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Unearthing the Artist: An Autoethnographic Investigation

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Abstract

In this paper I address how autoethnography was utilized to research the role and value of arts practice research in Western classical music professional training and practice, by a classically trained professional violinist. As a researcher, I use the philosophy and method of Dalcroze Eurhythmics as a framework to excavate the multiple layers of my own practice and investigate whether there is wider potential resonance for other professional performers. I utilize a mixed-mode approach, combining artistic practice with a number of documenting strategies, in particular using autoethnography as a tool for documentation and reflection. I propose key findings concerning the value of arts practice, and how an autoethnographic journey facilitated the emergence of the self as artist, within the Western classical music culture. The processes of excavation, enabled by autoethnography, attempt to unearth the holistic artist within the performing musician.

Keywords

Dalcroze Eurhythmics, classical music education, string playing, autoethnography, arts practice research

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Unearthing the Artist: An Autoethnographic Investigation

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In this paper I address how autoethnography was utilized to research the role and value of arts practice research in Western classical music professional training and practice, by a classically trained professional violinist. As a researcher, I use the philosophy and method of Dalcroze Eurhythmics as a framework to excavate the multiple layers of my own practice and investigate whether there is wider potential resonance for other professional performers. I utilize a mixed-mode approach, combining artistic practice with a number of documenting strategies, in particular using autoethnography as a tool for documentation and reflection. I propose key findings concerning the value of arts practice, and how an autoethnographic journey facilitated the emergence of the self as artist, within the Western classical music culture. The processes of excavation, enabled by autoethnography, attempt to unearth the holistic artist within the performing musician.

Keywords: Dalcroze Eurhythmics, classical music education, string playing, autoethnography, arts practice research

Prologue

I begin this article with an early poem and subsequent journal entry that was to provide the guiding metaphor for this exploration.

After All These Years

After all these years
I look at the violin in my left hand
My bow in the right
And I wonder how strange it is that
These 2 objects seem so disconnected from my body.
Why? After all these years.

I look at the music on the stand
I wonder where to start
I find practicing so tedious
Still not a clue how to practice
Why? After all these years

Journal entry 6th January 2019

I set upon this research with the sense of embarking on a journey. I intended to explore new lands and bring back the riches I would (hopefully) find. I would return like Columbus with a sack of spuds and tobacco, or Marco Polo with a basket of silk and spices. The riches I would discover in new, exotic lands would add richness to my performance practice and that of others.

In fact, I lived a very different story. I went to no new lands, and I discovered no transformative baubles. Instead, I never left the spot I was standing on when I started. Instead, I had been digging. Down through the layers that had built up over my professional career. Built up through my childhood. Built up over the decades and centuries before I was born, by cultural practice, tradition and assumption. It was an exercise in archaeology.

It took many forms. Sometimes I used a spade, sometimes the most delicate of toothbrushes. Sometimes I knew for what I was searching, sometimes I dug blindly. Sometimes I dug alone, sometimes I was joined by fellow diggers. The dig was usually messy, frequently chaotic and infused with its own momentum.

What I was digging for was myself. The artist I was born as, before the layers were added.

I dug until I had unearthed the artist.

Introduction

I have been playing the violin since I was 4 years old and have built up a successful performing career as a soloist, chamber musician and orchestral player. I have however, always felt that something was missing in my musical life and experiences. I perceived a lack of connection between myself as a violinist and that of a creative artist. I struggled to bring a sense of artistry into the practice room, a lonely space where musicians like myself spend many hours, vastly more than the time actually spent performing on stage. As a practitioner of Dalcroze Eurhythmics, a holistic method of music education in and through movement, I wondered what might happen if I invited both my Dalcroze and researcher selves into this rehearsal space to interrogate this perceived aspect of disconnect. My Dalcroze-self felt artistically fulfilled, so why did I not feel similarly when practicing the violin? What if I could incorporate elements of movement into learning repertoire, connecting my body more powerfully to the music? I needed to find a way to bring a research investigation into the practice room, harnessing my experiences, through sustained engagement in my practice as a classical violinist and practitioner of Dalcroze Eurhythmics (Daly, 2019). I wished to explore aspects of preparedness through the lens of seeking artistic connection, investigating “the relationships between a musician’s body, the body of the instrument and the music that comes out of and through both” (Carless & Douglas in Bartleet & Ellis, 2009, p. 34).

Method

The primary method I drew upon for my research, was my practice and experience as a classical violinist. I have been a professional violinist for over twenty years, with a parallel career as a teacher, coach, and facilitator. In the world of busy professional classical musicians,

there is often very little time for critical reflection and even less time for the collection of data that can contribute to the field of research (Schön, 2017). I used autoethnography to interrogate the impact of incorporating reflexivity into the violin practice room. The art of preparing and practising has been discussed by many writers, often musical performers themselves (Bruser 1997; Gerle 1983; Harnum 2014; Harris 2014), but in comparison to aspects of performance research, such as anxiety, what happens in the practice room is currently under researched. I believe that this lack of critical reflection and gap in the literature is to the detriment of our work as performers and teachers of the next generation of musicians.

Dalcroze Eurhythmics is a holistic, experiential music education method which uses the body to develop an understanding of music through the engagement of our emotional, intellectual and corporeal faculties. It was created by the Swiss musician, composer, and educator, Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950) in response to observing an overly cerebral focus in the training of the music students at the Geneva Conservatoire (Jaques-Dalcroze 1921/1967; Juntunen 2004). He devised music classes where,

...students are freed from the constraints of performance to experience the deep musical knowledge and feeling evoked through movement. When they have discovered themselves as the source of their own musicality, they have much to bring to the practice room. (Farber & Parker 1987, p. 45)

Unfortunately, unlike a concert experience, there are rarely witnesses in the practice room and therefore the mysteries in the solo rehearsal space tend to remain unsolved. Musicians don't usually allow for extra time to critically reflect on their practicing, (in a constructive, non-judgemental way), as finding enough time in their lives to practice can already be a huge challenge. The practice room therefore often remains a place full of secrets. In this investigation I demonstrated how arts practice-based research tackled this enigmatic realm through autoethnography, enabling the performer to research what happens behind the closed doors of the practice room

To obtain a sense of the relationship between Dalcroze Eurhythmics and my violin practice, I immersed myself in both, carefully and methodically monitoring progress and their inter-relationship. I adopted a more structured approach to my practice routine, using a variety of techniques (including recordings and peer feedback) to collect data and evaluate. This rigorous approach to gathering data proved illuminating from the onset of the inquiry, which highlighted for me the necessity of becoming a researcher in the practice studio, and not just being the instrumentalist. Autoethnography required me to dig deep inside, to unearth the underlying artist.

Ethical Considerations

As arts practice research is predicated on the inclusion of human participation, ethical considerations were therefore essential to this work, in terms of my professional practice and a commitment to dignity and respect in my pedagogy and performance interactions. The University of Limerick operates a rigorous ethical procedure from which I received ethical clearance to complete my research.

Data Gathering and Analysis

I chose autoethnography as a key methodological approach for my practice, as it allowed me to turn the investigative lens on how I was spending my time in the practice room and other aspects of preparedness (Cottrell, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Ellis & Bochner,

2000; Muncey, 2005). It permitted me to research using my own voice, and to gain new perspectives of my practice, through the use of journaling, memories, interviews, and other methods, such as audio-visual recording (Chang, 2008; Webber, 2009). I employed all of these documentary tools in order to gather data, which enabled me to interrogate my research question more thoroughly and “to access a new way of knowing” (Daly, 2021, p. 2).

In order to gather data, I journaled throughout my arts practice, autoethnographic journey, seeking what Quaye described as the researcher finding “one’s voice, develop(ing) it, and creatively use(ing) it” in my research process (Quaye, 2007, p. 10). This required me to schedule journaling time into my daily practice routine, which I was quite resistant to doing initially, as I felt that my limited time for practising would be more wisely spent with my violin in my hand, rather than a pen.

Journal entry 3rd May 2019

This is so frustrating!! I hate this new reflective time. I don’t even remember what I started with first today. Oh yes, I did my new breathing exercise with my bow to see if I could connect my exhalation to my down bow stroke. Actually, that was really useful to do as a warmup. I might try it again tomorrow and see if I can keep that connected feeling when I start my pieces as well.

A few weeks later, I wrote the following:

Journal entry 11th June 2019

I find I am now really looking forward to this time during my day. It gives me space to think! I remember resenting this research writing time a while back, but it actually saves me SO much time in the end. I can see clearly what is working well and what is a waste of time. I now know exactly what I want to focus on tomorrow.

My research was process-driven, iterative, and emergent, and to reflect these qualities I used poetry, as an autoethnographic documentary tool. Corresponding to when I play the violin for my listener, I wanted my reflexive and autoethnographic writings to “artistically reveal essence and create a resonance between writer and reader” (Leavy, 2009, p. 51). When my dad died very suddenly a few years ago, I was incapable of expressing my grief. I justified this grieving absence to myself and others by explaining I didn’t want to upset my children, but actually the truth was that I didn’t have the ability to express verbally, the shock and grief that had consumed me. It was then I discovered the power of poetry. I wrote a number of poems during the weeks that followed his death. They just poured out of me. But then the poems stopped. The compelling compulsive urge was gone. I didn’t write again until, on commencing this qualitative inquiry I hit a raw moment during some data collection memory recall work. The river started to flow freely again. I felt I had been unplugged.

Unplugged

*So much easier to express in words
When the rhythm is liberated
And the pulse is free.
So much easier to express in words
When it’s too painful and raw*

*To be conventionalized.
So much easier to express in words
Embryonic snippets bubbling
onto a welcoming page.
So much easier to express in words
When the music can be expressed
As dissonant as I please.
So much easier to express*

I employed ethnographic tools alongside autoethnography to gain additional perspectives in this research (Krizek, 2003). Valuable insights were gained from colleagues through formal interviews and conversations. All participants signed consent forms on commencement of the 3-month research period.

A large portion of the data gathered, centred around challenges the participants themselves experience concerning the art of practice. The theme of the emergence of the self as artist soon became prevalent, dominating the data. There was overwhelming eagerness to take part in the research and many commonalities in response to set questions surfaced. Out of the 15 interviews I conducted, only one person said they felt generally “satisfied” and “artistically fulfilled” in the practice room. Everyone else said they often felt “disconnected”. They were very keen for me to share my Dalcroze ideas on how to experience greater connection and how I applied a “kinaesthetic approach to my practice” (Daly, 2021a, p.6) All the participants agreed that embracing a more Socratic approach in the studio created a stronger sense of autonomy. The data analysis also revealed that the word “improvisation” appeared 23 times. Improvisation plays an important role in the teaching and learning of Dalcroze Eurhythmics and all 15 participants responded that they would like to include this more regularly in their practice. I asked everyone to describe how they felt in terms of being creative in the practice room. Analysis of the data revealed that the response “uncreative” arose 12 times, closely followed by “tedious” and “boring” 11 times. I also asked my participants whether they identified “as artists” when practicing and 13 responses were negative. Nine people summarised their attitudes to preparedness with phrases such as “just getting it done” or “it’s my job” or “stressful to learn all the dots on the page.” In response to a question asked in relation to the impact of being fully present and mindful while practicing, all 15 responses expressed how this was a struggle to achieve, but was crucial for developing a sense of artistic fulfilment in the practice room.

I also invited feedback from fellow researcher and faculty member, contemporary dancer Lisa Mc Loughlin. We were both exploring aspects of preparedness in our separate art forms, and we often met to practice together. As a formally trained ballet dancer, she also was seeking enhanced, embodied connection in her practice. We met weekly during my research period of 3 months to explore ways, through self-movement, to find deeper creativity and artistic inspiration in the practice studio, followed by an immediate writing up session.

*Diane and I have been quietly working together in a way I feel all good collaborations should start, like the fox in the book *The Little Prince* by Antoine De Saint-Exupery. The fox tells the little prince that in order to tame him he must be patient:*

First you will sit down at a little distance from me—like that—in the grass. I shall look at you out of the corner of my eye, and you will say nothing. Words are the source of misunderstandings. But you will sit a little closer to me, every day... (De Saint-Exupery, 1943, p. 21).

In this way Diane and I have been slowly getting to know each other and how we each work and gradually working our way into one another's practice. Silently without words, but through the languages we each understand best.

At first the classical musician was someone I dared not to go near while she was playing her instrument, and all of our previous explorations have reflected this. However, I felt that as I was swept away in the torrent and beauty of Diane's playing, she wasn't getting much from me in return. I asked her if she would be interested in doing more movement, and not just playing, and she said she had been thinking something similar. We began moving back-to-back and immediately I could hear her listening to the movement of my body and me to her and we began our physical exploration. It was thrilling for me to attempt to "make" her play by manipulating her body and then hear this come straight through the violin. She then began to "make" me move through the use of the bow and by more consciously directing the sound. I felt a sense of play and trust through the exploration, both from her allowing me to come so close to her while she was playing and also trust that I can be led by Diane through the music and her movement also. As a starting point for our respective interests in autoethnographic research, I feel this is a very rich source for documentation, and hopefully for Diane also. I feel very lucky to be able to collaborate and research with an artist who not only has a profound understanding of their instrument and a highly refined musical sensibility but also someone who is willing, able, and open to exploring how this movement can come into her body and into mine. (L. Mc Loughlin, 2019)

Within ethnographic and other qualitative traditions, it is not normative to talk about data analysis, but rather the use of terminology around interpretations of performance in juxtaposition with the literature, and the insights that emerge through the research. However, in the literature around arts practice/practice-based research, the analysis of practice and experience often uses the term "data analysis" (Bispo, 2015). My research therefore combines the language of both arts-practice and ethnographic approaches in my use of the terms such as data analysis, autoethnographic reflexivity and interpretive perspectives.

In order to allow the prevalent themes to emerge, I analysed all the journals, interviews, recordings and other forms of data collection, drawing from reflexive thematic analysis (Clarke et al., 2019). This allowed me to assess the dominant themes that emerged across the research. I created tables of quotes and excerpts relevant to the themes combined with the adaptation of colour coded techniques and used the mind mapping software, Inspiration version 9, to facilitate a better understanding of the relationships and connections between the ideas and concepts

Following this process of data-driven analysis, the following key themes emerged: mindfulness, improvisation, creativity and autonomy with an overarching theme of the emergence of the self as artist.

Discussion

Through interviews with colleagues who felt at ease to speak openly and honestly, I discovered that I was not alone in facing challenges in the practice studio. There arose a number of relationships within my research that needed to be explored, including my experience of the traditional non-holistic culture of the Western classical musician, and the somatic-based Dalcroze Eurhythmics approach. Bartleet states that relationships are at the heart of what autoethnographers and musicians do, and arts practice research provided the necessitated space to reflect on these.

By openly talking about them, we present our experiences in a way that others can relate to. Learn from and maybe challenge. No traditional musicological methods would have led me to see this realisation, they're far too distanced and objective. (Bartleet, 2009, p. 729)

Before I started this research journey, I had two professional personas. One was as a violinist–soloist, chamber musician, orchestral player and improviser. The other persona centred around my role as a Dalcroze Eurhythmics teacher. What drew me towards this research was the realisation of a sense of disconnect between these two roles and the curiosity to explore possible fusion of the two. Upon embarking on the journey, I added a third persona, that of researcher.

During the initial stage of research, these personas felt disconnected. I was often overwhelmed by the demands of academia and felt insecure in the validity of arts practice research (Gilligan, 2005). Candlin notes that it “is this overlap between arts practice and academia that potentially makes students, staff and management anxious” (Candlin, 2000, p. 3). There had previously to this research, been little crossover between my violin life and my Dalcroze Eurhythmics educating life. I naïvely believed that the plethora of new skills waiting to be gleaned from Dalcroze Eurhythmics would provide all the answers to my research. I was mistaken.

I began this research journey believing in an idealistic idea of becoming a more connected musician by engaging intensely with the Dalcroze Eurhythmics music education approach and applying it to my practice as a violinist. I anticipated hours of stepping and clapping polyrhythms, developing instant recognition of complex chords and their inversions, transposition of elaborate modulating melodies in solfege, scintillating piano improvisations, and writing about how this would positively impact my violin playing. I envisaged a paper that would articulate how Dalcroze Eurhythmics helped to improve my tone quality, left hand shifting, bow distribution, string crossing and much more. However, the data analysis provided zero references to these elements. In the end, it was not these specific details that had the impact, but the overriding philosophy that lies at the root of everything Jaques-Dalcroze himself believed in - the harmonisation of the whole person in relation to time, space and society (Jaques-Dalcroze, 1930). The findings centred around embodied presence, improvisation, creativity, autonomy and connection between mind, music and body. Palmer articulates how we “live in closer conformity to our souls” by learning to “trust bodily knowledge as part of our inner guidance” (Palmer, 2004, p. 106).

What sprung from the research was not a merging of my disparate personas, but the unearthing of a new one—that of artist (Stinson, 2004), a musician in the fullest sense of the word. As Stinson notes, “To be an artist is to create forms, grounded in lived experience, which express knowledge and meaning—forms that will touch others” (Stinson, p. 165). My feeling of who I am and what I do with my violin has shifted dramatically (Carless & Douglas in Bartleet & Ellis, 2009). Thus, I no longer feel trapped or confined. By drawing on the inspiration the research provided, I have been empowered to create in the practice room. I have rehearsed with and without my violin, with and through movement and creatively, documented reflexivity throughout. I am no longer a violinist, but a musician and artist who plays the violin.

One of the objectives of the training of a Dalcroze teacher is “to develop the student globally, as a social being and as an artist” (Le Collège de L’Institut Jaques-Dalcroze, 2011, p. 4). In the analysis of data, I was struck by the absence of reference to the values of discipline, skill, or technique. Prior to this autoethnographic process, these values formed the foundation of my professional and creative identity. This research finding of artistic unearthing speaks primarily to a redress of values. In observing the data, the scope of my values now encompassed much more; creativity, autonomy, embodied presence, and mindfulness—forming a fertile

ground for my experience in the practice room, my future audiences, my colleagues, my students and myself. This is not to say that discipline, skill and technique were no longer important—rather, I have reached a point of recognition in my practice, where they form part of a richer repertoire of skills and experiences, the impulse towards a fully embodied, creative presentation of music.

My Journal Entry: 19th Feb 2018

It feels like I am digging away lots of dirt that has gathered year by year. I feel like I am being unpeeled and uncovered. But what's underneath? Is there a buried treasure, X marking the spot...labelled "the creative, connected" musician? Underneath it all I just want to serve the music. Maybe I am simply digging for the courage to disregard the rules that I feel hinder this. The self-belief to be creative...for my musical soul to feel free, to breathe fresh air.

At the beginning of this research, I had hoped my experience of practicing the violin would be transformed. However, it was not what I actually do in the practice room that has transformed. Yes, it has changed in many ways, primarily in that I now see myself as an artist, with the synergy between all my previous disparate identities as performer, teacher, researcher and collaborator coming now from the one impulse. This makes my practice time more engaging, creative, and autonomous. However, what has really transformed is me, and what I value—an embodied realisation of the power of arts practice to “touch, affect and possibly transform” the researcher (Palganas et al., 2017, p. 430).

As referred to earlier in this article, in order to gain an external perspective, I interviewed two people who have known my playing for many years and who had been keeping a close eye on my research, the CEO of the Irish Chamber Orchestra, and the leader of the orchestra. I asked them both for their feedback concerning my research investigation, as I was approaching the end.

Gerry: Well, you know I have been fascinated in watching your progress since you began this research. You were always a wonderful player anyway, but I think your playing has changed substantially, so much freer.

Katherine: It has been really exciting to watch your journey over the last few months. You have always been an instinctive musician and a very natural violinist, but by doing this research and undertaking huge musical challenges you seem to have transformed yourself. You have found so many new dimensions as a musician, dimensions that were always there but are now fully embodied. It's like by pushing new boundaries, you have found a new skin... I would definitely describe you as physically more grounded. You own the space when you perform in a way that is new...a really strong intention to express what is yours.

Gerry: You seem to be more playful with your violin and your whole approach to music. It's contagious you know...you seem to invite it.

Katherine: ...I think it's affected your sound and range of colours...and I have noticed a change in your use of the bow. You are painting more colours, creating different sounds, and your sound is richer and more present. When I play chamber music with you now, it influences me in a positive way...I think

it's the result of you having clearer intentions about what you are trying to say. I believe arts practice research has set you off on a journey that will last a lifetime. It is already enriching the lives of all of us that are lucky enough to be your colleagues.

Through my engagement with autoethnography, I started moving towards this place that only this kind of research could lead me, reflecting on the following words:

The process of engaging in, reflecting and analysing, writing and feeding back into one's own arts practice and teaching is, itself an "artistic action research" model that contributes to the discipline area as well as the development of the individual artist academic. (Blom et al., 2011, p. 369)

Concluding Words

Professional Personas, Emergence of the Self as Artist.

My arts practice research journey led to the excavation of my identity as a practising artist, gradually revealing multiple layers. Through my engagement with autoethnography, I created a space for myself within my practice where I could document epistemic knowledge. This space was vital for creativity and inspiration, as well as a rigorous engagement with the documentation and reflexive needs of an arts practice investigation. Kershaw (2011) describes "the radical change that practice-based research may offer to established methods of knowledge production" (p. 123). This research was individual to me, but hopefully may inspire and resonate with other fellow musicians and encourage them to take up the baton to explore their own practice through autoethnography. In my role as Course Director of the MA in Classical String Performance at the University of Limerick I have designed a module in Creative Embodied String Performance Research to encourage my students to do their own archaeology and to empower them to discover their true artistic selves (Daly, 2021, 2021a)

To provide the final words of this paper, I return to the person who helped me take the initial plunge to trust my body in the practice room, and to stay committed to the research process, Lisa McLoughlin.

Diane Daly is a rare artist, rarer still in the world of classical music. Her desire towards physical understanding of Dalcroze's application to her violin playing, is both poetic and illuminating. That which is authentic in the individual, resonates to many performers as "Even when you are the primary source of data, your story often includes others-others of similarity, difference, and/or opposition" (Chang, 2008, p. 68). I am so glad to have had the privilege of working with her, and her bravery and enthusiasm inspires me and so many other arts practice researchers to challenge our assumptions, take ourselves to task and most of all, be brave enough to bare our souls. (L. McLoughlin, 2018)

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Author Note

Dr. Diane Daly is a violinist, educator, and researcher. As a performer, she made her debut in Ireland as a soloist with the RTE Symphony Orchestra at the age of 12. She has played principal with all the Irish orchestras and toured internationally with ensembles including The Academy of St Martin in the Fields, The European Union Chamber Orchestra, Camerata Ireland and the Irish Chamber Orchestra. She has appeared as a chamber musician at festivals including West Cork, Kilkenny, Heidelberg and Aldeburgh. She is in demand as a soloist and was due to tour Brazil and Chile in 2020 before Covid-19 intervened. In other genres she has performed and recorded alongside many of the biggest names in rock and leads her own jazz trio that is a regular fixture at festivals. Diane is a qualified Dalcroze researcher and teacher and for many years ran a parallel career as educator, incorporating Dalcroze approaches into instrumental teaching. In 2015, she brought the two strands of her career together when she embarked upon an Arts Practice PhD investigating the influence of Dalcroze techniques on her professional performance practice. From this research emerged a number of insights and new approaches that became Creative Embodied String Performance (CESP). This incorporates fresh approaches to devising, preparing and performing repertoire. Her research was funded by the Irish Research Council. Diane has been the course director of the MA in Classical Strings at the University of Limerick since 2017, and from this base is developing a number of exciting and innovative research projects both in Ireland and across Europe that develop the concepts of embodiment, presence, creativity and connection. Please direct correspondence to diane.daly@ul.ie.

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