**Dispatch from the shores of Artistic Research**

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*This text does not reflect the more sophisticated debates about impact that emerged after it had been written.*

**1 Introduction: Before academia**

In this essay I bracket the formally approved UK definition of impact as “an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, *beyond academia*”.[[1]](#endnote-1) I do this in order to focus on the impact of Artistic Research on the practitioner herself, rather than her stakeholders: I am interested in the effects of research *before academia*. The discourse in question is Western Classical instrumental pedagogy, and the research in question is that which is undertaken by instrumental pedagogues in conservatoires. This is frequently Artistic Research (hereinafter AR), but also includes Musicology and Performance Studies, both informally as staff development (sometimes funded) and formally in higher degree programmes.

What should the practitioner undertaking AR think about when she is asked to report on her activities to colleagues in Higher Education (hereinafter HE)? She should probably not bother rationalising why she has not normally occupied herself with the production of self-supporting outputs with an independent reception history of their own; mainstream Musicology is busy doing that anyway. She should probably not bother explaining why her activity has not had the kinds of impact recognised in scientific disciplines. And she should probably not bother defending the fact that her outputs in AR have not been a means for generating impact *per se*, and that they are no less valuable than their impact profile, both of which propositions might be assumed from a perusal of UK HE research policy, which configures the evaluation of impact around “reach” and “significance”.[[2]](#endnote-2) What she probably should spend time thinking about is the extent to which the AR has existential significance. This includes its capacity for transformative self-improvement and *phronesis*, both in private and in her public-facing activities, and as a slow-burn process that eludes simple measurement, both of which things worry policy makers in HE. And it includes the fact that she may well have spent more time focussing on creating her outputs to the detriment of planning and disseminating their impact, other than ensuring that there is a basic platform for it. Indeed, she will probably have an overwhelming sense of having expended energy during the AR process – personally, physically, psychologically, and even morally. The briefest moment of self-reflection probably tells her that she feels like a different person now.

The moral is simple. For the practitioner of AR, Practice (of whatever stripe) comes before Research, ‘before’ being always axiological and normally chronological. Thus, given the existential significance of AR and given the interactive (or at least public-facing) element of impact, the precise tone of the passage between output and impact is a key factor in how her AR proceeds and how she might respond to the institutional demand to incorporate impact into output. Thus, the starting point for this essay is a two-fold assumption: (1) the conventional definition of impact as the demand that the practitioner show how she is influencing the behaviours of external clients on the basis of peer-reviewed results; (2) that, even if impact is built into the research project from the start, as with publically funded projects, nevertheless it begins either after the output proper has been finalised, or after the output has been at least projected forwards within the research design.

**2 Passages**

Consider the dynamic logic underlying the practitioner’s incorporation of impact into her outputs. The term incorporation refers here, perhaps paradoxically, to the way in which one thing is included within another without either thing losing its own identity and its own potential to set things in motion. Incorporating impact into output involves a public display of self-definition by means of which AR generates the tools for engaging with funding bodies, for whom impact has become the main driver. Such, at any rate, is the kind of simple passage between output and impact wished for by policy makers. In reality, incorporation is played out in the particular context of the practitioner’s current musical project, but for the practitioner herself, it is also important to acknowledge that the creative possibilities arising from the very indeterminacy of impact’s incorporation into output are more important than the impact *per se*. Moreover, incorporation may not be as clear and rigid as is often assumed in research policy, and indeterminacy may actually be of much more than merely peripheral value to the practitioner.

For the practitioner encounters numerous moments of indeterminacy in the *passages* between output and impact, during the process in which the one is incorporated into the other, often a long and iterative process. Why emphasise the “passages” between output and impact? Why drag out the move from the former to the latter? Is it not enough just to say that output is output and impact is impact, and that the two are linked causally and perfectly clearly in what practitioners do when undertaking research? To characterise, and perhaps caricature, the way that the two are normally related in mainstream research, including much Musicology, is it not clear that output is done before impact is begun, that output requires researchers’ work and impact generates listeners’ and readers’ pleasure, that output accumulates energy and impact expends it (or indeed the opposite), that (to put the matter in terms amenable to funding bodies) output is earning and impact is spending (or indeed the opposite)?

No. I do not think that it is that clear with respect to the way in which practitioners of AR undertake to pass between output and impact or to incorporate the latter into the former. The very fact that the question at the end of the previous paragraph above can be reversed (the ordering of “what earns” and “what spends”) suggests that the problem lies in the framing of the question, not in its terms. After all, the boundaries between output and impact are somewhat more permeable in AR than they are in mainstream music research. Indeed, this permeability is a central moment of AR, especially for its practitioner, for whom the openendedness of the activity is paramount. It is thus important to maintain the openness of the “passages” in AR. One way of configuring these passages is offered by Jean-François Lyotard. Re-reading Kant’s critical philosophy, in which the issue of how to relate, synthesise, or at least reconcile, the three faculties of reason is a central problem, Lyotard takes up and develops Kant’s concept of “passage” as a means of navigating around what he terms the “archipelago” of phrases.

Lyotard introduces the concept of passage with a nautical metaphor: sea exploration. “Each genre of discourse would be like an island; the faculty of judgement would be, at least in part, like an admiral or like a provisioner of ships who would launch expeditions from one island to the next, intended to present to one island what was found (or invented, in the archaic sense of the word) in the other, and which might serve the former as an “as-if intuition” with which to validate it. Whether war or commerce, this interventionist force has no object, and does not have its own island, but it requires a milieu – this would be the sea – the *Archipelagos* or primary sea as the Aegean was once called.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Within this passage there is a kernel of a heuristic idea for how we might configure the passage from output and impact in AR insofar as this has some kind of direct, transformative impact on the practitioner herself “before academia”. The basic point underlying the rest of this essay is that ‘output’ and ‘impact’ are, to adapt Lyotard’s terms, separate genres of academic discourse (separate islands), with separate modes of engagement with each other, separate values, and separate trajectories (trading routes). And the key point, as Lyotard notes, is that judgement – essential, of course, both to AR and to the musical life of its practitioner, and the key means of navigating between islands – is nomadic, dynamic, always provisional, forever launching expeditions, continually trying out judgements, and always moving on towards the next island on the horizon.

**3 Commitment**

When the logic of Musicology and Performance Studies (often acolytes for scientific disciplines) is transferred across into the discourse of AR, as often seems to happen in research policy, despite well-meaning rhetoric about wanting the newer discipline to flourish *sui generis*, then the foundations of AR are articulated with certain *commitments*. These include the following five commitments: (1) to a visual logic in which the passage between output and impact can be seen clearly and hence in which interpretations of the passage can be seen to adequate more or less to their objects; (2) to a discourse of purity which claims that greater clarity and transparency in AR’s outputs is good; (3) to a logic of performativity in which there are no loose ends in the relationship between output and impact; (4) to a logic of performativity in which the relationship between output and impact is neatly reciprocal; and (5) to a late capitalist logic that equates productivity and success. Such commitments have been honoured in various ways, as politics, ideologies, and methodologies have been debated and written into practice, as the global archive of AR work has begun to accumulate and fold back in upon itself, and as artists have taken matters into their own hands rather than wait for help from institutionally sanctioned models.

Such commitments, however, tend to force the passage between output and impact in a particular direction, to reduce the cartographic distinction between islands and suggest that different islands can be governed in the same way, from a third neutral port. In practice, given the institutional stakes of AR in HE, this means that output often gets subsumed into impact, because the latter is more media-friendly, and the material resistance of the output tends to get ignored. Such commitments therefore have their limits. For a start, it remains an open question whether the practitioner of AR should concern herself with clarifying and defining the relationship between output and impact in each separate project. For output and impact make different kinds of demands on her, and require different kinds of value judgements. For example, while the HEFCE formal guidance on how impact should be assessed incorporates the idea that “The impact of research may be foreseen or unforeseen. [and that] It can emerge as an end product, but can also be demonstrated during the research process”,[[4]](#endnote-4) little attention is actually paid to these possibilities, and to their consequences for the practitioner herself – a far cry from the ways in which outputs are defined.

In this context, perhaps the practitioner might consider adopting the following alternative set of three commitments: (1) to retaining an essential moment of indeterminacy in the relationship between output and impact; (2) to broadening the definition of artistic success to encompass more of what is usually classed as failure or as experimental (because of a category error whereby AR is judged as if it is ‘pure’ performance); (3) to refusing to simply describe outputs with impact vocabulary as if that itself creates impact. As Lyotard emphasises, the point is to find passages “between these *heterogeneous* genres”,[[5]](#endnote-5) not to reduce things to single activity. These three commitments sit awkwardly alongside much of the recent rhetoric of UK research policy, and run broadly counter to the way that impact is assessed in the UK. The commitments are concerned, rather, with helping the practitioner to realise that she does not need to commit to a particular passage from output and impact in order to be productive; the one does not necessarily require the other, and the incorporation of impact into outputs can remain relatively indeterminate. In fact, perhaps the practitioner should expend less energy determining (1) whether or not her outputs are likely to have a certain kind of impact, (2) who precisely will be implicated in impact activity, (3) how stakeholders should engage with the impact process, and (4) how the impact will have a life of its own. Perhaps she should expend more energy doing AR and producing outputs. The avant-garde-like indeterminacy and uncertainty at the heart of AR certainly needs to be allowed to flourish if the level of musical engagement in the research project is to remain at the highest level, and committing in advance to a particular mode of incorporating impact is an obstacle to this, as it forces the passage between islands in the musical archipelago in a particular direction and authorises only certain kinds of traffic between islands. In this particular respect, AR distinguishes itself from Musicology and even from a fair amount of Performance Studies.

4 Indeterminacy

This *indeterminacy* at the heart of AR, and hence also at the heart of how the practitioner manages the passage between output and impact, is more persistent than the indeterminacy in Musicological research, where, sooner or later, it is managed out of existence, either during peer-review or during dissemination. The indeterminacy is that of artistic practice in general, the sense of venturing into the unknown in artistic practice, whether or not research is involved.

Thus, within cultures of performing that are dependent on the acquisition and display of mastery and expertise, as is the case in conservatoires, and within cultures in which the personal existential example of the pedagogue herself – her leadership – plays a huge and generally positive role in the progress of her students, it is undesirable to attempt to manage impact and output separately as if the passage between them is one-way only, usually and normatively from output to impact. This is especially the case when encouraging staff to undertake research into their own pedagogy, as with some AR. It is more productive for the practitioner to be encouraged to acknowledge the indeterminacy of the passage between her outputs and their impacts, and to problematise the notion that her outputs necessarily come before their impacts and that outputs are completed in advance of impact. Sometimes it is even productive to resist research-driven notions of clarity and to allow outputs and impacts to merge artistically into one another – to inhabit the passage between the two. This is because, for the practitioner undertaking AR, outputs, whether written or sonic, are not objects: they are processes (just like impact, of course), with all that this implies of openness, ongoing development and differentiation, refinement and revision – and of course sometimes rejection. Outputs come with a general demand to be worked through in a manner that is more complicated than simply the demand that impact must be generated beyond academia. Critical judgement, Lyotard says, “appears as a force of ‘passages’ between the faculties, to the point where it is accorded a major privilege in the area of unifying capacity”.[[6]](#endnote-6) Outputs give feedback to the pedagogue-practitioner that ranges from the critical to the confirmatory to the ridiculing and the revelatory, and that – sometimes unbeknownst to her – transforms her musical practice in all sorts of interesting ways.

The point of this claim is neither to undermine or slow down the impact agendas driven by funding bodies and academic institutions nor to sever the link between impact and funding. The point is that attempts to minimise or ignore feedback in the drive for socially useful outputs, and attempts to eradicate indeterminacy from the passage between output and impact (recall what is specifically excluded from the evaluation of impact),[[7]](#endnote-7) alienate the practitioner and prevent her from learning existentially from her own research. This would be undesirable not just for the success of practitioners and conservatoires but for the onward march of human culture.

For the essential quality of AR is not mastery or success. It is having a direction in mind, but setting sail for the open sea and following the sea breeze. Sensitivity to the singularity of the materials at hand, to what they demand of the practitioner and to how they sometimes resist manipulation, is more important than insisting on a pre-determined route through the material towards a static goal. This means that navigating the passage between output and impact will be determined more by the output and its material affordances than by the ways in which impact can be set in motion: the practitioner should feel guided by feelings that she might apprehend but not comprehend, and by intuitions that might arise unexpectedly from the situation, from the subtle changes brought about with the tides. Lyotard puts it as a question: “if no guiding thread leads the way for the judgment’s expeditions, how can the judgement find its way amid the labyrinth of passages?”[[8]](#endnote-8) In a sense, then, this means that the practitioner’s mode of travel is by sail rather than by outboard motor; it is drawn along by the dynamics of the natural environment rather than forcing a technologically driven path through everything it comes across. The feeling is essentially that of waiting: resisting the desire to jump ship too quickly onto the shore of another island in the assumption that life on the new island is the same as where she has just sailed from. Thus, there is no quick answer to the ongoing question of how she might incorporate impact into her outputs without being blown off course – away from artistic matters. Between islands there may or may not be a “guiding thread”,[[9]](#endnote-9) and this forces the practitioner to develop ways of thinking and modes of practice that are open-ended, flexible, and adaptable to the contingencies of what the material suggests along the route, as she works her way towards outputs.

5 Incorporation

What might this mean pragmatically? How might AR practitioners avoid *incorporating* impact into output too aggressively or too quickly? Recall Lyotard’s point that “There is no unity to language; there are islands of language, each of them ruled by a different regime, untranslatable into the others. This dispersion is good in itself, and ought to be respected. It is deadly when one phrase regime prevails over the others.”[[10]](#endnote-10) Output and impact are different phrase regimes, different languages, and they need to be kept separate, not incorporated automatically. Colonising islands should be avoided.

Incorporating impact into output tends increasingly to determine Musicological research agendas (and of course research in scientific disciplines even more), and to be built into research projects from the start in order to get funding. Forcing impact and output into ever closer proximity (chronological and epistemological) by reducing the role of the passage between them both places the practitioner into ever closer proximity to her stakeholders (generally a good thing) and empowers stakeholders to determine certain aspects of the AR (much more complicated). Outputs tend to be targeted for assimilation into the discourse of impact, betraying a residual desire for mastery that is a quite different matter to (and often oblivious to) the expertise associated with AR.

In this context, navigating the passage between output and impact creates the potential for three types of conflict to arise – personal, institutional, disciplinary – especially while there is an ambiguity about who guards the open waters, about who owns the practice of AR (practitioner or stakeholder?). First into the water is usually output, and hence impact often arrives fighting to catch up and defend its own discursive space and repel accusations of being behind the times, of having already missed what is essential about the artistic output. The essential components of output, after all, are often born “before academia”, before the intervention of impact. They come seeking a peaceful epistemic commerce with impact, not capture and assimilation by a marauding vessel. Nautical metaphors apart, there is certainly something troubling about defining the passage in AR between output and impact, though this certainly does not mean that it is futile to seek greater clarity. It is simply that practitioners need to be pragmatic about the real purpose of defining the passage between output and impact, of mapping the waters between their respective islands. Who is it that really benefits from clarity?

6 Conclusion

The question, then, is this: how can the practitioner manage the passage from the output resulting from AR to the impact that it affords? How can impact be incorporated gently and slowly into her outputs without threatening (1) her practice and (2) her position in HE? Or, “how are passages to be prevented from becoming forcings?”[[11]](#endnote-11)

Rather than concluding that the passage between output and impact must be defined as a formal process that may or may not be navigated according to certain maritime protocols, we can suggest that there is a more fluid and pragmatic way of navigating. Output and impact leak into each other; both embody elements of indeterminacy; and their reciprocal cross-contamination is indeterminate and unpredictable: it can be modelled but not guaranteed. This means that, pragmatically, we should probably sign off with a temporary conclusion, reflecting the current disciplinary status of AR, and couched as a loose imperative: *anchors away!*

1. HEFCE, REF 02.2011, *Assessment Framework and Guidance on Submissions*, §140, emphasis added [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. HEFCE, REF 01.2012, *Panel Criteria and Working Methods*, §102 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 130-131. C.f. Jean-François Lyotard, *Enthusiasm: The Kantian Critique of History*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 11-19 (a shorter version of the text in *The Differend*). C.f. Michael Naas, ‘Lyotard Archipelago’, in Claire Nouvet, Zrinka Stahuljak & Kent Still (eds.), *Minima Memoria: In the Wake of Jean-François Lyotard* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 176-196 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. HEFCE, REF 01.2012, §83, emphasis added [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Lyotard, *The Differend*, 130 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Lyotard, *The Differend*, 130 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. HEFCE, REF 02.2011, §143 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Lyotard, *The Differend*, 135 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Lyotard, *The Differend*, 134 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Wittgenstein “After”’, in Jean-François Lyotard, *Political Writings*, trans. Bill Readings & Kevin Geiman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 19-22 at 20 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Robert Harvey, ‘Telltale at the Passages’, *Yale French Studies* 99 (2001), 102-116 at 107 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)