Central Queensland University

Judith Elizabeth Brown

Using autoethnography to create narratives to understand musical taste and the experience of collaborative music performance

Abstract:

For the past decades, insightful memoirs have been published by collaborative pianists, providing an insider's perspective on the art of piano accompaniment. This paper draws on my doctoral thesis that used an autoethnographic narrative to explore the experiences of collaborative music performance from the perspective of a piano accompanist. The narrative incorporated creative writing elements such as direct speech and descriptive scene setting to recreate the experience of collaborative music performance, allowing the reader to gain some insight into its creative process, and thus understand elements of musical taste and how this impacts on the experience of collaborative music performance. The paper argues that this methodology provides an appropriate way to examine such subjective experiences and that the use of autoethnographic narrative, incorporating creative writing techniques, can be a useful addition to music research methodologies, particularly in the field of music performance research.

Biographical note:

Dr Judith Brown is Director of the Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music (CQUniversity, Australia). She is a graduate of the Elder Conservatorium of Music, University of Adelaide, where she majored in piano performance, and her doctoral thesis used autoethnography to examine the phenomenon of flow in collaborative music performance as a piano accompanist. A collaborative pianist with an active performance profile as a soloist and accompanist in many different genres of music and performing arts, in 2009 Judith was the recipient of the CQUniversity Vice-Chancellor's Teacher of the Year Award, and in 2010 she received an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Taste – Narrative – Autoethnography – Collaborative practice – Piano accompanist

Introduction

Autoethnography has emerged since the turn of the twenty-first century as a useful methodology for examining personal and collective creative practice (Pace 2012; Bartleet and Ellis 2009a). While it is a qualitative methodology, it is not strictly defined in its structure and allows researchers to present their data in a range of creative ways. In my own experience of using autoethnography in my doctoral study, this was one of my earliest hurdles – finding a way to represent the data to which I could then apply some form of analysis to answer my research questions. I read many books and articles about autoethnography, particularly looking at the work of Ellis and Bochner, whose articles in the second and third editions of the *Handbook of qualitative research* (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, 2005) provided some blueprints for using autoethnography in a scholarly context. Some autoethnographers represent their data in poetry (de Vries 2007), music (de Vries 2006) or art (Holman Jones 2005). Others use journaling that may include written journal entries or electronic journal entries in video or audio formats (Duncan 2004). Many researchers use narrative, often using elements of creative non-fiction in order to unpack the phenomena (de Vries 2000; Bartleet 2009) and thus gain some outsider perspective on what has been an insider experience.

My doctoral study examined the phenomena of flow in collaborative music performance from the personal perspective of the piano accompanist. I presented my data as an autobiographical narrative that made use of creative elements such as direct speech and descriptive scene setting to recreate the experience of collaborative music performance. This article will look at the construction and presentation of this data and argue that this mobilisation of elements of creative writing was an appropriate way to examine the subjective experiences that occur in the moment of collaborative music performance and the effect of musical taste on the experience itself.

The piano accompanist as collaborative artist

The term ‘accompanist’ has been used for centuries to describe the person who provides musical accompaniment, usually on piano, for a singer or instrumentalist (Burkholder, Grout and Palisca 2006). Over the last thirty to forty years the nomenclature has changed and the term ‘collaborative pianist’ or ‘associate artist’ has come into use (Graves 2009; Katz 2009), especially when one considers that the work undertaken by a pianist in the performance of a violin sonata of Brahms or Beethoven, for example, is far from the conventional understanding of ‘accompanying’. It is clear that collaborative pianists need to spend considerable time practicing alone to gain the necessary skills to achieve even a moderate level of competence (Wiest 2004; Nielsen 1999; Wristen 1999).

In the twentieth century, a number of interesting memoirs were published outlining the professional work of some of the world’s most successful collaborative pianists. Gerald Moore’s memoir, *Am I too loud?* (1962), provides a personal narrative of his years of professional work as an accompanist, providing today’s collaborative pianists with interesting tips on dealing with artists of all

musical genres and temperaments. More recently, Martin Katz, an American collaborative pianist and educator, published a volume providing practical advice to collaborative pianists as they tackle their day-to-day work accompanying everything from songs and sonatas to orchestral reductions for concertos and other large-scale works not originally written for the piano (2009).

Aside from these published works, there are a number of journal articles and higher degree theses that examine the role of the accompanist in collaborative music performance. Many of these bear out my own personal experience as a piano accompanist, or collaborative pianist, acknowledging that there is still a shortage of pianists who are interested in becoming accompanists and involving themselves in collaborative activities such as accompanying choirs, solo instrumentalists and singers (Röscher 2003; Wiest 2004). The work is demanding and requires a great deal of pianistic and musical skill (Mansell 1996), a high level of sight-reading skill (Lehmann and Ericsson 1996; Mainz and Hambrick 2010; Wristen 2005), as well as empathy with the performer (Brown 2012; Service 2012; Moore 1962). The collaborative pianist plays a vital role in performance quality (Sheldon, Reese and Grashel 1999) as they must work just as hard as the soloist to ensure that the final product of the performance attains the desired standard. This creative partnership is often forged with minimal rehearsal time, relying on the experience of the collaborative pianist in knowing the repertoire and the genre within which that repertoire sits (Moore 1962; Service 2012; Brown 2012).

Graves' biographical article about professional accompanist Margo Garrett brings to light the excitement of this profession and the important collaborative work that is piano accompaniment (2009). Berenson also writes of the joy of collaborative music making and the excitement of being part of the performance of great musical works (2008). Emerson describes a similar joy with the study and performance of the work of Franz Schubert:

This is why we return to experience some music many times, as it seems to be eternally regenerating. That it can, like the best art, continue to resonate with meaning, not only across successive generations, but across different stages of one's own life seems little short of miraculous (2009: 118).

The aesthetics of music

Music is an art form that draws upon and appeals to the physical, cognitive, emotional and spiritual dimensions of human kind. Music is central to the lives of billions of people 'yet it has no concepts, makes no propositions; it lacks images, symbols, the stuff of language. It has no power of representation. It has no necessary relation to the world' (Sacks 2008: ix). Music has the power to change our lives, shape cultures and change the course of history. During the 1960s, music was tied to social change (Rodnitzky 1999) and it was music that gave voice to the concerns of the civil rights movement that engulfed America and the world during the 1950s and 1960s (Covach). The political and social movements that shape the history of the world continue to be defined by patriotic songs and music that can stir ordinary citizens to great acts of heroism.

The characteristics of great music and great performances of music are often intangible. Is it possible to know great music when one hears it? Davies suggests that great music ‘seems to speak to deep human feelings and experiences so that some works appear to possess not just content but profound content’ (1994: ix). Schmuckler notes that ‘music provides a window into issues of aesthetic preference and emotional responses’ (1997: 266). What aesthetic qualities make ‘great’ music? Is a description of great music also defined by one’s cultural background or education, or can great music transcend issues of personal taste and social milieu and stand objectively as ‘great’ music without the subjective analysis of social positioning and cultural definition? Gracyk provides an answer:

Music’s aesthetic value emerges when one experiences it, yet its rewards are only accessible to persons who possess appropriate cultural capital and to whom such music personally matters. Music’s value is therefore a function of the continuation of a musical culture (1997: 217).

Scruton argues that to understand what makes music beautiful and aesthetically pleasing requires a deep understanding of the component parts of pitch, rhythm, tempo, timbre and form. Through critical reflection on music, he argues that music is more than just a mere collection of sounds. ‘The grouping of sounds is not dictated by their real relations, but is completed by us, in an act that is subject to the will’ (1997: 29). The human interaction with sound is vital in the act of creating and appreciating ‘great’ music. While both rock music and Western art music have many different sub-sets and sub-genres, all musical styles make demands on their performers according to the stylistic conventions of the genre.

Performers today rarely present a performance of music without having spent time in research and analysis to fully understand the large and small-scale structures of the music that they are preparing to perform. In doing so, they are putting into practice the particular aesthetics relevant to their genre and responding to the expressiveness and emotions inherent in the music being performed (Davies 1999). It is, however, the balance between authenticity and order, and deeply felt emotional experience, that is the hallmark of a great performer.

Someone who hammers away enthusiastically at the piano keys without any discipline or sense of order is unlikely to produce music; the player whose fingering and technique are perfect but who lacks all feeling sounds dry and academic. To some extent, at least, we must learn to integrate our feelings and our technique; our discipline and our sense of musical freedom (Green and Gallwey 1986: 195).

Music performance and emotion

Our enjoyment of music is often linked to our emotions, and studies have shown that the more we understand the music we listen to, the more intense that emotional connection can be (Kreutz et al. 2008). Music can produce a profound effect on us. Music performance can express the deepest of human emotions, even though the ‘music itself is inanimate and cannot be said to have emotions’ (Trivedi 2001: 411). Carr adds to this debate by stating that ‘music has emotional

significance, not merely because it causally arouses feelings (which we may nevertheless admit that it does) but by virtue of its intrinsic emotional character' (2004: 266). It is not the origin of sound itself that is of interest, but 'the intentional identity of what we hear in sounds when we hear them as music' (Hamilton and Scruton 1999: 158). Cook explains that in seeking to understand the significance of music in a modern society, we focus on the effects of music on the listener (1989). In attempting to shed further light on the role of the music listener, Hargreaves notes that there are three distinct responses to music that can be identified: *mood/emotional* responses that listeners exert little control over; *taste* responses, which 'reflect long-term predilections, and are reflected in activities such as concert-going and record buying' (1986: 108); and, *preference* responses, which are seen as responses that are less committed than responses dictated by taste. Hargreaves argues that people prefer music that is moderately familiar to them, but after listening to new styles of music repeatedly, can grow to like a new style and hence change their musical preferences (1986: 116). Flowers and Murphy found that music preference was often affected by early experiences in music education. 'What was learned in music education classes (general music, ensembles, and private instruction) had a lasting effect, both in subsequent activities that were selected and in the opinions and attitudes that were formed' (2001: 31).

The complexities of musical stimuli do not allow for a definitive understanding of musical taste and preference, but the role of music as a tool for engaging with the depth of emotions that we experience as humans, demands a closer investigation of experiential psychology, and this can be delivered through autoethnographic investigation.

Writing autoethnographic narrative

Emerging from the postmodern view of the world, autoethnography acknowledges and acclaims the role of the insider in bringing to light an intensely personal and subjective experience so that the relationship between the 'knower' and the 'known' is merged. Schwandt notes that qualitative inquiries pay 'attention to the fine-grained details of daily life' (2000: 190). In the same way that case studies are not generalisable in the sense of a realist ontology (Guba and Lincoln 1996), an autoethnography provides meaning in that it 'provides opportunities for the reader to have vicarious experience of the things told' (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 751). In this case, a study into the phenomenon of collaborative music performance, with its use of a first-person narrative, allows the reader to gain an understanding of the experience through vicariously engaging with the experience from the point of view of the piano accompanist, but there is clearly wide application to other creative artforms and experience.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that uses reflexive inquiry to investigate a subjective phenomenon providing a case study of the self. The process of creating an autobiographical narrative allows the researcher to reflect-in-action (Schön 1983), providing the researcher the opportunity to develop a

multi-layered text. Autoethnography removes the risks inherent in the representation of others, and allows for the production of new knowledge by a unique and uniquely situated researcher, thus offering small-scale knowledge that can inform specific problems and specific situations (Wall 2006; Denzin and Lincoln 2003). Autoethnography privileges the voice of the researcher who is also the researched, as he or she is the individual who has experienced the phenomenon under investigation. The narrative that formed the data for my own study allowed me to both recreate my collaborative music performance experiences for the reader and provide me with the raw data to objectively analyse what happened in the moment of performance. This type of evidence provided me with tangible data concerning an intangible set of experiences.

Bartleet and Ellis suggest that autoethnography is a particularly useful methodology for musicians and performing artists who wish to examine their practice (2009a). The subjectivity of music performance has led to an air of mystery surrounding the nature of the music performance experience. Autoethnography and the use of autobiographical narrative provides a means of creating data to open out this experience to more public scrutiny and add to the body of knowledge about the experience of music performance. Below, I present a section of the narrative that formed a core component of my autoethnographic narrative in my thesis. This section relates to a collaborative performance where I experienced an intense emotional response that related to my understanding of classical music forms and my personal taste for this form of music.

Accompaniment can be a very emotional experience. The close collaboration that grows from this type of musical partnership is seldom spoken in words. The music itself can be a potent force for changing moods, expressing inner emotions and these moments can occur at any time – sometimes in the privacy of the studio and sometimes in performance.

I experienced this feeling when accompanying Muriel, the full-time voice lecturer at the conservatorium, in one of her rare solo recitals. She had a heavy face-to-face teaching load during the term that left little time for her own performance preparation and so, after much encouragement from her colleagues at the conservatorium, she finally agreed to do a recital of art songs at the beginning of the year, before the exhaustion of vocal teaching became too overwhelming. In this program we performed a song cycle ‘Over the Rim of the Moon’ by Michael Head and set of songs by Rachmaninoff. Muriel was a very accomplished singer and the Romantic style evident in the work of both of these composers suited her voice quality and allowed her to tap into rich emotional territory.

Since the Rachmaninoff songs were not part of an actual song cycle or other set of songs, Muriel took the time during the concert to explain the content and context of each song before she performed it. They were all sung in English, rather than the original Russian, and they all dealt with human emotions. During our rehearsals we had not really discussed the backgrounds of each of the songs and had spent our time exploring the musical imperatives of tempo, dynamic, phrasing and attack.

Her remarks to the audience about the third song, ‘O sing no more’, took me

completely by surprise. When Muriel explained that it was written as a lament of a mother for her lost child, I suddenly gained new understanding of the depth of emotion buried in this song. As we began the performance I found myself becoming caught up in the despair of the young mother depicted in the song. My own experience as a mother allowed me to empathise with the story portrayed in these lyrics. Muriel's singing and the exquisite melodic and harmonic language of Rachmaninoff's music transported me to another place and I struggled to read the music through the tears filling my eyes. It is rare to have this sort of intense emotional experience in a performance, as there are often other distractions, most notably endeavouring to play the piece of music correctly, that get in the way of a deep emotional connection. However, this was one of those occasions of intense emotional connection between all the performers and the music itself. The experience lifted the quality of my playing too. Such was the sense of being totally encapsulated by the emotion of the lyrics and the beauty of the musical score.

In constructing this narrative I have drawn on my memory of past experiences of collaborative music performance and, through the process of creating the narrative, I have been able to recall further characteristics of various memorable performance events. An important aspect of the data collection, writing and analysis was 'member checking' (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Stake describes 'member checking' where the researcher is studying a case involving another person (1995). In my study, I used professional conversations (Tillema and Orland-Barak 2006; Orland-Barak 2006; Healy et al. 2001) with some of my collaborative partners as a form of 'member checking' of the data for this study.

Writing a compelling narrative

The narrative that forms the data contains elements, such as direct speech, that are not exact representations of the actual events. The use of the first-person is evident in the narrative that forms the data for this particular study. It is through the use of the first-person voice that I attempt to recreate for the reader the experience of collaborative music performance, and then use this narrative as a starting point to objectively analyse what is essentially a subjective experience. Making use of narrative devices such as direct speech and scenic description helps to create what is, hopefully, an evocative text 'that is a powerful means of conveying complexity and ambiguity without rendering closure' (Sparkes 2002: 11).

An autoethnography is, by definition, a case study of the self. As such, autoethnography, like memoir writing, has faced criticism as a methodology for being 'self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, and individualised' (Atkinson 1997; Sparkes 2000 qtd. in Wall 2006). Subjectivity can also be seen as a weakness of such methodologies, but consistent with a case study approach, this study 'concentrates on experiential knowledge of the case' under consideration (Stake 2005: 444). The type of experiential knowledge expounded in my study was subjective, and Stake acknowledges that this is common in case study research: 'Case researchers greatly rely on subjective data, such as the testimony of participants and the judgement of witnesses. Many critical observations and

interview data are subjective' (2005: 454).

The use of memory in the creation of data has been criticised by realist researchers as lacking in rigour and systematicity (Wall 2006), however, Coffey notes that the process of ethnography relies on the use of memory of the researcher to recall experiences in the field and of the social interactions that were observed by the ethnographer (1999). Autoethnography faces the same criticisms (Muncey 2005: 205; Wall 2006, 2008), especially if the data for an autoethnographic study is created using the researcher's memory. It is well documented that our memories are shaped by our experience and can be distorted over time (Bochner and Ellis 1996; Denzin 1996; Denzin 1997; Van Maanen 1995) and so an autoethnographer needs to use multiple sources to create the data for this type of research in order to create an account that is both believable and useful for research and analysis purposes.

Conclusion

What perspectives can be deduced from this discussion about the role of autoethnography in my research? My own engagement with the creation of an autobiographical narrative to explore particular phenomena in collaborative music performance provided me with the experience of reflection and analysis that has enriched my creative practice and my teaching of solo and collaborative piano. It has also opened doors to further professional practice as I engage with other researchers in the creative arts, including memoir writers, who are also grappling with the representation, and analysis, of subjective phenomena and the vagaries of memory. The narrative excerpt provided in this paper attempts to provide readers with an insight into the importance of musical taste to the level of intensity of the emotional experience in collaborative performance. The autoethnographic narrative form also offers a means of representing subjective data and allows the researcher to step back from the experience to gain some objectivity, allowing them to compare the phenomena under examination with other case studies in the field, and thus add to the particular body of research knowledge.

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