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The craft of musical performance: skilled practice in collaboration

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Abstract

This article examines the nature of skilled practice within two settings of musical performance, the rehearsal and the compositional workshop. Drawing primarily on the work of Richard Sennett and Tim Ingold, I suggest that a characterisation of musical performance as a craft practice attends to the development of skill and expertise through the performer's physical and everyday encounters with the world, and provokes a reconsideration of the dimensions of performance that might otherwise be taken for granted. The first case study addresses rhythmic coordination during a rehearsal of *Four Duets* for clarinet and piano (2012), composed by Edmund Finnis for Mark Simpson and Víkingur Ólafsson; and the second traces the development of instrumental techniques by composer Evan Johnson and performer Carl Rosman as they collaborate on a new work for historical basset clarinet, '*indolentiae ars*', *a medium to be kept* (2015). The article makes the case for skilled practice as an improvisatory interplay between performers and the meshwork of people, objects, histories, and processes which they inhabit.

Keywords

Collaboration, craft, musical performance, rehearsal, skill, workshop

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The craft of musical performance: skilled practice in collaboration

Introduction

It seems almost beyond comment that musical performance is a skilled practice: developing the necessary physical and psychological agility and acuity of an expert performer requires hours of careful practice. Yet, once musicians attain the level of ‘expert’, their technical facility tends to be taken for granted as an individualised and static attribute that is sustained indefinitely, rather than as a dynamic and in some cases volatile phenomenon.¹ This article aims to move beyond an understanding of skill as objectified, person-centred knowledge by approaching musical performance as a craft practice in two empirical case studies music-making. The first addresses rhythmic coordination during a rehearsal, and the second traces the development of a new instrumental technique over a series of compositional workshops. Through close analysis of interviews with the musicians and audio-visual footage of pre-performance activities, I illustrate the dynamic character of skilled practice, shaped not solely by the knowledge of individual practitioners, but through a close reciprocity between perception, action, and the discursive and material conditions of their surroundings. Ultimately, I make the case for skilled practice as an interplay between performers and the complex musical ecosystems,²—a meshwork of people, objects, histories, and processes— which they inhabit.

The article begins by outlining geographic engagements with musical performance, before considering the ways in which skill and expertise in musical performance have been explored in musicological scholarship, and highlighting the ways in which research on skill in ‘concert’ music performance often downplays the embodied and experiential dimensions of music-making. To engage more productively with these phenomena, I characterise musical performance within a framework of craft,³ summarised by Richard Sennett as ‘the skill of making things well.’⁴ This approach is necessarily ecological in its perspective, taking

account of the development of expertise, or *enskilment*, through activities such as repetition, problem-solving and -finding, and creative engagement. Yet, as I discuss, Sennett's understanding of craft exhibits a stasis that struggles to account for the fluid and distributed dimensions of performance. To explore this tension further, I present two empirical case studies drawn from a larger research project that investigated the creative processes of musical performance by documenting clarinetists and composers working together in various collaborative contexts.⁵ The conclusion reflects on the instability of skilled practice, recognising that drawing attention to the processual and emergent qualities of musical performance requires foregrounding the role of improvisation: the constant attention and response entailed by engaging with the surrounding environment.

My focus is on two examples of a specific practice—in broad terms, contemporary classical, or 'concert' music—which until relatively recently has been side-lined in studies of musical performance.⁶ It should be acknowledged that 'contemporary music' is itself a very broad and generic term; there is a range of other musics that are not explored here, and which could potentially bring a complementary or contrasting perspective to discussions of skill. For a pop vocalist, for example, skill might be employed in the use of bodily gestures to construct a sense of self, or to communicate a song's narrative with an audience.⁷ The skills of jazz performance could range from the improvising pianist's hands gradually comprehending the keyboard's terrain, to the more pragmatic deployment of knowledge to conclude a jam session effectively.⁸

The spaces in question—the rehearsal room and the workshop—are also important here. The term 'workshop' denotes an environment (either face-to-face or online) of craft practice, trial, and development in which composers and/or performer(s) interact during a work's compositional stage. In contrast to the rehearsal, which can be understood as being structured according to a (potentially) relatively firm objective, a workshop is a place of

experimentation. Thus while I agree that rehearsals constitute ‘an experimental space where sounds are put together and taken apart, played with, argued over’,⁹ I suggest that the workshop goes further in offering a more exploratory environment, in which outcomes emerge that might not have been predicted at the outset.¹⁰ However, as my discussion will show, if the focus is shifted from the outputs of these exchanges to the processes by which they are reached, the improvisatory routes through which sounds are ‘taken apart, played with, argued over’, are universal to both.

Situating skill in the ‘musical ecosystem’:¹¹ musical performance and craft

Susan Smith has identified performance as central to music’s ‘powerful way of knowing and being’,¹² and I agree that musical performance is particularly well positioned to shed light on the experiential, practised, and embodied aspects of skill. Indeed, geography has increasingly examined the situated ‘doing’ of musical practice,¹³ reflecting a wider disciplinary ‘metaphorical and substantive turn from “text” and representations, to performance and practices’.¹⁴ Of particular focus has been the relationship between music-making and social formations such as gender, identity, and politics.¹⁵ As Tariq Jazeel has suggested, geographic engagements with music hold the potential to contribute to understandings of ‘musical practice, participation and the shaping of social spaces, networks and communities’.¹⁶ Moreover, a growing concern has been the affective and emotional geographies of musical performance, for example, Paul Simpson’s work on street music performance is particularly valuable in exploring the ‘affective relations’, of ‘practices within a specific sociospatial context’,¹⁷ demonstrating how performance is an embodied practice inextricably embedded in material, social, cultural, and economic relations. Simpson’s research also reflects a broader geographic interest in ‘the quotidian social relations, practices and interactions of everyday life’.¹⁸ While this article is concerned with concert music, which at face value might appear

somewhat far removed from Simpson's object of focus, it similarly contributes to understandings of the everyday aspects of musical performance, rather than the perhaps more elevated *coup de foudre* moments that are conventionally associated with this practice. Nevertheless, while the geographies of musical performance discussed above support Michael Gallagher and Jonathan Prior's claim that 'performance and the arts may offer ways to engage with the intangible, imperceptible, ephemeral and affective dimensions of life',¹⁹ and despite geography's recent renewed interest in questioning and retheorising embodiment and habits of the body,²⁰ geographic scholarship has yet to examine skilled practice in the context of musical performance.

By contrast, since John Blacking's influential work on 'the biology of music making',²¹ the complex ways in which musicians perform and interact with their instruments in wider musical cultures has become a well-established theme in ethnomusicology. For example, drawing on research with Blacking into Afghan lute performance, John Baily has shown how the interaction between the ergonomic design of an instrument and the performer's sensorimotor skills has creative implications in terms of the structure of the music that is produced.²² Kevin Dawe similarly emphasises the importance of instrumental mediation in his cross-cultural research on the guitar,²³ describing performative 'emplacement', or the 'body-mind-environment', which is 'felt, seen and heard through and around the guitar.'²⁴ This sense of cognition being deeply grounded in body-instrument interaction is also conveyed in David Henderson's ethnography of Nepalese drumming lessons, through which his bodily knowledge became so embedded that it became impossible to disentangle himself from it.²⁵ Martin Clayton and Laura Leante's interdisciplinary research on north Indian raga performance has enriched understandings of embodied cognition considerably, exposing its many cultural, social, instrumental, and circumstantial layers.²⁶ Anthropology's growing concern with the social life of objects also offers an opportunity to

delve more deeply into the relationships between performers and instruments that might otherwise be overlooked.²⁷

It would seem then, to be widely recognised that performing and perceiving music are intrinsically connected to bodily knowledge and experience, yet studies of skill and expertise in concert music performance have generally treated skill as an individualised attribute, traced along a somewhat linear trajectory: novice performers employ various strategies in order to acquire the refined abilities of an expert; crudely put, they learn to play their instruments better. The subject has tended to be addressed from two (related) directions: either pedagogically, in terms of analysing the strategies required to enhance and maintain expertise in performance;²⁸ or through psychological investigation of the components of expert performance (such as practice routines, memorisation, and sight-reading ability).²⁹ The following description of expert performance by K. Anders Ericsson, who has published widely on expertise across a number of domains including music, typifies this distinctly ‘head-bound’ and person-centred approach. He writes: ‘[D]evelopment of reasonably high levels of performance, even in well-defined task domains, involves the acquisition of mental representations and skills to generate and select the better products and better actions under conditions requiring flexibility and creativity.’³⁰ This statement leaves a number of questions unanswered, such as, what are the particular skills that enable the performer to, as he puts it, ‘select the better products and better actions’; and moreover, what is the relationship between ‘better products’ and ‘better actions’?

By contrast, Tim Ingold adopts a less dualistic perspective, using craft to examine the relationship between practitioners and their materials. His assertion that the craftsman ‘*thinks through making*’³¹ serves as the point of departure for the argument that musical performance understood as a craft practice, rooted in the performer’s physical and everyday encounters with the world, can help to conceptualise skill. Historically, discussions of craft

and music have been composer-centric;³² in fact, musical performance has not been investigated in any detail within a framework of craft. Ingold's characterisation of craft whereby 'both the practitioner's knowledge *of* things, and what he does *to* them, are grounded in intensive, respectful and intimate relations *with* the tools and materials of his trade',³³ highlights the distributed nature of actions and processes. The craftsman has an inherently bodily relationship with his or her materials, and a highly developed awareness of how they respond to intentions and actions. In attending to embodied practices, a craft-based model of performance points to a broadly ecological approach, situating the practitioner in the context of an active engagement with the constituents of his or her surroundings, proposing that perception is a function of the organism in its environment. Action and perception are therefore directly coupled, or, as Clayton and Leante have argued, 'are understood as two sides of this same ongoing relationship'.³⁴ In this way, the organism adapts to and is actively engaged in a constant learning process.³⁵ Ecological theory has been applied to music by a number of scholars concerned with understanding the distributed character of perception and musical meaning,³⁶ and more recently, the processes of performance.³⁷ Eric Clarke, Mark Doffman, and Liza Lim develop an Ingoldian model of distributed creativity in their study of a composer's interactions with an ensemble. The authors' 'musical ecosystem' captures the phenomenologically complex connections and interrelations at play in a performance event;³⁸ yet, although they acknowledge the role of corporeality in this process, the relationship between performer and instrument is not examined in detail and their work is not primarily concerned with questions of skill.

If craft emphasises quality-driven work, one route through which performers pursue this goal is repeated practice, where tactile resistances are encountered and grappled with, and through which the skills of performance are honed. Instrumental practice routines and rehearsals often draw on the organised repetition of gestures, through which ways of playing

are incorporated into the performer's own bodily sensibilities and can occur without conscious attention. At face value, repetition might appear to be a prosaic activity, yet it need not be mindlessly mechanical. Ingold suggests that 'Through repeated trials, and guided by his observations [the novice] gradually gets the "feel" of things for himself—that is, he learns to fine-tune his own movements so as to achieve the rhythmic fluency of the accomplished practitioner.'³⁹ This way of working can be observed in all manner of practices, including handwriting, where children are initially taught to develop fluency and precision by 'copying models';⁴⁰ or Japanese calligraphy, where imitation and reproduction are highly valued attributes that are central to training.⁴¹ Ingold adopts precisely this perspective, showing that the repetitive movements that constitute seemingly mundane activities, from sawing a plank of wood,⁴² to striking iron on an anvil with a hammer,⁴³ to looping string to weave a bag,⁴⁴ are guided by attentive engagement to the practitioner's surroundings. The precise outcome is never guaranteed and will vary—either minutely, or in more significant ways—each time, and as a consequence, no work is ever finished: performance is *itinerative* (i.e. involved in a journey) rather than iterative (simply repetitious).⁴⁵ By the same token, in repeated musical performances, the ways in which a score is interpreted will vary from performance to performance. Thus skilled practice is inherently *dynamic* and improvisatory: 'not an attribute of the individual body in isolation but of the whole system of relations constituted by the presence of the artisan in his or her environment',⁴⁶ characterised by Ingold as a 'meshwork of interwoven lines of growth and movement'.⁴⁷

Using craft as a lens therefore has the potential to enable a richer, and fundamentally embodied understanding of music-making, but this is not to overlook the disadvantages of relying too heavily on a craft-based model of performance. Fundamentally, while Sennett emphasises that craft is 'embedded in everyday life',⁴⁸ there remains a romance attached to the practitioner as singular 'expert' that he identifies in the carpenter, citizen, instrument

maker, and artist. His tendency to focus on the practitioner's individual mastery of skill glosses over the wider ecology in which enskilment is situated. Sennett has much to say about the passing-on of skilled practice from master to apprentice, and the apprentice's journey from novice to expert, but has less to offer on the co-constitutive nature of creative decisions. There is a risk then, that craft perpetuates what has been described as the 'slow-creep dynamic' of enskilment, whereby technical proficiency gradually becomes refined and habitualised over time, but which neglects 'the more volatile shapes of life that habit might give rise to, calling the sustainability of skilled performance into question, and demanding creative responses.'⁴⁹ By contrast to Sennett, Ingold proposes that knowledge is not a static entity that is passed on from person to person, but is forged through the practitioner's active and embodied engagement with the constituents of his or her surroundings, a process he describes as 'wayfaring':

[P]eople do not acquire their knowledge ready-made, but rather *grow into it*, through a process of what might best be called 'guided rediscovery'. The process is rather like that of following trails through a landscape: each story will take you so far, until you come across another that will take you further. This trail-following is what I call *wayfaring* [...] it is through wayfaring, not transmission, that knowledge is carried on.⁵⁰

This characterisation, emphasising both process and intersubjectivity as crucial to how learning takes place, opens up further questions about the dynamic and emergent character of skilled practice in performance.

Performers must have the capacity to seek out solutions to the challenges presented by the score, but this is not to suggest that performance is a solely reactive activity. Sennett emphasises that craft is driven by the practitioner's practical yet *proactive* engagement with their materials; the ability to *problem-find* as well as to *problem-solve* through, a 'dialogue between concrete practices and thinking'.⁵¹ For Sennett, solving and finding are two sides of the same coin. On encountering a problem, a practitioner might explore his or her material

and gain familiarity with its details in order to solve it; but sometimes a practitioner *pursues* problems in order to cultivate a closer relationship to their material.⁵² Indeed, some of the performers I have encountered in my research have delighted in opening up and problematizing their material, conveying a sense of pride in discussing their working practices that goes beyond a concern with mere technical accuracy. In this way, the challenges offered by musical materials can be a valuable source of active creative engagement. With this discussion in mind, I turn now to the case study material of the paper, with the aim of showing that skill is a manifestly collective endeavour, but in subtly different ways.

‘Getting the rhythm’ in *Four Duets for clarinet and piano*

The first case study takes place in a house in Islington, London and analyses the interactions between the clarinettist, Mark Simpson, and pianist, Víkingur Ólafsson, in preparing Edmund Finnis’s *Four Duets for clarinet and piano* (2012) for its premiere at the Royal Festival Hall in London on 8 December 2012. An episode from the musicians’ first rehearsal (see Figure 1) presents an opportunity to observe the processes that were involved in refining a way of playing an apparently simple and fixed musical outcome: rhythmic synchronisation. Their exchange illustrates the role of repetition in refining a shared sense of timing between the two performers. Although the musicians’ interactions evidence the gradual ‘fine-tuning’ to achieve ‘fluency’ that Ingold describes, the trajectory of finding a solution to the well-worn problem of playing in time together was far from smooth, and certainly not predictable.

[Insert Figure 1 here.]

Much of this rehearsal⁵³ was spent cultivating a mutually agreed shaping of rhythms in the third piece, ‘III’; the first page of the score⁵⁴ is shown in Figure 2.

[Insert Figure 2 here.]

At first glance, *Four Duets* appears to present few technical challenges for performance, with Simpson describing the notation as being ‘deceptively simple’⁵⁵ and Ólafsson agreeing that ‘It’s a pretty sparse score’.⁵⁶ The instruments’ parts are written in synchrony for much of the movement, shifting between different combinations of rhythmic figures, resulting in a disrupted sense of pulse. The clarinet has a more prominent role, with the piano instructed to ‘shadow’ its partner from the outset; indeed, the *ppp* clarinet melody is almost completely doubled by the *pppp* right hand of the piano. This was the first piece that the performers rehearsed together, and after initially playing it through in its entirety, it became apparent that they were both dissatisfied with their rhythmic shaping. Having identified that the problematic element was coordinating the quintuplet (five quaver) rhythm, they repeated the entire piece again but were still dissatisfied. At one point later on in the rehearsal, Ólafsson commented half-jokingly that ‘quintuplets are always a little bit dangerous’, acknowledging the challenge that the ambiguity of the rhythms presented when the performers were attempting to evenly space five beats against the four of the metric pulse.

Video Example 1 (<https://vimeo.com/145112684>) is a three-minute clip taken from their longer twenty-five-minute exchange. Numerous strategies were employed during this episode, including speaking the figure using numbers and different configurations of syllables, using a metronome, whistling, clicking, subdividing the quintuplet figure into its quaver components, and speaking over the piano and clarinet parts. After the initial technical problem is identified, the performers reflect and try to articulate an awareness of their own bodily sensations (for example, Simpson’s comments: ‘I feel as though I wait for you...’ and ‘The way I’m trying to do it is...’); this is followed by a period of diagnosis, with Simpson observing, ‘Because the downbeat changes’ and Ólafsson responding ‘You’re always too early with the “Bee”’, and ‘It’s the context of it that’s difficult’.

At face value, this exchange might be understood simply as a matter of proficiency: with more experience of playing together, this kind of rehearsal practice would become redundant. This would be doing the musicians a disservice, however, as once they had found a way of playing with which they were satisfied—signalled by Ólafsson stating ‘That was it’—it was not revisited. Nevertheless, at this early stage of the rehearsal process, achieving and refining a mutually agreed rendering of the rhythmic nuances required sustained working and reworking of the material. This repeated practice enabled the musicians to reach an agreed rhythm, approaching it in different ways repeatedly to refine and embed it, but it is important to note that it was only through practical enactment—through hearing and feeling the music—that a solution was found. Despite the performers’ overt discussion to clarify how each other was ‘feeling’ the rhythm, much of this activity was non-verbal and apparently spontaneous, as if they were musically ‘feeling their way’ by playing, singing, and gesturing. The reciprocal yet non-linear relationship between discourse and practice that facilitates the ‘the path from notation to performance’⁵⁷ was evident, but what was more striking was the role of implicit communication between the musicians: Ólafsson was able to assert ‘That was it’, and Simpson’s agreement was tacit, with neither of them articulating the nature of the improvement, or how it had been achieved.

If this discussion sounds overly positive, this is not to deny the slight underlying tensions that are sometimes discernible in the musicians’ exchanges, perhaps due to the divergence in their apparent aims, with Simpson seemingly opting for a slight stretch of the phrase, and Ólafsson apparently looking for a more tightly managed and concise approach. There is a moment at c. 02:20 in the video where, as Simpson sings the rhythm, Ólafsson somewhat wearily rubs his eyes and looks out of the window, before responding in a more direct manner: ‘I know. [...] You are too early with it.’ What is more, the clip does not show the moment at the end of their conversation when Ólafsson, after saying ‘That was it’,

immediately turns to me (seated behind the camera) and asks, ‘Are you enjoying it?’ before we all break into laughter, aware of the necessary yet sometimes tedious negotiations of rehearsal practice.⁵⁸ Although the musicians appeared to have conflicting understandings of the nature of a quintuplet rhythm, with Ólafsson’s somewhat literal ‘correctness’ conflicting with Simpson’s rather more fluid and questioning approach, neither of the performers’ interpretations could be defined as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’; as Simpson commented to Ólafsson, it was a matter of ‘agreement’—they were seeking to align their ongoing movements rather than execute pre-existing rules. Therein lies the socially situatedness of skill: the musicians’ synchronisation was gradually embedded through a combination of practice, routine, but also crucially, experimentation.

In the context of a discussion on expertise in musical performance, this brief and modest moment of rehearsal might appear to be a particularly mundane example of skilled practice. Indeed, at first glance, the performers might be regarded as simply trying ‘to get a job done’ within a limited time frame, a way of working that could characterise all manner of rehearsals and artistic work. Yet, the everyday nature of their exchanges and interactions belies an intimate relationship with their materials and one another, and brings the discussion back to craft. The practices outlined in this episode are certainly not immediately striking moments of virtuosity or creative endeavour, yet applications of practical competence in pursuit of discrete details in this way are common attributes of a musician’s performance practice that are often tacit or go unacknowledged. Paradoxically, when I brought this episode to Ólafsson’s attention, he placed little emphasis on the strategies they employed, stating simply ‘I think we did metronome stuff’:⁵⁹ the performers assumed this way of working to be a fairly obvious and straightforward aspect of the rehearsal process. While these kinds of practices might seem somewhat quotidian and might even be taken for granted by the performers themselves, they point towards performers becoming skilled by making

decisions in engaging with their materials that can have potentially significant consequences for performance. The pursuit of rhythmic synchrony in this episode provides an example of the score serving as a framework within which the performers' perceptions and actions were 'coupled',⁶⁰ not mechanistically, but as a way of coordinating the two parts in the right kind of way. This points towards those itinerative qualities of craft practice that were outlined above: becoming rhythmically attuned enabled the musicians to fit the parts together to achieve, as Simpson put it: 'The little interplays Finnis has with these motives which are what gives the piece this alluring sophisticated texture on the top'.⁶¹

Undoing skill? *'indolentiae ars', a medium to be kept*

In contrast to the previous case study, in which the performers worked together with the shared aim of achieving rhythmic coordination, this case study presents a collaboration between the composer, Evan Johnson, and clarinettist, Carl Rosman, who were working with the intention of exploring the disruption of the finely tuned bodily interactions that take place between performer and instrument, in order to develop compositional material for *'indolentiae ars', a medium to be kept* for eighteenth-century basset clarinet (2015).

Johnson's decision to write for this instrument, whose design differs significantly from the 'standard' modern clarinet, had several consequences for the collaboration. To understand how the instrument's properties relate to my discussion, first I will provide a brief overview⁶² of its design, before focussing on an example of enskilment whereby a technique was discovered almost by accident, nicknamed 'thwocking' by Johnson. The processes by which the musicians pursued the thwocking effect perhaps illustrate Ingold's concept of 'wayfaring' most explicitly, evidencing a gradual development of shared understanding as they worked together to develop new performance practices.

Figure 3 shows the model of basset clarinet⁶³ and Figure 4 shows the instrument in use during one of the workshops, in a classroom of the Lichtenbergschule, Darmstadt, Germany, during the 2014 Summer School for New Music.

[Insert Figure 3 here.]

[Insert Figure 4 here.]

The instrument possesses a number of properties that are distinct from the modern model, of which perhaps the most striking, and of most relevance to the present discussion, is its limited key system. In contrast to the modern clarinet, which can have up to around twenty-nine keys, the basset clarinet usually has nine, of which four operate the lower ‘basset’ notes. This minimal mechanical system, with keys that operate independently from one another, has a number of consequences for the performer. On the one hand, the lack of fully chromatic keywork presents ergonomic constraints in that the player must employ ‘fork’, or cross-fingerings (where the fingers are raised and lowered out of the usual, serial order). Tuning the instrument can be problematic, requiring alternative fingerings and adjustments of embouchure to temper the pitch. On the other hand, the open tone holes and lack of linkage between keys means that many more fingering configurations are possible, affording huge flexibility of timbral colour.

The basset clarinet’s distinctive technical properties had two (related) consequences for Johnson’s and Rosman’s collaboration, and thus the circumstances of this collaboration offer a particular example of sharing knowledge. First, it requires a markedly different technique to that of the modern clarinet, and while Rosman has a reputation as an internationally leading performer of new music, he had never performed on this instrument in public, commenting at the first workshop that ‘I’m not quite there yet with it to do something beyond just playing it to myself.’⁶⁴ His use of the word ‘yet’, however, is telling: it points towards his ambition to refine his relationship with this particular instrument and thus to

achieve the ‘fluency’ of expertise that Ingold identifies. Part of this process involved the musicians exploring the technical and sonic possibilities of the instrument together—to develop, in Johnson’s words, ‘an instrumental technique that doesn’t really exist yet’.⁶⁵ Secondly, the basset clarinet’s ergonomic affordances were somewhat unpredictable, disrupting Rosman’s sense of technical control and resulting in some unforeseen sounds during the workshops. The experiences of skilled musicians on encountering new instruments are somewhat different from those of a typical novice, as they possess a variety of existing knowledge which is adapted to the unfamiliar performance situation. Rosman is clearly an expert performer of the modern clarinet, but his relationship to the basset clarinet was somewhat transitional at the outset of the project. And, although Johnson was initially unfamiliar with this distinctive instrument, he certainly could not be described as a novice musician, and has composed for a number of wind instruments in the past.

Video Example 2 (<<https://vimeo.com/169693094>>) shows an episode from the first workshop in Cologne where the somewhat volatile relationship between Rosman’s technique and instrument became a source of creative exploration. The example opens with the musicians discussing specific cross-fingerings that are required by the instrument’s design, their prominence in Mozart’s Clarinet Quintet K. 581 (1789), and the implications of the technique for performance (Rosman describes the placement of the hole on the bore of the instrument: ‘The hole’s in the wrong place: that’s too high, that’s too low, so I need something in the middle’, with Johnson responding that the cross-fingering is ‘a compromise, fundamentally’). This exchange is followed by a short period of exploration and discussion of the role of a high B flat in significant or ‘pivotal’ moments in the piece. Listening to Rosman, Johnson remarks on the liminal noises caused by the transition between alternating fingers covering and uncovering the open holes: ‘The changing of those fingers is making a little bit of a hiccup.’ While Rosman responds that these sounds generally tend to be avoided in

classical clarinet technique, Johnson comments on their appeal for him. In an interview after the workshop, Johnson expressed his enthusiasm for these unexpected sounds:

The sound of the fingers opening and closing—those little pops that you get—that’s the sort of thing that never would have occurred to me sitting at home that that would happen. [...] This is completely new thing for me; it’s something I’m really excited about.⁶⁶

During a subsequent workshop these sounds were pursued further, with Rosman exploring the sonic outcome of executing tremolos of increasingly wide intervals, which required more fingers to move simultaneously (Audio Example 1: <<https://vimeo.com/148254553>>). The interaction during this episode has a sense of shared discovery: the musicians’ exchange is guided by their close attention to Rosman’s embodied relationship to the instrument and the variations in the resultant sounds, with Johnson expressing a preference for particular combinations of notes and diagnosing ways of executing the sounds, noting the combinations of fingers that generate the strongest sound (‘So it’s really the right-hand trills that have the thwocking effect.’). As Johnson comments at the outset of the exchange, he could have sought out various sonic effects by consulting the fingering charts that Rosman produced and sent to him, but their face-to-face workshop interactions afforded a more immediate and reflexive investigation of the possibilities. Rosman’s relationship to his instrument at this stage of the collaboration offered a particular kind of unstable state that Johnson was curious about, and in response to Johnson’s questioning, Rosman was able to manipulate the ‘cracks’ and ‘edges’ of the technique in such a way that Johnson found aesthetically interesting.

The episode concludes with the pair laughing over Johnson’s invention of the onomatopoeic term thwocking, with Johnson playfully elaborating the term into an Italian expressive direction (‘Thwockando! Quasi thwockando, ma espressivo!’). In both of the audio-visual examples an unforeseen quality of Rosman’s slightly insecure technical relationship to the instrument was appealing to Johnson, and was consequently employed in

the eventual piece. Johnson's performance notes in the final score reflect his enthusiasm for the sound, instructing the performer that trills and tremolos should be executed 'with fingering "noise" (in particular, perceptible timbral disruption from the opening and closing of the open holes) encouraged.'⁶⁷ Paradoxically, it is possible that if Rosman had possessed a more 'developed' technique at this stage, these transitional sounds might have been completely eradicated from his playing, and would never have appeared in the piece. Furthermore, part of Rosman's rehearsal process would involve the preparation and refinement of the fragile thwocking sounds so that they could be produced in a habitualised manner in performance, whilst retaining their liminal quality. While Rosman's relationship with his instrument would be gradually refined to reach the accomplished level of 'expert' to which Ingold alludes, the trajectory of his developing technique was one of discovery, as opposed to transmission, thereby blurring the boundary between 'novice' and 'expert'.

To return to a fundamental question that has run through this article, what does it mean to be skilful in performance? The two case studies make the case for enskilment as a complex and convoluted process that emerges out of interaction, and a capacity to seek out 'problems': the first episode documented the negotiation between two individual musicians to reach rhythmic attunement. The role of visual and embodied dimensions of performance were shown to be of fundamental importance in the strategies Simpson and Ólafsson employed to refine their interpretation, yet their instruments were apparently passive objects within the rehearsal process. In the second case study, however, the instrument's physical affordances took on a much more obviously active role, with the thwocking effect celebrating the unstable and chaotic relationship between performer and instrument. It is arguably the case that all musical works are contingent on a particular combination of the performer's body, skills, and instrument; and *'indolentiae ars'* demonstrates this reality particularly acutely.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper has explored the distributed character of skilled practice in musical performance, using craft to tease out the dimensions of performance that might otherwise be overlooked, but moving beyond Sennett's somewhat static concept of the expert practitioner. Simpson and Ólafsson's repetitive rehearsal practice enabled them to achieve a shared understanding of the rhythmic figure as they gradually became more attuned, both to one another and to their instruments. The ways in which their performance choices were reached and implemented reveal the sometimes prosaic dimensions of music-making, and illustrate the close relationship between the conceptual and the practical. In the second case study, processes of enskilment can be observed as distributed across the (sometimes fragile) interplay between performer, instrument, and composer—a relationship that was symbiotic: as Rosman's technique developed he was able to share his increasing proficiency with Johnson, which in turn enabled Johnson to explore new creative avenues. This interdependency is illustrated particularly vividly by the thwocking technique, which despite its apparent liminality, was embedded in an entanglement of relations including the cultural and historical resonances of the basset clarinet and its physical idiosyncrasies, the tactility of Rosman's fingers on the instrument's open holes, the musicians' personal relationship and their mutual aesthetic concerns, and the sustained periods of experimentation afforded by their workshops. Rather than working towards the sustainability of enskilment, their workshop engagements sought to exploit these discoveries for creative ends. In this way, the case study sits somewhat uneasily with Sennett's definition of craft as 'the skill of making things well'. How can craft account for the approach employed by Johnson and Rosman, who were concerned with pursuing the fragile and the volatile? Indeed, on the face of it, this case study might appear to be in opposition to the first, with Simpson and Ólafsson honing their approach to achieve an apparently objective outcome—rhythmic synchrony; while Johnson

and Rosman were experimenting with the more permeable borders between practitioner, instrument, and skill.

One way of reconciling this apparent contradiction is to focus on the *processes* rather than the outcomes at play within the case studies, which brings the discussion back to the ‘myriad tactile improvisations by which [...] living organisms co-opt whatever possibilities their environments may afford to make their ways in the tangle of the world.’⁶⁸ Improvisation can be identified in the rapid exchange of strategies between Simpson and Ólafsson; and in Johnson and Rosman’s somewhat more probing and reflexive investigations. Whether a practice is ‘centripetal’, as in the case of Simpson and Ólafsson’s rehearsal episode, or ‘centrifugal’, as demonstrated in the explorations of Johnson and Rosman’s workshop, the distinction lies in their *aims* rather than the means through which these aims were realised.⁶⁹ Musicians’ capacities are developed through improvisation, not in an extraordinarily innovative or revelatory sense, but through the exercise of proactive yet practical engagement with the world around them.

Another way of approaching the situation is to view the collaborative activities of Johnson and Rosman as foregrounding Sennett’s notion of creative resistance—the idea that craft involves not merely encountering resistance and ambiguity but seeking it out (echoing the problem-solving/finding dichotomy discussed earlier).⁷⁰ In making this assertion, Sennett proposes a distinction between boundaries and borders. By contrast to inert and absolute boundaries such as walls, a border operates like the porous membrane of a cell, at once permeable and resistant, allowing for active interchange and ambiguity. This negotiation of borders and edges can be identified in Johnson and Rosman’s workshop interactions, where imprecision and instability were pursued almost to the point of breakdown. Sennett’s argument also brings the discussion back to improvisation, since anticipating and dealing with ambiguity requires improvisation.⁷¹ Improvisation clearly pervades the practices of

performance, emphasising both process and intersubjectivity as crucial components in the development of skilled practice. In different ways then, the two case studies elucidate the dynamic nature of skilled practice and the processes of enskilment, whether coordinating perception and action in pursuit of refinement, or working at the threshold of skill to investigate new techniques. But a striking feature of both case studies is the significance that must be attributed to improvisation: the improvised practices that enabled Simpson and Ólafsson to approach recursively the problem of rhythmic synchrony; and the improvisatory manner in which Johnson and Rosman worked with the affordances of the basset clarinet.

In focussing on the improvisatory nature of skill in musical performance, geographic (re)conceptualisations of habit as dynamic and pliable are particularly valuable.⁷² As I hope to have shown, the development and absorption of skill through repetition, the ‘thousand little everyday moves that add up in sum to a practice’,⁷³ is central to performance; and yet the directions that these processes take are neither predictable, nor necessarily reproducible: the key point is their *transformative* nature.⁷⁴ As Merle Patchett argues, ‘it is through *instability*—the small differences upon which continuity depends—that craft and skilled practices gain temporal duration and spatial extension.’⁷⁵ Patchett’s acknowledgement of history raises an important point: in focussing on the moment-to-moment interactions of co-present musicians, is there a risk of ahistoricising the skilled practices of performance, rather than attending to their long-term development?⁷⁶ The role of the historical instrument in the second case study powerfully illustrates Paul Glennie and Nigel Thrift’s argument that ‘practices and skills are, in a sense, a motor of history.’⁷⁷ While the thwocking effect is only one small aspect of the collaboration and the compositional rhetoric of ‘*indolentiae ars*’, it demonstrates quite subtly how musical instruments can be understood as ‘repositories’⁷⁸ of different kinds of knowledge, cultural and historical, that emerge and are animated through collaboration. It would thus be fruitful to follow the musicians over a more sustained time period, where,

somewhat paradoxically, part of Rosman's rehearsal process would involve the preparation and refinement of the thwocking effect so that it could be performed in a relatively stable manner during performance. The experiences of musicians in preparing and performing liminal techniques could raise interesting questions about the nature of virtuosity, as well as having further implications for current discussions on the nature of skill and enskilment in musical performance and other craft practices. A focus on performance facilitates understanding of 'the practical ways we have of going on in the world, from moment to moment, event to event, utilizing a whole range of interconnected social, cultural, emotional, expressive, material and embodied resources'.⁷⁹ As practitioners work together, their interactions are enmeshed, both with the 'concrete' material tools of their environment and with the implicit but no less significant aspects of their craft—the embodied and tacit processes of performance.

Notes

- ¹ D.Bissell, 'Habit Displaced: The Disruption of Skilful Performance', *Geographical Research* 51 (2013), pp. 120–29.
- ² E.F. Clarke, M.Doffman and L.Lim., 'Distributed Creativity and Ecological Dynamics: A Case Study of Liza Lim's "Tongue of the Invisible"', *Music & Letters* 94 (2013), pp. 628–63.
- ³ While the words 'craftsman' and 'craftsmanship' seem to be regarded as universal terms in the work of Sennett and Ingold, they are problematic in their gendered associations. Thus, in this paper I employ the words 'craft' in place of 'craftsmanship', and 'craftsperson' as an alternative to 'craftsman'.
- ⁴ R.Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London, Allen Lane, 2008), p. 8.
- ⁵ E.Payne, *The Creative Process in Performance: A Study of Clarinetists*, PhD Thesis, (University of Oxford, 2015).
- ⁶ The first study of a contemporary commission was published just over a decade ago; see E.Clarke et al., 'Interpretation and Performance in Bryn Harrison's *être-temps*', *Musicae Scientiæ* 9 (2005), pp. 31–74.
- ⁷ See, for example, J.W.Davidson, 'The Role of the Body in the Production and Perception of Solo Vocal Performance: A Case Study of Annie Lennox', *Musicae Scientiæ* 5 (2001), pp. 235–56.
- ⁸ D.Sudnow and H.L.Dreyfus, *Ways of the Hand: A Rewritten Account* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2001); M.Doffman, 'Jammin' an Ending: Creativity, Knowledge, and Conduct among Jazz Musicians', *Twentieth-Century Music* 8, (2011), pp. 203–25.
- ⁹ N.Wood, M.Duffy and S.Smith, 'The Art of Doing (Geographies of) Music', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25 (2007), p. 874.
- ¹⁰ My distinction is based on the language employed by the participants of my research. As one musician put it, 'The word "workshop" can mean about a million different things. Every single so-called "workshop" I've ever attended has been an utterly different entity' (Author interview with E.Finnis, 10 April 2013).
- ¹¹ Clarke et al., 'Distributed', p. 630.
- ¹² S.Smith, 'Performing the (Sound)world', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 18 (2000), p. 616.
- ¹³ B.Anderson, F.Morton and G.Revill, 'Practices of Music and Sound', *Social & Cultural Geography* 6 (2005), pp. 639–44.
- ¹⁴ C.Nash, 'Performativity in Practice: Some Recent Work in Cultural Geography', *Progress in Human Geography* 24 (2000), p. 654.
- ¹⁵ Nash, 'Performativity'; T.Jazeel, 'The World is Sound? Geography, Musicology and British-Asian soundscapes', *Area* 37 (2005), pp. 233–41; A.Leyshon et al., *The Place of Music* (New York, Guilford, 1998); F.Morton, 'Performing Ethnography: Irish Traditional Music Sessions and New Methodological Spaces', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 6 (2005), pp. 661–76; G.Revill, 'Performing French Folk Music: Non-Representational Theory and the Politics of Authenticity', *Cultural Geographies* 11 (2004), pp. 199–209.
- ¹⁶ Jazeel, 'World', p. 239.
- ¹⁷ P.Simpson, 'Ecologies of Experience: Materiality, Sociality, and the Embodied Experience of (Street) Performing', *Environment and Planning A* 45 (2013), p. 194. See also Simpson, 'Street Performance and the City: Public Space, Sociality, and Intervening in the Everyday', *Space and Culture* 14 (2011), pp. 415–30; 'Sonic Affects and the Productions of Space: "Music by Handle" and the Politics of Street Music in Victorian London', *Cultural Geographies* (2016), pp. 1–21.
- ¹⁸ R.Hudson, 'Regions and Place: Music, Identity and Place', *Progress in Human Geography* 30 (2006), pp. 626–34.
- ¹⁹ M.Gallagher and J.Prior, 'Sonic Geographies: Exploring Phonographic Methods', *Progress in Human Geography* 38 (2014), p. 277.
- ²⁰ See, among many others, D.McCormack, *Refrains for Moving Bodies: Experience and Experiment in Affective Spaces* (London: Duke University Press, 2013); J.D.Dewsbury and D.Bissell, eds, 'Habit Geographies' [Special Section], *Cultural Geographies* 22 (2015), pp. 21–146.
- ²¹ J.Blacking, 'The Biology of Music-Making', in H.Meyers, ed., *Ethnomusicology: An Introduction* (New York, Norton, 1992) pp. 301–14.
- ²² J.Baily, 'John Blacking and the "Human/Musical Instrument Interface": Two Plucked Lutes from Afghanistan', in S.A.Reily, ed., *The Musical Human: Rethinking John Blacking's Ethnomusicology in the Twenty-First Century* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2006), pp. 107–23.
- ²³ K.Dawe, *The New Guitarscape in Critical Theory, Cultural Practice and Musical Performance* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2010).
- ²⁴ Dawe, *Guitarscape*, p. 123.

- ²⁵ D.Henderson, 'Handmade in Nepal', in R.K.Wolf, ed., *Theorizing the Local: Music, Practice, and Experience in South Asia and Beyond* (New York; Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 185–202.
- ²⁶ For a summary, see M.Clayton and L.Leante, 'Embodiment in Music Performance', in M.Clayton, B.Dueck and L.Leante, eds, *Experience and Meaning in Music Performance* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 188–207.
- ²⁷ See, for example, A.Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, [1986] 2013); E.Bates, 'The Social Life of Musical Instruments', *Ethnomusicology* 56 (2012), pp. 363–95.
- ²⁸ See, for example, A.Williamon, ed., *Musical Excellence: Strategies and Techniques to Enhance Performance* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004).
- ²⁹ For example, M.V.Araújo, 'Measuring Self-Regulated Practice Behaviours in Highly Skilled Musicians', *Psychology of Music* 44 (2015), pp. 278–92; N.F.Bernardi et al., 'Mental Practice in Music Memorization: An Ecological-Empirical Study', *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 30 (2013), pp. 275–90; V.Drai-Zerbib, T.Baccino and E.Bigand, 'Sight-Reading Expertise: Cross-Modality Integration Investigated Using Eye Tracking', *Psychology of Music* 40 (2012), pp. 216–35.
- ³⁰ K.A.Ericsson, 'Creative Expertise as Superior Reproducible Performance: Innovative and Flexible Aspects of Expert Performance', *Psychological Inquiry* 10 (1999), pp. 329–33.
- ³¹ T.Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London, Routledge, 2013), p. 6, original emphasis.
- ³² See, for example, the composer Paul Hindemith's manual, *The Craft of Musical Composition* (London, Schott & Co., 1941); and more recently, J.A.Owens, *Composers at Work: The Craft of Musical Composition 1450–1600* (New York; Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997).
- ³³ T.Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London, Routledge, 2011), p. 239, original emphasis.
- ³⁴ Clayton and Leante, 'Embodiment', p. 198.
- ³⁵ J.J.Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception [Classic edition]* (New York, Psychology Press, [1979] 2014), p. 119.
- ³⁶ See E.F.Clarke, *Ways of Listening* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005); S.Emmerson, *Living Electronic Music* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007).
- ³⁷ See Clarke et al., 'Distributed'; L.Windsor and C.de Bézenac, 'Music and Affordances', *Musicae Scientiæ* 16 (2012), pp. 102–20.
- ³⁸ Clarke et al., 'Distributed', p. 630.
- ³⁹ T.Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London, Routledge, 2000), p. 353.
- ⁴⁰ T.Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London, Routledge, 2007), p. 148.
- ⁴¹ F.Nakamura, 'Creating or Performing Words? Observations on Contemporary Japanese Calligraphy', in E.Hallam and T.Ingold, eds, *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, (Oxford; New York, Berg, 2007), pp. 79–98.
- ⁴² Ingold, *Being Alive*, pp. 52–53.
- ⁴³ Ingold, *Perception*, p. 353.
- ⁴⁴ Op. cit., pp. 354–61.
- ⁴⁵ Ingold, *Being Alive*, p. 216.
- ⁴⁶ Ingold, *Perception*, p. 291.
- ⁴⁷ Sennett, *Craftsman*, p. 4, original emphasis.
- ⁴⁸ Op. cit., p. 14.
- ⁴⁹ Bissell, 'Habit', p. 126.
- ⁵⁰ Ingold, *Being Alive*, p. 162, original emphasis.
- ⁵¹ Sennett, *Craftsman*, p. 9.
- ⁵² Op. cit., pp. 214–231.
- ⁵³ Approximately twenty-five minutes out of a rehearsal that lasted one hour and twenty-five minutes in total.
- ⁵⁴ E.Finnis, *Four Duets for Clarinet and Piano* (Self-published score, 2012) p. 8.
- ⁵⁵ Rehearsal, London, 5 December 2012.
- ⁵⁶ Author interview with V.Ólafsson, 4 February 2014.
- ⁵⁷ A.Bayley, 'Ethnographic Research into Contemporary String Quartet Rehearsal', *Ethnomusicology Forum* 20 (2011), p. 405.
- ⁵⁸ This last point also emphasises Simpson's caution about the limitations of video in fully capturing 'the affective relations' that permeate encounters such as these. See P.Simpson, "'So, As You Can See...': Some Reflections on the Utility of Video Methodologies in the Study of Embodied Practices", *Area* 43 (2011), p. 350.
- ⁵⁹ Author interview with V.Ólafsson, 4 February 2014.

- ⁶⁰ Ingold, *Being Alive*, p. 55.
- ⁶¹ Author interview with M.Simpson, 16 January 2013.
- ⁶² The following account attends to the properties of this particular instrument within the context of the collaboration. For a detailed discussion of the basset clarinet, see E.Hoeprich, *The Clarinet* (New Haven; London, Yale University Press, 2008).
- ⁶³ The instrument was made by the Dutch instrument maker Peter van der Poel. See P.van der Poel, 'Lotz-clarinets', < <http://www.petervanderpoel.nl/klarinetten/lotzE.html>> (10 August 2014).
- ⁶⁴ Workshop, Cologne, 4 April 2014.
- ⁶⁵ Email correspondence from E.Johnson to author, 15 April 2014.
- ⁶⁶ Author interview with E.Johnson, 6 April, 2014.
- ⁶⁷ E.Johnson, 'indolentiae ars', a medium to be kept (Self-published score, 2015).
- ⁶⁸ T.Ingold and E.Hallam, 'Creativity and Cultural Improvisation: An Introduction', in Hallam and Ingold, eds, *Creativity*, p. 5.
- ⁶⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 13.
- ⁷⁰ Sennett, *Craftsman*, pp. 214–238.
- ⁷¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 235.
- ⁷² See, for example, Bissell, 'Habit'; 'Virtual Infrastructures of Habit: The Changing Intensities of Habit Through Gracefulness, Restlessness and Clumsiness', *Cultural Geographies* 22 (2015), pp. 127–146; A.Latham, 'The History of a Habit: Jogging as a Palliative to Sedentariness in 1960s America', *Cultural Geographies* 22 (2015), pp. 103–26; M.Patchett, 'The Taxidermist's Apprentice: Stitching Together the Past and Present of a Craft Practice', *Cultural Geographies* 23 (2015), pp. 401–19.
- ⁷³ Sennett, *Craftsman*, p. 77.
- ⁷⁴ Bissell, 'Habit'.
- ⁷⁵ Patchett, 'Taxidermist', p. 415, original emphasis.
- ⁷⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 402.
- ⁷⁷ P.Glennie and N.Thrift, 'The Spaces of Clock Times', in P.Joyce, ed., *The Social in Question. New Bearings in History and the Social Sciences* (London, Routledge, 2002), p. 152.
- ⁷⁸ E.Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild* (Cambridge, MA; London, MIT Press, 1995), p. 96.
- ⁷⁹ B.Anderson et al., 'Practices', p. 640.