

Jazz Research in Theory and Practice

For my opening paper this morning, I thought it would be useful to give a general overview of the research agenda in Conservatoires, to discuss some key issues I think we need to consider, and to outline several initiatives developed in Leeds over the last few years. My presentation discusses some of the underlying challenges surrounding the development of research cultures in Conservatoires and provides a context for European practice-based jazz and popular music research. I aim to provide a backdrop to the day's discussions, and to contextualise the issues that will follow.

Research in Conservatoires: issues to consider.

As we know, Conservatoires occupy a unique cultural space in that they promote a link between education and the music profession, arguably more than any other musical institution. They not only champion excellence in terms of high levels of performance and composition but they have also increasingly become recognised as high level teaching environments, diverse cultural hubs and research-based institutions. However, although many Conservatoires promote research activities - usually geared towards performance or the investigation of performance - as part of their mission, jazz and popular music activities are still considered alien to many Conservatoires, especially where research is concerned.

The following five points identify some of the key institutional, cultural and political issues for us to consider:

1. Practice (Performance/Composition) as Research Problems for Conservatoires?

The first, and somewhat obvious point, is that Research in Conservatoires differs in many respects from the work carried out in Universities. The primary difference being that, in Conservatoires, the focus of research largely revolves around the 'doing' of practice or the writing about doing, whether it is performance or composition. Now, whilst this point seems obvious, there is a strong bias at present towards research being underpinned by the written word – in effect, performance and composition are unable to stand alone as research practices without the justification of language. In the UK, for example, the debate has raged on for years as to whether performance can stand alone as a legitimate research activity. Whilst there is an increasing body of active performers as researchers, the issues still largely remain live and unresolved amongst the musical community. This point obviously has the potential to cause problems for Conservatoires who wish to champion the work of their performers as researchers without the need to justify their actions, and places musicologists – or those who write about music - in a position of authority.

2. Changing perceptions: Conservatoires' status as research institutions

Linked to the first point, the status of Conservatoires as research-oriented institutions is affected by the dominance of history. As the first point demonstrated, when the subject area of music has been dominated by the musicology of universities, the act of writing about music dominates the research agenda and the nature of performance as a form of research is presented as problematic. Typical questions posed by musicologists include, how can performance research be defined objectively? Does research underpin all types of performance – how can this be measured? How can we distinguish between performance research and pure performance, such as a repeat performance or a function gig? In defence of performers, I would argue that a lot of musicological writing offers the same degree of problems – just because something is written down does not mean that it ultimately qualifies as research or that the academic community automatically agrees on the value of the piece of written work as research.

However, whilst we can defend the value of performance as research in relation to the work going on in Universities, we do face a challenge in changing the perceptions of Conservatoires, from the bastions of an out of date tradition to diverse environments where a range of musics are created, celebrated and investigated. As Conservatoires develop their research cultures to include doctoral level study in Performance and Composition, so too will our understandings and defence of research into performance become stronger.

3. Professional versus academic practice “I’m a performer not an academic”

- **Musician perceptions of research**

When discussing the development of research cultures with colleagues from other Conservatoires, I am continually aware of problems we face in terms of supporting research and justifying the work we do to the outside world. However, one of the primary obstacles to developing research cultures in Conservatoire environments comes from within as many professional musicians are reluctant to engage with research or fail to acknowledge that what they do constitutes research. The challenge for heads of research comes in trying to get musicians to buy into – generation of new insights, the creation of knowledge, do they have an original voice, how does their music offer fresh interpretations – these are things that good musicians do

- **Musicians as part-time employees**

From an institutional perspective, it is sometimes difficult to strike a balance between the professional and educational worlds – indeed, many performance staff are happy to have part-time links to conservatoires and so do not want to commit more time to research initiatives or funding bids etc. When Part-time staff do wish to engage with research, it is sometimes difficult to find ways of rewarding them for the work they do – full-time University staff can enjoy

research leave and sabbaticals, however, part-time musicians are valued primarily for their professional reputation and teaching prowess.

- **Conflicting interests between different institutions**

Equally, in the UK, many professional musicians work for more than one Conservatoire – this can cause problems for institutions who are rewarded for their research feeling that there might be a conflict of interest. In effect, who can claim ownership or association of research when a musician works for one or more Conservatoires?

- **Division between academic studies and performance/composition**

The emergence of Academic Studies departments in European Conservatoires has. However, from a research perspective, this structural design could be seen to be divisive, giving over the impression that academic studies is the only arena where research – or the thinking about music - takes place. Within a jazz context, this divide is further perpetuated when musicians distance themselves from any claims to formal educational training. This promotion of jazz as an unmediated experience do not serve to support the need for research, as research can be interpreted as the ultimate form of mediation.

4. The value of jazz/popular music research both inside conservatoires and outside

Moving the mainly generic issue concerning Conservatoires research culture to jazz and popular music, a further level of complexity is added to our discussions when discussing the way in which research is valued in Conservatoires.

- **Jazz/Pop research in Conservatoires**

At present, jazz and popular music research in Conservatoires is limited to a few select institutions and, in many cases, is marginalised and not valued. The majority of UK Conservatoires now have an element of jazz and popular music within their portfolios, however, many of them would view the subject matter too risky to support in terms of research or as a subject from which to seek research funding. Incidentally, research funding for performance and composition is hard enough to come by let alone research into jazz and popular music. In this respect, events such as these are important in demonstrating a need for more research into jazz and popular music in Conservatoires and to celebrate and champion what we do as researchers.

- **Journalistic/sociological backgrounds**

As we know, jazz and popular musics have until fairly recently, been alien to the work of the academy. Indeed, the majority of Conservatoires began to adopt jazz and popular musics into their portfolio of programmes from the mid 1960s to the present. With this in mind, there has been no track record of widespread pedagogical or research practice in jazz and popular musics beyond somewhat journalistic writings and educational guides. With this in mind, we have a task to counteract this inherited past in demonstrating that jazz and popular musics are legitimate research practices. I know from

previous experience within the academic community that jazz and popular musics have not been taken seriously as a scholarly subjects - however, times are changing as we know, with jazz and popular music providing one of the most significant growth areas in music education.

- **High art/commercial divide**

When discussing the value of jazz and popular music research we also need to be mindful of the inaccurate promotion of differences between high art and commerce. I would suggest that this well-trodden mythology still permeates our music culture and many of our institutions. The high art/commercial divide can lead to assumptions that jazz and popular music performances are generated for money whereas scholarship is and should be devoid of commercial gain. This continuation of an age-old view that art (research) and commerce (jazz and pop performance) are incompatible in the arts is unhelpful and we need to be proactive in counteracting this assumption. I am always surprised by this view of music, especially when we compare the arts to science where most of the best and significant research projects are also commercially viable.

- **Outputs** (scores, books etc.)

In the UK, the current research funding agenda is based on a grading of research outputs. Whilst I have no problem with the idea that researchers are measured on the quality and impact of the research they create, we need to be aware that, within the context of jazz and popular music, research outputs and factors of research esteem can be different. For example, the current UK system measures the quality of music research on research outputs arguably by the standards and expectations of Western Classical Music, therefore outputs such as books and scores are interpreted as having more value than recordings and live performances. Furthermore, performances in artistic venues such as the Royal Festival Hall in London are viewed as indicators of esteem. However, within a jazz context, prestigious venues such as Pizza Express would be viewed as a restaurant instead of an important venue. The improvisatory nature of jazz performance causes problems as well when we consider outputs as the music is fleeting and there is no concept of the 'work' to document. In this respect, we have to be flexible in acknowledging alternative contexts for research and understanding that the value of research might differ according to the type of music we are investigating.

- **No formal networks to represent the interests of performance research**

Finally on this point, there is currently a lack of formal networks in which for jazz and pop performance researchers can come together to discuss their ideas and disseminate their research outputs. This is again where the PJP can perform an important role, enabling musicians to come together, share ideas and collaborate over the coming years.

5. Conservatoire structures and curriculum design

The final issue I want to raise concerns the place of research in Conservatoire structures and the design of programmes of study. Many of us have strong research programmes within our institutions whilst others are perhaps thinking about developing research. I would argue that a strong conservatoire research programme is one that is integrally linked to the core curriculum, informing the development of teaching and supporting student learning.

- **Academic studies**

However, I am aware that in many conservatoires, research is limited to the isolated work of full-time staff working under the auspices of academic studies departments. Although I am sure for many of you, this system works well, I want to raise the question of whether the notion of academic studies could actually be regarded as 'divisive' - especially for those of us wishing to champion the cause of performance research. From my perspective, academic studies is a loaded term, implying that academic study – and therefore musicology - is based on the thinking about music (and is therefore more scholarly and serious) whereas performance is purely about doing.

- **Course design**

Secondly, I want to raise the question of how we encourage more performers and composers to pursue research careers? Obviously, there is a friction between 2nd Cycle taught masters programmes and preparation for doctoral study as there is no formal requirement for research skills training within many M level programmes. However, by undertaking a cultural shift within institutions, students can be encouraged to develop research planning in relation to their practice through the nurturing of self-reflection and critical thinking skills. If managed in an appropriate way, there is a place for a research element within taught masters programmes, even to the extent of encouraging musicians to think about repertoire, justifying the work they do and expressing how their work is original and contributes to a body of knowledge already in existence.

As a close, I thought it would be worth briefly running through some research developments at Leeds:

Leeds model

- Abolished academic studies - historical modules can be practical and performance sessions have analytical/self-reflective methods
- Integrating theory and practice - encourage musicians to engage critically with their practice (at undergraduate level and taught masters programmes)
- Leeds International Annual conference takes place in March each year. Latest ideas in research, also features work of undergraduates and postgraduates
- Centre for Jazz Studies UK established in 2004 - designed to bridge gaps and ensure that research is not something detached from student experience – centre has acted as a commissioning body and has led a number of important research projects

- Funded projects - ESRC Investigating Musical Performance, PALATINE research into improvisation, Music and Architecture (Arts Council), Creative Exchange (PRSF)
- Publications – Centre for Jazz Studies staff have also played an important role in the development of jazz musicology and Jazz Research Journal (Equinox Publishing), Jazz Perspectives (Routledge)
- Jazz Research Network from 2007
- Jazz PhDs from September
- Performance and Composition as research – commissioning, performers, recordings etc. Number of staff have come through the system and are already making an impact - Dr Matthew Bourne (BBC Innovation Award, Perrier Award Winner), Dr Petter Fadnes (Music and Architecture), Dr Catherine Parsonage (Author of 'The Evolution of Jazz in Britain', Head of Centre for Jazz Studies)

Finally, the growth of events such as these should be about sharing good practice, networking and developing ideas. Conservatoires have the ideal opportunity to lead from the front, highlighting the wealth of creativity and diversity of music making in Europe at the same time as supporting performance research of the highest quality.

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