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PRACTICING AND THE PRACTICE OF ART

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Musical Craft

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Many people think that practising mainly comprises repetition. This is based on the assumption that you would ‘get it’ if you repeat enough times. That is how we learned to ride a bicycle or use chopsticks. But we also know that repetition is only one part of it. We learn to speak a new language by repeating and then using it. Understanding what may be said in which circumstance, is a knowledge gained by using it, and not simply by repeating it. Repeating and using are two of many actions, which may also include varying, imagining, understanding, reconfiguring, doing the opposite, experimenting, and so forth. Which actions are happening when you practise, particularly at an advanced level? Instrumental practice at an advanced level may involve complex systems or models giving the practice a character of being a methodology towards attaining excellence. This does not mean that advanced practitioners are conscious of using such systems or models. But the main purpose of practising is maintenance and improvement; and because most musicians use practice as the single most important means for attaining a standard, it suggests a wealth of strategies lying in their practising.

The literature on how to learn to play an instrument is rich in quantity and variety. It ranges from do-it-yourself websites on how to play the guitar in ten easy steps to academic papers on how to enhance performance from a psychological perspective. Each teacher, author or commentator offers a practice strategy. Strategies address two principal questions: *what* to do and *how* to do it, in order to achieve an aim. The ‘what’ question determines tasks to be undertaken, and the ‘how’ question explains the method with which those tasks are carried out. While the ‘what’ question relates more significantly to the outcome, the ‘how’ question is equally indispensable if the necessary tasks are to be carried out. Musical performance in classical art-music has a strong tendency towards goal orientation, typically expressed with phrases such as ‘achieving excellence’. This leads us to study the ‘how’ endeavours that musicians go through. Yet we often take for granted that there are set standards for excellence, where musical aesthetics is somewhat static. Perhaps musical excellence is not a given: we define musical excellence by doing it, by interacting with existing aesthetics. The search for this new excellence is our research.

Craft comes in as a critical factor in this search. Achieving excellence is an act: it does not happen with thinking alone. Craft has the power to turn thinking into an act, taking concrete steps where thinking doesn’t reach. ‘Thinking like a craftsman’ is more than a state of mind, it has a sharp social edge, argues Richard Sennett, and the social edge differentiates craft from ideas such as embodied knowledge

(44). In the so-called Western civilization, craft is often seen as manual labour without brains. The days when craftsmen were seen as pioneers are long gone. But the practice of craft survives in music-making, through musicians' achievement of musical excellence. We still have tools and expertise available to us in forging new knowledge, that is musical excellence of today. Approaching music-making from practical, social, cultural and political perspectives is about recognizing the value of craft in musical discourse.

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