

Assessing Quality in Socially Engaged Musical Performances

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Abstract

This paper explores some of the practical and philosophical challenges of assessing quality in socially engaged musical performances, and advocates an holistic philosophy of music as a means of resolving some of these challenges.

Recognising the functional differences between ‘presentational performance’ and ‘participatory performance’ (Turino 2008) goes some way to understanding the complex social contexts of musical performance, but can ultimately result in a polarised perspective on musical performance which is not necessarily reflective of the complexity of ‘real life’ situations (Camlin 2014).

Using case studies from six years of ‘socially engaged’ (Helguera 2011) performances by third year students on the UK’s first BA (Hons) Community Music programme, situated within the artistic programme of Sage Gateshead, this paper draws out some of these complexities, and reveals the need for more unifying philosophies of music which account for such complexity. Rather than more traditional ‘recitals’ of musical skill, the third year 40-credit Performance Project module requires students on the programme to engage with specific social, philosophical or ethical considerations in curating a musical performance, resulting in a wide range of ‘socially engaged’ performance events.

Responses have ranged from participatory performances in schools for children with special educational needs and disabilities; a one-day community folk festival; an installation celebrating the musical faith traditions of the diaspora of Ap Chau island; collaborative performances with service users of mental health organisations; a Blue Light Choir to support the wellbeing of emergency services personnel; as well as more traditional showcase performances within Sage Gateshead’s International Jazz Festival (GIJF).

Artistic Citizenship (Elliott et al. 2016) provides a valuable philosophical ‘lens’ through which to view this complex and diverse range of responses, as does the author’s philosophy of ‘music in three dimensions’ (Camlin 2016a; Camlin 2016b) which advocates a dialogic ‘creative tension’ (Bakhtin 1981; Wegerif 2012; Camlin 2015) between the aesthetic, praxial and social dimensions of music as a way of reconciling the apparent differences between them. Hence, quality in situations of musical performance cannot be understood in absolute terms, but rather is contingent on the situated social context/s which give them meaning (Camlin 2014).

Rationale

In recent years, we have seen a blossoming of policy initiatives responding to criticism of the apparently ‘elitist’ nature of the sector of Arts and culture (Elliott et al. 2016; Hunter et al. 2016; Gross et al. 2017), with the sector characterised in terms of a lack of ‘vigilance’ (Bourdieu et al. 1991, p.3; Camlin 2018) in the use of public funds to develop accessible and

inclusive activities for the broadest benefit to people and society (Neelands et al. 2015). As the sector works to develop a broader range of socially-engaged practices, the question of quality in such practice appears as a thorny nettle to be grasped. How do we know if a given instance of 'participatory' music is any good? How do we compare it with its more traditional 'presentational' counterpart? And why would we want to?

Developing a robust understanding of what constitutes quality in socially engaged musical performance is important for a number of reasons. Principle among these is the need to ensure the best possible experiences for participants and audiences. Participatory music is not simply a 'lesser version of the 'real music' made by the pros' (Turino 2008, p.25).

However, viewing 'presentational' and 'participatory' music as entirely separate fields – i.e. conceiving of 'participatory' performance in its own terms in order to differentiate between it and more 'presentational' forms of performance - carries with it the risk of fostering an unhelpful dichotomous relationship between the two which limits our understanding of either. Rather, in order to advance our understanding of musical performance, we need to develop a more holistic way of discussing it which accounts for the complex inter-relationship of its complementary dimensions.

Background

The context for this study is the undergraduate music provision situated within the artistic programme of Sage Gateshead, a music organisation and venue in the North of England which is home to the Royal Northern Sinfonia, and which also pioneered a comprehensive programme of Learning and Participation (L&P) during the 'boom' in arts funding for social impact (Matarasso 1997) from c. 2000. At its peak, the L&P programme employed a workforce of over 140 musicians to deliver a wide range of musical activities with a wide range of participant groups, from pregnant mothers and Early Years groups, a weekend music school for children and young people, turntablism and rock / pop workshops for teenagers, an extensive music participation programme for adults - including a 'Silver' programme for the over-50s with over 1,000 weekly participants – through to health musicking (Ruud 2013; Stige 2013) in care homes, music therapy and much more in between. For most of the organisation's history, the annual expenditure on the L&P programme has been roughly the same as that spent on its Performance Programme – c. £6.5M each in 2013-14 (Sage Gateshead n.d.) – emphasising the equal artistic weighting between these two elements of the organisation's work.

Music in Three Dimensions

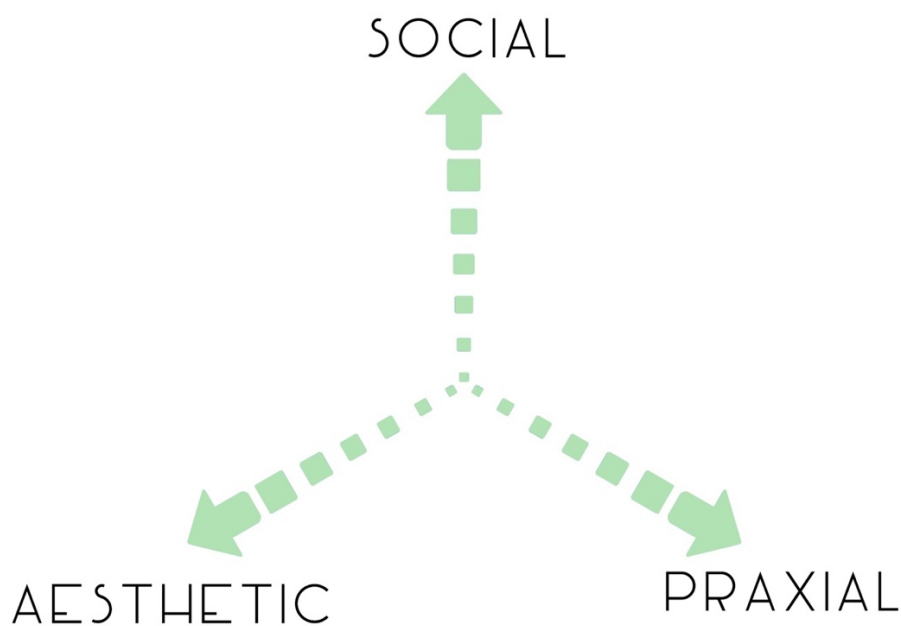
Situating undergraduate musician training within this extensive and complex offer of 'presentational performance' (Turino 2008, pp.51–59) on the organisation's three stages and the 'participatory music' (pp.28 – 49) of its L&P programme required the development of a philosophy of practice to enable students to make sense of the diverse range of situations they found themselves learning and working within. Developing such a philosophy became the focus of my own doctoral research from 2011-16 (Camlin 2016a; Camlin 2016b).

While the quality standards of presentational music may be more commonly discussed and debated e.g. (Godlovitch 1998), the quality standards of participatory music are perhaps more elusive. Turino argues that:

‘the quality of [participatory] performance is ultimately judged on the level of participation achieved. Quality is also gauged by how participants feel during the activity, with little thought to how the music and dance might sound or look apart from the act of doing and those involved’ (Turino 2008, p.28).

These fundamental differences in character make comparisons between these two kinds of ‘musicking’ (Small 1998) problematic, especially as many instances of musicking do not fall neatly into either category (Camlin 2014, p.106).

As a ‘dialogic’ philosophy of practice, the ‘music in three dimensions’ model addresses the problem by re-framing the performance and L&P elements of Sage Gateshead’s artistic programme as musical ‘dimensions’ held in a ‘creative tension’ (Wegerif 2012, p.4) with each other. Rather than seeing ‘situations of participatory music-making [as] a different form of art and activity entirely [to ‘presentational performance’] - and conceptualised and valued as such’ (Turino 2008, p.25), the idea of aesthetic and praxial dimensions of music existing in a complementary interdependence with each other recognises the complexity of real-life situations of ‘musicking’ where the boundaries between these apparently discreet dimensions are often blurred or transgressed (Camlin 2014).



The introduction of a third ‘dimension’ to the picture - namely music’s potential for bringing about ‘social’ benefits beyond the music itself such as improvements to positive individual health and wellbeing (MacDonald et al. 2013) or capacity for strengthening social bonds (Veblen 2008; Barenboim 2009, p.134; Hallam 2015) – further emphasizes the complexity of musical situations, whilst at the same time preventing discourse from falling back into a more dichotomized argument about the relative merits of ‘aesthetic’ vs. ‘praxial’ forms of musicking, or the stale ‘excellence vs. inclusion’ or ‘process vs. product’ debates which have so hampered philosophical – and practical – progress in the field.

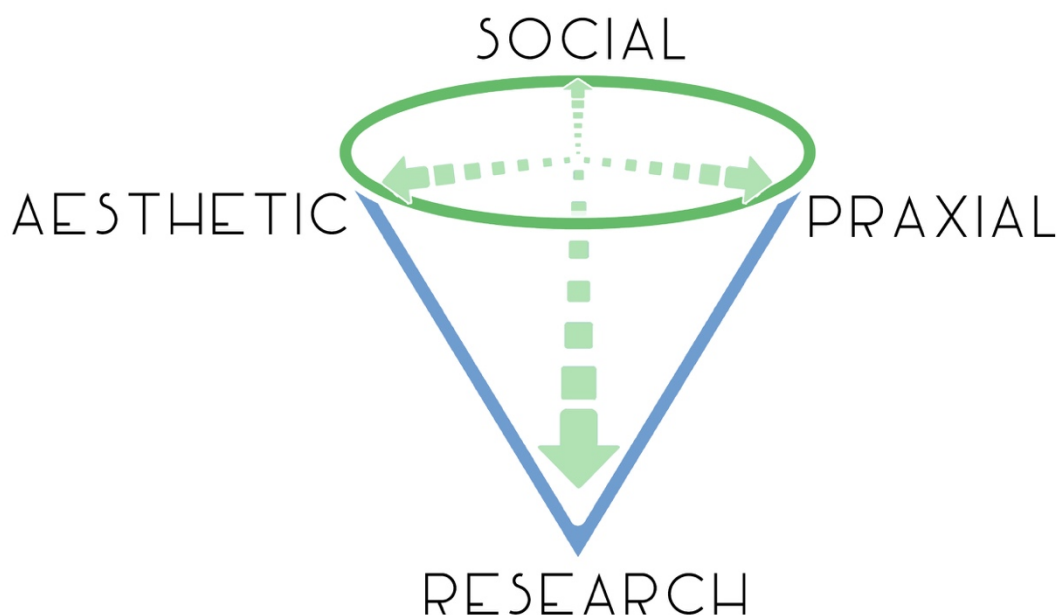
As Chernoff notes, the social dimension of participatory performance is implicit within the act of participation itself:

‘Since an African musical performance is so much a part of its social setting, we can recognise African critical standards by what happens in the situation itself. In such a context, everything one does becomes an act of "criticism": people express their opinions by participating. They make a contribution to the success of the occasion, and they behave with the understanding that what they do is an act of artistic participation as well.’ (Chernoff 1981, p.153)

Or, as Turino puts it, ‘participating in music and dance is more about the social relations being realised through the performance than about producing art that can somehow be abstracted from those social relations.’ (Turino 2008, p.36) ¹

Research as 4th Dimension

There is also an implicit ‘fourth’ dimension to this philosophy, which is essentially the extent to which ideas about the aesthetic, praxial or social dimensions of musicking are grounded in research or critical thinking. Critical reflection is a principal means by which we can come to a better appreciation of the complexity of musicking, as it invites us to reflect on our own experiences in more objective detail. Whether our starting place for thinking about music and its power is as a performer, music therapist, teacher, youth or social worker, community musician or any other practitioner of music, when we *do* think about music in more critical terms which extend beyond our immediate professional situation, we begin to more fully appreciate the areas of commonality between our collective practices, rather than those which divide us.



Praxis

Taken as a whole, this integrative philosophy of music’s power represents a robust ‘praxis’ for the contemporary musician, in the sense of ‘mindful doing’ (Bowman 2005, p.53) or an

¹ This is not to suggest that aesthetic forms of music are *necessarily* abstractions from such social relations; merely that it is possible to make a separation between them. Presentational music clearly has a social impact on its many and diverse audiences.

‘imbrication’ of theory and practice (Nelson 2013). The perspective of Artistic Citizenship further highlights the ethical responsibilities of praxis:

‘praxis is a multidimensional concept that includes active reflection and critically reflective action guided by an informed ethical disposition to act rightly, with continuous concern for protecting and advancing the well-being of others. It is action dedicated to personal and collective flourishing, grounded in commitments to transform and enrich people’s everyday lives.’ (Elliott et al. 2016, p.6)

Being able to justify practice - in relation to any of these dimensions - on the basis of relevant theoretical understanding and research findings is important for contemporary musicians as it fosters of a sense of rigour in practice, and is an important means of underpinning quality. It supports them to more fully inhabit the role of ‘artistic citizen’ by supporting them to create artistic work as necessary and / or relevant responses to the situations, communities and localities where they find themselves as they emerge into professional practice. In supporting them to engage with research and be pro-active about responding to findings, it also helps musicians to be, ‘critical consumers of the new research findings that will come out during the many decades of their career’ as well as helping them to ‘generate new research questions’ (Goldacre 2013, pp.214–215) themselves, seeking out their own understanding of the complexities, tensions and discontinuities of practice through their creative work.

Undergraduate Performance Project

Within the context of this underpinning holistic philosophy of music, undergraduate students of Community Music (CM) at Sage Gateshead are required to devise and curate a performance in the third year of their studies which considers some of the ‘social, ethical or philosophical’ aspects of musical performance. Some of their performance events fall more clearly within the dimension of ‘presentational’ performance while some of them are more clearly from participatory traditions. However, many of their events do not fall so clearly within either tradition, and this raises an interesting challenge of how to assess the quality of these contrasting events consistently and fairly, despite their obvious differences in character.

Quality is Contingent on Situation

The guiding principle behind assessment in these circumstances is one of contingency (Camlin 2014). In other words, in order to understand whether any given instance of musical performance is any good, we first need to be clear what it is intended to be good *for*:

‘Art’s importance stems from the effectiveness with which it is “put to work” in the realization of a variety of overlapping and interwoven human values or “goods.”. The value of art, like all value, is a function of what it is good for, the uses to which it is put.’ (Elliott et al. 2016, p.6)

In the following section, I outline a number of case studies of student performance drawn from across the performance continuum outlined above, and examine how consistent assessments of quality can be made despite the quite different purposes and situations involved.

Being expected to explore the ‘creative tensions’ between ‘presentational’ and ‘participatory’ dimensions of performance means that very few students choose to curate

events which are either wholly 'presentational' i.e. a recital or wholly 'participatory' i.e. a musicking situation where there are 'no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants' (Turino 2008, p.28). In the former, demonstrating 'social, philosophical or ethical considerations' becomes more of a challenge. In the latter, it becomes harder for students to present a performance event which can be distinguished from a participatory workshop. However, in the space in between these two dimensions, there is much opportunity for rich exploration of some of the tensions and inconsistencies which constitute more socially-engaged performance.

Performance-as-participation

Whilst wishing to resist the temptation to create a taxonomy of musical performance which punctuate this continuum, it is also the case that some musical performances share certain characteristics. Performance events which are conceived as 'presentational' events but which inspire or facilitate participation might be loosely considered to be 'performance-as-participation' (Camlin 2014, p.110), where the presentational elements invite those present to move between being listeners and active participants in the performance. At different times in the performance, those present might be expected to listen attentively to a particular solo performer, sing along with a familiar song, or get up and dance. Doing so provides no particular obstacle for those present; they fulfil the different roles expected of them without really having to think about it.

Case Study 1: We Are Who We Can Be

In Emily's performance event, she fronted a large house band as part of an uplifting funk / soul revue, supported by an amateur adult choir. She worked with a local mental health recovery group to capture the stories of individuals recovering their mental health, and with their informed consent, used the resulting narratives as song lyrics for new compositions which formed the bulk of the house band's repertoire. The adult choir, too, included some patients from the mental health recovery group, so there were several ways for participants to engage with the performance event. Some participants made narrative contributions which were realised as song lyrics, where hearing their words sung back to them in performance was very validating of their experience. They might also have been involved in the performance of those lyrics through membership of the choir, taking their involvement to a deeper level. Audience members could participate simply as listeners, enjoying the uplifting groove-based music, or their experience of the event might be heightened through their personal connection to some of the performers, finding a deeper meaning in their friends' / relatives' participation in the public performance of their recovery.

For Emily, finding a way to combine participatory elements into her band's performance helped her to find a stronger performing identity:

'The performance has altered my thinking around my identity as a musician. Now I feel that I could build a career completely out of music, which includes performance. It has enabled me to celebrate my identity as a musician and music leader. My cartoon version of myself has been developed, and I hope to expand this even more at future events. I feel very proud of the participants, especially my choir who have worked really hard throughout the year.'

Participation-as-performance

Toward the other end of the continuum, we find performance events designed more specifically around this celebration of participants' public and social identities as

performers. In these instances, which we might term 'participation-as-performance' (Camlin 2014, p.109), the audience are applauding the participants' participation as much as (or maybe more than) they are the quality of the works performed. At the heart of the audience's involvement is their role as 'witness', recognising and validating the participants' public 'appearance' in the form of musical performer, essentially celebrating the realisation of individual identity and social relations through performance (Turino 2008, p.26).

The idea of social 'appearance' as an integral part of being human owes much to the ideas of Hannah Arendt:

'Everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. For us, appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality. Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance.' (Arendt 1977, p.50)

Case Study 2: Big About Corby

Callum worked with a number of schools in Corby, Lincolnshire to curate a showcase event featuring performers from all of the schools involved. A sell-out audience for a large local venue ensured a great atmosphere and community spirit on the night, with opportunities for everyone present to be involved as co-performers during the final songs of the evening. There was much evidence of civic pride throughout the evening, involving large numbers of performers who got to 'appear' in public in front of a large cross-section of their community. Callum joined in with some of the groups on his trumpet, but the focus of the evening was always on the 'appearance' in public of the less-experienced performers.

"I would best describe this whole process as an inspirational learning journey that has taught me so much about myself, and my practice. This whole project has identified and supported local talent, and encouraged people to develop their interests and expertise in music at whatever level it may be. My main aim was to encourage participation; not to pressurise individuals to be the world's best singers, but to nurture the creativity of the children, empowering them to believe in themselves and their artistic abilities, as when they start to do this, they become more involved." (Callum)

Integrative

Other students' performance events blurred the boundaries of aesthetic and praxial forms of musicking still further. Resisting attempts to categorise them as either 'presentational' or 'participatory' performances, they integrated aspects of both dimensions to powerful effect.

Case Study 3: Fram Fest

Ellie curated a one-day folk festival in the Northumbrian village of Longframlington, involving local heritage community musical groups alongside international performers like fiddler Stuart Hardie as well as her own student ensemble. The day started with singing workshops and a maypole dance, featured showcase performances throughout the day including the premiere of her arrangement of a neglected local folk song, Longframlington Fair, and culminated with a community ceilidh. Genuinely community-focused, but with a

strong emphasis on musical quality, attendees spent the day seamlessly moving between the contrasting roles of listening audience and co-participant.

For Ellie, casting herself in the multiple roles of performer-producer-facilitator helped her to achieve a stronger professional identity:

‘I have become a more confident as a person, as a musician and a facilitator, having experienced this process. The whole journey was a learning curve, as I have never attempted a project like this before. When I performed with my band in the evening, I was more relaxed into the performance because of everything else that I had achieved that day. I like to think I have come out the other side with better organisational skills, and overall, more confidence in what I can achieve in life.’ (Ellie)

Case Study 4: Disability Dilemmas

Sarah also used the opportunity of her performance event to launch her career as a performing artist, enlisting fellow-performers from her section of the Pandemonium Drummers from the Olympics opening ceremony, alongside a house percussion band, various collaborations with other musicians and a solo piano set. Turning her speech disability into a performing asset, she conceived a stand-up routine using pre-recorded sequences and live dialogue to invite the audience to join her in ‘laughing about’ disability. Her performance event provided her with a unique opportunity to control and re-invent her public musical identity, from that of a ‘disabled musician’ to that of a ‘musician with a disability’:

‘I felt there was apprehension before my first event where people didn't know how I would combine music, disability and humour or compere the event. I felt people focused on my challenges more and not my ability, but people then saw me for my ability. This has led to me performing and presenting more about music, disability and humour at other events, including developing my own show again.’² (Sarah)

Discussion

What is revealed through this short discussion of students’ contrasting responses to the same brief to curate a socially-engaged performance event is that the sheer diversity of responses even in this small sample renders a more ‘fixed’ understanding of quality largely insufficient.

Unless performance events are located very firmly within the traditions of either ‘presentational’ or ‘participatory’ performance, attempting to understand quality by reference to the standards of either dimension *on its own* proves problematic. What constitutes quality in more fluid or dialogic instances of socially-engaged musical performance is complex, and above all, contingent on the situation itself. It follows that so too is any assessment of such quality; any basis for assessment is itself flexible and relates to shifting and contested areas of aesthetic, participatory and social practice.

A more authentic assessment of quality is perhaps to be found in how well an individual student develops a critical understanding of the particular circumstances of their performance event in relation to these different and complementary dimensions.

² Sarah’s current show, ‘Twitch’ is on tour throughout the UK in autumn 2018, including DaDaFest in Liverpool.

Furthermore, quality may be only partially revealed in the realisation of the event itself; a fuller understanding of quality emerges in the student's subsequent reflections on the event, and the evolution of their 'praxis' in relation to their experiences.

Some of the students' comments reflecting back on the experience and its legacy for their artistic development highlights the rich and transformative power of this approach to performance:

'I created this event as a way of pushing myself past what I thought I could be capable of. I had struggled with crippling self doubt and confidence as a musician throughout my time at University. To put on this event, I would have to become a cartoon 'diva' version of myself and try to turn my nerves into excitement. The performance was a massive success. Everyone seemed to enjoy it, and I surprised myself by becoming this diva on the stage! The performance really showed me that I can do anything that I set my mind to. Now, if I'm ever faced with a situation where I start to doubt my abilities, I remember my performance and realise that it's only the self doubt that is stopping me. The performance has also shown me a way to help the participants of my choir when we perform. A lot of the participants get terrible stage fright, and so now I encourage them to adopt the idea of turning the nerves into excitement.' (Emily 2015)

'It was an extremely important event that encouraged community cohesion through the love of music. It provided children with a fantastic performance opportunity whilst also developing their musical skills/knowledge and networking with others who had similar interests. From a personal perspective, it highlighted the wealth of community spirit that my home town holds and the songs that I decided to use emphasised to the children, their schools and their families that they are capable of anything if they put their minds to it - a view that I strongly believe and encourage, particularly in my current post. There has also been a positive legacy from the event and I have recently been approached to run another event this year.' (Callum 2017)

'My 'FramFest' performance project will always mean an awful lot to me as it was ultimately put together in memory of my grandad who had died of cancer the year previously. It was also evidence that a grand idea can be seen all the way through to fruition if you want to achieve something enough. I still talk about it in job interviews today as one of my proudest achievements - I literally learned how to be organised through completing this project. I have used the skills I learnt through organising this event in all my jobs since graduating, but even more so with my current job because I am in the process of curating small local events for community based art projects with the aim of raising money for charity. Although FramFest was possibly one of the most stressful 'jobs' I've (naively) taken on, I learned so much through doing it and always look back on it with the fondest of memories.' (Ellie 2012)

'Doing [my performance event] allowed me to share my experience of living with my disabilities and break down the barriers around disability being a taboo subject, proving that you can laugh about it and disability isn't a bad thing. As well as being able to show my full musical ability, which is the most important part for me.' (Sarah 2015)

'The whole experience itself, affected me as an individual, as it emphasized the humanistic values that underlie every political movement or conflict. The experience

also helped me develop my artistic vision, as it allowed me to think more broadly about the performance itself and its underlying aims and objectives, [allowing] me to view every artistic movement as a manifestation of an underlying concept. I believe that the particular experience has transformed me as an individual, allowing me to think and explore concepts in their broader, higher purpose.’ (Efro 2017)

Authenticity

What all of the students’ reflections share is a sense of the ‘social/ ethical responsibility [which] lies at the heart of responsible artistic practice’ (Elliott et al. 2016, p.3), and the opportunity to locate themselves authentically within such a responsibility. In each case, curating a socially-engaged performance event provided students with the opportunity to develop and realise an authentic artistic identity as unique and distinctive as themselves as individuals. Freed from the narrow constraints of a more ‘rational’ understanding of quality, students are able to create instances of musical performance which are powerful and transformative for all involved, not least themselves.

Conclusion

Assessing the quality of socially-engaged musical performance solely on the basis of more ‘fixed’ ideas about what constitutes quality is insufficient. Within socially-engaged musical performance - or musical performance more generally - aesthetic, praxial and social dimensions of musical performance all need to be accounted, and in proportion to the demands of the situation. A more comprehensive understanding of the quality of any given instance of musical performance can be found in the dialogic inter-relation of these complementary dimensions, and also in the extent to which these dialogic relations are understood in more critical terms i.e. justified within a critical appreciation of literature and research evidence pertinent to the situation, and with subsequent perceptions and observations grounded in critical reflection.

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