

Postgrad [R]evolution: Music

Making music—art, research or both?

Helen Lancaster



Melissa Carey, autumn_04

A university is characterised by its research centres, a conservatorium by its master musicians. With research high on the agenda, this parallel could provide unity but instead seems lost in an argument over paperwork. At a meeting of the National Association of Tertiary Music Schools in 2003, the head of one Australian music institution is reported to have said, “I hate the word ‘research.’ What you’re doing and what I’m doing is research—why do we have to write it down?” (Diana Davis, “A working model for postgraduate practice based research across the creative arts”, *Doctoral Education in Design*, 2003).

The question highlights a fundamental issue of the debate which positions academics and musicians in different corners. The

traditional PhD ‘thesis’ (meaning the total submission) makes a contribution to knowledge or presents substantial new insights into a field of learning. It asks questions and proposes answers by testing theory or hypotheses. The process and outcomes should be replicable and documented, usually in a substantial, written dissertation. On one hand is the argument that creative work can neither meet these expectations nor contribute to knowledge, on the other is the contention that it extends the field.

According to Peter McCallum, formerly of the Sydney Conservatorium, “The arts are concerned with creating things which are valued for their aesthetic or expressive qualities. I find it more useful to say that artists create aesthetic objects rather than to say that they create knowledge.” But the knowledge argument runs the risk of narrowing the scope of the word. Knowledge need not rely on written fact—new knowledge may emerge through interpretation (Adrian Vickers, *Research in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts*, 2004). To confine knowledge to “acquaintance with facts” is to ignore it as “practical understanding of an art” (Oxford Dictionary). Aesthetic knowledge may be non-verbal: “while some of music’s aesthetic information can be described in words, a considerable part remains untranslatable” (Reiner and Fox, “The Research Status of Music Composition in Australia”, *AJME* 1, 2003).

Dennis Strand’s report *Research into the Creative Arts* (DETYA, 1998) lists 3 approaches to creative research: the conservative, traditional approach (research about), the pragmatic midway mix of creative and written work (research in), and the liberal approach supporting creative practice as research. The distinction between the last 2 is crucial. In the third, creative work has the status of a thesis, its contribution to knowledge conveyed through the work itself. Although some Australian music institutions choose the DMA as a safe alternative to this format, there are cases emerging in PhD programs. This article offers a few such examples.

There is no confusion about musicological research, or research about music. It leads to scholarly work, historical, theoretical or critical, and is written down. Research in music practice is also acceptable because outcomes contribute to music or develop something new—and there is accompanying text. Some universities have offered this mix for so long that they no longer place it on the “creative” list. In this form, the thesis comprises a portfolio of scores with a written component—superficially a similar format to that in which creative work is the thesis. The thesis doesn’t need to be dualist. Richard Vella’s assessment is

that the issue is not so much about the ratio of creative and written components, but rather how best to communicate the research inquiry: “Is it in the work and understood through the experience of the work or must it be explained in some textual commentary on the work?”

Research occurring through music practice may look the same but here the outcome is artistic. PhD candidate Eve Klein (Macquarie University) explains the distinction: “creative works need to operate as a practice or understanding of how the work reconfigures and pushes the artform. The complexity is making this visible beyond simply producing a new ‘original’ artistic work.” Defining the difference between a composition or performance as an artistic event and one which is the outcome of research confounds academics and provides an easy escape for those who allocate funding. Amongst struggling music institutions, money is the motivating force driving their determination to have creative practice recognised as research.

As composition takes on less predictable forms (not all on the page), some institutions exercise more caution than others. Having inherited a composition-based PhD from the University of Sydney’s Music Department, Sydney Conservatorium has extended it to electronic music composition where original software might form part of the outcome. However, as Peter McCallum explains, “in the Con’s case (the software) could never be the sole thesis. That would be a matter for computer science.” Perhaps there’s another argument—that in a cross-disciplinary world, software extends the field and might therefore be considered research in music practice?

Melissa Carey

Southern Cross University takes a more liberal approach. The abstract from Melissa Carey’s research, “Graphic Notations: Visual Representations of Music and Aural Representation of Image”, acknowledges that “our concept of what constitutes ‘music’ has changed”. To prove her point the thesis will be an installation with wall-hung images, artists’ scorebooks and an accompanying audio CD. Carey’s new notational technique (Intermedia Frottage) uses image-sound conversion software to translate image into sound. In this process “the image takes on the role of a graphic score that can be ‘read’ in relation to the sound composition as well as providing an initial map for its creation”. Carey explores the sounds which result from different readings of image, demonstrated in *autumn_04*. Constructed from a single leaf image using the principle of theme and variations, “each object layer in the image was saved, and subsequently ‘sounded’

individually. The resulting sound files were then reconstructed to create sound composition, in...the way we might 'read' the image as a collection of discrete objects, rather than simply scanning from left to right."

Matt Robison

A description of Matt Robison's thesis (also at SCU) as a creative folio of 14 original compositions presented on an audio CD with a written component presented in electronic form on CD-ROM neglects the fascinating evolutionary journey his work has taken. A successful musician whose work has been played on television and on the ABC's Triple J network, Robison claims that research informs and inspires his creative work, and believes his creative and commercial success is "intimately linked" to research practice. His thesis has been acknowledged by examiner Professor Derek Scott (University of Salford, UK) as a model for this kind of doctorate.

Robison's example typifies the argument for composer and performer that creative work is informed by a unique mix of experiences. The composer framing new work and the musician preparing performance each embarks on a journey comprising research of various kinds, some more obvious than others. Huib Schippers (Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre) describes performance as "the end-result of complex physiological, technical, conceptual, aesthetic and social processes" (*The Marriage of Art and Academia*, 2003). Reproducing such a journey borders on the impossible, making it difficult to convince academia of its place in the research funding stakes.

Postgrad boom

Australia's record of philanthropic support is poor, but Sydney Conservatorium's recent windfall of a \$16 million bequest from pastoralist George William Henderson will fuel plans for a new PhD in performance commencing in 2006. According to the Conservatorium's Dean, Professor Kim Walker, the bequest will support top scholars and performers in "a unique program involving performance, composition and research." The Elder School of Music at the University of Adelaide has already introduced a PhD by examination in performance which, according to Charles Bodman Rae, is the first of its kind in Australia. All current Elder candidates have secured Australian Postgraduate Awards, so their research is valued where it counts. The work of one, Leigh Harrold, has also attracted ABC-FM to record his performances of American composer Robert

Muczynski's piano music and assess them for commercial release. Also at Elder, jazz pianist Chris Martin is investigating unexplored potential for incorporating 12-tone vocabulary into jazz. Through performance, Martin's thesis documents "a personal improvisational vocabulary and style that reflects the incorporation of a highly structured approach to dissonance" within the jazz tradition.

Grant Collins

A successful professional drummer and composer, Grant Collins (QUT), combines composition and performance to review the boundaries of the large modern drumset as a medium for contemporary solo performance. Investigating compositions which employ all 4 limbs, Collins will "develop and introduce new techniques to establish advanced levels of co-ordination, independence and motion not previously achieved on a standard drum set." His thesis combines the development of new playing techniques, live performances and recordings, and new compositions to develop repertoire for training the techniques he is exploring.

If research is expected to demonstrate relevance to the performance and composition of music, Collins is well on the way to achieving this. Ensuring that the results are rigorous and objective is the responsibility of the framework QUT provides for the creative PhD. As supervisor, Richard Vella claims "understanding the idiosyncracies of the candidate's work is the first step" in the process leading to interpreting or contextualizing creative work as research. He explains that "the relationship between the artist's creative work and the external world can be done through analogy, parody or some other rhetorical positioning. It can be discursive, analytical or sensory. As long as this relationship is expressed, the candidate's outcomes or findings can be experiential, explanatory or both. It is the expression of this relationship that makes the work research within the current university context" ("Practice based Research", 2005).

Eve Klein

Creative work is challenged by academic expectations of adequate and accurate measurement systems to test the research. Like Collins, Eve Klein (Macquarie University) plans to create new work as a way of developing and testing new techniques. In Klein's case, it is an investigation into how electronic music alters and reconfigures philosophical discussions of operatic vocality. An excellent example of pioneering spirit among creative PhD

candidates, Klein has carefully documented all aspects of her creative work, noting an “onerous sense of needing to ‘justify’ the creative component rigorously.” Further, Klein has also undertaken extensive vocal training to enable her to perform vocally to professional operatic standard, a time-consuming commitment.

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If institutions are characterised by their research, the new breed of music researchers points to a different style of music institution for the future, one which understands and supports practice as research—regardless of the paperwork. Hopefully, universities will get the (non-textual) message.

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