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Towards practice research in ethnomusicology

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for ethnomusicologists to begin using performance not just as a tool to understand the social and cultural field, but to use music and dance as methods in ‘translational’ ethnomusicology that focuses upon the translation and communication of artistic performance aesthetics and to theorise a space for research outcomes that are sited in original performative knowledge, explored, produced and delivered through performance itself. The paper briefly surveys some of the key historical discussions of musical performance in/as research and the epistemological challenges that surround a methodologically defined field such as ethnomusicology where there is no central musical canon. The paper introduces the concept of ‘emic resistance’ where the researcher-performer resists translating their non-verbal, somatic aesthetic musical knowledge into text. The paper concludes by drawing on some of the most recent developments in both ethnomusicological and closely related performance-analytical scholarship to propose a translational model for practice research in ethnomusicology.

KEYWORDS

Ethnomusicology; practice research; artistic research; Scotland; bagpipes

Introduction

This article sets out to examine the trajectory and scholarly potential of practice research in ethnomusicology and to examine the utility of performance in ethnomusicological research. Ethnomusicologists have always been people who play music or dance in their fieldwork, with different emphases on its function, agency and reception, depending on their personal research interests. However, what I argue here is that historically, performance has not been an end in and of itself in ethnomusicology, but has always been a method used in the service of understanding more about human culture and society around the world, and that today, there is potential for practice research to emerge as both a more central method, and the object of research in ethnomusicology. In particular, this paper argues for ethnomusicologists to begin using performance not just as a tool to understand the social and cultural field, but to use music and dance as methods in ‘translational’ ethnomusicology that focuses upon the translation and communication of artistic performance aesthetics and to theorise a space for research outcomes that are sited in...
original performative knowledge, explored, produced and delivered through performance itself.

Ethnomusicology as a discipline has several aspects that fundamentally challenge the ‘artistic research’ paradigm that has emerged in other domains of performing arts research. This is not casual exceptionalism derived from the ethnomusicologist’s adherence to relativist values but is rooted in the real differences between ethnomusicological, and other flavours of musicological or artistic research. Particularly in relation to performance of music and dance, the three key differences that distinguish much of the canon of artistic research in music from ethnomusicology are: (1) the lack of a central canon of repertoire in ethnomusicology as compared to other musicological disciplines who share a more or less accepted (or even continually negotiated) canon of works against which the novelty and originality of new music can be compared; (2) the extreme relativism inherent in the training and professional outlook of ethnomusicologists that emphasises the local and particular over the universal and elite, and; (3) the particular issues surrounding the ontological understanding of ‘new knowledge’ in orally developed or transmitted repertoires from around the world.

Throughout this paper I generally use the term ‘practice research’ to mean doing research in and through the performance, composition or improvisation of music, to distinguish it from much more ethnocentric, Western conceptions of when musical practice becomes research explored through constant debate in the field of ‘artistic research’. Throughout this paper I therefore refer to ‘artistic research’ as a discrete sub-discipline in the performing arts, that when applied to music, is limited to Western art musics and its experimental and compositional sub-genres, and which relies explicitly upon knowledge of an accepted canon of Western musical works for its existence. Östersjö makes this ontological thorniness clear when he attempts to define ‘artistic research’ as a European movement that examines three domains of knowledge, ‘the artistic, the embodied, and the discursive… [and how they emerge from the]… embodied processes of the creative work’ (2017: 89). The problems of establishing a definition of ‘artistic research’ in the Western tradition largely centres on the semantic ambiguity of musical performance and composition set against the unacknowledged presence of a long and historically established canon of Western musical works understood both by professional performers and in the academy (Borgdorff 2012; Dogantan-Dack 2015; Impett 2017). This is one of the key differences between practice research within ethnomusicology and in other disciplines of music studies where there is a stable canon of core repertoire about which I have written in more detail elsewhere in this journal (see Swijghuisen Reigersberg, Corn and McKerrell, this issue). The term ‘practice research’ therefore seems to me to be a more inclusive, less ethnocentric term when attempting to refer to musical performance, composition or improvisation as research in and of itself, and is particularly important for ethnomusicology which is defined through method, rather than repertoire. In the panoply of music studies, ethnomusicology stands out as a discipline that emphasises method over genre or style. I suggest that it is precisely this epistemological focus on ethnographic method that distinguishes ethnomusicology from other flavours of music studies which have tended to focus on musical styles, genres or time periods. It is telling therefore that ethnomusicology continues to expand the choice of genres and locations where it is being practised, something in and of itself which supports the focus upon fieldwork as an approach. Consider for instance, other sub-disciplines of music studies where practice
research or ‘artistic research’ has tended to be significant: Art music composers within the academy have always been examined against previous composers. Examiners in composition have evaluated the scores as musical texts, or the performances as instances of the musical work, where practice is understood as something undertaken within the confines of an accepted historical lineage of methods and ideas, and where the new knowledge as research is always understood in relation to previous musical works. Composers in the euro-classical schools do not therefore have a particularly hard job to evidence the claim that their practice research is new; if no-one has ever ‘written’ it or ‘composed’ it before then it is new, but they may have a harder time convincing examiners or audiences of its quality, which is a different question. Ethnomusicologists, on the other hand, are very often dealing with music and dance practices that are not new, and that by definition are performing the past in the present. Ethnomusicologists widely agree their discipline to be an approach to studying musical cultures, rather than an object-focused or challenge-led discipline. What ethnomusicologists agree upon and share is mostly to be found in their relativist outlook, ethnographic method and interest in musical cultures. This global dispersal of ethnomusicological research mitigates against any central canonical set of aesthetic or artistic values and practices, and is one of the key attractions of the field for many scholars. That is to say, the real object of study is people, culture and society, and the subject is music. But by no means do all ethnomusicologists study traditional music from around the world. As an approach, ethnomusicologists have increasingly branched out to study the music of the whole globe and in urban and rural environments in increasingly diverse musical genres (Berger 2012; Feld 2012; Helbig 2014; Nooshin 2013).

In this context, practice itself therefore can take almost limitless form and therefore arguing for practice as research necessarily needs to lean on a different intellectual scaffolding to most other sub-disciplines of music studies which is important both to the methodological development of ethnomusicology, and also to how we assess the very notion of practice as research in a discipline that does not rest upon a canon of accepted practice.

Ethnomusicology has largely used performance as a means to learn more about global cultures and values, primarily through its use as a research method of ‘learning to perform’ in an instrument or vocal tradition. However, there have been several key figures in ethnomusicology who have examined the role of performance in research, and critically the notion of ‘bimusicality’ as a research method over the years. ‘Bi-musicality’ emerged in Ki Mantle Hood’s widely read 1960 article ‘The challenge of bi-musicality’ (Mantle Hood 1960). This was then adapted into his very widely read 1982 graduate level handbook The Ethnomusicologist (Hood 1982), rapidly establishing ‘bimusicality’ in ethnomusicology’s foundational methodological canon. Bimusicality in ethnomusicology most usually meant Western-trained musicians learning to perform in a non-Western musical tradition, and to leverage that process of learning as a research method, thereby embedding all the attendant problems of Western ethnocentrism and postcolonialism for those who came after. Mantle-Hood did not really mean ‘bimusicality’ to mean performance-as-research, modelled as it was on ‘bilingualism’. More, he intended to position performance skills and knowledge learned in non-Western contexts as a means towards greater understanding of social, educational and other structures that are performed in and through music. That ethnocentrism, and the concomitant epistemological problems in an ever more relativist discipline
has, in Larry Witzleben’s view, relegated the term ‘bimusicality’ to the ‘scrapheap of the field’s history’ as understood in New Grove summative essays (2010: 137).

A significant contribution in understanding performance as a research method emerged through the work of John Baily, a psychologist before becoming an ethnomusicologist. His position grew out of a wider disciplinary concern with Ki Mantle-Hood’s concept of ‘Bi-musicality’. Baily avoids the term ‘bimusicality’ because of this and emphasises a process of ‘learning to perform’ (2001: 86). Like others before him, John Baily advocates the learning of musical instruments as a means towards other epistemological ends—that is performance in the service of understanding social, political, gendered or ethnic structures and so on. He notes, the famous example of A.M. Jones in the 1930s who advocated practice-based knowledge to Hornbostel, because Hornbostel’s Western ears simply heard much African rhythm as incredibly complex and syncopated. Jones suggests that once one has learned how to perform as part of an interlocking, polyrhythmical group, that what at first appears hugely complex linear rhythm can appear simple when understood as a collaborative performance practice where simpler rhythms intersect and construct a polyrhythmic surface structure.

Baily’s experience of ‘learning to perform’ in Herat in learning to play three instruments: the dutâr; the sehtâr, and; the Afghan rubâb underlie his five main research-related domains for practice-based research: (1) acquisition of performance skills by the researcher; (2) the study of musicality, learning and cognition; (3) role, status and identity; (4) participant observation, and; (5) the post-fieldwork period (2001). Overall, he demonstrates his concern with knowing music from the inside, from understanding music from a performer’s perspective. His insights-as-research detail the morphological and organological changes to these instruments and their performing technique, as well as the social structures and cultural traditions surrounding these instruments. He explicitly contends that ‘learning to perform’ is key for ethnomusicologists to understand the relationship between culture, organology and the human body. For instance, understanding the ‘ergonomics’ of the musical practice itself can show how traditional repertoire is adapted to particular instruments (2001: 94). Baily’s second main plank is to demonstrate how musical training can assist in research into musical transmission and cognition. Perhaps most significantly, he suggests that performance-based knowledge and skills offer a means to ‘improved opportunities for observation’, or as he puts it, ‘musical relationships forming the basis for social relationships’ (2001: 96). So Baily’s model of learning-to-perform was also primarily used as a research technique to reveal or better understand almost exclusively non-musical knowledge. Epistemologically then, this is very different to the current position of phenomenologically-informed practice-based or ‘artistic research’ in other disciplines (Borgdorff 2012; Kozel 2007).

We can witness this de-centring of musical performance for its own phenomenological value, in John Blacking’s letter to Baily in May 1972, Blacking reveals what was presumably a fairly widespread legacy of bimusicality in the fledgling discipline of ethnomusicology: that learning to perform an instrument or vocal tradition in a particular tradition is a means to a more textual and social end. Its explicitness in exposing Blacking’s relationship to performance in ethnomusicology is worth re-quoted again:
I am not too happy about your plan to study under “masters of the tar” in Teheran … I do not think it at all necessary for you to learn how to play the instrument superbly … unless you plan to become a concert artist. But I do think it very necessary for you to discover how the average tar player learns and transmits his skills, by spending some time with several different players both in the cities and rural areas … I am assuming that you plan to become an ethnomusicologist first, and a tar player second, third, or fourth. If I am wrong, what I have said will be irrelevant. (Blacking [1972] in Baily 2001, p. 88)

In other words, John Blacking, Mantle-Hood and other key figures in the discipline felt that bimusicality, or Baily’s inflection, ‘learning to perform’, in another musical tradition was a means to another end; to understand more about how music is transmitted, its social function, the position and interaction of performers in broader society, ritual, kinship and the many other concerns of an earlier structuralist anthropology of music (or as Deborah Wong puts it, ‘the field of relational power and control created by the transmission of knowledge’ (Wong 2001: 5 in Witzleben 2010: 139)). It views musical, performative knowledge itself as an indirect (but valuable) result of the research which was most often focused upon the underlying, syntactic structures or socio-cultural dynamics in a particular music culture. Or as Baily refers to it, ‘the underlying model’ for instance of his teacher Amir Jan’s folk music (2001: 93). Similarly with Blacking, his concern in his model of deep and surface structures was very much the structuralist’s concern with generative grammars and their relationship(s) to social structure: musical knowledge as a sonic and well patterned domain for the understanding of social structure.

Uncommonly for anthropologically-leaning research, ethnomusicology has benefitted greatly from this emphasis on performance as a research method. It has, as James Kippen and Larry Witzleben point out elsewhere, enabled (some) ethnomusicologists to simplistically avoid the ethical minefield of neo-colonialism of the West and its Others through adopting an initiate’s or pupil-status in their chosen cultural field. Historically, amongst researchers, this engendered a sense of subservience of the master-pupil, or teacher-student musical relationship, rendering its own set of problematic ethical dilemmas, focused around subservient, pupil-student-learner identities (Rommen 2007). The emergence of significant epistemological debates about decolonising ethnomusicology at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century now makes the issues around performance of musical traditions from ‘home’, ‘elsewhere’ and of the ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ as critically important. Performance research is essentially subject to the same ethical problems of positionality for the researcher and the researched that emerge through fieldwork in talk and text. Doing research through musical performance means acknowledging the non-verbal or somatic forms of understanding in musical traditions as another medium of communication that emphasises the importance of an ethical reflexivity for ethnomusicological researchers, especially in relation to the musical tradition they perform. Ethnomusicologists, however, are increasingly attuned to the power relations and inequities of global and local power flowing from ethnicity, race, gender and ability, and further research will be needed to properly understand how privilege, prejudice and power can be performed non-verbally and used as transformative ways to reconstruct musical traditions in today’s heavily mediatised world.

The other key area where ethnomusicology has engaged substantively with practice is in relation to world improvisatory traditions. As Bruno Nettl suggests,
ethnomusicologists had somewhat neglected improvisation early in the discipline’s history, but he tracks the growing historiography of improvisation in performance across South Asia, Iran and in Jazz Studies (Nettl 1998). As he notes, there is fairly widespread consensus on the definition of improvisation as performance of music at the moment of its creation, or perhaps more simply as Ali Jihad Racy puts it in the same volume; ‘composing while performing’ (1998: 103). But as Nettl notes, in ethnomusicology at least, ‘… the distinction between the concepts of performance practice, improvisation, and, indeed, composition in (at the very least) oral traditions is as yet an unsolved issue’ (1998: 12). However, he had earlier made the useful point that when one considers a variety of musical traditions, then improvisation and composition can be understood as lying on a continuum (1974). His introduction to the collection of essays on the topic, In the Course of Performance, does tend towards the classic ethnomusicological predisposition for reading across social values and structures in musical practice, citing various research studies as evidence of how different societies read improvisation in relation to East–West, High-Low, Male-Female and straight-gay binaries (Nettl 1998: 6–12). Nettl, like Blacking, tends to lean into structuralist concerns of the twentieth century, and neatly summarises the most productive work in ethnomusicological approaches to improvisation which focus upon how the underlying musical motifs are mobilised and form the basis for improvisation in performance across diverse aurally transmitted musics beginning with Lord’s classic study of South Slavic epic traditions (1965) and demonstrating how the ethnomusicological concept of mode supports such diverse traditions as the Persian Radif, Carnatic musics in alapana or ragam, in Berliner’s (1978) classic study of the music of the Shona people of Zimbabwe and in Arabic taqsim. Indeed, my own doctoral research drew upon these and particularly Harold Powers’ (1958, 1980) research to apply the ethnomusicological concept of mode to Scottish bagpipe music (for a summary see McKerrell 2009). Many orally developed, or aurally transmitted musics indisputably have motivic content at the heart of their tradition regardless of how much agency is afforded to improvisation as composition in the moment of performance, or as pre-composition. We can learn a great deal from the historical research on improvisation and motivic usage in ethnomusicology, but it is fair to say I think that this work is grounded in curiosity about the grammatical or foundational musical structures that enable those improvisatory performance traditions: It is research about musical performance rather than in musical performance, and it is therefore not really ‘artistic research’ but research about artistic practice.

There is another possibility as yet unexplored in ethnomusicology where improvisation accounts for a deep understanding of the orally developed or aurally transmitted musical mode, but goes beyond it to use improvisation as a research technique in the creation of new musical structures, either within the source tradition, or employing those patterns musically in a new target musical tradition. That has the potential for serious engagement with practice research methods from other disciplines.

This work has already begun in ethnomusicology. The Korean flautist, Hyelim Kim’s practice research combines Korean traditional music with Western Jazz performance. Her insights reveal the disjunctures in rehearsals between quite distinct aesthetic and underlying syntactic structures in approaching playing together. Through detailed analysis of audio-visual evidence combined with her own personal ethnography as a daegeum performer in ensembles, she reveals the differences in musical patterned thinking.
Specifically, musical and verbal discussions with jazz collaborators revealed both positive and innovative somatic techniques for highly original intercultural performance, but also the problems of integrating Korean traditional rhythms that undermine the ability of jazz musicians to build up the collective ‘groove’ (personal communication). Her research is leading to new insights in performance in quite dramatic body movements in performance which support the cross-cultural musical performance. She raises very important questions about intercultural aesthetics which are currently unaddressed in the largely Western-centric debate about ‘artistic research’, which is dominated by art music and musicians. Her work, and that of others including Fay Hield’s work on the Modern Fairies project at the University of Sheffield, in particular, raises some very significant problems about how involved other collaborating performers can be, or are in producing the research insights, as opposed to simply participating in professional performance ensembles (Larrington and Hield 2021). This is an important aspect of practice research, in the sense that as a field of research it may well include artists who are not ‘researchers’ but who can contribute to the production of research through the production of new knowledge translated and communicated for those beyond the community of practice.

**Practice research as translational ethnomusicology**

One can claim as an ethnomusicologist that ‘learning to perform’ an already established research methodology of traditional music, whether at home or elsewhere in the world, is adding new knowledge or insights where practice is not the object of study but a methodology that informs the social and cultural. However, ethnomusicologists are sometimes simply working to present social or grammatical structures that are performed in and through music but are already very well known in the musical culture they are researching. I call these performative structures and aesthetic values *tacit knowledge*. They are tacit because the performing community does not need to articulate them in text, they exist as structures, values and feelings within musical performance. In some respects, this sort of embodied, unspoken knowledge, is at the heart of the aesthetics of a ‘tradition’, where ‘tradition’ in this case focuses upon a performance. And it is in this aspect that practice research in ethnomusicology has great potential, in translating the tacit knowledge of traditional aesthetics for those outside of the tradition. There is certainly a valid argument to be made that presenting clearly and translating hidden, obscured or non-verbal deep structures, or the generative, cognitive or syntactic structures that underlie a particular musical tradition for the first time to a much wider audience can be construed as ‘new knowledge or insights’, much in the same way as say for instance biologists and botanists have made significant discoveries of the human-medicinal properties of various flora and then translated these into new drugs. The corollary in ethnomusicology would be the translation and ‘discovery’ of social or grammatical structures in the Others’ music, leading to new applications in socially distant music cultures. For example, think of the use of Gamelan or cyclical structures in Western Art music, or the commodification of Rom musical traditions into ‘Gypsy Jazz’. However, one cannot claim that they were previously unknown; given that the performing community has been working with them long before the arrival of ‘their’ ethnomusicologist. In my own doctoral research for instance (2005, 2009), I focused on the inner workings of the modal usage of motivic content in traditional Scottish bagpiping; this knowledge...
itself was not new, but no-one had ever written it down or explained it before. So in that sense, one’s own insider’s performative knowledge was constitutive in the necessary act of translation (it is no coincidence with hindsight, that my own doctoral research was a textual output as I understand now—I was in effect using ethnomusicology to translate tacit knowledge and aesthetics for those beyond the piping tradition). As Stephen Blum so aptly puts it in his analysis of improvisation:

> Many of the activities we are inclined to call improvisation are evidently taken for granted as basic obligations of performers towards themselves, toward fellow members of ensembles, and toward patrons or other listeners. Moreover, such obligations may well go without saying. Ethnomusicologists are often in the position of trying to describe processes of social interaction that participants have little or no interest in describing. (1998: 28)

And in this way, he puts his finger on the key aspect of why performance should be important to ethnomusicologists; performance in and of itself is not research, but can be an act of translational research in communicating and demonstrating new knowledge to those outside the tradition and cross-culturally. In my own case, my doctoral research was a ‘new’ and ‘original’ insight textually: no-one had ever before applied ethnomusicological mode theory to uncover the motivic basis for bagpipe music and to explain how the notion of ‘tradition’ and ‘traditional’ as an aesthetic judgement can be understood at the smallest unit of musical cognition—the musical motif. Pipers knew it, know it, and have developed the canon of acceptable motifs and structural tones over many years; however this was tacit knowledge, tied up so indivisibly with the act of learning to perform, that it can be understood as new knowledge in the textual, musicological domain albeit translated from its pre-existing, tacit and oral folk domain. But it was not performance research, despite the fact that I came from a position of relative expertise as a performer; the research aspects lay in the translational value and communication in text to outsiders beyond the tradition.

Looking elsewhere, one finds the same sense of practice in ethnomusicology as a research method constitutive in an act of cultural translation and communication in a different medium. Brita Lemmens, in a recent research article, focused on her artistic experience of learning Portuguese Fado as an outsider, suggests that the relationship between the developing discipline of ‘artistic research’ and ethnomusicology is that they methodologically share ‘… art-practice-based study and reflexivity’ (2012). She suggests that much of the scholarship in artistic research focuses upon the performance and practice of the individual researcher, in common with auto-ethnography. This is essentially at the heart of the tension between research and practice: that the process revolves around the observation of one’s own artistic or musical practice. In her artistic research, Lemmens documents her slow acquisition of poetic structure and its relationship to sung agogic stress, vocal inflection, the social dynamics of a fado club. Most importantly, she excavates, and brings into view, the mechanics of tacit cultural knowledge that forms part of Fado practice. As she suggests, the total process of artistic research for her is an act of translation; of making visible formerly tacit cultural performative knowledge. She suggests that the difference between ethnomusicology and artistic research is that the goals of the research are communicated differently: ethnomusicologists communicate largely in text and artistic researchers communicate through performance (2012).
But the medium is the message here; the original knowledge Lemmens communicates which she translates from the tacit to the textual and audio-visual is knowledge already understood within the Lisbon sub-culture in which she lived; the originality of her research was in revealing and translating performative and embodied musical knowledge into textual and audio-visual information for outsiders. Her research has taken that tacit, culturally-embedded knowledge and translated it for a potentially global audience, effectively translating from tacit to text. In this way her own ‘learning to perform’ as Baily would probably term it, has again been constitutive of original research, and the originality lies in the bringing into view the formerly tacit, culturally situated musical knowledge into a wider, global practice. Critically for ethnomusicologists and other musicians, that cannot be done solely through her performance of Fado, much in the same way as my own research into the motivic basis for Scottish tradition could not be solely communicated through performance. Musical sound is generally too semantically ambiguous to communicate with the level of semantic specificity needed for research when there is no central artistic tradition or canon. What this points towards is a position, which historically has been the case in the discipline of ethnomusicology where musical performance has been constitutive in the research process, but not the central outcome. And what this reveals more generally, is that ethnomusicologists have been very reluctant to acknowledge or bring forward tacit and performative knowledge as valuable in and of itself.

More recently, Cassandre Balosso-Bardin’s research with professional musicians reveals the fundamental divergence of purpose between ethnomusicologists and musicians. Her interviewees have demonstrated that working towards musical performance and towards research, are two quite different activities. She however has demonstrated through her fieldwork that the level of ability, or performative expertise was crucially important to her research trajectory. Her own contextual understanding, knowledge of the history and organology of the Mallorcan bagpipes, and of the repertoire, established her credentials which continue to support her research. She argues that high-level musicianship can build a strong sense of trust and reciprocity with other musicians in the field where performative ability creates cultural capital that can be expended on research (personal communication 2019; Balosso-Bardin 2016 and this issue).

Similarly, another piper Felix Morgenstern, a very advanced ethnomusicologist-performer of Irish Uilleann pipes, on conducting fieldwork on Irish traditional music in his home of Berlin Germany, has encountered the opposite reading of his expertise: his expertise was seen as a distancing Otherness from the less proficient learners taking classes in Uilleann pipes and highlighted the need for expert ethnomusicologist-performers to ‘clarify their intentions’ in fieldwork to avoid any projection of condescension onto their fieldwork practice. For Morgenstern, the notion of performing ‘prowess’ facilitates his insiderness within Irish traditional music but he is ‘doubly-enrolled’ in notions of ‘home’ that rest on his performing identity and his ethnic identity as a German researcher and have caused him difficulties in gaining fieldwork access and trust from participants in his research precisely because of his expertise.2 These sorts of performative negotiations around the skill level of the ethnomusicologist clearly affect not only the access to the field but raise a key question for practice research in
ethnomusicology around how different performative abilities might lead to different research outcomes.

**The tacit knowledge of tradition**

Returning after fifteen years to my own ethnomusicological engagement with the Scottish bagpipes is proving much more thorny than my original period of quasi-practice research: for many years I have avoided undertaking any research on my own home performing tradition—Scottish bagpiping. It has taken many years of reflection and of engagement with other ethnomusicologists in the field for me to understand why. The reluctance has to do with one’s own personal identity and sense of belonging. For the last twenty years at least I have been engaged in performing at (sometimes) the highest levels of solo competitive piping, and similarly with professional folk bands in Scotland and around the world. This professional-level engagement with my own playing has naturally waned over the last decade as my own professional life has burgeoned largely in talk and text combined with the demands of a young family. Today, I rarely perform in public on the bagpipes, and have been learning the tenor banjo for some years. My performing life is now more or less focused upon (pre-pandemic) weekly pub sessions where I play a mixed repertoire of Scottish and Irish traditional music either on the Uilleann pipes, whistle or (increasingly) on the tenor banjo. The diminution of my Scottish bagpipe performance has come not simply because of time pressures suggested above, but also because I recognise, that to be a really effective and worthwhile performer takes a level of commitment to daily practice that I cannot now maintain. However, what this gradual (yet intentional!) waning of my professional performing career has revealed to me is a growing understanding through the arc of phenomenological distance (see Rice 1996), of the cultural value and importance of the tacit knowledge involved in the piping tradition.

This reluctance to explain or to engage in explanation of deeply felt aesthetics of tradition might be termed *emic resistance*. Where the embodied knowledge involved in many years of performing expertise, skills and knowledge produces a resistance to forms of translation and explication of one’s own tacit knowledge of tradition. I have certainly felt this over many years, and have noted similar feelings of resistance to discussing musical performance practice in text from other performers-turned-ethnomusicologists in Scotland, England and Ireland and in North American Anglo-American contexts. I have not particularly wished to explain through textual translation the inner aesthetics or important somaesthetics (see Shusterman 1999, 2008, 2012) of my own home musical tradition. Indeed, this emic resistance is both connected to the desire to perform and to the concern for explaining perhaps what seems most obvious to other insiders, but perhaps not to outsiders. Those with whom you play regularly would most certainly think that writing about the way it feels to play and the basic sense of melodic aesthetics is not just spurious, but potentially uncomfortable. Alongside this historical Anglo-American trajectory of musical anthropologies of the Other, and; more explicitly as Brett Pyper has pointed out with detailed observation, the very strong necessity to decolonise ethnomusicology itself, the emergence of practice research might enable ethnomusicology to truly become a more global approach, less bound up with the global North (personal communication). That means ethnomusicologists being
able to explicitly accept a more comparative, sensual and somatic disposition in their fieldwork and writing. This emic resistance to explaining performance of our native traditions may also be one of the factors that has contributed to the dearth of ethnomusicologies-of-home (Stock 2008). Indeed, unlike ethnomusicology, the very foundations of our sister disciplines, ethnology and folklore, assume a nativist position for the researcher-in-the-field leading to a natural predilection for historical or explanatory and rationalist research orientations, that speak and hold value to the national and performing communities of one’s own country. The absence of a focus on the non-textual, the embodied or the felt aspects of intangible traditions which are rarely, if ever verbalised by performers themselves, is an increasingly notable feature of ethnomological and folkloric research (exceptions aside of course). Disciplines that do not engage more substantially in cross-cultural comparison and theorisation, which includes explaining the inner workings and values of performance traditions, are inevitably going to struggle to gain traction in the twenty-first century in the face of ever more innovative globalisation and glocalisation. In other words, if we are not able to explain the emotional and affective power and values of performance to those beyond our own traditions (the stuff that really matters about music), it is going to be hard to justify maintaining a discipline that only privileges specialist and textual knowledge for a primary audience of those already inside (see McKerrell and Pfeiffer 2019).

As Naila Ceribašić formidably summarises, this emic resistance is a particular problem for those undertaking ethnomusicology-at-home precisely because as they are undertaking fieldwork with people they (often) know, in a native language, they most often put aside debating in text the ‘music knowledge about music’:

In our local context [Croatia], there are hardly any instances of ethnographies of musical performance based on experiences of an intrinsically musical mode of communication gained through participant observation. This, again, probably has to do with doing ethnomusicology at home. Our domestic readers, generally speaking, are not especially eager to learn more about our experience of a musical mode of communication with which they themselves, most likely, have some musical experience, and especially if the representation has only to a degree met the standard of the ‘deliberately methodical manner’ that Seeger argued for, as it most likely would be if one takes into account the complexity of the issue. (2019: 9)

However, I now find myself keen to explore my own performing expertise as an act of translation and indeed, comparitivism, in order to better understand cross-cultural aesthetics of tradition. Is what counts as ‘traditional’ for me similarly constructed (with different musical materials) in sister performing traditions? Is rhythmical stress and agogic stress similarly a core part of creating a distinctive personal style for other pipers around the world? And does it have a similar somatic and powerfully affective agency? What makes for a good accompanist in terms of chordal and rhythmical consonance and attack? What do musicians regard as the core tradition and how do we perform it? Do performance aesthetics relate in some way to social values (that recurrent ethnomusicological question that has never been laid to bed).

In fact, in recent ethnographic reflexive writing, I have noticed more and more how so much of my own aesthetics are dictated by my understanding of rhythm and individual variation upon the traditional melody. Putting one’s own stamp on a tune where strict adherence to very tightly controlled melodic material has always been at the core of
Scottish and Irish traditional musics. To do so, and to understand this as privileged knowledge, is emerging for me as an arena of practice research that reveals most about group aesthetics of performance and tradition, as well as an individual’s personal style. Critically however, research means new knowledge, and it is really this and my intellectual disposition towards forms of knowledge that has changed. I now no longer feel any substantial resistance to digging around in my own musical and performative experience; I recognise its value more and more as I have engaged with nuanced ethnomusicological, and performance-analytical writing from elsewhere that deals with the immanent, joyful and somatic importance of playing and singing music (and dancing) (Baily 2001; Balosso-Bardin 2016; Blom et al. 2011; Cook 2018; Grau 2007; Laoire 2003; Lemmens 2012; Morton 2005). Knowledge is more than text, it has always historically been communicated in text, but it is much more than this, especially for musicians and their audiences. The feelings that one experiences in playing or listening to a really fine performance are at the core of music-making and the heart of the intrinsic or aesthetic value of music. Re-reading my own reflexive notes after rehearsing some tunes for an album project reinforced the point for me:

And it is ironic of course that I feel as I am now into my middle years (one assumes) and as a ‘traditionally traditional’ piper … for the first time, I am interested in recording my own, individual, album. This has grown out of a fascination in research with how practice is being implicated as research knowledge, but also for me, much more personally, a realization that playing traditional music makes me happy. Something really quite simple.

In a complex world.

(author’s personal field notes after practice 2019)

Research should therefore be able to translate and explain what the ‘traditionally traditional’ or the ‘happy’, ‘authentic’ or other affective agency of performance is felt and achieved. Is there an ethnomusicology that allows us someday to understand how different cultures express feelings of longing through music? Or that allows us to theorise or even improve how we teach children to learn their own intangible cultural heritage through cross-cultural insight into just how authenticity is musically performed and how it feels? How do the elite and the everyday performers stamp their own personality onto the music and song of a tradition? And does this actually feel different in different cultures? Perhaps even, a renewed focus on practice research has real potential for ethnomusicology to open up that long-forgotten arena of cross-cultural aesthetics in music, approached scientifically by Lomax and his Cantometrical inheritors, perhaps now only realisable when we dispense with positivist and objectivist methods, to embrace the performative turn and recognise the truth of embodied experience and its research potential?

Conclusion: towards practice research in ethnomusicology

Practice research can therefore be used as an ethnomusicological research method in two ways, firstly; in acts of translational research where practice is used as a method to translate previously tacit or embodied knowledge into other modes of communication such as text for the benefit of comparative research on world musical traditions, aesthetics or
feelings. And secondly, in primary practice research, or ‘artistic research’ in ethnomusicology, where the research consists of practice that demonstrates and communicates new knowledge in a particular field of performance, composition or improvisation. This latter approach bears the most theoretical consonance with the systems approach of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi whose work emphasises the key issue that creativity involves the act of making a substantive change to a domain in a particular field of practice. Csikszentmihalyi’s has most often been cited in ethnomusicology for his concept of ‘flow’ that a number of colleagues have sensibly suggested can be one of the powerful experiences in making music (Berger 2015; Cooley 2011; Fairfield 2018; Jackson 2000). However, in relation to practice research, his key insight, is that ‘creativity’ involves not just one actor, but a contextually-sited person, field and domain. He argues that creativity as a phenomenon involves a domain of practice within a particular culture, a field of practitioners or peers that co-create the domain and the person or individual whose creativity can be understood through the social acceptance by the field of any changes to the domain of practice (Csikszentmihalyi 2014). This systems approach he developed might therefore be useful for a new field of practice research in ethnomusicology focusing on new forms of music and dance; but as audio-visual researchers will testify, it also has its positivist problems in acting as a superstructure for non-verbal ways of knowing. In my view therefore, the key areas of work from an ethnomusicalological perspective for performance practice as research might therefore include:

(1) Practice research for translational ethnomusicalogy:
- **Analytically informed practice as research** where practice research informs the analysis of musical meaning and structure (see Cook 2018).
- **Cross-cultural analysis of musical aesthetics** including how performance communicates traditionality, authenticity, joy, sadness, excitement, and how cross-culturally different cultures perform and experience time, pitch, timbre etc.
- **Cross-cultural research on the musical performance and transmission, genre, communication and education** through the use of metaphor and temporal cognition.
- **Applied or advocacy ethnomusicology** that includes practice research in relation to social conflict, displacement and migration, social capital and cohesion, recidivism, personal and communal health and wellbeing, happiness and other areas like repatriation ethnomusicology from archive back to community.
- **Historical ethnomusicology** where practice research is used in research on historical sound recordings, revivals, earlier traditional music re-made and performed for today.

(2) **Practice Research in Ethnomusicology** is as yet, largely unexplored in ethnomusicology, but holds the possibility for ethnomusciologists working with communities of practice to produce new music and dance performances that flow from insiders’ values and aesthetics, but act as research through the clearly communicated and documented knowledge of new musical forms and performances in and of themselves. Research is made manifest in the ability to document and communicate to outsiders, the cultural and musical value of new music and dance, and is therefore also partly about translational ethnomusicology. We might therefore characterise performance practice that does not make any novel or recognised changes to a field of practice or genre of music as simply, vocational practice, and not research.
Using performance practice as a research method in an act of translational ethnomusicology must therefore be a method that results in ‘new knowledge’. In relation to traditional musics from around the world, the key aspect separating research from practice must therefore be the ability to produce new knowledge about a performative tradition that one can communicate beyond the community of practice. This lays the emphasis on translation and by implication, on documentation, getting inside the artistic process and potentially, a sense of intercultural comparativism. In my own tradition, performing songs and tunes within a particular tradition, for an audience inside that tradition already familiar with its own values and musical aesthetics, cannot simply count as research in a circular argument. The ability to present performance as research depends upon the ability to communicate new knowledge to the research community (which may or may not contain members of the community of practice). When one is working with old material that has been passed on from generation to generation, performance therefore involves an act of negotiating and communicating one’s relationship to the symbolic historicism of the material and also to the sense of the individual and novel that one brings out in performance: performing the millionth rendition of a repertorial standard tune or song is difficult to argue as practice research. However, if that is accompanied by an explanation of the artist-researcher’s relationship to that musical material and how they have negotiated its historic symbolism in performance, and this communicated to an audience beyond those insiders in the community of practice, then that can therefore count as ‘new knowledge, effectively shared’.3

The notion of ‘emic resistance’ I introduce here is also why intercultural translations of ethnomusicological, ethnological and cultural anthropological articles dealing with music are so vital; unless we can read it, translation across cultures will not occur and we cannot genuinely claim that research speaks out there in the world. Particularly, as Brett Pyper points out, if the importance of decolonisation to ethnomusicology and other disciplines is too heavily grounded in the global North and its notions of musical practice. And as Ceribašić suggests, one of the reasons for Samuel Araújo’s ‘dialogical ethnomusicology’s’ success, is precisely because his locally-bound ethnographic engagement with Brazilian musicians was set within a much wider arc of internationalist scholarship as he engaged with ethnomusicology across continents (2019: 11). The scholarly field matters. Helping people to understand their Others and to grapple with cultural difference is one of the key benefits of ethnomusicology in this increasingly atomised twenty-first century world of identity politics. Ethnomusicology has potentially even greater value as digitalisation and globalisation continue to juxtapose local cultures and values on- and off-line. Translational ethnomusicology therefore becomes more urgent, especially when one considers how valuable musical performance can be in constructing intercultural dialogue.

In this sense therefore, the definition of research is located in both the explanation and communication of the performative material, and as such must include textual as well as audio-visual evidence. This act of translation is therefore critical to assessing practice as research, and ideally, the artist–researcher should be able to explain to those beyond their performing community the internal aesthetics of performance and how they are taking forward the tradition and creating new knowledge. This is in many respects a more complex and multi-faceted task than justifying research through the composition of new music or new sounds, and in this way, ethnomusicologists who work with orally
transmitted or orally developed musics around the world, with no canonical core repertoire, have a tougher job than almost any of those euro-classical researchers whose justification of research is grounded in novelty or complexity in relation to an accepted historical cannon of music. As ethnomusicologists however, we must also acknowledge that for practice research to emerge as a powerful new methodological tool and disciplinary paradigm, it will involve adjusting and expanding the notion of what ethnomusicology can offer.

Ethnomusicological approaches to people making music can therefore expand beyond understanding the values, culture and society of musical groups around the world, to encompass their musical and aesthetic values evidenced through performance in a more explicitly comparative and translational field. This work has already begun, certainly amongst a few ethnomusicologists who have been performing explicitly as part of their research trajectory, and as departments of English, Fine Art and Architecture have been doing for some time. It is now possible for us to think of the performative as part of the ethnomusicological pursuit, if, and only if, we are clear about how we evidence and discuss the key criteria of new knowledge and communicability of performance beyond the community of practice and across cultures in a translational ethnomusicology.

Notes
1. http://modernfairies.co.uk/.
3. This is the shorthand definition of research favoured in the UK Research Excellence Framework in 2014 and again in 2020.

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