

A path to artistic research

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Abstract: I propose to describe, clarify, and communicate a performative experience, which express my transformation concerning music making and being on stage. "A path to artistic research" reports a growing process in my PhD, which has been going on for over a year. In this paper I describe some reflections of my experience based on the bodily and emotional memories of my performance, albeit brief but significant. This certainly marked a new direction in my musical career. Supported by a verbal language, I intend to convey in as much detail as possible, what led me to produce this performance and what this change of direction meant, which indeed has complemented my career as a Western Classical Musician. The connection and empathy with nature is not alien to the human being. Remembering and living a performative ritual, brings out that natural relationship with the cycle of life, sharing the relationship with sound and space that envelop the body in an atmosphere without time or points of comparison. The Sufis, the Yogis, call it *transe*, a state in which the whole being enters into a state of *rapport* and deep immersion with something unknown.

Keywords: Performance; ethics; improvisation; flow; flute

Recommendation

Before reading the text, its recommended to watch the recorded performance (Figure 1), which is central to this article, by clicking on the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yc2WQCc3PAY>



Figure 1. Detail of the recorded performance scenario at the CCCI Auditorium of DeCA-UA, Portugal, where the inaugural class of the 2019 / 2020 Doctoral Programme in Music took place (all photographs of the performance were taken by Raquel Harmansukh).

You cannot swim for new horizons
until you have courage to lose sight of the shore.
(William Faulkner)

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Planning the performance

The Doctoral Programme in Music of the Department of Communication and Art of the University of Aveiro (DeCA-UA) celebrates the beginning of each academic year with an Inaugural Class. Traditionally, a musical moment is offered before the Inaugural Class.

This Inaugural Class could never be the same without this musical moment. This moment opens a space dedicated to the musical performance, creating an atmosphere that invites students and teachers to start the new academic year with challenging and transforming activities.

This musical moment is offered to the first-year students of the Doctoral Programme in Music. In November 2019 I was invited by the director of this Doctoral Programme, to offer that moment, giving me freedom of choice over the repertoire with a single restriction: maximum duration of 10 minutes.

Fortunately, the event took place before the COVID-19 pandemic started, therefore I had the opportunity to perform in the presence of spectators, which broadened my sensory field and the possibilities of creation, with the audience playing a fundamental motivational part. And reinforcing Erika Fischer-Lichte's idea of audience-performance interaction:

The performance results from an interaction between performer and audience. There is an 'autopoietic feedback loop', that is, what is happening there is the result of actions, of an organisation of space and time, and above all of the way some elements are related to others. (Fischer-Lichte, 2001, p. 18)

This interaction opened my sensory and intuitive field and enabled me to express my feelings with gestures. This so-called 'feedback loop' to which the author Fischer-Lichte refers, was activated.

Writing about my own experience was not easy, especially when so many months have passed and as the writer Marifé Santiago² said in a lecture, memory can be deceiving when talking about our own work:

(...) to put words to an experience, which by its very definition has always been outside that which has a word that is shared, and which can even create a certain confusion. (...) When we suddenly try to argue it with a language, let's say, which is the one we are used to and accustomed to in the field of the outside, but not always in the field of the inside... even (...) there is also an old fear, which is that of the artist who has to talk about his own work, because he understands that talking about his own work, is to do a delayed exercise of something that has already happened, and as it has already happened, it is therefore the territory of memory, and memory tends to be deceitful (we know this all too well), it tends to modify structures as we need them, it tends to create a story that most probably has nothing to do with experience.³ (Santiago, 2019)

² The poet and writer Marifé Santiago holds a PhD in Philosophy from the Complutense University of Madrid. Professor of Aesthetics and Theory of the Arts at the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos (Madrid) and Patron of the María Zambrano Foundation, corresponding member of the Royal Academy of History and Art of San Quirce and vice-president of 'Clásicas y Modernas'.

³ '(...) ponerle palabras a una experiencia, que por propia definición ha estado siempre fuera de aquello que tiene

Therefore, the artist who speaks of his, her or 'them' own work is in danger in the depths of memory and the significance of his, her or 'them' own experience. Still, I rely on my emotional memory and the physical records (videos, audios, photographs) that helped me to a large extent to rescue the highlights of this performance.

My intentions

Live performances have the power to transform spaces where the spectator and the performer devote their concentration, imagination, and time to have an experience. This moment is not always easy or natural for those of us who come from a Western Classical Music background. Rules, prejudices, traumas, low self-esteem, arrogance, dependence on ideas from a teacher or from an authoritative figure, are some of the obstacles that a musician tends to deal with, every time he, she or 'they' performs on stage. With all that academic, emotional, and bodily baggage, playing for 10 minutes a movement from a classical composition would not represent a major risk for my professional career, since I am very used to it as a trained classical musician.

But a few weeks before the event, my choice was clear: I would play the first movement of Johann Sebastian Bach's sonata for solo flute in A minor. Having made that decision, I also faced at the same time, an internal struggle because I did not see how I could play Bach's sonata without falling into the traditional model of a performance more concerned on my skill than on creativity. Precisely this shift from obedient musician to creative artist was, and still is, the challenge of my PhD work and, indeed, of Artistic Research. Playing conventionally a Bach sonata had nothing to do with my purpose. On the contrary, it inevitably represented the traditional way for approaching a concert.

Thus, I took it upon myself to challenge what represented and sustained my own artistic persona. After 25 years of musical life dedicated to Western Classical Music for Flute, I decided in the early morning of the day the inaugural class was to take place, that Bach would not be an option and that I would improvise. This decision filled me with anxiety and at the same time with great excitement and giddiness at the risk of creating something in a few hours.

Once enrolled in my doctoral research I explored the interaction with some plants in the creation of a performance. I found interesting the idea of making a sort of exploratory and creative experience with some remarkable characteristics of the plant universe, such as leaves and soil. Starting with something very basic, but at the same time profound, and considering that it would be a first encounter on stage with my doctoral work, which gave me a sense of familiarity, as it was an encounter between my regular performance practice (something known to me) and improvisation (something less known to me). Thus, there was a balance between the two knowledges, which resulted in the transmission of knowledge created in real

una palabra que se comparte, y que incluso puede crear cierta confusión (...) cuando de pronto intentamos argumentarla con un lenguaje, vamos a decir, que es el que estamos hechos y acostumbrados a que ocurra en el terreno del afuera, pero no siempre en el terreno del adentro... incluso (...) hay también un viejo miedo, que es el de artista que tiene que hablar sobre su propia obra, porque entiende que hablar sobre su propia obra, es hacer un ejercicio en diferido de algo que ya ocurrió, y que como ya ocurrió, es por tanto, territorio de la memoria y la memoria tiende a ser engañosa (lo sabemos de sobra) tiende a modificar las estructuras según las necesitamos, tiende en el fondo a crear un relato que muy probablemente no tiene que ver ni siquiera con la experiencia.'

time. The direction of this knowledge transfer had a clear aim: to awaken restlessness and motivation in the first-year students of the Doctoral Programme in Music so that they themselves would be willing to step out of their comfort zone and experience other possibilities and see an example of someone who *'loses sight of the coast'*.

Materializing the performance

With dry leaves found on my way to the auditorium just before the performance, 4 kilos of soil (Figure 2), brought from the interior of Portugal, that have helped to grow some olive trees with more than 200 years old, and the flute, I walked with determination, embracing this adventure.



Figure 2. At Avecasta village, Tomar, Portugal, collecting soil of the backyard of 'Casa Raíz': a hostel and therapeutic space where workshop events, retreats, concerts, and therapies are frequently held (photo taken by Tereza Freitas, the owner).

Moments of the performance

If we juxtapose this text with the performance, I divide the latter into four moments that were clearly contrasting and that have their own significant meaning, being all intertwined uninterruptedly. I should clarify that this division was not planned prior to the performance, but after a self-observation of the performance and emotional memories, I decided to separate these four moments, which I will describe below.

Moment I

'Opening space, in the present'

Squatting down, with my back to the audience, I started with a few deep breaths to open my inner space and that brought tears to my eyes (Figure 3). Openings are always important to me, but I usually do it off stage. This time I decided to do it in public, opening myself from the beginning to an unprecedented experience and offering a very intimate ritual to the people who were present, which led me to a sense of self-confidence and wholeness.



Figure 3. Opening space, in the present (moment of preparation for the performance).

This experience of intensively living in the moment corresponds to the notion of *becoming* proposed by Deleuze & Guattari, that in Auslander (2007) words, becoming is presented as a state of movement, in which 'one never finally becomes anything but is perpetually in a state of creative becoming' (Auslander, 2007, p. 88):

Deleuze and Guattari's emphasis on becoming as an end in itself harmonizes with major trends in performance theory that likewise value action and process over result and product (performance itself is frequently defined in such terms). (Auslander, 2007, p.88)

This same author refers to a space where boundaries are fluid, and the desire flows in multiple directions, that is called 'deterritorialized':

The deterritorialized is the space (both spatial and psychic) occupied by the metaphorical body without organs. This contrasts with territorialization and reterritorialization the attempts to totalize, to structure hierarchically, to contain – through institutions such as religion, family, and school. To (re)territorialize is to try to contain and place boundaries around desire, to repress it. The deterritorialized is fragmented, multiple, uncontained. In such a space, boundaries are fluid, selves transform, desire flows in multiple directions. (Auslander, 2007, p.87)

This 'becoming' and 'deterritorialized' are concepts that I will include, from now on, in my practice as a creator, finding spaces and attitudes where I can explore boundaries and be on stage with more possibilities.

Another attitude that modified my way of being on stage was not to be afraid, something that is certainly detrimental to performance work. I do not want fear to be confused with nerves or anxiety, because anxiety can have positive aspects in performance, however, I will not go into this field, as there is much to discuss about this aspect, and it is not the purpose of this paper.

Going back to the beginning of this first moment, I could not hold my tears or feelings. My

throat closed to the point of not being able to blow, therefore, I chose to emit whispered sounds and it was there where my whole body started to take its own rhythm, the throat relaxed, and I felt the muscles of my legs gaining strength to stand up and continue with what I had already started. Surrounded by an atmosphere that favoured my skills as a flautist, I seemed to be playing effortlessly. I could compare it to the state of *flow*, a term coined by Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi:

The state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it. (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990, p. 5)

I had a sensation of balance between the outer and the inner environment, as Csíkszentmihályi explains the origin of this feeling:

When the information that keeps coming into awareness is congruent with goals, psychic energy flows effortlessly. There is no need to worry, no reason to question one's adequacy. But whenever one does stop to think about oneself, the evidence is encouraging: "You are doing all right." The positive feedback strengthens the self, and more attention is freed to deal with the outer and the inner environment. (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990, p. 99)

From the beginning of the performance, the aim of the message for the first-year students was quite clear: take advantage of the fact that they were facing a PhD that would not make them leave their musical instruments in a corner for three or four years. That Artistic Research was offering us an opportunity to create art with social impact, cultural and political actions that seek empathic reactions, communication through expressive gestures. And challenging our old mythopoetic configurations and an expansion of consciousness among other characteristics of artistic research (Correia & Dalagna, 2020).

Moment II *'Tilling the soil'*

The path to the soil in the centre of the stage was challenging (Figure 4), as playing the flute requires two hands and I had to take off my high heels to be barefoot, to be in direct contact with the ground.

The fact that this movement had not been rehearsed, brought an uncertainty that was overcome when I managed to keep my balance with only one leg and let go of the first heel by brushing it with the other leg (I am grateful for my yoga practise!).

It was clear from the beginning of the performance that I wanted to communicate, through the flute, all the physical and emotional sensations experienced in real time.

As my first bare foot contacted the soil, the sound is interrupted by a sense of connection with the earth. A tonal melody begins, intertwined with whispered and percussive sounds. As both feet finally touch the soil, the sound is interrupted again as at that moment the mound of the earth placed on the stage moved as it was stepped on, which gave a twist to this first moment and a start to a different space of being.



Figure 4. Tilling the soil (this photograph shows a moment of the process of approaching the soil).

My state at that moment and the decisions I made came mostly from being interested and involved in the present and from taking actions without premeditation. As Deepak Chopra (2018) shows in a video of a child of less than a year old playing with a colourful spinning toy, Chopra said that we can observe: existence, experience, no constructions, no stories, pleasure, desire, joy, sense of mystery, consciousness, and a being without theological or religious constructions, in less than 23 seconds.

In part, I identify with this attitude when improvising, highlighting the sense of mystery, pleasure, and the experience of existence.

This first solo⁴ improvisation on stage, I found it very pleasurable, and I can say that I was transforming my reality, and I found an explanation from Chopra as to why I was able to transform this experience:

A liberation to create and transform my own experience of reality, taking into account and starting from the idea that reality cannot be a system of ideas (religion, philosophy, science)... they cannot give us access to reality, one has to turn to the source of that idea; ourselves. (Chopra, 2018)

Therefore, turning to myself gave me a sense of healing in a small sample of an authentic moment.

Moment III *'Sowing the seed'*

Entering the soil barefoot generated a profound feeling of rebirth, of rootedness, of belonging.

⁴ I had already had experiences of improvisation, but with other instruments in a *'Meditative Concert'* context, where sounds are used for therapeutic purposes using instruments such as gongs, singing bowls, percussion instruments, whistles, rain sticks, pre-Hispanic Mexican instruments etc.

It meant planting the seed of my doctoral project that was beginning to give tangible results, in a figurative sense (Figure 5). Perhaps the body representing the seed that would germinate.

The feeling of moisture and texture of an element capable of creating and sustaining life on the soles of my feet, initiated a desire to sing, to prostrate myself and lean on the earth that sustains us, with humility and gratitude. I returned to the melody with which this third moment began but accompanied by my own singing. In this way, I honoured nature, as an essential element of our life.



Figure 5. Sowing the seed (interaction with the soil).

The Japanese master Kazuo Ohno, one of the great representatives and pioneers of Butho dance, speaks of entering an incomprehensible world to reach liberation, and of a search for freedom through the truth of the body. Dance as a critical conception of the human being, the representation of the human being in its most primal state. Speaking of soul in the motions:

There's an infinity of ways in which you can move from that spot over there to here. But do your movements allow us to feel your spirit? Have you figured those movements out in your head? Or are we seeing your soul in motion? ... the essential thing is that your movements, even when you're standing still, embody your soul at all times. (Ohno, as cited in Barret, 2019)

One thing to consider is that body movements are not only created by the individual *per se*. Embodied heritage as part of our movements is what Ohno expresses:

Alive, in each and every one of us, are countless individuals whose lifetime experiences, joys, sorrows, angers, doubts, and so forth have been successively passed down from one generation to the next. The physical form I assume now is but the fruit of what I've inherited from those who have existed before me. (Ohno, as cited in Barret, 2019)

Hence, this analysis of this moment is regarding to the true body movement, although from a different starting point, since the Butho dance was born from the absence of any model after

the Second World War and from a need for rebirth after barbarism⁵. The aesthetic result of this performance is similar in this representation of the incomprehensible, of something without structure, of the deep sensations of the human body guided towards an artistic expression.

As this type of dance is a sample of creation in real time, that is to say, it does not follow a script, it is improvised and since the emotions are expressed spontaneously, I feel identified with this type of artistic expression, because of its character and its form.

Moment IV

'Let it germinate'

The conclusion and closing of the performance consisted of walking to the back of a white projection screen that divided the stage in two (Figure 6). With the main melody (theme) in combination with sounds produced by blowing and percussion from my tongue and fingers, the energy that had sustained me from the first moment gradually faded away.



Figure 6. Let it germinate (conclusion and closing of the performance).

There was no attempt to prove anything to anyone, the body was willing to receive the sensations of each step, present, in tune with the sound produced by the flute and the voice in movement. In general, the body and mind let themselves be led by an intuition that seemed to be guided by something external.

⁵ Tatsumi Hijikata, who inspired Ohno to begin experimenting with Butoh, named the Butoh 'The Dance of Darkness'.

'Letting go' and trusting, 'in the moment', makes that being guided becomes a journey without so much resistance; that resistance that causes the body to be driven away from vulnerability. Being vulnerable exposes the performer in his, her or 'them' most sincere state. That was my experience in those 5 minutes of absolute surrender to what I call 'freedom of creative feeling'.

About improvisation, you do not improvise from 'nothing', but you leave the familiar paths, you let go of what once held you down and you trust the process, you trust your muscle memory and your tacit knowledge.

I identify in this performative experience with the so-called 'autotelic experience' described by Csíkszentmihályi (1990), as I engaged in a challenging presentation that became a pleasant and intense constant *flow*.

The autotelic experience, or flow, lifts the course of life to a different level. Alienation gives way to involvement, enjoyment replaces boredom, helplessness turns into a feeling of control, and psychic energy works to reinforce the sense of self, instead of being lost in the service of external goals. When experience is intrinsically rewarding life is justified in the present, instead of being held hostage to a hypothetical future gain. (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990, p. 161)

Reinforcing the sense of self, and keeping all these memories and sensations, I took this experience as a cathartic transformation which brought an interest to explore new paths on my approach to music performance.

What is next?

Starting from the principle that art is communication, the intention, dedicated to the new students of the 2019 / 2020 school year of the Doctoral Programme in Music, was, from the beginning, to transfer a message through bodily action and non-verbal empathic communication. As a second-year student, I had something to say, and I wanted it to be transcendent. But how could I, through 'the sensitive field', transmit the fact that they were in a Doctoral Programme with the opportunity to do something different, to transform, to open performative frontiers between research and the arts and create new realities?

I dealt with this concern by reinforcing Joel Birman's idea in which he refers, in an interview, that one of the functions of art is to promote the expansion of the spectator's imaginary, summoning the imaginary without words and calling for the creation of an imaginative aesthetic (Birman, 2014).

One of my purposes is to give the spectator a space for his, her or 'them' own creativity, to let one's own experience become something very personal.

The artist Marina Abramović, who has been a source of inspiration for me in terms of discipline, determination, and commitment to performance, talks about the time needed on stage for both the performer and the audience, where both parties create something during that time:

The performance is a process. The public as well as the artist has to go into it. They must

meet in a completely new territory and build from that timeless time spent together. That's very important. Because you need that time so that something can really happen as a performer. But the public also needs time for something to happen to them. Because they need time to adjust. (Abramović, 2006, p.34)

Communicating an idea with conviction begins with a self-suggested conviction, *i.e.*, forms of transmission are sought based on this self-suggestion, which was previously nourished by the collection of other ideas and concepts. The challenge for the artist is always present in the intervention part. It is known that the arts have a transformative power through the impact that the artistic product has on the public. Generating feelings, from the most basic ones such as love, compassion, hate, disgust, joy, sadness, has been the task of artists of all times, therefore, transmitting such a complex message was not a simple task.

I think it is particularly important that this kind of texts, attempts to describe a performative experience, do not in any way interfere with the experience of the spectators, much less impose any feelings or thoughts. Everything I described above reflects a very personal experience. In a very particular way, I think that the richness of a work of art lies in what is not explicit, in the mystery of the origin of the feeling that transforms and moves us. To live the work of art from our life experience seems to me fundamental, without preconceived ideas that could interfere in this relationship that involves us with the work of art. However, an adequate clarification that complements the experience of the public encounter - artistic product, undoubtedly intensifies this experience.

A desire to transmit and prolong this 'state of present feeling' is what invades me nowadays. And practicing it seems to me the answer to achieve it, not only in a musical performance context, but also in everyday life. Meditation has been a tool that seems to help me to be for several minutes in this state of present feeling. Transporting this 'being' from a meditative state to an artistic activity has been a first step that feeds my aesthetic experience for future performances.

To Tackels (2020), is important to leave the familiar and the comfortable, to venture out, to visit other fields, to leave the home ground and to stop doing repeatedly what we already know to do well (routine) without creation or any type of invention. The idea is to suspend this flux, taking distance from your own work, only to return improved afterwards to the initial work. I can say with certainty that, for me, this is worth the risk. And breaking new ground into the unknown has given me the freedom to create and transform the experience of my reality.

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