

Sounds Apart – Drifting Identities

A Research and Development Project at the Faculty of Fine, Applied, and Performing Arts, University of Gothenburg

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Towards an Expanded Field of Art Music is an artistic research and development project funded by the Swedish National Research Council. The working team includes six members: Ole Lützow-Holm (composer and project leader), Anna Lindal (violinist), Henrik Hellstenius, Anders Hultqvist, and Chaya Czernowin (composers), and Magnus Haglund (critic). Incorporating a series of subprojects—of which some are conducted and presented on individual terms, some achieved collectively—the research attempts to support a deepened appreciation of the object and meaning of art music as both a knowledge producing practice and a discursive field.

We are introducing a dual perspective on composition and interpretation that views hearing/listening as a creative act. Art music, classical and contemporary, is distinguished by a certain austerity related to a desire for perfection within the genre itself. With the intent to develop practical as well as theoretical strategies that may serve as a complementary image to the prevalent manifestations of the art form we hope to promote a bolder engagement in its complex chain of communicative transfigurations.

The underlying inducement of our research is motivated by the idea of suggesting unconditionally alternative concepts of musical interpretation and composition based on artistic practice. Not to replace one approach with another, but to reinforce the awareness of an expanded field of possibilities while maintaining that it is both relevant and necessary to debate the institutional formats and rituals of classical music culture and to assert, among other things, the existence of an urgent situational link between the *making*, the *place*, and the *comprehension* of music. Our project aims to emphasize and make evident that art music cannot be regarded as separate from society, that it is inevitably intertwined with oppositions and aesthetic shifts of its time and thus in continual need of critical discourse, revision, and new interpretations. One methodological point of departure is to reveal complementarities that might eventually enrich the normative understanding of musical implications, celebrating a *both-and* rather than an *either-or* through a combination of artistic work and concerts, seminars, workshops, and various publications.

With this in mind, I will provide an example of a kind of writing exhibiting a subjective and tentative means of negotiating an *object of desire*:

I was never really a storyteller and therefore, I believe, somewhat indifferent to form as such. For isn't it so, at length, that good stories owe a great deal of their impact to the construction of the narrative? However, I've always been fascinated by trifles and minor phenomena—by small things—and how their appearance changes with the light, the viewer's state of mind or the angle of the gaze and above all, perhaps, by how they keep coming back *the same* and yet *not the same* because the context is another, the moment of occurrence, all circumstances put together, is unique and once-in-a-lifetime. That encourages me to challenge the concept of *newness* and *progress* in music—and to ask whether the experience of identity is actually to be found in the linear, perfect and

reproducible arrangement of sonic events, one after the other, as is usually claimed. Consequently I have begun to reflect on the work as a sound-specific *place* rather than a prescribed *sequence* of organized sounds. I like to envisage the performance—as well as the hearing—of a piece in terms of going to a park with more than one entrance and many possible paths to walk. Here, though, it is crucial to recognize the place itself as an artefact, detached from *nature*, and to remember that it has once been grasped and composed by someone as an artificial topology—a well-defined, cultivated terrain, perpetually in a state of *decomposition* and metamorphosis. What then creates the distinct, unmistakable identity of the park in my awareness is not so much the perception of a formal totality, as how I—both deliberately and by chance—break up this topology into discrete patterns of reference points.¹

The project is about faith in the critical value of art and about the belief that creation is joined to a *dialogical mode* of perceiving the world. It refers to poetic translation and other hermeneutical practices as well as to pre-Romantic musical tradition, in which the work as a whole was but to a limited degree authorized by a singular originator, depending on the imaginative interferences and adjunctions of the performer.

In one of the individual projects, *Bandrom* (rehearsal room), Anna Lindal, in close collaboration with the Norwegian composer Øyvind Torvund, repeatedly plays (new) parts of a *work in progress* of his on site-specific locations. There is an explicit ontological aspect applied to the process insofar as Lindal, whenever she performs the music, also passes it on to other musicians—aurally, through hearing. Hence, we do not encounter merely the piece in multiple versions realized by one player. Rather, the piece will continually move on and alter as new players in other moods and environments on different instruments adopt it.

When listening to music, there is always a communicative ambiguity involved that one takes into account and to which one relates. Though at the same time, we face a demand for technically perfect, finalized, and reproducible readings of the classical repertoire that has turned music history into a state of equilibrium and brought it to resemble a museum. What happens, then, when musicians and composers claim a more independent attitude with respect to interpretation? One manner of responding is to take an inquisitive look at other interpretive practices. That is why our project inquires if the *theatre's* unrestricted, playful dialogue with the dramatic text could possibly afford a significant input; whether its constantly new arrangements and readings of the tradition could inspire music.

Questions arise such as: Who owns the musical score? How far does the potential of interpretation range? Does it have an ultimate, clearly identified scope and if so, to what extent is it precious to defend its borders? How can one validate if an interpretation has fulfilled or violated its purposes? What are the elements that constitute the *identity* of a musical work?

This may seem a precarious list of inquiries to someone who is unfamiliar with the type of matters and procedures that designate artistic research. But what characterizes this diverse field of practice-based exploration is exactly a course of action to observe

¹ Ole Lützow-Holm, "The Boundaries of Interpretation"—introduction to a public seminar on musical interpretation practices as part of the research project *Towards an Expanded Field of Art Music* at Academy of Music and Drama, University of Gothenburg, October 2, 2009.

and contemplate the emergence of an artefact *while working on it*, without insisting on a general, objectively conclusive result. It maintains the relevance of autobiographically studying the rapport between the creator and the object of creation while in the act of creating it—and suggests, at the same time, the impossibility of reliably theorizing on the subject.

It could rightly be asked: What constitutes the *scientific* aspect of this project? One possible answer is: The democratic dissemination of a particular sort of detailed experience—an amalgamation of practical and theoretical knowledge—within a public setting of experimentation, discourse, and critique.

Related recommended books and essays:

Barrett, Estelle and Bolt, Barbara, eds. *Practice as research: Approaches to creative arts enquiry*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007. ISBN: 1-84511-432-9.

Borgdorff, Henk. "The Debate on Research in the Arts," Publication series *Sensuous Knowledge*. Bergen: Bergen National Academy of the Arts, 2/2006.

Haglund, Magnus. "The Place of Music." *ArtMonitor* 7/2009. Gothenburg: Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts, 2009. ISBN: 978-91-978475-0-6.

Hannula, Mika, Souranta, Juha, and Vadén, Tere. *Artistic Research: Theories, Methods and Practices*. Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki, and Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts, University of Gothenburg, 2005. ISBN: 951-53-2743-1.

Krauss, Rosalind. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." *October*: 8/1979. Reprinted in Foster, Hal, ed. *Postmodern Culture*. London: Pluto Press, 1985. ISBN: 0-7453-0003-0.

Lilja, Efva, ed. *Close Encounters: Artists on Artistic Research. Dance: Research and Development* 2/2007. Stockholm: University College of Dance. ISSN: 1652-3776.

Piper, Adrian. *Out of Order, Out of Sight*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996. ISBN Vol. I: 0-262-16155-9; ISBN Vol. II: 0-262-16156-7.

Said, Edward. *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain*. New York: First Vintage Books, 2006. ISBN: 978-0-375-72633-0.

Svenungsson, Jan. *An Artist's Text Book*. Helsinki: Finish Academy of Fine Arts, 2009. ISBN: 978-951-53-3009-3.