

# Go to Hell: Some Reflections on the Role of Intuition and Analysis in Artistic Research

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## Introduction

This essay comprises personal reflections on the practices of artistic research and musical collaboration which have become integrated factors of my identity as a musician. In all of this work, I see myself as a nomad between the art world of contemporary and experimental music and the science worlds that define artistic research in academia.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I will discuss some factors that characterize the artistic and scholarly practice as they have unfolded since I started doing my PhD in 2002, followed by a series of senior research projects. The relation between intuition and analytical thinking<sup>2</sup> is one perspective. However, in my artistic practice, artistic collaboration has always been in the foreground, and I will also consider in what ways collaborative practices can be both better understood and enhanced through artistic research.

## Background

I am a classically trained guitarist. Between 1992 and 2002, I developed a career as a freelance performer of contemporary music. In 1995, I became the artistic director of Ensemble Ars Nova, a leading Swedish ensemble for contemporary art music at the time, with a particular focus on music with electronics. My practice as a soloist and chamber musician was, at this time, primarily focused on commissioning new works from composers in Scandinavia and around the world. What emerged out of this practice was a series of long-standing collaborations with composers, some of whom I have continuously worked with, from the early 1990s to the present day.

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1. I use the sociological concept of the art world with reference to Becker (1982), and I conceive science worlds similarly, hence, as social constructions that are dependent not only on the professors, conductors, and soloists who make it to the headlines but rather understood as a network of relations between institutions and people that is also highly influenced by the development of different technologies. The negotiation of aesthetics is, of course, essential in art worlds, and values may be shared across different art worlds, just as institutions may impact several diverse ones. When I suggest that the artistic researcher needs to have a nomadic identity between art and science worlds, this is related to how artistic practice must be situated, developed, and assessed within art worlds. However, I will argue in this essay that science worlds afford methods and resources that may be beneficial for experimentation and artistic development (see Östersjö 2020a).

2. Mark DeBellis (2009), in a paper discussing the role of intuition in the understanding of musical structures in score-based music, suggests that intuition is “an active process, more plausibly understood as one that brings structured percepts into existence than as the inspection of a structure already present” (125). In four short chapters, Kathleen Coessens and I discuss the role of intuition in musical performance and composition (improvisation is perhaps not discussed but always implicit in the examples we draw upon). We suggest that intuition is an extension of the self through transmodal interactions between embodied layers (a musician’s habitus) and material interactions with instrument, score, and other artifacts. As a result, “intuition partakes in an exchange of inside and outside, imagination and perception, knowledge and action, opening a potential field of interaction (Coessens and Östersjö 2014, 327).

When a new PhD program for artistic research in music was launched at the Malmö Academy of Music in 2002, I proposed a project concerned with the emergence of contemporary performance practices, and how these can be observed in the collaboration between a composer and a performer. My motivation was grounded both in my professional work on the scene of contemporary music, and my concern for how these practices were not being documented, transmitted, or understood. There were many opportunities to study collaborative processes in my professional practice. Thus, when I started out, I decided to document a greater number of projects than could actually be fitted into the final thesis. Some of these were collaborations that had already been ongoing for ten years, like my work with the Swedish composer Kent Olofsson,<sup>3</sup> but also with composers whom I approached explicitly for this project, like the German composer Rolf Riehm. I will return to the outcome of the project below.

An essential component in my PhD was the development of methods for qualitative analysis of video documentation of artistic processes. I intentionally sought to integrate the observation and analysis of the ongoing process with the artistic development, to enhance the dynamics of my interaction with material and immaterial agents. I have since then continued to refine such methods after the completion of my thesis in 2008. This, in turn, is woven into my deep commitment to artistic collaboration as a locus for experimentation and learning processes, that could perhaps best be described through the Vygotskian notion of zones of proximal development (Vygotsky 2012). Or rather, it is the extended interpretation of Vygotsky through John-Steiner's observations of artistic collaboration, which constitutes the model on which I have grounded my analysis of artistic collaboration between musicians.<sup>4</sup> I believe there is also a difference between the knowledge-oriented theory of Vygotsky and the practice-based experimentation facilitated through artistic collaboration, which constitutes the basis for developmental zones in artistic collaboration. Through my PhD project, it became increasingly apparent how such experimental practices could be further enhanced through the combination of artistic collaboration and qualitative analysis. In many situations, further gain was to be found in situations in which the analysis expanded shared understandings of the artistic process.

When I defended my thesis, I had already entered an application for a postdoctoral project which was to take off as an exploration of a rather different facet of my artistic practice. It was an international project looking at musical improvisation in different cultural settings. If my PhD was concerned with interpretation and composition – and approached these two facets of musical practice through a music-philosophical inquiry –, the new project explored a third

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3. As I write, I am dividing my time between a MIDI Chapman Stick – used to control the hyper organ of the Acusticum Concert Hall organ in Piteå, for the premiere of Olofsson's latest output in this collaboration, a concerto for this hyper instrument with chamber ensemble and electronics –, and the final editing of a monograph on musician's listening (Östersjö 2020b). The premiere of the concerto is due in two weeks, on February 3, 2020. This is the latest outcome of a collaboration that now lasted for 28 years. See Östersjö (2008), Olofsson (2018), Nguyen and Östersjö (2019).

4. While Vygotsky studied enhanced learning in children achieved through collaboration with teachers and peers in artistic collaborations, similar processes typically occur between colleagues. In her classic study of artistic collaboration, Vera John-Steiner (2000) takes Vygotsky's theory as a point of departure and proposes that artistic partnerships also build on what she calls emotional zones of development. She argues that "the facilitating role of the social, participating other need not be limited to the cognitive sphere. It is also relevant to the process of appropriating emotional experiences. Developing children, as well as developing adults, expand their affective resources by appropriating the consequences of shared experience. Such a process includes identification, scaffolding, expansion by complementarity, and constructive criticism" (128). John-Steiner's emotional zone of proximal development expands Vygotsky's theory to embrace the central role of empathy and trust in artistic collaboration.

component in my practice: free improvisation. Within the framework of the new research project, entitled *(re)thinking Improvisation*, my colleague Henrik Frisk and I carried out a sub-project concerned with the work of the Vietnamese/Swedish group The Six Tones, which we had formed together with two leading master performers of traditional Vietnamese music in 2006, Nguyen Thanh Thuy and Ngo Tra My. *(re)thinking Improvisation* resulted in a book, edited by Frisk and myself, two CDs, recorded live during the 19 concerts of the event, and a DVD, drawn from the seven days of lab sessions (Frisk and Östersjö 2013).

The laboratory format has been essential for my practice as an artistic researcher.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on the experience of taking part in the Knowledge Lab at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in 2005, curated by Sarat Maharaj, I set out to develop a format in which artists and researchers could engage in dialogical explorations across art and science. The first attempt was the launch of a festival called Connect, co-curated with the composer Luca Francesconi. Just as in *(re)thinking Improvisation*, the heart of the event was a laboratory that ran in the daytime, often centered around artwork presented in screenings and concerts in the evenings. But the creation of dialogical situations built on trust, as an investment in social capital which "enables and facilitates interaction, collaboration, risk taking, experimentation, interpretative leaps", as discussed by Gritten (2017, 253), turned out to be a difficult task. It has taken many years to implement such a framework successfully, and failure is always a possibility. Still, in later years, I have seen many successful examples of how sharing and earnest conversation has taken place within laboratories for artistic research. But again, the central focus in my practice as an artistic researcher lies in an even more intimate format for the creation of an intersubjective understanding of the artistic process, the qualitative research method of stimulated recall.

Stimulated recall is a standard qualitative research method in education, medicine, and psychotherapy. The term was coined by Benjamin Bloom in 1953, in a study using audio recordings of classroom teaching as stimuli, aiming to allow the student to relive the original experience and give an account of their original thought processes. While Bloom made a selection of clips from the teaching situation, Kagan and colleagues (Kagan and Krathwohl 1967) developed the method further by asking each subject to view the entire documentation, stopping to identify moments that required comment. Stimulated recall has been used to study collaborative processes in music-making (Bastien and Hostager 1988; Bastien and Rose 2014). Since 2009, I have sought to develop a methodology built on stimulated recall, which draws out an intersubjective understanding from a dialogue between musicians, a conversation which is structured through the confrontation with the very detail of video and audio documentation of the ongoing artistic work. Initially, the fact that the project we were studying was an emerging intercultural collaboration entailed a need for the creation of such shared understanding, since it demanded a method which avoided Eurocentric and top-down models for analysis. As a result, The Six Tones became the platform from which emerged a listening practice built on stimulated recall methods. Since then, I have sought to bring this practice to many other collaborations (see, for instance, Brooks et al. 2019).

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5. In later years I have been very much engaged in bringing the lab format into the design of PhD environments, in which feedback on artistic outputs can be integrated.

## Music in Movement

In the second part of this essay, I will provide personal reflections on some artistic outputs from Music in Movement (2012-2015), a research project carried out by The Six Tones in collaboration with the Swedish choreographer Marie Fahlin and a number of composers.<sup>6</sup> Building on a perspective on musical creation and perception drawing on the theory of embodied music cognition (see, for instance, Leman and Maes 2014), the project explored methods for the creation of music at the intersection between choreography and musical composition. The core idea consisted in a development of Rolf-Inge Godøy's concept of the gestural sonorous object (2006), a theory drawn from a critical reading of Pierre Schaeffer's typology and morphology of sound objects. Godøy's argument was that, from a perspective drawing on embodied cognition and its transmodal view of human perception, a gestural component can be observed, or presumed, in every sound object. Our question was, if musical perception is transmodal, can musical composition be thought of, not as the organization of sound objects, but of transmodal entities, conceived as sound and movement – as a gesture? This question became the foundation for an artistic quest, which emerged from my work on Rolf Riehm's *Toccata Orpheus* (1991), a composition for solo guitar.

However, one may ask, how could the source for this question emerge from studying a composition for solo guitar? Nonetheless, it was indeed the central reference, together with my interactions with the composer when studying the piece. Little did I know – when I went to Frankfurt in 2004 for my first working sessions with Riehm – how transformative these encounters would be. Encounters between score and instrument, score and a performer's body, and between two musicians: a composer and a performer. Furthermore, the transformative experience was not immediate. Our rehearsals were not so different from any other rehearsal of contemporary solo work. There were issues with how the notation expressed the composer's intentions, down to how certain indicated playing techniques were actually to be executed. Other questions concerned the shaping of the music, and sometimes the composer would resort to metaphor and poetic inspiration in attempts to verbalize their intention. The transformative experience actually emerged, as I will argue further below, through analysis, not just of the process, but also of the score. And this analysis led me to formulate an understanding of musical performance as embodied interpretation.<sup>7</sup>

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6. Music in Movement was funded by the Swedish Research Council, and it resulted in works created in collaboration with the composers Richard Karpen, Pierre Jodkowski, Kent Olofsson, Kim Ngoc Tran Thi, Henrik Frisk, Gerhard Eckel, and the sound artist and improviser Matt Wright. All of these works approached musical performance from an interdisciplinary perspective, situating the compositions in a wider framework of music theatre, film, and installation art.

7. I suggest in my thesis (Östersjö 2008), with direct reference to my work on *Toccata Orpheus*, that the "notion of 'embodied interpretation' implies that we may, for instance, be able to 'feel' the thinking of a composer by trying an original fingering. This is not to say that the 'original' fingering that the composer (may have) notated when writing the piece is necessarily 'better' or, for that matter, more 'authentic'. My point is simply that elements of thinking-through-performing may become accessible for the performer by this indirect interaction through the instrument. As Merleau-Ponty might have put it, here in a paraphrase by the choreographer Maxine Sheet-Johnstone: "movement must somehow cease to be a way of designating things or thoughts, and become the presence of that thought in the phenomenal world, and, moreover, not its clothing but its token or its body" (Sheets-Johnstone 1981, 400, cited here in Östersjö 2008, 277-78).

The first rehearsals took place in February 2004, in the composer's home in Frankfurt. Just as with all other projects in my PhD, each session was documented on video and audio.<sup>8</sup> Very soon, it became apparent that we had very different conceptions of the composition. In retrospect, I believe this had to do with the different nature of the material manifestation of the composition in the score, and its performative identity, which I had yet to come to grips with. For me, *Toccata Orpheus* (see Figure 1) was a complex score of very detailed instructions for sound production.<sup>9</sup> I gradually began to grasp that Riehm conceived of the piece more as a theatre of musical gesture, and that a performance of the piece was to be understood as an embodiment of Orpheus, underpinned by the prose poem, by the composer, which was part of the 18 page preface, otherwise consisting of performance instructions.

Figure 1 / The first page of the score to Rolf Riehm's *Toccata Orpheus* (1991).

8. The qualitative analysis I carried out did not entail actively involving the composers with whom I was collaborating. My interest in stimulated recall methods, which aimed at establishing intersubjective forms for analysis, emerged during my PhD, but I did not begin to test it until 2009.

9. The entire composition emerges from an experimental usage of tapping, a playing technique in which a finger, either of the left or the right hand, strikes a given note on the fretboard. In *Toccata Orpheus*, this gives rise to a particular choreography across the fretboard. The score is action notation, with two staves for each hand. See also this video recording of the piece, created as a working material in the first phase of my work with the composition: <https://youtu.be/Fy-0JKaCz9g>.

The concept of the gestural-sonorous object became an essential analytical tool in my work with the piece. A detailed analysis of the score understood as a structure of gestural rather than as sonic materials, and a conceptual and embodied understanding of the composition became the source for developing a multi-media installation, in which the piece was to be performed (see Östersjö 2008, 256-262 and 273-277). However, although this interactive installation was successful in many respects, my analysis of *Toccatà Orpheus*, through the lens of the gestural-sonorous object, continued to haunt my imagination, and eventually became the source of a series of projects exploring musical composition through gesture.

Each artistic sub-project in Music in Movement was carried out by The Six Tones, the Vietnamese group<sup>10</sup> of which I was a founding member, in collaboration with composers, artists from other disciplines, and – in each of these projects – with the choreographer Marie Fahlin.<sup>11</sup> Music and choreography are deeply integrated into traditional Vietnamese theatre, and we were interested in how these connections could be explored in experimental multimedia work. But, in our very first experiments, we returned to the gestural material of *Toccatà Orpheus*. We first found that the sound-producing movements across the fretboard of the guitar, when performed without the instrument, appeared to contain convincing qualities as choreography. Second, we decided to transcribe the entire composition for the Vietnamese instruments, with the visual movement as the primary source.

Already learning the original guitar piece by heart had been a challenge. When faced with the task of performing the piece without the tactile and sonic feedback from the guitar, new difficulties emerged. Performing *Toccatà Orpheus* is very much characterized by the resistance afforded by the instrument and the unconventional playing techniques. When the instrument is taken away, a new lightness replaces the former resistance. The movement qualities, in performance without an instrument, are sometimes very different, when gravity – instead of the particular tension between body and instrument – defines the nature of effort and ease. Needless to say, when the two Vietnamese performers were to learn the choreography from movement alone and transcribe them to musically meaningful performance on their instrument, new challenges were at hand, which appeared to make the one I had experienced seem rather limited. The learning process was indeed durational, a sometimes tedious struggle with seemingly pointless exercises which demanded joint rehearsals and individual practice spread over more than a year, between winter 2012 and autumn 2013.<sup>12</sup> Such challenging and experimental work would have been inconceivable a few years earlier. The shared experience we had from earlier projects – challenging the framework of conventions which once had shaped our individual musicianship – now gave us confidence and motivation enough to continue the struggle. However, of course, we would not have continued this work had not the initial working sessions in February 2012 been so promising. Already in the very first

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10. The group started specifically as an intercultural collaboration between musicians from Sweden and Vietnam. However, as our work evolved, The Six Tones have become a voice in the development of experimental music on the scene in Hanoi, and the group's identity, as we understand it, has increasingly become more Vietnamese than Swedish/Vietnamese. Still, the group's work is deeply characterized by intercultural collaboration, typically through encounters between the musicians' shared voice and artists from other contexts.

11. My initial interest in her work, particularly when thinking of the aims for Music in Movement, was related with hand gestures, and other restricted materials. The outcomes of our mutual collaboration unveiled a much greater dynamic though, and should be the topic of a separate article, at some point.

12. For a further discussion of this working process, and a performance analysis that underpins the artistic process, see Östersjö (2016). The web repository of the journal includes further video examples.

tests, choreography drawn from the movement sets from a performance of *Toccata Orpheus* provided a distinctive and original choreographic material. But we continued to pursue the question of how to best explore them in the new composition in various ways.

Very soon after the first working sessions in 2012, we also decided to make a motion capture recording of my performance of *Toccata Orpheus*, to quantify gestural components and thereby be able to create new representations of movement in other media. The primary aim was to use this data in a piece by the Austrian composer Gerhard Eckel, which eventually became a centerpiece in the final production. But this installation would not have been conceivable without the conceptual framework we came up with for the piece, again drawing on the poetic and political conception from which Rolf Riehm had drawn inspiration to the guitar composition. This entailed notions on how the performer would embody the experience of performing to the gods of the underworld and the political nature of his rebellion against the “natural order”. When thinking of how to bring forth the violence and fear of such experience, the idea of creating an installation in the dismantled nuclear reactor, R1, at KTH in Stockholm, occurred to us in a project meeting. Marie Fahlin also immediately came up with the title for such a piece, which would start by bringing the audience down the stairs, 25 meters below the ground: *Go to Hell*.

Gerhard Eckel’s installation became the ideal machinic embodiment of this subterranean experience. In the reactor hall, his light and sound installation *Motion Grid* expanded the fine-grained data from the guitar performance to movement across the entire wall where the twelve offices (in the reactor hall, of course, where else?) were situated. There was a speaker and a filtered light in each office, and movement across the fretboard was mapped onto these twelve locations in the reactor hall. The sound of the speakers (in itself very dry, like a Geiger meter) could be modulated by opening and closing the doors. It was a very powerful modulation at that since the speakers would only truly activate the resonance of the space when the doors were open.<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 2 /** The Six Tones in a performance of *Go to Hell* in Zone 9, a former medicine factory in Hanoi, December 2013.

13. This video excerpt provides a glimpse into the performance, with Gerhard Eckel’s *Motion Grid* performing, with a video representing the mocap of *Toccata Orpheus* (slowed down four times in the installation) projected on the opposite wall. In the video, these two images are brought together, although the viewer in the space could never have seen them simultaneously. See <https://youtu.be/SIVECzvXbB4>

Once we had transcriptions of the gestures in *Toccata Orpheus*, the next phase was carried out in sessions with The Six Tones and Marie Fahlin, testing extended improvisations with isolated little components from these gesture sets. These improvisations generated new music on our three instruments (dan bau, dan tranh, and a 6-stringed classical guitar). Eventually, we created music drawn from gesture and composed for the gigantic space of the reactor hall, shaped in collaboration with Henrik Frisk, who expanded the music into a surround system encompassing the entire reactor hall. The further expansion of these choreographies was carried out by the videographer Anders Elberling, and the light design created by SUTODA. Although the piece was conceived of as a highly site-specific composition, it was performed in festivals in Gent and Hanoi the same year.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 3** / Stefan Östersjö in a performance of *Go to Hell* at Zone 9, during the Hanoi New Music Festival, December 2013.

In the final analysis, an essential factor in this process is time. My first rehearsal with Rolf Riehm took place in 2004, and the first installation was created in 2008. Already such a four-year time span is a rare luxury for many artistic projects. But, when The Six Tones met up with Marie Fahlin to undertake new experiments with *Toccata Orpheus*, eight years had already passed since my first rehearsal with Riehm. Further to this, in 2013, when we had developed the entire multimedia performance in the R1 nuclear reactor, the entire process had taken eleven years. In a book chapter, co-authored with Kathleen Coessens and Henrik Frisk (2014), we reflect on the role of intuition in musical creativity, drawing on an embodied and socio-culturally framed understanding of musical practice. The study is mainly concerned with

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14. Any suggestions for dismantled nuclear reactors that would be suitable for a repeat of this production are indeed very welcome!

the decision making in the moment of performance, and we observe that intuition seems to function as a background layer that only surfaces in the opportune moments (which we refer to as Kairos).<sup>15</sup> What is important here, though, is how we also observe how the composition project we are analyzing, a piece for 10-string guitar and an interactive electronic music system, was guided by intuitive ideas “in time-scales other than the ‘now’ in performance” (352). Actually, over several years, we were driven by consistent but not verbally spelled ideas. Similar intuitions guided my work on *Toccata Orpheus* and the ideas which became manifest in the artistic production created within Music in Movement. While grounded in my discovery of an embodied interpretation of the score (hence, emerging from performing), they also held components of analytical thinking. Still, the artistic quest identified in my work on *Toccata Orpheus*, was more an inner vision of a different practice than something that should properly be referred to as an “idea”. Further, when the project took off in 2012, it was not a matter of merely enforcing a singular idea on all the collaborating artists. On the contrary, if there was one basic intuition, it was also grounded in the notion that an embodied musical practice always entails a *praxis* built on collaboration and interaction.

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15. We see the moment of Kairos as the opportune moment, the time of decision making, but also as “an inner appreciation of the conflation of the complex information and interpretation through the senses, the body and the mind, in the knowledge and experience now related to the background. Focus and background, inner and outer experience, unite in the experience of the body which is the material locus of complex interaction” (Coessens et al. 2014, 351-352).

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