The Travelling Mindset: A Method for Seeing Everything Anew

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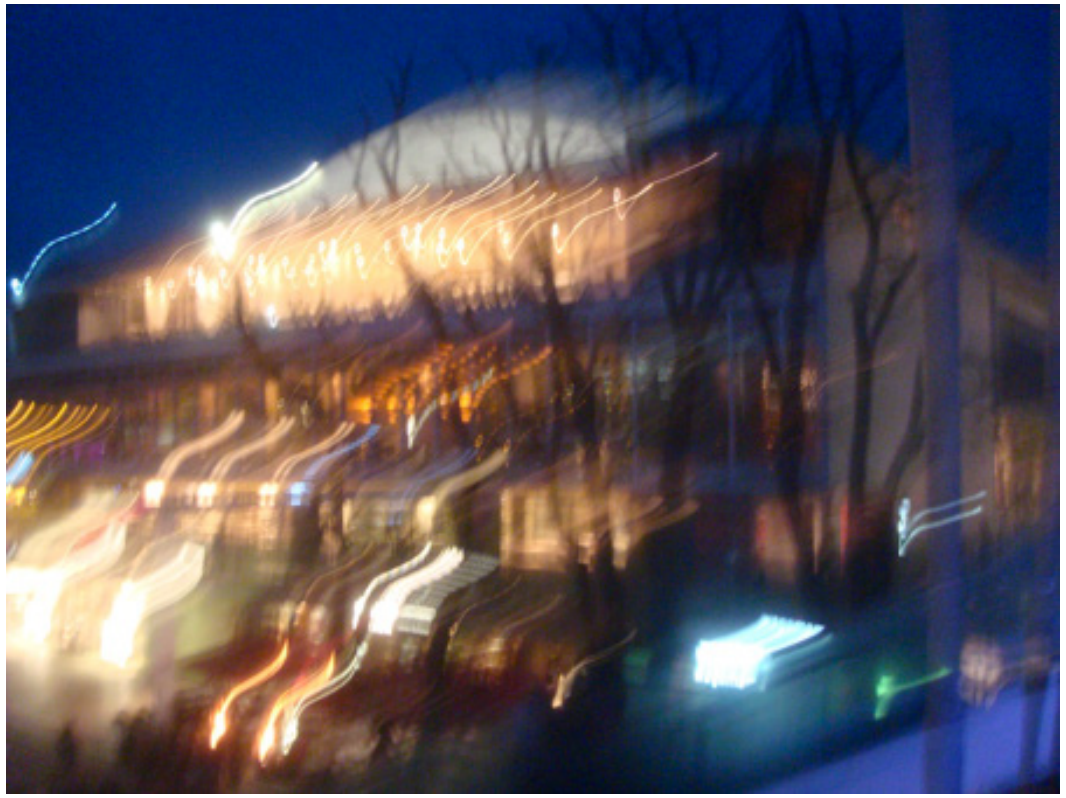
All too often as artists and musicians we take the spaces which we inhabit for granted. We believe that we know all we need to know about a place, event, or situation because of long acquaintance, and therefore unthinkingly accept the expectations, ceremonies or behaviours associated with them. However, this stance could be questioned. What if instead we adopted the 'travelling mindset'[1] suggested by the 18th-century French 'armchair philosopher' Xavier de Maistre? Might this enable us to begin to see familiar things anew and perceive things differently? Walking is a good way to help train oneself to use this travelling mindset. How, by taking a walk, might we learn this technique for observing our surroundings, and thereby perhaps learn to reconsider the often controlled and managed spaces in which we habitually operate?

Our walk took place along the south side of the river Thames, the cultural quarter of London known as the South Bank. It began at the Tate Modern museum with a stroll through the galleries, and continued on to the Royal Festival Hall for a short early-evening concert of classical music.[2] It was late afternoon and we met in the vast Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern. This cathedral-like industrial space, with its smooth concrete sloping floor and dark steel girders, rising to skylights 35 metres above, houses the Tate Modern's rolling exhibition of larger sculptural pieces and art installations. I was there to lead a walk based on the theme of 'Temporality and Space in Art and Music', and was joined by practitioners of music and the arts – academics and post-graduate students from the Royal College of Art and the Royal Academy of Music. The themes I was drawing out centred on the different types of spaces in which art and music are prepared for and exhibited - the spaces and the teleologies of these art forms affect us differently, both as practitioners and observers.[3]

At an art gallery, as a member of the viewing public, you are free to move through the space, you can walk at your own pace. You can choose the order in which you see things. You can stand and linger, looking closely at the details of the brush-strokes or sculpted lines, or you can walk straight past a piece. You vote with your feet – *you* create the tempo. There are, of course, instances where this is not the case, for instance when people stand in your way, or in the case of performance art - I heard someone say at an exhibition recently 'that's the problem with video-art: it takes time to watch it.' At a concert, once the music starts, you are committed – you have no freedom to walk past something like you do in a gallery. If you find you don't like it, or you've heard it before and don't feel like experiencing it just now, you're stuck. The thing is, music takes *time*: it unfolds, it develops, it is structured to be listened to from start to finish, and in a live concert setting you are compelled to do just that – stay and pay attention. Does this put people off taking a risk with classical music they're not sure they will like, or classical music they don't know at all? Perhaps. However, music does have a magical quality of capturing your attention, and even when your mind wanders, it is free to do so, accompanied by the sounds you are hearing. It is a different kind of freedom – one you can take advantage of whilst sitting in your seat, hearing new or familiar sounds.



These were some of the subjects that we were considering whilst walking. But why, one might ask, would a group of artists and musicians be taking a walk at all? What has walking got to do with it? Wouldn't we be better off to stay in our practice rooms and studios, surrounded by our instruments, tools, and materials, and just keep working? Maybe not. Perhaps there are times when this just won't suffice. Perhaps sometimes we need to get up, go out, see something else, get a different perspective, get our minds thinking along unexpected tracks. There are many different kinds of walk that one might embark upon. You can walk to get from A to B; you can walk to think through a problem; you can walk to recharge, to combat lack of inspiration or depression - what Vincent van Gogh called 'the meagreness';**4** you can walk to clear your mind, often coming to some solution without having been consciously thinking about it - Barbara Ueland in her book *If You Want to Write* calls this 'moodling'**5** - it helps the sediment to settle in your mind, leaving you with some clarity; you can walk for enjoyment, thinking of nothing at all except the act of walking and being; or you can walk to observe with curiosity the details around you. Many musicians, artists, and writers have walked to help them get ideas and work through problems. I recently came across a piece about walking by Will Self in which he quoted Nietzsche who said 'I never trust an idea that didn't come to me on a walk'.**6** van Gogh was an avid walker and observer,**7** Charles Dickens walked the streets of London every day gathering material for his stories,**8** and Ernest Hemingway walked around Paris to help him think.**9** Virginia Woolf used to walk, once citing the desperate need of a new pencil as the excuse to leave her desk and refresh herself by treading the streets of London:

> No one perhaps ever felt passionately towards a lead pencil. But there are circumstances in which it can become supremely desirable to possess one; moments when we are set upon having an object, an excuse for walking half across London between tea and dinner […] when the desire comes upon us to go street rambling the pencil does for a pretext, and getting up we say: 'Really I must buy a pencil,' as if under cover of this excuse we could indulge safely in the greatest pleasure of town life in the winter – rambling the streets of London.[10]

Despite these many reasons for walking, and despite the ostensible theme of my walk, my *main* aim for this walk was actually to propose a *mindset* for walking, a possible *way of seeing*, a method for *observing*. It's the *how* we're looking at things that I want us to focus on, and going for a walk is an ideal way of practicing this method for perceiving the world around us. As artistic practitioners, be it in the arts or in music, there is of course the act of making or doing, in which we are nearly constantly engaged, so much so that we might often no longer be able to see the wood for the trees – we're always so busy *doing*. But how might we capture that process, in order to be able to look at it more objectively and learn something from it? To be able to do this is especially important to academics or postgraduate students engaged in research into their own artistic practice (often known as practice-as-research or artistic research), but it can also be very useful as a teaching tool, or as a way of developing one's awareness of one's own practice. Awareness of our environment enables us to look at music or art as social practice, and to look at what we do and the spaces we inhabit more objectively, to see how they actually influence us and our creativity.

To achieve this level of objectivity with regards to something so familiar, we might think about studying our own practice as if we were anthropologists or ethnomusicologists studying the daily life, cultural practices, or music-making traditions of a community in an unfamiliar faraway place such as a remote African village or the Amazon rainforest.[11] Traditionally these researchers journey to foreign lands and their fresh view and objective stance come as a matter of course; it is an integral part of their method to approach their field-work subjects with openness, a lack of judgement or preconceived ideas, and to try to view and understand the situation from the point of view of the people they are studying. You might wonder why we might need to emulate this kind of work when thinking about music or art. But the fact is that the techniques we need to employ are very similar. Their journey takes them to an unfamiliar place, but we need to try to see our immediate surroundings as if they were far away, unfamiliar, and strange. A painting or photograph, or a recording of music, are fixed and can be looked at or listened to and examined repeatedly. Live performance events, or our own artistic practice, are fleeting, so we need different techniques to analyse them. We need other ways of capturing these processes in order to be able to examine them self-reflexively. There are several tools we can use to capture creative processes in action, and anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have used these for a long time: various forms of experiential writing, including practice or work diaries, reflective commentaries, notes from lessons or other interactions; and fieldwork observation, field-notes, or interviews with people with whom we work. We can also capture documentation of our experiences through audio or video recording.

There has been a marked increase in this kind of approach to studying classical music in the last decade or so.[12] Some time ago Jonathan Stock[13] called for further work to be done in this area, explaining why those working in the tradition of Western Art Music would benefit from borrowing ethnographic techniques: 'It is self-evident that music is more than simply sets of sounds […] Music is process as well as product, an arena for both social action and personal reflection'.[14] He quotes Anthony Seeger who writes that music is 'emotion and value as well as structure and form.'[15] Stock continues: 'The musicologist that analyzes what musicians and others actually do on particular musical occasions, and how these individuals explain what they do, is likely to gain enlightening perspectives on the sounds that emerge.'[16]

Ethnographies of music colleges have been written by Bruno Nettl[17] and Henry Kingsbury,[18] and the further growth of research in this area is evidenced by the work of Stephen Cottrell,[19] Stephanie Pitts,[20] and the publication of the special issue of *Ethnomusicology Forum* on 'The Ethnomusicology of Western Art Music', edited by Laudan Nooshin (and subsequently published as a collected edition).[21] I would urge anyone to look at these sources in order to get an idea of what the possibilities are in terms of thinking and methodologies – it quickly becomes quite clear that these ideas can easily be employed across disciplinary boundaries. Another useful volume, *Shadows in the Field*, contains several articles which offer insights into how to undertake this type of research.[22] These authors offer suggestions as to how to write up observations, how to be self-reflexive in one's research, and techniques for dealing with problems of advocacy, anonymity, representation, and interpretation when writing up one's findings.[23] The work of Anthony Seeger has helped me to think about the researcher's place in relation to his research subjects,[24] and Gregory Barz[25] offers a useful model of a trinity of ethnography, describing the flow of ethnographic research as: 'Field research (Experience) – Fieldnote (Reflection) – Ethnography (Interpretation)'[26] Barz also suggests that:

> Field research is performed […] Fieldnotes are for many ethnomusicologists an essential aspect of knowing; they are not only critical in determining what we know, but also illustrative of the process of how we come to know what we know. […] fieldnotes inscribe action while simultaneously affecting and reflecting that action […] The process of writing notes in the field presents a significant opportunity to pivot between experience and understanding, explanation and knowing.[27]

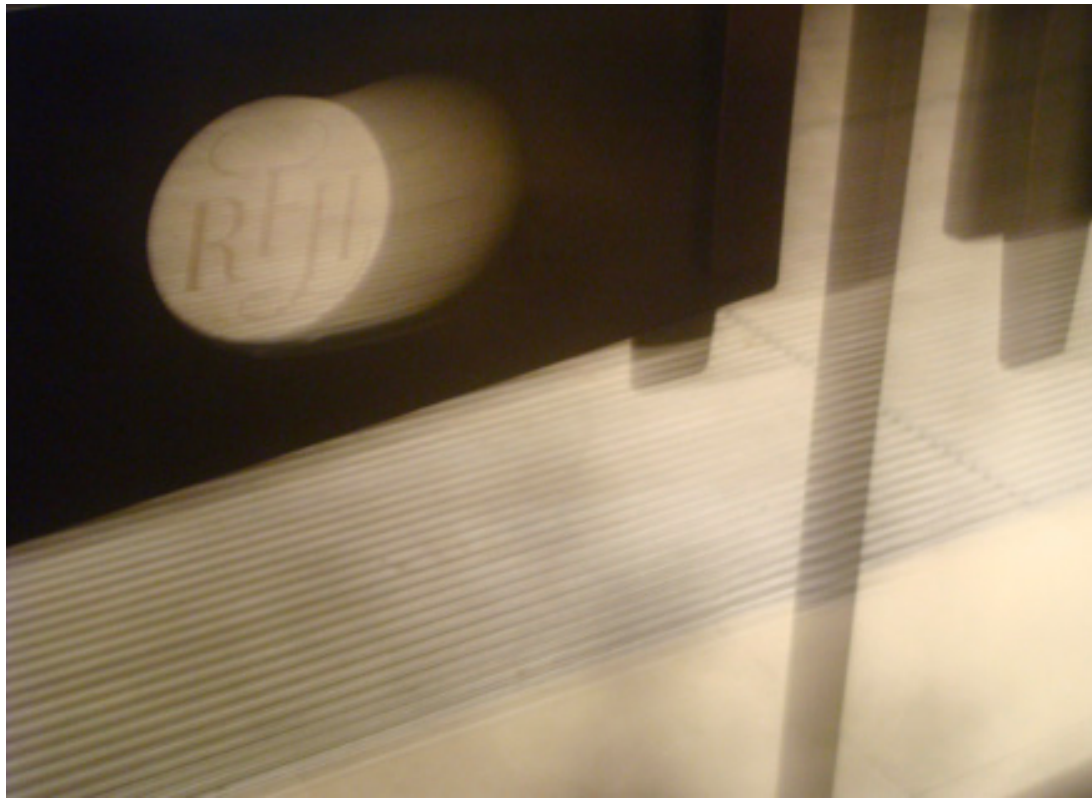
So the question now is: how can we as artists and musicians (or in fact any kind of thinker or practitioner) train ourselves to do this kind of work? If ethnography is a 'scientific description of the races of the earth', and 'ethnomusicology is to make a study of music […] in relation to the culture in which [it is] found',[28] my own definition of an ethnography of classical music or of artistic practice more broadly conceived is to look at something incredibly familiar but opening your eyes and mind and *trying to see it as if for the first time*. Bruno Nettl calls this doing 'ethnomusicology at home', by looking 'at the familiar as if it were not, at one's own culture as if one were a foreigner to it.'[29] He sets up the example of an 'extraterrestrial ethnomusicologist from Mars'[30] appearing in a cultural institution, with no prior contextual knowledge of the milieu being observed.

If you're going to examine your own practice in this way it helps to be at once subjective and objective, to be on the inside looking out and on the outside looking in, reflecting on your own practice, being self-reflexive, *by looking at everything anew.* We could take as inspiration someone who tried this in the late 18th century. Xavier de Maistre, an aristocrat and army officer, was once confined to his apartment for several weeks as punishment for engaging in illegal duelling. His movements thus restricted, he began to think about travelling, and his musings became a book called *Journey Around My Room.*[31] Remaining in his room, attired in his dressing gown, he took a journey from where he sat. He advised this as a method of travelling that might be 'infinitely more practical' for those neither 'brave nor […] wealthy'. He 'particularly recommended room travel to the poor and to those afraid of storms, robberies, and high cliffs'.[32] De Maistre exclaims:

> What a grand resource this way of travelling will be for the sick! They won't need to fear the inclemency of the air and the seasons. As for the cowards, they will be safe from robbers; they will encounter neither precipices nor quagmires. Thousands of people who, before I came along, had never dared to travel, and others who hadn't been able to, and yet others who'd never even dreamt of travelling, will be emboldened to do so by my example.[33]

He asks us to look at familiar everyday things in the same frame of mind as if we were embarking on a journey to a foreign destination, a frame of mind which is usually much more attuned to the myriad small details of our surroundings.

> Don't let anyone start telling me off for being prolix in my details: all travellers behave the same way. When you set off to climb the Mont Blanc, or when you go to visit the wide open tomb of Empedocles, you never fail to describe the smallest details precisely; the number of people, the number of mules, the quality of the provisions, the excellent appetite of the travellers – everything, in short up to and including the times your mounts stumble, is painstakingly recorded in your diary, for the instruction of the sedentary world.[34]

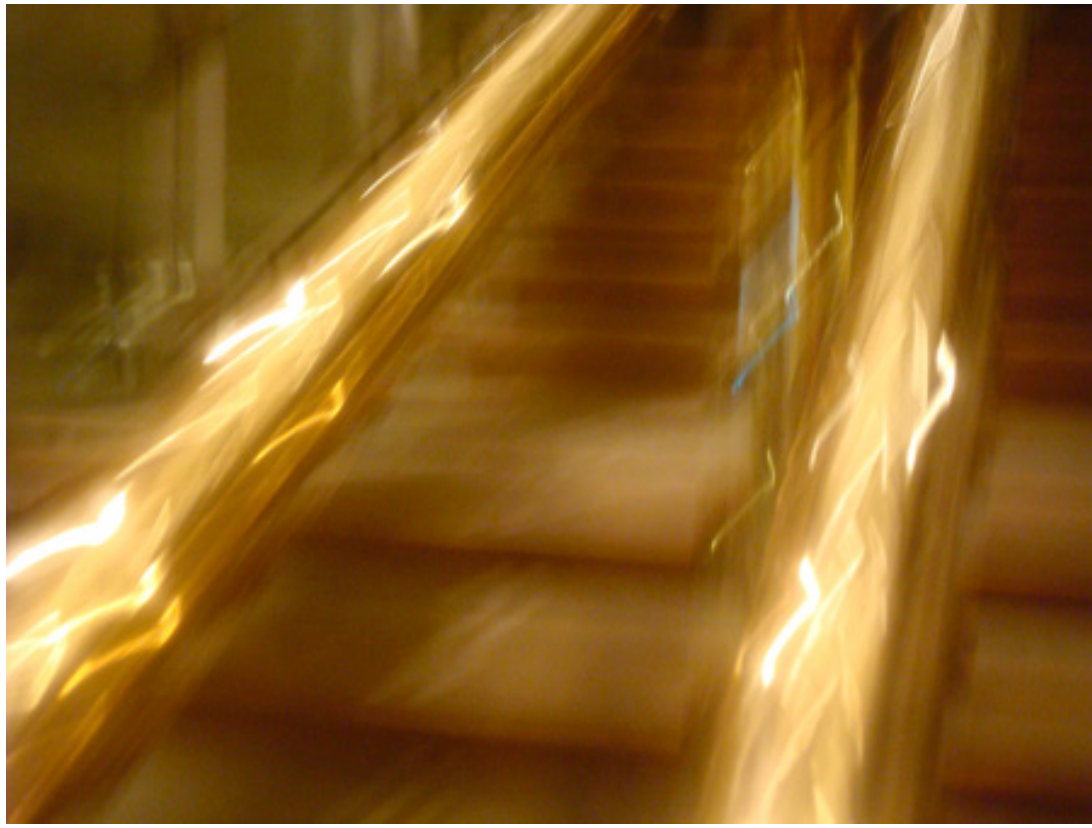


De Maistre begins by telling us that his room is rectangular, extends from east to west, and is 36 paces in circumference. He begins his journey by the table, and sets out obliquely towards the door, soon encountering his armchair, in which he settles comfortably for a time. He advocates being open to following different paths during your journey:

> I will be crossing [my room] frequently lengthwise, or else diagonally, without any rule or method […] I don't like people who have their itineraries and ideas so clearly sorted out […] My soul is so open to every kind of idea, taste and sentiment; it so avidly receives everything that presents itself! […] There's no more attractive pleasure, in my view, than following one's ideas wherever they lead, as the hunter pursues his game, without even trying to keep to any set route.**35**

From his armchair (in which he likes to sit by the fire with books and pens, free to read, write, or dream) he is delighted by the view of his bed, which is 'situated in the most pleasant spot imaginable',**36** and from which he recalls watching the morning sunlight moving along the wall, with the shadows from the trees fluttering on his pink-and-white sheets. He meditates on the scenes that are enacted in beds: 'A bed witnesses our birth and death; it is the unvarying theatre in which the human race acts out, successively, captivating dramas, laughable farces and dreadful tragedies. It is a cradle bedecked with flowers; it is a throne of love; it is a sepulchre.'**37** The objects he encounters along his journey – be it a series of paintings, his dog Rosine, a plate of toast and a cup of coffee, his mirror, or a dried rose - inspire direct descriptions, related memories, moments of reverie, and tangential departures into remote ruminations.

In his book *The Art of Travel*, the modern philosopher of everyday life Alain de Botton explains that de Maistre interrogated the concept of what de Botton calls the 'travelling mindset':**38** 'de Maistre's work springs from a profound and suggestive insight that the pleasure we derive from journeys is perhaps dependent more on the mindset with which we travel than on the destination we travel to. If only we could apply the travelling mindset to our own locales, we might find these places becoming no less interesting than the high mountain passes and butterfly-filled jungles of Humboldt's South America.'**39**



To get a fuller picture of the state of mind that de Botton is describing, we might let him elaborate, though remembering that he is writing in the 21st century, so the examples he uses are contemporary. He asks:

> What, then, is the travelling mindset? *Receptivity* might be said to be its chief characteristic. We approach new places with *humility*. We carry with us no *rigid ideas* about what is interesting. We irritate locals because we stand on traffic islands and in narrow streets and admire what they take to be *strange small details*. […] We *dwell at length* on the layout of a menu or the clothes of the presenters on the evening news. *We are alive to the layers of history beneath the present and take notes and photographs*. […] Home, on the other hand, finds us more settled on our expectations. We feel assured that we have discovered everything interesting about a neighbourhood, primarily by virtue of having lived there a long time. It seems inconceivable that there could be anything new to find in a place which we have been living in for a decade or more. We have become habituated and therefore blind. De Maistre tried to shake us from our passivity.**40**

We as musicians and artists can apply this mindset to all the habits and behaviours that we experience every day but don't question – our own activities and thought patterns, assumptions, learnt behaviours related to our art, the etiquette of the spaces where work is performed or exhibited, or the accepted ways of talking and writing about our milieu. We might ask ourselves if these habits and expectations help to structure our working lives in positive ways, or whether they perhaps restrict our creativity.

In this way, walking or engaging in field-work observation can trigger processes of thinking, making and researching. I do this regularly with my students, whether undergraduates or doctoral researchers. We go on a field trip to an event with which we are intimately familiar - in my case a concert of classical music at a high-profile concert hall. Students of music in conservatories or university music departments have usually internalised the habits and expectations of such an event from having spent well over a decade, in most cases, regularly performing in these kinds of concerts.

By setting out to observe in detail and to confront our ingrained expectations and assumptions we can really help ourselves to see things anew and question the status quo.

Returning to the idea of walking as a way of practising having a travelling mindset, if we choose to go for a walk and question the institutions in which our arts are exhibited and performed, what details might we notice? Some of the things we might look out for are the exteriors of the buildings and the entrances – each façade gives a message: do they feel imposing, inviting, or both? Once inside, what are the liminal spaces like, the spaces in between the outside world and the display space – the foyers, the cafés, and shops? We might look more closely at the exhibition or performance spaces – how is the work presented; is there a separation between art/artist and audience, or are they brought together on the same plane? Who is there - what is the demographic, how do people move and settle? What are the expected behaviours and dress codes, and do people adhere to them? We might imagine the making or creating spaces that precede these presentation spaces – the places where the artists and musicians make or rehearse before exhibiting the fruits of their art. Once in a gallery or concert hall, how do we experience that exhibition or performance – what does the particular medium demand of us as observers and consumers? Are the performers enacting the performance, or is the art displayed, according to our expectations, and if not, how are they subverting those expectations? What is the content of the art exhibition or concert – is it traditional or innovative, does it surprise or bore us, does it successfully meet its stated aims, does it interact with or react to the venue and audience? How does the venue market itself – does the marketing match the sense you have of the place? Is it a purely cultural space, or is there a combination of leisure and culture; do people use it in the way it was intended, or do the public discover other ways of using the space? As you depart, what overall impression are you left with?

This may seem like a long list of questions, but it might enable you to recreate our walk from art gallery to concert hall for yourself or in fact any other walk or process of observation relevant to your particular setting. You can also take this a step further by considering your own practice. By using a travelling mindset, detailed

observation techniques, note-taking, and self reflection, you have a better chance of capturing your thought processes, your artistic decision-making, and the minute instantiations of your craft in such a way as to be able to bring this tacit knowledge to the foreground. These ethnographic techniques can help you to present the ephemeral but centrally-important evidence of your working process in a way that more clearly and convincingly presents its validity and value.

By developing a critical stance towards our own practice, and by being willing to ask ourselves questions about what we do, we might find a deeper and clearer understanding of what we want to articulate as practitioners. By taking a walk through the spaces of art and music, and learning to use a travelling mindset to see things anew, I hope we may all begin to discover a new objectivity, self-awareness, and a new view of space, time, and self.

1 The term 'travelling mindset' is used by philosopher Alain de Botton to describe de Maistre's experimental approach to embarking upon an imaginary journey. Alain de Botton, The Art of Travel, London: Penguin, 2003, p. 246.

2 Photo credit: The images in this article are details from the Tate Modern and Royal Festival Hall. Photographer: Alan Douglas Carruthers, © 2010/2011/2016. Reproduced with permission.

3 My theme of temporality and space is somewhat echoed in the themes of porosity and presence in Richard Sennett's article 'Good Homes for Art', in Kiera Blakey, Music and Architecture: Ways of Listening, London: Theatrum Mundi, 2014, pp. 25-37. http://theatrum-mundi.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/T-M-Publication.pdf - accessed February 13, 2016.

4 Barbara Ueland, If You Want to Write, (1938), Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1987, p. 42.

5 Ueland, 1987, p. 38.

6 Friedrich Neitzsche as quoted by Will Self, 'King of the Road', ES Magazine: Evening Standard, February 12, 2016, p. 26-28.

7 Barbara Ueland, If You Want to Write, (1938), Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1987, p. 21, 42. There is a famous self-portrait of him walking through the countryside near Arles carrying his easel and painting equipment entitled 'The Painter on His Way to Work. http://www.vangoghgallery.com/catalog/Painting/374/Painter-on-His-Way-to-Work,-The.html – accessed April 28, 2016.

8 Peter Ackroyd, Dickens, London: Vintage 1999, p. 163. He opens his short story 'Night Walks' with: 'Some years ago, a temporary inability to sleep […] caused me to walk about the streets all night, for a series of several nights […] In the course of those nights, I finished my education in a fair amateur experience of houselessness.' Charles Dickens, 'Night Walks', in Night Walks, London: Penguin, 2010, p. 1.

9 'I would walk along the quais when I had finished work or when I was trying to think something out. It was easier to think if I was walking and doing something, or seeing people doing something that they understood.' Ernest Hemingway, A Moveable Feast, (1964), London: Arrow Books, 1996, p. 38.

10 Virginia Woolf, 'Street Haunting' (1930), in The Death of the Moth and Other Essays, (1940), London: Penguin, 1965, p. 23.

11 People who have done this include: Anthony Seeger who went to study the music and social organization of the Suyá Indian tribe of Mato Grosso, Brazil; Michelle Kisliuk who looked at the singing and dancing of the BaAka pygmies in the Central African Republic; or anthropologist Nigel Barley who went to North Cameroon to observe the coming-of-age circumcision and rainmaking rites of the Dowayo tribe. (Anthony Seeger, 'Theories Forged in the Crucible of Action: The Joys, Dangers, and Potentials of Advocacy and Fieldwork,' in Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (eds.), Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 271-288. Michelle Kisliuk, '(Un)doing Fieldwork: Sharing Songs, Sharing Lives', in Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (eds.), Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 183-205. Nigel Barley, The Innocent Anthropologist: Notes from a Mud Hut, London: Penguin, 1983/1986.

12 Though music psychologists had also already been working in the area of music-making as social practice

13 Jonathan Stock, 'Documenting the Musical Event: Observation, Participation, Representation', in Eric Clarke and Nicholas Cook, (eds.), Empirical Musicology, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 15-34.

14 Stock, 2004, p. 19.

15 Ibid., p. 19.

16 Ibid., p. 19.

17 Bruno Nettl, Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995.

18 Henry Kingsbury, Music, Talent & Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988.

19 Stephen Cottrell, Professional Music-Making in London: Ethnography and Experience, Aldershot and Burlington, Vt: Ashgate, 2004.

20 Stephanie E. Pitts, 'What Makes an Audience? Investigating the Roles and Experiences of Listeners at a Chamber Music Festival,' Music & Letters, Vol. 86, No. 2 2005, pp. 257-69.

21 Including salient articles by Amanda Bayley, Melissa Dobson and Stephanie Pitts, Tina K. Ramnarine, and Rachel Beckles Willson. Ethnomusicology Forum, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2011; Laudan Nooshin (ed.), The Ethnomusicology of Western Art Music, London and New York: Routledge, 2013. Another useful text which argues for an ethnographic approach is Nicholas Cook, Music: A Very Short Introduction, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 99-101.

22 Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (eds.), Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

23 Such as Kay Kaufman Shelemay and Michelle Kisliuk: Kay Kaufman Shelemay, 'The Ethnomusicologist, Ethnographic Method, and the Transmission of Tradition', in Barz and Cooley 2008, pp. 141-156. Michelle Kisliuk, '(Un)doing Fieldwork: Sharing Songs, Sharing Lives', in Barz and Cooley 2008, pp. 183-205.

24 Both in his article in this volume and in his paper given at the RMA/CHARM Conference, Royal Holloway, University of London, September 13, 2007. Anthony Seeger, 'Theories Forged in the Crucible of Action: The Joys, Dangers, and Potentials of Advocacy and Fieldwork', in Barz and Cooley, 2008, pp. 271-288.

25 Gregory F. Barz, 'Confronting the Field(note) In and Out of the Field: Music, Voices, Texts, and Experiences in Dialogue', in Barz and Cooley, 2008, pp. 206-223.

26 Ibid., p. 215.

27 Ibid., p. 206.

28 For a useful overview of the history of ethnomusicology, see: C. Pegg, H. Myers, P.V. Bohlman, and M. Stokes, 'Ethnomusicology', Grove Music Online, Deane Root (ed.), http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com - accessed April 20, 2016.

29 Catherine Schwartz (ed.), The Chambers Dictionary, Edinburgh: Chambers, 1993, p. 578. The definition of anthropology is: 'the scientific study of human beings and their way of life, the science of man in its widest sense', The Chambers Dictionary, p. 65.

30 Nettl, 1995, p. 11.

31 Ibid., p. 1.

32 Xavier de Maistre, A Journey Around My Room (1790), (Richmond, Surrey: Alma Classics, 2013. The original French title is Voyage autour de ma chambre. He followed this up in 1825 with A Nocturnal Voyage Around My Room (Expedition nocturne autour de ma chambre).

33 de Botton, 2003, p. 245.

34 de Maistre, 2013, p. 4.

35 Ibid., p. 24. The notes for this passage explain that 'The ancient Greek philosopher Empedocles, according to legend, threw himself into Mount Etna (notes, p.138).

36 Ibid., p. 7.

37 Ibid., p. 8.

38 Ibid., p. 9.

39 de Botton, 2003, p. 246.

40 Ibid., p. 246.