

ORCiM, a fertile ground for Artistic Research

Peter Dejans in Conversation with Anne Douglas, 11 June 2010

When we started the Orpheus Institute in 1996 with support from the Ministry of Education, we were not in fact founded to create a platform for artistic research. The initial intention was to develop an institute for individuals who had left the conservatoire and who had gained some professional experience. We were supposed to be something between a Conservatoire and a University.

The main goal for a conservatoire is to enable a musician to master their instruments or a composer to master their compositional skills. There is little time or mental space for a student to take a significant step back from what he or she is learning and to reflect upon their own practice. However, musicians have questions. They take these questions with them into their daily lives as musicians. Their questions became our starting point.

The birth of artistic research for the Orpheus Institute as an idea emerged for me personally through an inspirational three-hour conversation in 2002 with Kari Kurkela, the founding father in the 1980s of the doctoral programme for artists and musicians at Sibelius Academy, Finland. The opportunity to realise the idea in our own doctoral trajectory followed in 2002/2003. The University of Leiden created its new Faculty for the Creative and Performing Arts, in collaboration with the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague. They had the legal structure for organising a doctoral degree but did not have experience of a research environment suitable for musicians. They looked to the Orpheus Institute. We had a laureate programme and the experience of questioning and reflecting on and through musical practice. In January 2004 we officially opened the doctoral programme (docARTES) with the University of Leiden and the Royal Conservatoire of The Hague and the Conservatory of Amsterdam. In 2008, the University of Leuven and the Lemmensinstituut (Leuven) joined us officially as a fourth partner.

THE CONTEXT

THE CONTEXT

It has been a process of organic growth in which we immediately faced those practical questions that are strongly linked to content. Did we need a doctoral programme? Why should an artist do doctoral work? What is research in this field? What does research bring to an artist? What does an artist bring to research? How should an artist be guided and supervised and what qualifications are needed to do so? What is the content of an artist led doctoral programme? Should we copy the university system or change it? Could we even question it? We explored how the Orpheus Institute could benefit from taking on an institution like a doctorate and, in turn, whether we could benefit the existing model in universities. We discussed how we might relate to other new disciplines that have emerged in the last fifty years and the processes of change they had brought about during the last half of the 20th century.

Up until now, the two means of creating a research environment at the Orpheus Institute are the doctoral programme (docARTES) and the Orpheus Research Centre in Music (ORCiM), which is a group of research fellows. In 2004 we worked in a responsive mode. Individual doctoral students came with their research questions 'in their backpack'. They opened the backpack and created some interaction with senior researchers, with staff, with colleagues. Then they closed the backpack and moved on. There was some sediment, but not enough to label as a research environment. It was not sufficiently fertile ground. There was no humus layer in which to sustain growth.

Creating the humus layer was actually the main motive for creating a research centre. The challenge became to create the research environment, but not predetermine the research. It took me four years of searching like a nomad, somewhat unsettled. I was confident, however, of the destination.

In our research centre, we now bring artist researchers together from different nationalities, different cultures, different ages. Most but not all of them are post docs. There are individual researchers working on individual research topics of the daily actions of a musician like rehearsing, analysing, interpreting and articulating. We have collaborative research and individual activities. We reach out to the outside world through conferences or guest speakers. Our doctoral programme is gradually changing its nature from a doctoral curriculum into a 'junior research centre'. A guest lecturer becomes a guest researcher. Our teaching staff become senior researchers. Courses

THE CONTEXT

become reading groups. It is a kind of laboratory in which research and its processes are relabelled. We invite individuals to create. By looking at what we create and how we create it, by looking at methods, questions, frustrations, we are able to develop some advice, some warnings as well as some information, to generate the necessities that one might need in a backpack before starting the research journey. It is about providing possibilities, bringing people and opportunities together and waiting for the 'chemical reactions'. It is about sensing what is already there as good research in the guild of musicians and artists. We are not creating the gold. We are bringing some of the gold that exists below ground to the surface. We are still at the very beginning. Music itself is unthinkable without time. It is a development of time. That is how we think about our own process of maturing a research culture - through time.

A doctoral programme or curriculum has not been an end in itself, but a means to arriving at a thriving research environment. By seeing the doctoral programme through the lens of a research centre, Orpheus Institute becomes a larger entity with different levels: juniors, post-docs, seniors, and general researchers. By being forced out of the utilitarian and income generating modes of a doctoral curriculum, we are forced into examining again and again the core of what we are actually doing in research. We have an ongoing existential fear and this has become our strength. We are not a large institution such as a university or polytechnic. A day in which we are not creative with this development and with articulating to others why, how and what we are doing, is a day that is lost.

Through this experience we can see that the emergence of a new discipline such as artistic research begins with a question, a concern or a need. It then becomes a programme. Programming demands institutional settings to link discourse and its dissemination through journals and conferences. Discourse itself is more than writing up what others are saying. It is the digestion of what is said and its transformation into another kind of outcome. It is a long process that you cannot completely steer. You live it. This new discipline is somewhere between the development of a 'searching' mind and a 'researching' mind. A 'searching mind' is a necessary, but insufficient condition for research. It is a starting point. We were already abiding by academic rules but perhaps in a less structured way. We had already determined in 1996 that the work of the Laureate programme should be manifest both in an artistic outcome (not even a result

THE CONTEXT

– an outcome) and a verbal articulation. There are advantages and disadvantages to making the shift towards greater levels of structure. Mission statements listing proposed outcomes, entrance examinations, supervision committees and interim reports can have a very positive effect. It can make you take another step in your development from an unconscious and intuitive way of organising things to a more reflective one. You are forced to grow from a child to an adult but in that growth, you may also lose. Many adults keep the positive character of a child and childhood. These are the most interesting adults, I would say.

Challenges emerge when we have to apply rules and would like to change the rules. We looked further and we saw that, in the community of a university, there was an enormous range of individuals, departments and disciplines. There was a place for our discipline. It needed some bureaucracy to grow, but if we went too far, there would be a loss. We had to search for the balance. There is always, in this kind of negotiation, something that one can influence. It comes down to the attitude of people and the power of negotiation, of being a diplomat and of being creative. It is like a submarine that only surfaces when what you want to show cannot be ignored.

Through artistic research we are changing the way knowledge is generated both in relation to more traditional disciplines and within music research cultures such as ORCiM. We are creating a language. It is by doing research that we are learning how to do research. We learn more from our students than they learn from us. The impact of this new research on existing knowledge and its methodologies goes well beyond the presentations and insights of a particular doctorate or a particular curriculum.

Within ORCiM, we started with delineating research fields that existed in the experience of its researchers. Different individuals related to themes of analysis, notation, creativity, sound works and listening. This was our first account in the first year. In the second year we identified a meta level grid: thoughts and concepts, embodiment and the materiality of music. This grid organises a field but does not create a field. It is easy enough to impose a research agenda that determines research questions and activities but it can be the wrong kind of entry point. To create a humus layer we needed a *pars pro toto*, a part that would stand for the whole.

THE CONTEXT

Three criteria began to emerge that would guide the way to come to a choice. The research had to be practice based. That means that the individual's own artistic practice is the source and target domain of the research and this practice needs to generate something that we do not yet know. Secondly it should be anchored within local rather than imported expertise. In this way we could sustain ourselves. Thirdly, it should be distinctive, not in the sense of not doing what others were doing, but rather to find the distinctiveness in what we were doing already. If we could not find that distinctiveness, we should abandon the particular line of inquiry. Through these three criteria and after a lot of exploration we came to 'artistic experimentation'.

To return to the metaphor of the humus layer, by precisely not determining which plants should grow but rather creating an environment that was immensely rich in terms of good conditions for the growth of the discipline itself, we would be able to detect which were the interesting doctoral and post doctoral projects as well as the less interesting ones.

Artistic research has a developmental role to play within the practice of art rather than an explanatory role. Experience and knowledge are interwoven in our discipline. Experience can become a form of enlightenment. When it becomes crystallised into existing knowledge and is repeated as a sequence of enlightenments over time, it becomes not just 'an experience', but a manageable, useful and replicable form of knowledge.

We are still at the very beginning.

In this development, ORCiM in the context of Flanders has four unique selling points. The first is the combination of a doctoral programme and a research centre operating as an inter university and international institution. I do not know of another example in the discipline. The second is our role in setting up a relevant network that is important for our discipline. On the occasion of the official opening of our research centre (February 2009), Orpheus Institute started off with EPARM; the European Network Artistic Research in Music, whose operational work might in future be organised under the umbrella of the AEC, the Association Européenne des Conservatoires. The third is our supporting the process of academisation of artistic research in higher

THE CONTEXT

musical education. The fourth addresses the question - Where does the development of the arts happen? Does it happen in the work of a concert organisation, in a recording company, in an orchestra and its programming or through the orchestra's director? Does it happen in education or in a research centre? In artistic research, we are researching developments through those who are applying the research. This is a difficult concept. It is like a hologram in which you never have a fixed picture but one that is always diffused. If you take away the diffused quality, you lose something. It is perfectly possible to remove it but you lose what you have. We build on the past rather than trying to understand the past. It is like a cathedral that starts with the Byzantine, follows with the Roman. Instead of changing it in the Gothic, we build on a third layer.

With the choir that I conduct, Musa Horti, we have performed some choral music of the Swedish composer, Sven-David Sandström, who wrote six motets based on J.S. Bach's famous motets, using the same text and form, but with his own style and tonality. It is impossible for us to say that Sandström's music is better or worse than that of Bach. That we are unable to make that judgement is remarkable. Other disciplines judge change by declaring that something that was deemed right in the last century, is no longer right in this. Our relationship to knowledge in artistic research is developmental, but not one of creating better knowledge by improving on the past through structural growth. It is rather by creating structures for growth such as ORCiM, where the artist, through his daily activity, through doing, makes a development. This is the real meaning of embodiment.

Sandström, in writing these motets, is entering into a discussion with Bach. I am not sure I would label that as research. What then is research in the arts? It is in the doing - in the writing of a composer and also in the performing and listening and experiencing. It is in the whole rich phenomenon of creation and production, how it affects our being human and how it informs us about who we are and how we look at things, how we judge, how we are 'in being'. Last week we celebrated two hundred years since the birth of Schumann. We have the sense that Schumann lived a long, long time ago, but if I live to be seventy, I only have to go back three full lives and I am already with Schumann. He becomes extremely close. If I try to re-imagine something, I feel a new experience of time within me that is very personal. Information in and of itself is

THE CONTEXT

not knowledge. This impulse to reflect on an experience we have, the digging out of information and digesting it, this can bring us knowledge. If in the guild of musicians we experience people in the doing, in creating and passing the experience on to each other, if this can be developed, it can become knowledge. We need water to make wine, but wine is not water, just as information is not experience and experience is not research. Each requires a process of transformation to become the other.

If I acknowledge that research is about creating original knowledge – new insights, better understanding, then it is extremely challenging for an artist researcher, in the short trajectory of doctoral research, to label what he or she is doing and its affect as the production of new knowledge. Artistic understanding is situated between the maker and his or her work. If the maker happens also to be a researcher, what difference does it make to the work? The difference is this : how can I, as an artist researcher, better articulate what I am doing and how does my researching mind, through processes of contextualisation, through theory and through verbal, textual and bodily articulation, literally develop the work? That is the aspect that makes artistic research, research and it is necessary to demonstrate it as such. The humus layer, for me, is situated between the artist and the making of the thing. Viewed this way, research provides the potential to generate something that is greater than the artist's first intention.

Production of knowledge and understanding in art is not new. It is inherent to good art. It is the knowledge generated by the artist and reflected upon in order to question and improve the production itself by contextualising the work, that brings the work into the research field. The doctorate is a research qualification through which you are judged by peers to be able to do the research on your own. A doctorate is the very beginning, not an endpoint.

For me the phenomenon of the artist researcher does not touch the core of art, as some fear. An artist researcher is an artist that cannot avoid being a researcher. It is a way of life, of creating a disturbance through critical thinking. As the artist researcher you are fascinated by something that you do not have to be fascinated by, to be a good artist. You do not need a doctorate to be a good artist. Research does not pervert art. It makes concrete something that is inherent in art.