

## ***Artistic Experimentation in Music***

### ***An Anthology***

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# Artistic Experimentation in Music

INSTITUTE

Darla Crispin and Bob Gilmore (eds.)

## An Anthology

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AN ANTHOLOGY







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# Introduction

Darla Crispin and Bob Gilmore

This book is an anthology of writings about an emerging area of research: artistic experimentation in music. The paradox implicit in this opening proposition—can one already confidently make an anthology of texts about so recent a field of enquiry?—is here answered in the affirmative. The editors believe the time is ripe for a first gathering of materials from this cross-disciplinary terrain, which cuts across and between the boundaries of the conventional categories of performance, composition, historical and critical musicology, performance studies, musical analysis, reception theory, aesthetics, and much else.

The majority of the thirty-five texts have been written especially for this volume, and those few that are here reprinted from other sources are all of very recent vintage. The book is therefore somewhat unconventional in departing from the traditional concept of the anthology as a collection of texts of disparate origins in time and place. This is, rather, an anthology of the present. Moreover, the material is united by its common genesis in the work of one particular institution: the Orpheus Research Centre in Music (ORCiM), in Ghent, Belgium, founded in 2007 with the explicit aim of addressing questions and topics at the heart of musical practice, building on the expertise and perspectives of musicians and engaging in dialogue with longer-established research disciplines. This volume includes material resulting from the most recent research agenda of ORCiM, currently in its second phase: an exploration of artistic experimentation in music.

For readers unfamiliar with the aims of ORCiM, a brief explanation might help to shed light on the nature and scope of this book. ORCiM is an independent institution dedicated to artistic research in music. Its Research Fellows have in common that they are also musical practitioners, and the questions they explore are ones that emerge from their ongoing musical activity. This practice often involves activities that range across music and beyond, into the domains of the visual arts, literature, philosophy, and much else.

ORCiM's recent focus on artistic experimentation in music, the theme of this anthology, is an institution-wide project that began in 2010 and is still continuing. "Experimentation" here should not be taken to refer only to the twentieth-century development of *experimental music*: rather, the kind of experimentation described here is an attitude—or perhaps a wide-ranging set of questions—that can be applied to any sort of music, as the articles on Monteverdi, Brahms and jazz make clear.

The articles within this anthology, therefore, do not articulate a single view about what artistic experimentation in music *is*, or what specific activities it

entails. The articulation of a diversity of approaches, and even the uncovering of tensions, is an important aspect of this collection, given the early stage of development in the artistic experimentation research trajectory as a whole. This refusal to delineate an official “ORCiM line” on experimentation goes back to the wider context of artistic research, within which artistic experimentation is embedded. Over the past decade, artistic research has developed to the extent that it is now increasingly accepted as a potential mode of inquiry, especially within arts training institutions. However, these same institutions are under increasing pressure to articulate watertight definitions for artistic research, something that is not entirely viable, given its relative immaturity and complex nature. Furthermore, any artistic research agenda eliciting homogeneity within its research outcomes would seem problematic, especially to artists.

ORCiM’s approach to this has been to work on aspects within the frame of artistic research that seem most relevant to each of its own researchers and external contributors, and to allow differentiations to stand alongside each other. This creates a wide horizon of approaches, which are codified in the Glossary section of this volume, so that variants in terminology can co-exist within the anthology as a whole while the use of terminology in the individual articles remains clear. In the longer term, this seems a more practical way to work toward defining terms for artistic research.

If this book does not provide a simple, one-sentence definition of the concept of artistic experimentation, it nonetheless suggests a number of possible meanings and understandings, many of them closely interlinked, which are presented here with the aim of opening discussion and exploration rather than establishing a new, and arguably unhelpful, set of boundaries. Perhaps the most obvious of the many possible understandings of the term “artistic experimentation” is a form of enquiry that differentiates itself from “scientific experimentation.” But, as becomes clear from the texts in the book, this should not in any way be taken to imply that artistic experimentation is somehow less rigorous or less exact than its scientific counterpart, simply that its methods of enquiry are usually different. Likewise, the term experimentation has, both in everyday conversation and in professional practice, a range of meanings that are reflected in the texts here: any attempt to reduce or delimit its meaning would fail to reflect its use, both actual and potential, by artistic practitioners.

The advent of a research centre such as ORCiM may be regarded as a symptom of the coming to the fore of a particular set of contemporary research questions. Within the past decade there has been an intensification of intellectual interest and curiosity concerning the field of musical practice. We want a fuller understanding of how performances and compositions come into existence, and what the motives and methods used by musicians in the process of art-formation are. Advanced research in this area goes hand in hand with the generation of new research languages and media. These are an essential part of the reliable dissemination of outcomes and outputs based within musical practice. Propagation of such languages can enfranchise research groups and communities, and this can enable them to gain credibility in the wider public sphere. “Artistic research,” as a field of enquiry, has thus emerged to meet the need

both for a context in which to situate the questions of artists, and for a conceptual space in which they may experiment with how those questions—and their answers—might be communicated, whether through writing, speech and presentation, or through actual compositions and performances themselves.

For all their benefits, however, theoretical approaches present challenges to their newer, more practically-oriented counterparts. In a world of research in which publication is paramount, the hegemony of the written word sits uncomfortably beside a body of work that does not have its essence in spoken and written language, but in music itself. The oft-cited metaphorical relationship between music as a communicative medium and the more specific communicative properties of spoken and written language should not deceive us into underestimating just how different are the world-views of those on either side of this debate. And that itself is a problem: the division of artists and thinkers into separate territories places restrictions upon how one may work within and across these areas, and even upon how one may identify oneself as operating both within the world of research and that of an art practice.

This situation is changing, however. An increasing number of scholar-musicians are no longer resigned to accepting that the ideological gaps between practising musicians and those who reflect upon music without performing it are unbridgeable. Indeed, just as there has been a strong post-millennial strand that questions the fixation on scrutinising scores and recordings—on treating musical works as artefacts, rather than events—there has also been a discernible increase in the number of conservatoire-based teachers interested not only in pursuing excellence in performance but also in understanding more about what this excellence might be, and how it is both achieved and recognised.

For such thinkers, the impulse for engaging with research emanates from the artist's own questions about their art—its nature and origins, the processes through which it comes into being, the nature of its reception, and so on. Artistic research argues that the questions of the artist, derived through development of an expert *habitus*, will be of a different nature from those of one who has not attained some level of artistic excellence.<sup>1</sup> The challenges here are obvious enough. The first is that an objectivity model in artistic research cannot function as it purportedly does in other research areas, since the artist's questions come through, and are embodied in, his or her unique engagement with their art: instead of striving toward objectivity, the questions are overtly and, it could be argued, intentionally hyper-personal and reflexive.

A further challenge comes with the baggage tied up in notions of excellence and aesthetic value. This is not to say that the world of art is not already shot through with aesthetic judgements. But these live in the realm of criticism, and are rarely advanced as adjuncts to a research process. In relation to music, this is an astonishing state of affairs, since the only kind of widely disseminated, regularly presented writing on music *is* criticism. All these different research

1 The concept of *habitus*, used by Aristotle and reanimated more recently by thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu, may be taken to refer to the lifestyle, values, and expectations of particular social groups acquired through the activities and experiences of everyday life.

communities need each other, and they need specific research resources and discourses to enable their fruitful interaction.

Artistic research demands from its exponents high levels of proficiency in both the intellectual and the practical realms that are relevant to the specific research areas explored. Since the approaches involved require a high degree of self-scrutiny and analysis, the challenge to produce research outcomes that can bear critical scientific *and* artistic scrutiny is considerable. It requires the development of tools to inform critically the processes of practitioners, as well as opening new questions within the established scientific realms of musicology and social theory.

It is this critical space that ORCiM has sought to inhabit and explore with an increasingly precise focus. Its researchers gradually came to the realisation that working with music—exploring the nature of musical artworks in their process of coming into being and attempting to articulate aspects of this—formed a process that all researchers, each in their own style, could see in common. Each was involved in a continuous process of trying things out, evaluating the results of each trial and using these to inform and refine the nature of future work. ORCiM could be regarded as a metaphorical laboratory for artistic experimentation.

Through a series of propositions and questions, it became possible to make a case for the adoption of artistic experimentation as a principal focus for ORCiM. Some researchers were concerned that the resemblances typically cited between the arts and the sciences are often superficial, and do not always offer scope for questions of artistic research. Nonetheless, it could be argued that a body of successive actions (performances, compositions, etc.) within the frame of a particular art form can represent a systematic undertaking of acts of inquiry, with the primary focus of evaluation of the artist's work being upon the "experimental" product itself—the artefact. This focus means that critiques within art and science are directed differently: in science, the critique is directed back at the hypothesis, and involves the outcome as a means of testing this hypothesis through replication; in art, the critique is directed at the outcome, the artefact, and the aim is precisely to avoid replication, since each valid example of art should somehow be exemplary and *sui generis*. Therefore, while the paradigm of science includes the insistence on being able to demonstrate one's working, that for artists is to demonstrate an outcome that, while comprehensible within a wider tradition or body of consensus, manifests elements of uniqueness that enable it to be apprehended as a quasi-spontaneous and transformative experience. Developing an appropriate language of critique is therefore essential to making progress in promoting artistic research; the doing and making processes of the artist must progress hand-in-hand with the development of new language.

Inevitably, in forming a preliminary platform upon which to build a research focus based on artistic experimentation, more questions arose, many of which have yet to be answered conclusively. For example, it is by no means clear that the means by which the artist progresses from work to work can always be seen as analogous to the scientist's progression from experiment to experiment. It is

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also difficult to prove whether, for the artist, the movement is systematic, intuitive, opportunistic or random and arbitrary, or some combination of these. Furthermore, it is not easy to separate the processes driving this movement in the context of artistic experimentation from those in artistic practice more generally; and, finally, the functions of aesthetic theory and criticism in the artist's conception and execution of works of art and how such functions might change with the focus upon artistic experimentation is not obvious.

ORCiM distilled such concerns into four fundamental research questions that guided individual researchers and research groups toward more unified processes of inquiry during the 2010–13 span of its over-arching project in artistic experimentation:

1. What is the character, function, and potential of experimentation in musical practice?
2. How does experimentation shape artistic identity and expertise, and how can it disclose aspects of embodied knowledge?
3. How does artistic experimentation affect the development of musical practices, both historically and currently?
4. How does artistic experimentation in music relate to other fields of human activity?

An even more fundamental question lies beneath all these: is it really true that art is, by its very nature, experimental? In which case, the concept of artistic experimentation would eventually be perceived as tautologous. Or, is the more general inquiry within art something more akin to “imaginative invention” or “mental play,” and, if so, is there a meaningful distinction between this and an artistic experimentation that might be characterised as freer than its scientific counterpart but more rigorous than artistic practice in general? Might “the language of invention” be a more helpful substitute for “the language of experiment”?

It was precisely this friction, the tension in terminologies, which many ORCiM researchers found inspirational in considering new kinds of discourses about musical creation. Artistic experimentation became the key phrase at the heart of a unified research agenda, with researchers finding attraction or productive resistance in the multiple connotations of this concept. One possible understanding of the term, which forms the core contention of ORCiM's current research agenda, is that:

Experimentation is omnipresent in artistic practice and in the processes of music making. Artistic experimentation encompasses the actions that an artist undertakes in developing and constantly renewing personal artistic identity and expertise. Exploring this field has the potential to give greater insight into how art unfolds, and opens new possibilities for artistic practice and reception.<sup>2</sup>

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2 From an ORCiM brochure on artistic experimentation, Orpheus Institute (2010).

This anthology exemplifies this contention. It is organised in four large sections:

1. *Towards an understanding of experimentation in artistic practice*  
Challenging existing discourses in order to create new conceptual contexts for experimentation within artistic practice
2. *The role of the body: tacit and creative dimensions of artistic experimentation*  
Exploring embodied dimensions of musical practice in order to articulate significant aspects of tacit knowledge within the creative process
3. *Experimenting with materials in the processes of music-making*  
Creating and evaluating new musical situations and challenging the frontiers of current and established interactions in performance, composition, and improvisation
4. *Sound and Space: environments and interactions*  
Exploring environments and previously untried interactions in order to generate innovative and experimental artistic practices.

The materials and outcomes of ORCiM's practices of experimentation have a quality of continuous unfolding; the overlaps in the list show that research questions can transfer from one domain to another. This quality of non-completion is certainly one with which many musicians can instinctively identify, since artworks are under no obligation to offer definitive solutions or comforting boundaries—indeed, they may be created precisely with a view to exposing intractable problems and proposing them as matters for reflection, rather than resolution. The concept of experimentation creates a space for this, but it also provides some discipline for discussions and for developing new instances of art making. Important to the ORCiM experimental ethos has been the work of the philosopher Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, who visited the institute in June 2012 (as documented in the article by Michael Schwab at the end of Section 1). Several of the authors in these pages make reference, in their individual ways, to Rheinberger's ideas—still relatively little-known in English, despite the availability of translations of much of his most important work.

This anthology thus presents a selection of materials that will continue to be developed. This reveals ORCiM itself to be an incomplete experiment, but one with which artist researchers are invited to engage through study of the writings and the performance examples that follow. With the possible exception of its four final articles, the anthology is not necessarily meant to be read sequentially. The Glossary aims to further elucidate the specific terms used by the authors in their individual contributions, while also highlighting the important commonalities, differences, and even contradictions between how artistic researchers understand such vocabularies within the contexts of their own artistic experimentation activities. Appendix 4, Resources for Artistic Experimentation, endeavours to assemble those materials used by individual contributors that are of general relevance to larger questions concerning the tools, methodologies, spaces, and outcomes of artistic experimentation. The combined written and audio-visual materials in this anthology (in the form of the enclosed CD and the online video resources: see Appendices 2 and 3) offer





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a series of insights into different kinds of practice that can be compared and contrasted, in order to invite the reader/listener to join the researchers in an experimental space.

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