

Practice Research Special Issue Editorial

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Original Call for Proposals

The 21st century has seen a huge rise in practical and vocational courses in popular music, which is yet to be matched by a similar increase in research into and about practice. Philip Ewell's plenary talk on 'Music Theory's White Racial Frame' at the 2019 SMT conference made the point that it was not enough to look at a more culturally diverse range of repertoire through conventional theoretical lenses. It is also necessary to develop theory which goes beyond the practices and values of Western Art Music. Similar conceptual breadth should be applied to existing theories of performance, songwriting, the business of music and the uses of technology. This themed issue of the IASPM journal seeks to explore this practical turn in popular music studies through the aesthetics, the pragmatics and the politics of 'doing' popular music.

Proposals might include, but are not limited to:

- Music theory and pedagogy in popular music(s)
- Judgments of value or quality in popular music practice

- Movement, dance and the presentation of the persona
- Theorising virtuosity
- Using (and being used by) technology
- How can and/or should music make money?
- Theorising creativity
- Power and influence in popular music practices
- Modes of communicating popular music scholarship

Editorial

In our 2017 Special Issue on Popular Music Practice: Music as Research, our introduction recalled Phil Tagg's call for more music in popular music studies at the 2011 Grahamstown conference. Whereas Tagg's request had been as much, if not more, about putting music analysis on an equal footing with the study of popular music cultures, it also reflected growing scholarship about popular music practice. The 2017 Special Issue itself involved five articles which combined audio and text. Since that issue we have seen the continuation of the Art of Record Production conference and journal, the Innovation In Music conferences and books, the video publication of practice research on the 21st Century Music Practice website alongside the associated Cambridge Elements series and Bloomsbury book series, the first peer-reviewed album published by a university press (Carson, 2020) and, this month, the launch of the Society for Music Production Research. In addition, IASPM conferences have included more musical analysis and more research about music practices; the British Forum for Ethnomusicology conference and journal has also included more work about contemporary popular music practices. The original call for proposals for this special issue, reproduced above, was framed around Philip Ewell's call for a more diverse range of theoretical lenses but focused on the need for more theoretical diversity in research into and about popular music practices.

There has been a wide range of literature exploring the notion of practice research (see, for example, Borgdorff, 2012; Burnard, 2012; Bulley and Sahin, 2021; Slager, 2021; Zagorski-Thomas, 2022), with recent years seeing a particular focus on providing academic practitioners with a framework for using their own creative practice either as a vehicle for their own research or as a way into studying the practice of others. This has found popular music scholars roving into the worlds of practice-as or artistic research and emic forms of ethnomusicology. The 'practice-as' versus 'artistic' dichotomy seems mostly geographic rather than content based – the term 'artistic research' being used more in northern continental Europe and Australia – but Bulley and Sahin's (2021) report demonstrates that these practice research methods and methodologies stretch far beyond that which is best defined as 'artistic'. When Christopher Frayling (1993) wrote a report aimed specifically at visual artists in academia, he divided practice research into three categories: research into, through and for practice. Of the eleven articles in this special issue, Tolstad, Pisfil, Shea and Oyler fit into the 'research into practice' category, Wolfe, Sykes and Braae et al fit into 'research through practice', and Anthony et al, Whiting and Thompson & Harding are pedagogy research and therefore a version of Frayling's 'research for practice'. Zaddach provides a sort of meta-commentary on the nature of practice research. The umbrella term of 'practice research' that Bulley

and Sahin (2021) recommend is therefore complicated by the fact that it can relate to two areas. On the one hand is Frayling's (1993) broader category that encompasses all research about 'doing stuff' as opposed to research about 'things' (analysing artefacts, theoretical concepts or socio-cultural phenomena etc). On the other hand is the narrower idea that it is research through practice where the goals of the practice and the establishment of the criteria by which those goals are judged to have been achieved are part of the research process (Zagorski-Thomas, 2021, 2022). This issue, as should be clear from the above, encompasses Frayling's broader definition. While the 2017 Special Issue was aimed at introducing more varied forms of publication by including audio, this 2023 Special Issue is aimed at research which produces more diverse and targeted theoretical knowledge for practical and vocational courses in popular music.

In relation to the discussion about the term 'artistic research', Zagorski-Thomas (2021, 2022) has also divided the goals of practice research into three aspects: artistic, pragmatic and activist. All three aspects will usually be reflected in any given project. The individual's artistic goals are usually tempered by some pragmatic considerations about fitting into some existing style or tradition, often based on commercial and/or audience expectation. And there is often an ideological or activist aspect to a project's goals such as increasing diversity or improving access. Although this is true for all forms of arts-based practice research, it is especially true in Popular Music Studies where the focus on audiences, commerce, stylistic norms and gatekeepers is highly pronounced and also, given that popular music studies mostly focuses on musical styles, forms and traditions that cross cultural boundaries, considerations of equality, diversity and inclusion are already deeply embedded in the research culture. This can be seen, for example, in various ways that the culturally constructed pragmatic notions of conforming to existing structures of judgment are already embedded in theoretical work. To draw on some examples from this Special Issue: the Social Field of Csikszentmihalyi's Systems Approach (Thompson and Harding), Tolstad's use of Actor Network Theory and weaving oneself into the assemblage of 'knowers', Whiting's use of gatekeepers and imagined and real audiences, and Braae et al's adoption of musical theatre's common practice of using workshop audiences to develop their creative content.

All of these, and other, theoretical approaches to value judgment are, of course, intimately related to the reference to Philip Ewell in the original call and the statement that "it was not enough to look at a more culturally diverse range of repertoire through conventional theoretical lenses". Those theoretical lenses—no matter how hard we work on them—will always, in one way or another, embody value judgments of some sort. Indeed, furthering a trajectory initiated by ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood's (1960) call for "bi-musicality", our aim should not be to try to find universal value judgments but to ensure that the range of theoretical lenses and the value judgments they embody is as representative as it can be. These eleven articles do not represent as broad a range of cultural diversity as we would like but they do demonstrate that contemporary theories of musical practice are not as deeply entrenched in Western Art Music as those of music analysis. Zaddach's article does point to the potential for practice research to empower the disenfranchised and we need to be strategizing about how that potential can be realised.

Perhaps obviously, given that this is a Practice Research Special Issue, a linking theme between the various pedagogic papers is the notion of situated learning - of using some of the methods of practice research in the learning process. That has been a keystone in the teaching of practical music skills—both formal and informal—for as long as there has been music, but Thompson and Harding, Anthony et al, Whiting and Sykes all bring interesting perspectives to the notion of ‘scaffolding’. In each example, the concept of experiential learning occurs in a situation that models some aspect of ‘real life’ while mediating the full pressure of commerce or professionalism in some way. Some of this scaffolding is about providing a scenario where that situated learning is slightly less ‘cloistered’ than traditions of music education. This can be seen in Thompson and Harding’s professional brief-based approach to song writing education and Sykes’ blending of student and local community musicians in a big band. In addition, they are all also exploring ways of embedding theoretical knowledge into situated learning by providing various vehicles for parallel narrative and discussion to accompany and contextualise the experiential element.

Wolfe, Sykes and Braae et al, while engaging with what Frayling (1993) would characterise as practice through research, demonstrate two of the unique features of this form of practice research. The first of these is also discussed by Whiting in relation to songwriting pedagogy: the idea that the documentation of mistakes and/or failures is often as, if not more, useful than the final work. This is especially true when the critical reflection is about the judgment criteria for assessing why they were mistakes or failures. It also goes to the heart of one of the ongoing discussions in practice research: the relative importance of the creative output in comparison to the process of creating it. The argument that a subject expert should be able to extrapolate new knowledge about musical practice from the completed creative output seems parallel to the notion that a subject expert in pharmaceutical research should be able to extrapolate new knowledge by analysing a new drug. On the one hand, it seems like an arbitrary form of gatekeeping and, on the other, it precludes the communication of any contextual knowledge that may have emerged during the process—especially in regard to mistakes and failures.

The second of these unique features relates back to the setting of research goals that was mentioned earlier. The nature of this form of practice research often means that the research questions may start undefined or may change throughout the process because the setting of goals (artistic, pragmatic or activist) and the judgment criteria for assessing when and how they have been achieved are part of the research process. In other forms of research the judgment criteria—what constitutes a good or positive result—is established externally and is not part of the research process. Of course, in some areas of research the sub-goals, the things that need to be achieved or accomplished in order to achieve or accomplish the main goal, are established as part of the research process but the ultimate judgment criteria for a good result are not. Wolfe, Sykes and Braae et al were all negotiating and re-assessing what a good musical result would look and sound like as part of their research process.

Many of these articles also reflect a contemporary shift in creative practice towards being a consumer activity rather than purely a professional one. Of course, the marketisation of higher education is one important part of this but Tolstad’s

article deals with the business model of songwriting camps and mentions giving 'aspiring writers' access to established industry figures and gatekeepers and Shea's article utilises data from the commercial guitar tab websites that are built on user-generated content and earn from advertising. That is not to mention the consumerisation of music and production technology hardware and software technologies. And of course, there is a disturbing circularity in the fact that so many of these researchers are, like many of us in academia, active practitioners who subsidise their creative habit by teaching in higher education. While none of these articles directly address this issue, they provide an interesting alternative slant on the contemporary adage that if you are not being paid you are the product—the idea that if your music doesn't make a profit then you are the consumer. This brings us full circle, back to the distinction between artistic, pragmatic and activist goals in practice and to the types of indicator that are used as measures. Given that a few hundred physical sales can generate the same income as a million streams and that the notion of gatekeeper or influencer has become so fluid, how are practitioners measuring their success? There has been a backlash in the live music industry against performing for 'exposure' instead of money and yet the practice is still very common. More and more it seems as if the feeling of success is more important than financial reward and that the indicators of artistic and pragmatic value are becoming confused. Both Tolstad's and Thompson and Harding's articles involve aspiring artists vying for validation from professional gatekeepers in a way that has been separated from financial reward and, of course, phenomena such as the gamification of performance talent on television is another aspect of this.

One activist goal of this Special Issue is to showcase ways in which the theorizing of popular music practice can utilize a range of frameworks that are not built upon the traditions of Western Art Music. Years ago, in theorizing Black American music traditions, Amiri Baraka juxtaposed the 'deification of Accident' to predetermined rational processes (Jones, 1963). The vast range of popular music forms being taught in vocational and practical courses around the world are not just differentiated by their techniques and technologies, they are also distinguished by different aesthetics. The criteria for judging quality in grime are different to those in death metal, dangdut koplo, K-Pop, Afrobeat, reggaetón or psytrance. Practice research therefore needs to address the question of theorising value judgments for a variety of reasons: to increase representation and diversity, to help practitioners clarify their own definitions of success, to create a theoretical framework for creative aesthetics and to provide a more rigorous basis for practical pedagogy.

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