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Review: Spissky, Peter (2017), ‘Ups and Downs, Violin Bowing as Gesture’. Doctoral thesis, Lund University. <http://www.upsanddowns.se/>

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When Peter Spissky submitted his doctoral thesis at Lund University in Sweden, he started a trend which has become the norm, in that he submitted his thesis online, successfully incorporating his artistic research practice through videos, audio and visual content, as well as reflective and analytical prose. As Spissky notes: “The present dissertation takes advantage of the specific possibilities of website format, integrating the video essays not just as complementary examples to the written text, but as a main means for argumentation, analysis, and discussion” (Online, 2017). This new format, integrating the audio-visual practice enables practitioner-researchers to utilise and to document in more detail their practice for those not able to attend all live events, but more than this, it enables a more detailed curation of practice which would otherwise be lost in live events and ensures that the embodied practice is captured in as many ways as possible. Almost every Scandinavian thesis in artistic research has been submitted online at least in part since Spissky: in setting a trend he has asserted the benefit of audio-visual media for artistic researchers, to facilitating access to their practice, in terms of their practice, rather than translated through prose. In Norway, for example, everyone has an exposition in the research catalogue, and in Sweden all artistic research PhDs include audio-visual content, not only live, but increasingly in video format as well. This developing trend is akin to the trend for open access to research across the globe.

This thesis asserts the artistic practice in a positive and detailed manner. Spissky uses the practice itself to set out the context of the research, and to show the analytical methods, as well as using it to show the main results. The research speaks through, in and around the practice. I find this to be an enlightened way to express research procedures, methods and results in a way that embed practices and does not divorce practice from prose.

In the thesis Spissky explores his own role as a violinist and his own practice as a musical director, reflecting on his choices. He questions: “How can I claim to have invented something as obvious as violin bowing imitating gesture and dance? Am I really saying that nobody before me practiced gestural violin playing which would dance, tell stories, or engage in theatrical acting?” In so doing, his thesis aims to explore how expression is produced through his gestural bowing practice. He is cautious not to make claims which are unfounded and reminds the reader that he is self-reflecting on his practice to explore what choices he makes, how he experiments to make changes in his practice, and does all this in the context of historically informed violin practice. As a leading violinist, Spissky was appointed the concertmaster of the Concerto Copenhagen in 1999, and has since continued to lead Baroque performance practice, acting as musical director for Camerata Øresund since 2010, and he has continued to tour his performances/ensembles around the globe.

The website he has constructed works on many levels in order to explore his reflective practice, the method and his findings. He takes great pains to explain the structure and to ensure it is clear and accessible. In many ways, from my perspective, I like the fact that it has a retro feeling, akin to that of the CD-ROM PhD submissions seen in the decades prior to his own thesis in the field of dance and drama. There are essentially three layers, which have clear interconnections and clear lateral thinking to all aspects of his practice, which for me give me a strong insight into the ways in which Spissky works as a performer. The layers enable several approaches to analysing artistic practice. The first fundamental layer is used by Spissky to theorize what he does and how he does it in his current and past practice. The second layer is a kind of exposition, in which reflections start to be analysed with short video snippets, prior to the third layer, which is more detailed and uses the video extracts to formulate a detailed analysis to then articulate his findings. This tiered approach includes all the traditional aspects of a thesis (such as context, method, case study, findings) but it is done with a fluidity which I find exciting to explore. The videos enable more interactive content as the reader/spectator can move backwards and forwards to explore the audio-visual content in detail for themselves.

Spissky is someone who is adept at presenting his own experience and utilises his first-person voice well to share that experience of the insider. The preliminary pages are a good example of

this, where informal prose, propositions and statements set the scene for his research, for example: “So, to start with... let me talk about authenticity”. The main issues are introduced in a concise manner, linked directly to his own performance experience. The immediacy of the discussion, which is surrounded by photos of him performing, is not only accessible, but it sets a tone whereby the artistic context, theory and industry sector are introduced side by side. Spissky’s “praxis” is articulated through this approach (Nelson, 2013). My reflection on his “praxis” does draw my attention to the bibliography, which though thorough, does not include as much literature as it might on artistic research, practice-as-research and so on.

The project overview page illustrates three useful levels: mimetic action, dance and poetic imagery. Each is broken down into subcategories which pitch video content with analysis and reflection. The videos are clearly coded and annotated in a functional manner to ensure each example is detailed and factual. Likewise, the analytical approach is supported by video examples. He outlines his coding process and makes the reader aware that the analysis and practice are cyclic, in that one moves between, to and from, these things, until the practice embeds analytical thought. The inclusion of video rehearsals, showing his discussions with ensemble members is useful to anyone wishing to see how decisions regarding performance interpretation are made. The rehearsal elements allow the reader/spectator to witness artistic failure, in that the first attempt is not always successful. I applaud this. As Sara Jane Bailes notes in her examination of creative approaches, “there is potential to understand our understanding” (Bailes, 2010, abstract) if we acknowledge, what I describe elsewhere, as the “discords, problems and challenges in bringing a new creative work to fruition” (Blain and Minors, 2020, 13).

Each of the three sections has an analytical passage which not only makes for a cohesive structure but ensures that the reader experiences the three overarching layers concerning content, method and analysis, in every section of the thesis. As such the structure is less sectionalised than a traditional PhD in my opinion. The navigation map is particularly helpful, as the amount of material can become difficult to navigate while clicking through so many layers. The online format may not be particularly advanced, and may have a retro flavour to it, but it works!

The thesis commutes efficiently and where it needs to be, it is functional and factual, ensuring to incorporate relevant references. The focus on the video essays is effective. The micro-structure is much more discursive and analytical, both in prose and in audio-visual format. The lateral thinking which is shown between these modes is significant as any repetition between performed element and written element facilitates the explanation regarding the interpretative choices and as such it shows reflection in action.

The embodied interpretation explored throughout this thesis is articulated through the conclusions by matching audio-visual content with annotated scores. The self-made primary sources in the form of performance and rehearsal videos and annotated scores, are used effectively and shared openly throughout the thesis. As such, the conclusions are cohesive. No surprises arise. As Spissky asserts, this process of sharing different layers, and sharing rehearsal and performance enable “a new perspective to the process: the interaction in performance”.

References:

- Bailes, Sara Jane (2010), *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, London: Routledge.
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