

Two Decades of Artistic Research: The Antipodal Experience

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INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have seen the rapid rise of artistic research as a valid—and increasingly validated—scholarly pursuit. Triggered primarily by the gradual amalgamation of conservatoires and schools of music into the higher education sector in the Anglo-Saxon world since the Second World War and the Bologna process (from 1998) in mainland Europe, musicians have been inspired and stimulated (as well as forced to some extent) to make more explicit the processes and thinking that feed into compositions, performances, recordings and online creative music activities. On one hand, this has yielded some naive and far-fetched claims and some cunning retrofitting of research agendas to existing works, but on the other it has led to some profound insights and fascinating new work, particularly at the doctoral level. Taking the approaches that have surfaced in Australia as an example, this essay traces some of the history, strategies, frameworks, practices, and research training associated with this new presence in the academic landscape and assesses with an eye to the future where the field is in terms of strategy, artistry, scholarship, and pedagogy.

KEY CONCEPTS

Twenty years ago, Dennis Strand finished a major consultation across Australia about the practice and nature of practice-based research in the performing and creative arts, which led to the first important report on positioning research aspects of professional arts training in the university system. *Research in the Creative Arts* (Strand 1998) was a well-researched and broadly consulted response to the Dawkins reforms in the late 1980s, which had brought all higher education in the arts into the Australian university framework (Dawkins 1988). Strand's work constituted an intelligent first step in addressing an important gap: recognising artistic research outputs that had traditionally not "counted" in universities' tallies of word-based research publications. In the way Strand addressed this particular issue unfortunately also lurked its greatest weakness: he sought to establish equivalence between artistic research outputs and pub-

lications. This led to problematic positions for university employees (versus doctoral students): for instance, compositions under twenty minutes were equated with journal articles, while those over twenty minutes were equated to a book (Strand 1998, 139–42). This opened the floodgates for justifiably critical discussions on scholarly rigour and room to play the system (would John Cage’s 4’33” be 20’01” if he had been in an Australian tenure-track position?). But, despite that, the report contributed to the creation of a new category of research, Category J (in a system based on *numbers* of outputs, starting from A for Book, B for Book Chapter, C for Journal Article, etc.). However, it was only embraced in a lukewarm fashion, proved labour-intensive, and had become all but irrelevant by the early 2000s (Wilson 2017).

Then, in the mid-2000s, a new impetus to thinking about the scope, nature, and quality of research in Australia came with the announcement of the Research Quality Framework (RQF). Inspired by the UK-based RAE (now REF) and New Zealand’s PBRE, the then coalition government decided to initiate the shift from quantitative to qualitative measurement of Australia’s research prowess with the RQF (DEST 2005). This sent a shock wave through Australian academia. While it was never implemented for political reasons, the very threat of the RQF may have been the most powerful impulse for Australian universities to rethink their approach to research in the past decades. Aware of the unsatisfactory position of the performing and creative arts in the existing system, representatives of these disciplines were invited around the table to help design a system that was fair both to the person who conceived, researched, composed, and premiered an opera *and* to the person who wrote the five-thousand-word journal article about it—not only to the latter. Because word-based criteria like citation indices (or proxies like audience numbers or the prestige of venues) did not stand up to scrutiny, a largely peer review-based system was designed, judging outputs on the basis of a compact research statement, and including impact on academia, the profession, the discipline, education, and community (see Seares and Schippers 2005).

Sadly, this fine-mazed system was never effectuated due to a change in government (although some key aspects of it re-emerged in the UK’s successor to the RAE, the REF). Once in power, the Labour Minister who had consistently used “the fatally flawed RQF” as an *epitheton ornans* in opposition had little choice but to order a simplified system to gauge research quality, supported by the universities who stood to lose income from the more fine-grained version. The Australian Research Council worked with the field and developed Excellence in Research Australia (ERA), for the third iteration of which Australian universities submitted their research outputs in 2015 (after earlier rounds in 2010 and 2012). Like RQF, ERA fully recognises creative outputs as research, on the condition that a convincing case is made for their status as research in a 250-word research statement (in addition to and in a way quite separate from their artistic merit). While less refined than RQF, ERA has changed the landscape in the performing arts and creative writing, as well as the visual arts and crafts, where the majority of thousands of outputs in each are now creative works. In parallel, but oddly quite independently of this, the scope and quality of doctoral com-

pletions continued to become ever more confident and developed in terms of methods, artefacts, and outcomes (see below). It is here that the binary most clearly emerges in terms of the disparity between two cultures that work side by side: the academic artist/supervisor and the doctoral student. Both these landscapes will now be examined in turn.

THE ACADEMIC ARTIST

Initially, one might assume that the biggest winners in artistic research are academic artists—in being able to validate their practice as research within the context of the university. The very idea that the creation of work, the considered interpretation of work, the recording process, and curatorial work could now be described as research is of great value to the academic community. It is a position that few non-academic artists can aspire to: a university salary as a permanent subsidy to make new work, perform, record, curate, and think about art. But how does artistic research in music actually work on the ground in Australia, what is the uptake, and who are the winners and the losers? What is the value of research inside the conservatoire, and what is the value of this research to the external arts community? Have we yet moved beyond suspicion of the artist as researcher and reached a point of understanding in terms of approaches, models, and methodologies?

On paper, artists were treated equally to practitioners of other disciplines, being able to access grants, to validate research as part of workloads, and to present a common understanding to the external artistic community of the intrinsic value of the musician in a university—one who, through a high level of practice, seeks to extend, expand, and transform the field. However, the reality was quite different. Over the past twenty years, three overlapping approaches to the production of artistic research in music emerged. First, it belonged in the realm of definitions and methodologies, using text-based positioning and validation to argue and verify the concept of artistic research. Second, it existed in the music—that is, the idea of “pure” artistic research, letting the music speak for itself. And third, there were approaches that incorporated reflection on the act of making music. These three stages reflect generational changes in the cohort of researchers, which has shifted within a generation from those that think and write about music, to those that do music (and whose thought processes are rarely made explicit), to those that are trained in our own doctoral programmes fundamentally to do both.

In 2004, a number of forays into artistic research in music began at Griffith University under the direction of Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre. Various lecture series, including “Inside Music” and “Intangibles in Music,” were designed for staff and students to engage in the unpacking of musical performance. The series aimed for a demystification of performance as the result of some unknowable journey. Academics and students shared their decision-making processes, their forward, backward, and sideward steps in what was clearly a non-linear endeavour (as is much research across other disciplines). This was the beginning of a broader understanding among perfor-

mance staff of the real potential of artistic research and led to one of the seminal works in this area, Stephen Emmerson's *Around a Rondo* (2006). Featuring more than words and performances, the scope of this work was beyond what most performers imagined they could achieve and provided a deep and shared understanding that valid research could be identified even in preparing for the performance of canonic piano repertoire like Mozart's Rondo in A Minor (K. 511). It was the beginning of a watershed of activity in artistic research.

Once musicians began to understand that they could contribute to the field of research, a generation of overenthusiastic new "researchers" was submitting every performance, improvisation, and composition as an independent research item. "Business as usual" teaching-based performances were submitted—anything to be counted as a researcher. It was the era of performance-equals-research. Academia encouraged those trying to either "play the game" or address compliance issues—but as yet without any fundamental shift in practice or attitude. This not only clogged up university systems but came with limited verification, no peer review, and often limited communication of how this constituted research. Five similar performances of the same work in different venues equalled five separate submissions. Subsequently, more stringent quantitative measures were applied to the verification of research outputs: they must be of a certain duration, presented in significant locations, released on notable record labels, and peer reviewed—all while musicians witnessed the decline in arts journalism, a contraction of the music industry, and the redistribution of responsibilities in concert hall programming from a curatorial toward a "user pays" approach, which is also favoured by many festivals. It seems that doing research, and doing it in the right place for the right people, was still not enough to guarantee the value of the work as research. The question lingered, what is artistic research in music?

There were other researchers who focussed on this very question: interrogating practices and attitudes and developing methodological approaches. Their guidance led to proposing tighter guidelines around artistic research and the collating of performances in what is now known as "portfolio" submissions—a collection of individual outputs and practices, linked by a research statement that directly articulates the research embedded in the series of activities. The advantage of this evolution was higher quality, more robust research outputs, but also a much lower level of engagement from staff. University performance indicators and other metrics were still not capturing what both musicians and musicologists knew to be the reservoir of knowledge that musicians were grappling with.

The move away from metrics toward a qualitative description of the research provided artistic researchers with the chance to argue their research through a 250-word statement; the argument was provided to an external review panel to assist in understanding and assessing the research. What was the context of making the work? What was the contribution to new knowledge? What was the impact of the work? These were carefully considered questions, provided by the newly formed ERA (see above), which somehow managed to again create apprehension in the academic music community. It seemed like an affront to

music practitioners that they needed to write about their performance for it to be considered research. It must be pointed out that the only imposition on the researcher was to construct a 250-word argument, a far cry from the 40,000 minimum word count required for most practice-based doctoral projects. The complaints arose not because the construction of such a pithy argument was too difficult—it was the ongoing uneasy friction between making music and writing about it.

At the time of writing in 2016, it is easy to see the cyclical nature that occurred in the transition from musician-as-practitioner to musician-as-researcher. Apprehension is followed by change, in this case nervous questions around methodology—How can you be sure that you are doing research? What exactly are these intangible qualities of music-making, and why can't you write about them? What is the mysterious decision-making process an artist goes through when constructing an interpretation and how can these be articulated? Many artists have now made clear cases for such research (e.g., Coessens, Crispin, and Douglas 2009; Draper, Tomlinson, Emmerson, and Brown 2015), articulating the perspective of the informed performer. While it may be true that not all music performance is research, it is also true that the best research does not necessarily equal the best music.

It would be fair to say that the past twenty years have been full of opportunities and wrong turns: over-shooting the target, dubious scientific equivalency arguments, internal arguments about methodologies, but all the while researching and making music. As we move forward, there are increasingly more models and reference points about artistic research, supported by ever-increasing documentation of the field. However, the warning here is that the written history does not replace the aural history. Journals that can cope with the artistic output as the central research tenant now exist (e.g., *The Journal for Artistic Research*) and some of the frustrations of time-based art as research are being alleviated.

Historically, we have moved from the mavericks, to the triers, to the innate doers. The current crop of emerging researchers who have now graduated from practice-based doctoral programmes understand the nature of artistic research as a way of interrogating and extending their practice. It is a fundamental approach that allows the laboratory of the practice room/music studio to be the site of research. These new academic artists do not resist the research challenge but enact their holistic approach to reflective practice that incorporates research at its core. As musician-researchers, they operate both inside and outside academia with the same attitude. The skill acquisition from doctoral degrees is transforming elements of the artistic community and is a post-Strand outcome that merits further examination. The university setting benefits from this changing environment—with both undergraduate and graduate students and the broader artistic community as specific beneficiaries. As such, it is more a generational shift that has been articulated here, and a renewed understanding about the interface between academia and the music community.

ARTISTIC RESEARCH TRAINING

The doctorate in music has been around for a very long time: the DMus was first introduced at Oxford University in the 1500s as a practice-based undertaking and conceptualised as a form of apprenticeship to a guild. Ever since the industrial revolution, however, expectations for research have increasingly assumed a scientific and/or intellectual turn to position the doctorate as a prerequisite for most academic careers. Following the Dawkins reforms (1988), there emerged a growing sense of disenchantment with a pure-research PhD model that was perceived to serve the needs of the universities rather than those of society. Commentators (see Australian Higher Education Council 1989) began to ask that universities consider the development of more relevant degrees. Thus the professional doctorate was born in disciplines including education, jurisprudence, medicine, and the creative arts. The decade since 2006 has witnessed an exponential uptake in music research training programmes—from undergraduate honours (with thesis) through to MPhil, PhD, professional master's and doctorates—to the point where the servicing of these demands has become a significant component of university and faculty workload considerations. At the time of writing, Queensland Conservatorium hosts in excess of one hundred research students (most at doctoral level), supervised by a growing but relatively small complement of research-qualified staff with specific experience in artistic research (Draper and Harrison 2011).

The profile of the contemporary research student is worth examining further. While the MPhil and the PhD continue to support traditional research aspirations, most recent major growth has been in the practice-based undertakings of the Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA) and Master of Music, now more commonly described in terms of artistic research. Enquiry into a number of creative arts disciplines (see Draper and Harrison 2016) reveals common motivations and characteristics for those undertaking this kind of work: most are mature-age professionals who explicitly take time out to utilise the resources of the university, to deeply explore, develop, and understand an important aspect of their practice. Similarly, in formative research training pathways, such as undergraduate Honours, there is now an increased interest in one's own practice in contrast to musicological formats and the "third person validation" of only a few decades ago. This would seem informed by an overarching artistic research culture made visible through critical mass, staff and student profiles, and graduate destination outcomes.

To enter the DMA at Queensland Conservatorium, it is a requirement that successful applicants possess at least five years of professional experience relevant to the research topic, and that the final exegesis includes not only a substantial dissertation but also a significant portfolio of creative material. In many ways, this exceeds the expectation for the PhD in that artistic researchers must be able to "walk and chew gum at the same time" (as the local colloquialism goes)—that is, to be able to put forward and defend their ideas both in writing and in artistic work. By way of ensuring quality and validity, all DMA exegesises are externally examined by national and international experts in their fields.

What is perhaps more significant, however, is the very different writing requirements, assessment schemata, methods, and outputs that exist for research theses and their products, on the one hand, and staff creative outputs, on the other. Clearly, there are practical matters of scope, project length, employment conditions, or target audiences that tend to divide the two, yet there are feedback phenomena at work in this mix of so-called “students” and “teachers” where the interface between the two worlds is tellingly symbiotic. Less so than the master–apprentice model of old, the academic artist learns from the professional artist-as-student in terms of community contexts; this then informs a shared understanding of scholarly and artistic design and assists the student with the written exegesis in particular. Conversely, while theses are far wordier than ERA research statements, the principles for method, contributions to peer communities, and artistic findings continue to refine academic insights. On the music-making side of the equation, the relationship maintains a focus on artistic excellence and its practice for the academic (sometimes difficult in a time-poor university environment).

For the moment however, much of this remains in a “no man’s land” of the campus-based research community—certainly desirable as an experimental safe house and as an artistic research incubator—a setting that has not yet bridged the gap between the profession and the academy in terms of widespread acceptance. On the one hand it would seem there is a certain distrust of the artistic doctorate by the professional community in line with concerns originally raised by the ARHC—that is, a perception of university self-serving. Certainly, doctorates are not yet part of any music-based employment expectations outside the academy. Simultaneously, when university managers are asked to consider why there are such large numbers of DMAs, the common response is “lack of income in music” and “they want a university job.” However, research indicates that neither of these perceptions is entirely accurate (Draper and Harrison 2011, 2016). While the artist-doctor in question will have achieved professional recognition for musical “chops,” planning, methodology, defence, writing, and other skills developed in executing a dissertation do not usually continue on an assumed pathway to producing journal articles. Instead it is the generic attributes developed in systematic research training that variously emerge as advocacy, leadership, communication skills, and confidence in the profiles of DMA graduates on return to working environments (Draper and Harrison 2016).

While the greater majority of graduates return to making music in society, that is not the complete picture. In recent times it has become evident that while the greying academic population continues to retire, it is replaced by a new breed of young academics from all over the world. As a result, we find a narrowing divide between the idea of writing and the idea of making music (as common in the earlier divisions between so-called research staff and performance staff). In 2016, Queensland Conservatorium appointed twelve continuing, full-time positions, representing more than 25 per cent turnover of continuing (tenure-track) staff. The majority of these new appointments are widely recognised performing artists with doctoral qualifications. Thus, communities of practice, the old academy and the new academy, intimately rub

up against each other and reveal misalignments between the measurement of artistic research for staff (ERA), minimum criteria for research graduates, and new generations of academic appointments with higher aspirations beyond that. While some research may still be considered “more equal” than others for now, this evolving mix can only have a positive impact in the long term on the rise of artistic research, its acceptance in society, and its measurement by governments and universities.

CONCLUSIONS

At first glance, it seems Australia has made major inroads into aligning regulations, practice, and training in artistic research over the past twenty years. But are we really there yet? While there is an underlying sense of equity between types of research in ERA, this was not reflected in the government’s official annual research reporting mechanism, HERDC (which drove much more money than ERA). A new system, bringing HERDC and ERA closer together, does not seem to be artistic-output friendly either. In addition, many universities still treat artistic research differently from more traditional formats when it comes to assessing staff and promotion applications. That is quite surprising given the sheer number of outputs (many thousands over each five-year ERA period), and the fact that artistic research has developed quite distinct methodologies and criteria over the past decade, with leadership in the UK, north-west mainland Europe (notably through ORCiM and DocArtes), New Zealand, and Australia (see Borgdorff 2012). Of course, there is inevitably mediocre work, but there are many nodes of excellence as well, which truly contribute to a global understanding of disciplines that have creativity and artistic quality at their core, and can also increasingly make valid claims for academic rigour and artistic integrity in their *modus operandi*. The rise of artistic doctorates has undoubtedly contributed to this growth.

At the same time, after a twenty-year struggle for recognition, there is a sense that the energy is stalling. A number of initiatives seem to be needed to regain the impetus for artistic research in Australia and move forward an agenda of demonstrable equity, relevance, and excellence. These include continued advocacy and deepening engagement of staff in producing outputs with strong research components (rather than retrofitting research rationales to existing artworks). But, most of all, the sector needs to be empowered to develop a robust system of quality control with national and international partners that goes beyond current proxies such as grants, prestigious platforms, and critical acclaim for performances, compositions, and recordings. While such efforts will hopefully influence the proceedings of the current ERA round, there may be another decade of work ahead before artistic research is truly understood and recognised as an important part of the Australian and international research landscape, with a peer-review system fit for purpose and sensitive to the nature of this type of research, with more graduates from artistic doctorate programmes in academic positions, and the best artistic research outputs both critiqued and celebrated across the world.

Two Decades of Artistic Research

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