excellence Framework today, and quite a number reflect something of the ethos of the 'gentleman amateur'. The launch of a new range of departments between 1964 and 1975 following the Robbins Report of 1963 and also the growth of polytechnics, saw some wider and more colourful curricula, but not yet a real shift in terms of academic rigour. This would come from the 1980s, spurred by the work of a handful of scholars such as Julian Rushton and Arnold Whittall, the founding of the journal *Music Analysis* in 1982, and responses to the publication of Joseph Kerman's *Contemplating Music* (UK title simply *Musicology*) in 1985. The body of research and teaching which resulted, lasting until some point in the early-ish 2000s, can with hindsight be seen as something of a golden age to those enamoured of an approach to music study rooted in the humanities and the development of high-level skills of historical and analytical engagement.

After the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, enabling most polytechnics to attain university status, there was a marked growth in new types of courses, in commercial music, music technology and more recently musical theatre. These were all vocationally focused, and came to account for the majority of an expanded sector – today those taking humanities- or classical-focused courses account for fewer than 20% of students. At the same time, I would say that the so-called 'new musicology' tended to 'eat itself', because of rather nihilistic and rhetorically loaded critiques, drawing upon the language of emerging identity politics and of postmodernism, to attack most aspects of humanistic scholarship itself – as we have seen in other disciplines. A further pressure came from ethnomusicologists, never more enthusiastic or vocal than when attacking music history and analysis, rather than presenting any measured advocacy of their own field. On the whole, I would say many ethnomusicologists working in music departments, especially when in leadership roles, have succeeded primarily in undermining musicology of any type. It is notable that the only department focused entirely on ethnomusicology, SOAS, had to close down its non-joint-honours music degree a few years ago, after chronically low student numbers on all undergraduate programmes featuring music.

There are other factors involved, especially in the last decade-and-a-half most notably changes in research assessment to better incorporate the work of practitioners, rather than more conventional 'academics'; suffice to say here that we are back in a pre-1980s state, with most students coming to university to try and become practitioners. The difference is that where in earlier times they would train to become school music directors, choir masters and the like, now they are training to become popular guitarists or vocalists, studio producers, or to appear in West End musicals.

I am giving this overview to point out the extent to which practice is embedded in academia in music, and the traditional lines separating academic from practical study, still significant in various continental European and North American contexts, are blurred in the UK. To the best of my knowledge this situation is mirrored in the academic study of theatre/drama, dance, and various creative visual arts. The difference between a literature degree and one in creative writing appears to still be maintained, though there is often considerable pressure for the former to be replaced by the latter.

As a result, a great many academics working in UK university departments work together with a range of practitioners. There are clearly benefits through cross-fertilisation, but also marked disadvantages. My own experience, and regular engagement with and study of the work of those across the sector, has suggested a profound difference of values here, with many practitioners little interested in more dispassionate critical and contextual inquiry or academic freedom; nor are students primarily focused upon practice. Many want a 'degree' from their study, or in the case of the academics to be respected as on a par with more conventional academics, but without having to invest in the range of skills and attitudes involved. And indeed many react very negatively, and with offence, at any suggestion they might do otherwise. Studies such as that by Christopher Leedham and Martin Scheuregger demonstrate considerable variation in attitudes towards the written component of a composition PhD, which itself is by no means applied consistently. Many composers and performers, and probably many other types of artistic practitioners, want to get degrees, doctorates, and academic positions just for doing what they would do anyhow, without putting in any wider intellectual or other effort.

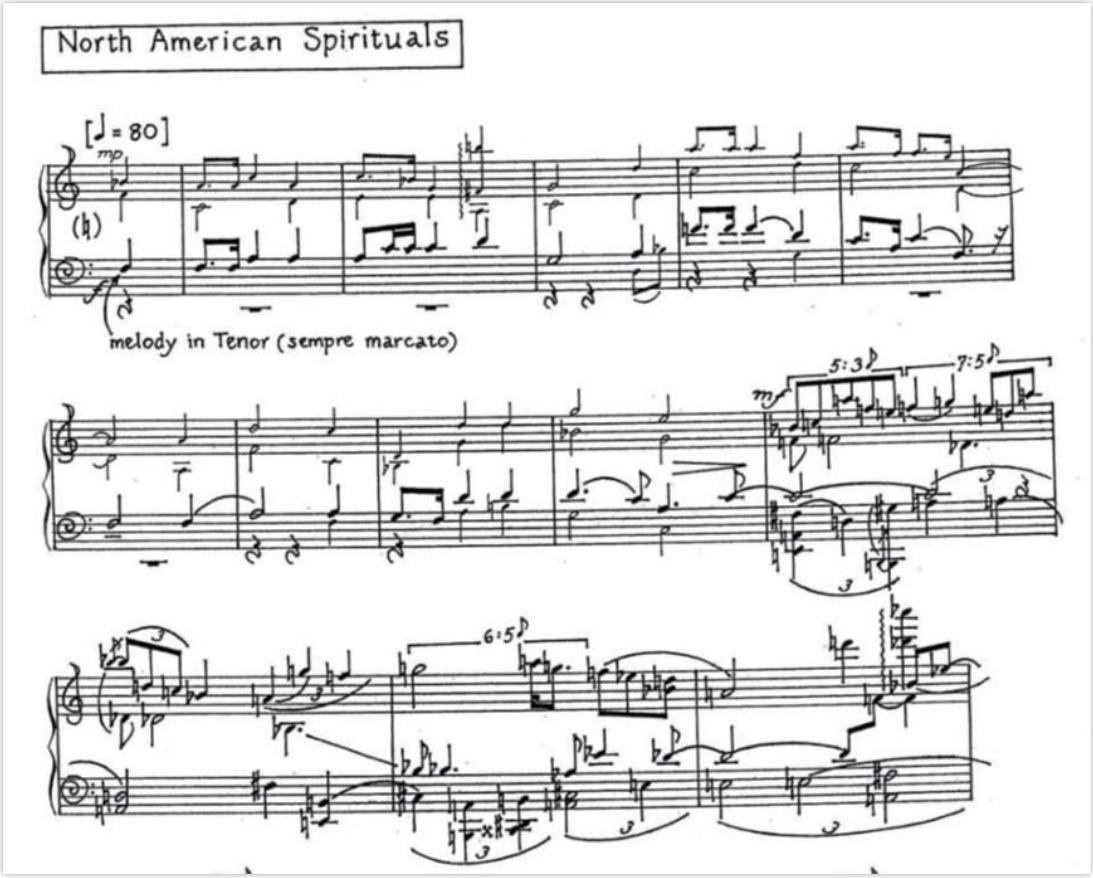
Despite having been an explicit defender of the idea of research embodied *within* practice, much evidence points to this sophisticated concept being hijacked in such a respect. Some of the wider research which leads to doctorates, or to publications, presents itself as 'autoethnography of practice', but consists primarily of rather unreflective reams of documentation, practice diaries and the like, mirroring a wider approach to artistic 'ethnography' which relies heavily on unmediated data collection rather than critical analysis thereupon. I could give various examples of this type of autoethnography, and not just in the musical field, but for the sake of rationing my more caustic contributions will hold back from this here. One alternative is provided by the continental concept of 'artistic research' – research undertaken by an active artistic practitioner, and generally relating to their practical work, but always presented in a conventional written form and subject to the same standards of evaluation as other types of research.

So I suggest to you a contentious hypothesis: the extent to which practice is embedded within music and other artistic fields is to the detriment of wider critical intellectual inquiry, and the culture thus engendered has a deleterious effect on scholars forced to find common cause with practitioners, without 'offending' them or the students drawn more towards their work. At the same time, those writing upon living practitioners, and then often dependent upon maintaining certain types of relationships with these latter, in order to interview them, have access to archive materials, and so on, can also be seriously compromised in their work, and find it a safer bet to produce work which I would consider hagiographic, and in the process frequently gain the practitioner's imprimatur, who can then arrange that they be invited to speak about their work at

prestigious non-academic events and so on. As such, scholarly work has suffered and lost some of its edge.

All of this is in my view a consequence of the 'two cultures' which interact in these situations. One is that of critical, humanities-inflected, inquiry and analysis, the other is the external world of practice, in which ingratiating oneself with the right people, avoiding saying the wrong things to those with institutional power, or other practitioners in a position to do one favours, and other factors generally engendering a degree of self-consciousness, in order to avoid the type of offence which might lead to some doors being closed, are commonplace.

The conflict between these has long been apparent to me, not least through my work with the composer Michael Finnissy. I have performed more of Finnissy's piano music than anyone else, including two series of the complete piano works, and premiered a large number of significant compositions. At the same time, I have also produced the largest body of written work on Finnissy's music. My early writings from the 1990s I would now dismiss as hagiographic, but since my very entry into academia in 2003, on a research fellowship to research Finnissy's music, I have been keenly aware of the need to wear different 'hats'. On one hand, when playing the music, I need to demonstrate a high degree of unequivocal commitment and immersion in the work in order that my interpretations are convincing (whether they are or not is of course for others to determine). But when writing, the priorities are different. To give you an example, let me cite the chapter *North American Spirituals* from the five-and-a-half-hour cycle *The History of Photography in Sound*, which I premiered and have recorded. Finnissy uses a particular strategy from the outset of this work – he takes the pitch content of hymns by eighteenth-century American composer William Billings, but replaces the tenor part with pitch content from one of four African-American spirituals, then modifying the other parts following the rules set out in Billings' own treatises on hymn composition. The example on the slide, from the beginning of the work, combines the Billings hymn 'Bedford' with the pitches from the spiritual 'Steal away'. Then the music draws upon other sources and develops a more freely rhapsodic approach, before returning to another hymn/spiritual combination.



Finnissy commented to me and others about this compositional strategy being an evocation of an African-American being forced to sing along at a white church, but actually subverting the process by bringing in their own music. Sure enough, some commentators responded almost immediately to this by claiming that Finnissy had written some music which makes a powerful statement about racial prejudice, and so on. But wearing my musicologist's hat, I am aware of how much is at stake in such ventures, and all the many difficult questions to consider, above all to do with appropriation, but also about historical perspective, in light of all the wider history of the African-American spiritual in performance, arrangement, other appropriation, and so on. Furthermore, Finnissy engages with a wide range of 'white' music through the course of this piece, but the 'black' content is limited to the spiritual. Similar questions apply to Finnissy's manifold appropriations of non-Western musics across the breadth of his output. Some of these have occasioned some critical informal responses from non-Anglophone contemporary composers, and may have affected Finnissy's continental reception. But at the time I was writing about this piece, almost no-one writing in English had raised these issues at all. I tried to consider them in some detail in the chapter of my monograph on the work, and even if ultimately I ended up essentially defending Finnissy's strategy, this was not without some reservations. I never showed my writing on this to Finnissy before publication, nor have done so with other subsequent writings. I am fortunately in the position, having been such a consistent advocate of the work as a performer, that a more critical approach as a writer will not lead to his severing connections, but this is a blessed position not available to all writing on contemporary composers. Certainly other musicologists who wrote in an even mildly critical way about composers such as Mauricio Kagel or Helmut Lachenmann have found this has created significant

difficulties for them, in one case leading to disillusion about pursuing musicology further. I am this year in the process of writing a new biography of Stockhausen, and am determined to keep my distance from the guardians of his legacy, but this certainly does not make the process easy.

So I do need to give some examples of other approaches which I find wanting. Two of these, both ethnographic, are covered in my article 'When Ethnography becomes Hagiography: Uncritical Musical Perspectives'. One is the DVD-ROM and associated articles by Amanda Bayley and Michael Clarke on Finnissy's Second String Quartet and its performance at the hands of the Kreuzer Quartet. In sectarian fashion, Bayley and Clarke utterly disregard all other existing Finnissy scholarship – not only my own but also that of Richard Toop, Jonathan Cross, Christopher Fox, Julian Anderson, Maarten Beirens, Richard Beaudoin and others. Nor do they consider plural performing traditions that have developed around Finnissy's work, nor demonstrate any awareness of the breadth of his output or other contextual knowledge (the lack of which is a criticism of some ethnographic work in a wider context outlined by sociologist Martyn Hammersley). Instead, the publications consist largely of quotations and interview clips, as well as a series of scanned score excerpts and parts of the sketches. Much of the supposedly analytical content is simply reproduced from the composer himself. Several features presented as especially distinctive about this work, such as its use of particular sources, intervallic concentrations, random devices or unsynchronised parts, can actually be encountered in a whole range of earlier Finnissy compositions and have been written about extensively by others. There is certainly no attempt at aesthetic assessment of the work of either composer or performer. As such, this work largely consists of data collection rather than independent critical analysis.

But even more problematic is the 'ethnographic' study of composer Kaija Saariaho by Pirkko Moisala. Moisala has the following to say about her work, implicitly evoking some of the ideas of scholar James Clifford in the early 1980s when urging a shift in focus for ethnography, clearly appealing to Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of *heteroglossia*.

> I have approached Saariaho's music by using ethnographic fieldwork methods: I have interviewed Saariaho on numerous occasions; the musicians, agents, and conductors with whom she has worked, as well as other musicians and conductors familiar with her music, have also provided time for research interviews. I have also observed rehearsals and performances of her works. This kind of approach is—in the spirit of Mikhail Bakhtin— interested in the heterophony of meanings given to musical works.

Elsewhere, in a self-legitimising methodological article published two years after the book, Moisala identifies her work with ethnomusicology rather than musicology, and describes her aims as 'to reveal the ingredients of Saariaho's music, to explain why it is as it is, and how it has developed over the years'. But such aims, and methods for achieving them, are well-established in other types of musicology. She does not engage in any score-based analysis, arguing against this because the work frequently uses electronics, but nor is there anything like sonic spectra and the like, performance analysis, or indeed anything suggesting independent aural engagement. She relies entirely on observation of rehearsals and performance, described in very generalised terms, interviews with the composer, others involved with performing her work, and

publishers. All that results is an old-fashioned 'life and works', padded out with unmediated quotes from critics – except where the critic is not wholly favourable, in which case Moisala attempts to pathologise them. This could not be further away from the view of one of the most acute commentators on ethnography, sociologist Mitchell Duneier, who urges the 'stance of the skeptic, often not accepting accounts at face value'. The assemblages of critical quotations are little different from those found in publicists' materials, and the dominant tone is one of adoration and adulation for the subject, sometimes expressed in purple prose such as the following:

> Her music encourages us to hear, look, and feel differently. It teaches us to focus on the things and events that are in-between, things that, at first, might not seem to be so important but that locate at the points where gravity is lightened by grace.

Plural opinions are utterly lacking on subjects as the dichotomy between 'intellect' and 'emotion', about which Moisala presents some rather crude formulations, nor are there any aesthetic judgements not synonymous with those of the author or composer, revealing Moisala's claims of *heteroglossia* to be a ruse. In short, heteroglossia amounts to much more than assemblage of positive testimonials. There is more I could say about severe lack of contextual information and more, but if you want that, read my chapter! I have mentioned a few other wider commentators on ethnography, several of who have developed a notable critical methodological discourse around this; Moisala's book is severely wanting in these terms.

This is not just about ethnographic writing, even if this approach can be given some methodological spin to compensate for its lack of original analytical or critical content. I have also written at length about the monograph by Lois Fitch on Brian Ferneyhough, locating many similar problems, and the history of music since 1989 by Tim Rutherford-Johnson, which has some other good qualities, but almost never enters into independent critical questioning either of artistic work or the explicit ideas accompanying it.

This is not about Bayley, Clarke, Moisala, Fitch or Rutherford-Johnson (or various others I might mention) as individuals; this is about a corroded intellectual culture in which the values of conformity, self-negation and sometimes sycophancy encountered in external economies of practice have been allowed to dictate the values and approaches of intellectual enquiry. Above all, a desire never under any circumstances to cause offence to practitioners is an unacceptable limit on scholarship. Creating offence for its own sake would be a facile approach, but being prepared to countenance this as a possibility, and not self-censor to avoid it, is essential if scholarly writing on music, or other arts or practices, is to amount to more than promotional material. We need quite urgently new academic codes of practice relating to these issues.

Finally, I want to mention the concept of 'collegiality', in my experience a much-abused concept, which I have encountered myself as a negative epithet from former practitioner colleagues and their advocates. I will cite the definition from the 1997 UNESCO *Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel*, which I think is as good as any:

> UNESCO 1997, VI. 32: *The principles of collegiality include academic freedom, shared responsibility, the policy of participation of all concerned in internal decision making structures and practices, and the development of consultative mechanisms. Collegial decision-making should encompass decisions regarding the administration and determination of policies of higher education, curricula, research, extension work, the allocation of resources and other related activities, in order to improve academic excellence and quality for the benefit of society at large.*

All of this is entirely compatible with an academic culture which does not require individuals to feel pressure to conform or fashion their work in line with some 'majority view' in their department or institution. I think this is essential, but never more so than in departments permeated by practitioners with little more than a token investment in the best of academic values.