

# The Epistemic Power of Music: On the Idea and History of Artistic Research through Music

A Stand-Alone Research Project  
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*Main Applicant*

Univ.Prof. Dr. Andreas Dorschel (Graz)

*Co-applicant*

Univ.Prof. Dr. Deniz Peters (Graz)

*Host Institutions*

Institute of Music Aesthetics  
University of Music and Performing Arts, Graz

Doctoral School for Artistic Research  
University of Music and Performing Arts, Graz

*For University Assistant Position:*  
Institute for Ethnomusicology  
University of Music and Performing Arts

## **Project rationale and description – Abridged version**

### **1. Introduction**

In a time where live artistic performance is undergoing severe restrictions and practitioners are experiencing challenges to their professional existence, it is more pressing than ever before to understand better what the epistemic – aside from the mere entertainment – value of art is. This project will examine the idea, and history, of research through music as a specific form of inquiry. It will do so by interrogating the validity and profundity of the idea of music having an epistemic power through historical instances, arriving at a set of parameters that will allow such research to be situated and evaluated in order to answer the question: *What is artistic research through music?* The question is of fundamental importance to the current discourse on artistic research, which is hampered by a missing historical dimension and a number of competing normative and narrow understandings of artistic research. We expect to go beyond those understandings of artistic research that figure research as being either *for*, *on*, or *in* music, by innovatively combining a layer of nuanced conceptual inquiry (what kind of knowledges are at play, and how?) with a layer that draws on and analyses concrete historical substance to ground and interdependently drive our central process of clarification.

For this, the project will combine philosophical and musicological approaches and methodologies. It will:

- Enquire into existing ideas about what constitutes research, and the relationship between research and knowledge (cf. Dorschel 2010a);
- Consider pertinent philosophical accounts of knowledge and understanding;
- Reflect upon the enduring historical connection between music and knowledge
- Examine music case-studies taken from the period from 1600 to the twenty-first century within classical music traditions, exploring if and how music connects with epistemology. Here, classical is understood in the sense expounded by Church (2015), where one of the elements rendering a music 'classical' is its involvement with some sort of music theory, thereby extending the definition of classical beyond the western tradition to (i.a.) Chinese, Arabic, Persian Classical music traditions, and at least two Indian ones (South Indian and North Indian);
- Evaluate which of these case-studies might be understood as research, and in what sense;
- Ask what implications exist for current artistic research through music;
- Contribute to the growing areas of philosophy and music, and the theory of artistic research, by examining epistemology in and through music

## 2. State-of-the-art

The field of artistic research (using the term as overarching a spectrum of practices called artistic practice as research, arts-led research, arts based research, *recherche creation*, etc.) is a strongly growing one involving diverse theoretical approaches to its understanding. Some literature locates thoughts on artistic research within personal practices (Barrett & Bolt 2007; Nimkulrat & O'Riley 2009; Dongantan-Dack 2015). Other literature approaches the field theoretically (Borgdorff 2006). In the latter an influential distinction structuring discourse about artistic research is found, according to which there is: (1) "research *on* the arts", referring to research that treats art practice as an object of study; (2) "research *for* the arts", an instrumental approach where very often technical research serves art practice; (3) "research *in* the arts". According to this distinction, this last category is considered artistic research proper, referring to those instances where artistic practice is not only the result of research, but has methodological status, such that the research is bound to acts of creating and performing (Frayling 1993; Borgdorff 2006, 2011). While this distinction is useful, the categories are not as clear as they might first appear, particularly between research *for* the arts and research *in* the arts (e.g., Hayes 2013). This project will press and challenge Borgdorff's categories, showing how each blends into the other and can be classed as a form of artistic research. At the same time, however, the project will acknowledge that some distinction is to be made between art, on the one hand, and art as research, on the other hand: It is one thing to recognise art's capacity to allow us to experience and perceive things differently, and another to see it as an alternative form of knowledge production with, to some extent, its own aims, rules and methods (Ehn 2012). It is yet another matter to regard certain art as a mode of research. In this project, hence, a conceptual clarification of understandings of artistic research and of knowledge types active in artistic practice complements the attempt to understand what, specifically, the instances of understanding are that arise through concrete (historical and contemporary) cases of music in

their distinct mediality, materiality and embodiment. The aim is, as Mahrenholz (2014, n.p.) suggests, not simply to explore “what we understand *about* music but what we understand *through* or *via* music”.

There are some collections that deal with artistic range across the spectrum (cf. Badura, Dubach & Haarmann 2015; Biggs & Karlsson 2011). Discourse in artistic research is more established in Design and the Visual Arts with various monographs on the subject (cf. Carter 2005; Downton 2003). It is gaining momentum in the field of music (Dogantan-Dack 2015) but to date outputs tend to be in the form of articles rather than monographs. This may be due to a combination of: (1) the categorisation outlined above, where only “research *in* the arts” counts as artistic research (and the result and methodological value of research remains tied to acts of creation and performance) and (2) the fact that although all art is “amphibian”, functioning at the point of the human world “where the concretely sensuous meets abstract and normative thought” (Nilsson 2009), the relation between words and music is arguably somewhat more problematic than the relation between words and other art forms and practices (see Begbie 2013; Jankélévitch 2003). Outputs in artistic research through music tend to result in: (1) performances/music works (for example much of the work that goes on at IRCAM: Gerzso 2013); (2) performances accompanied by rationales – rather than academic research articles – placed in academic journals (see Schacher 2016; Rennie 2014; Hayes 2013).

The relationship between words and music connects with the broader theme of thought and music, one vital to this project, since it underpins both historical and current understandings of music, which have been shaped by (1) the dual (or “amphibian”) character of music as both intellectual and sensual, and (2) the related contrast of verbal and musical articulation. The dual character of music, for example, is fundamental to ancient Greek understanding of music; although Plato recognises that music is both ratio and sound, it is music’s intellectual foundation that provides the source of knowledge (*Republic* VII, 531a–c). This strand of thought is transmitted to the Latin-speaking world and becomes a dominant way of understanding music (Stone-Davis 2011, see Annex 3), such that, later, Kant (drawing on and developing ideas by Leibniz (1686/1704) and Baumgarten (1750), the last of whom advocates aesthetics as a sibling to logic), struggles to decide whether and on what grounds music might be included amongst the fine arts, ultimately concluding that it is an agreeable rather than a beautiful art (Kant 1790/1790). Later still, and responding to that duality, Schopenhauer (1795/1818) suggests that as a non-conceptual medium music can “get behind” the world of representations, so as to present the underlying reality. In each case, music’s sensuality is counterposed to music as intellectual enterprise. It is this dichotomy that relates to the contrast of verbal and musical articulation, where the latter is cast through comparison to the former and is often found wanting (Johnson 2007). However, this approach is flawed, for language and music have their own logics. These have been conceived as discursive vs. presentational (Langer 1951), or saying vs. showing (Wittgenstein 1953/1922; Mahrenholz 2014, n.p.). And even here, music’s reference can be self-contained or can extend to the extra-musical. In short, examined as sound, music relies on infinite nuances whereas languages operate through limited and finitizing sets of concepts.

The bias towards notions of thought conceived in primarily linguistic terms has been pointed out and challenged (e.g., Jerrold Levinson 2006, 212). A fundamental question is bound up with this observation and challenge, namely, what is meaning? Ideas about meaning (and truth) vary across a historical and methodological spectrum, spanning from the view of knowledge and meaning as propositional towards the “world-disclosing” aspects of literary language (Cooper 2003, in Bowie 2007), where any form of articulation that opens up the world

in ways which affect the conduct and understanding of life can be regarded as possessing meaning (Bowie 2007). Within this latter understanding, music is a form of thought in itself as well as facilitating thought in a linguistic sense. This project will examine these postulations in relation to how music is a mode of research: how does music contribute to research as a non-verbal medium and how does it interact with and relate to linguistic reflection?

The importance of the project's method emerges in relation to the field-to-date. Although the need to conduct further research in the area of artistic research through music is evident, disagreement prevails how this ought to be done. There are those who recognise the need for a historiography of artistic research (Borgdorff 2011), whilst others suggest that because the phenomenon of artistic research is strongly related to recent institutional, cultural and national policies it should be understood as time- and context-specific and not readable back through history (Dogantan-Dack 2015). Taking into account wider debates on artistic research (Wilson, van Ruiten & Haarmann 2013, esp. 8), our project negotiates a third path, acknowledging that although "artistic research" is rooted in a contemporary cultural, social and political context, the connection between music and knowledge is long-standing. On this basis an examination of the ways in which music intersects historically with epistemology may yield insights into forms of music as artistic research and the ways in which they might now be theorised. This approach is grounded in the idea that any form of understanding involves a "fusion of horizons" [*Horizontverschmelzung*] (Gadamer), wherein every experience is bound up with a broader context of meaning than the present one, yielding a merging of the familiar and unfamiliar.

Such a move assumes the integration of knowledge and music. There is literature on the relationship between music and understanding (see Kramer 2016; Mahrenholz 2000), and music and cognition (see Peretz & Zatorre 2003 for an overview) but the connection reaches back further through history. In ancient thought, music was aligned with beauty, truth and goodness (i.e., Pythagoras; Plato; Augustine; Boethius). The knowledge imparted by music was conceived as objective, concerning the world and humankind's place within it. In the eighteenth century, accompanying a shift away from this cosmic orientation to one centring upon the human subject, musical knowledge set out to explore human capacities, including ingenuity and personal expression (see Stone-Davis 2011, see Annex 3). Competing ideas about the relationship between music and knowledge arise within this trajectory, ones that are still debated. Discussion includes:

- Whether knowledge is contained within music (see Rosen 2011; Kivy 1991; Dahlhaus 1989; Goodman 1968);
- Whether it arises in and through processes of music-making (see Stone-Davis 2015c, 2015e, 2011 [all in Annex 3]; DeNora 2000);
- How in each case this knowledge is generated and communicated by the music;
- Whether music operates via representation or expression (Young 2014, 1–34, 87–124). This project will contribute to this aesthetic discussion in the philosophy of music, first, by proceeding *from* deeply considering examples of concrete music first rather than applying prior philosophical conceptions to musical instances and, second, by finding examples that provoke and challenge those distinctions rather than necessarily confirming them.

### 3. Objectives

The project addresses the idea of artistic research through music by examining historical instances of the relationship between music and epistemology, and by enquiring into the idea's history, in order to cast light on the developing field. It will:

- Use philosophical paradigms of knowledge and investigate if and how music intersects with these;
- Ask in what senses music correlates with these epistemic paradigms as well as whether and how it challenges them;
- Elucidate music's relation to knowledge;
- Work constructively towards an advanced understanding of music as artistic research.

### 4. Project overview

Artistic research is an emerging field, with universities offering programmes at both master's and doctoral level internationally (Ehn 2012). Despite the popularity of such courses, the definition and parameters of the field remain in question, and different conceptions about artistic research have emerged across the range of literature on the topic. This project builds critically on this research, where conceptions tend to:

- Contrast scientific knowledge with artistic knowledge, where scientific knowledge is understood to operate with "stable and truthful relations between signifier, signified and referent" (Balkema & Slager 2004; see also Leavy 2009), and art does not;
- Hold that science is goal-oriented and deductive whereas artistic research is focused on experience and is inductive (Leavy 2009) or abductive (cf. Gell 1998, 14–16; Layton 2003);
- Juxtapose theoretical knowledge with practical knowledge, where, in contrast to art, theoretical knowledge deals in propositions that can be clearly articulated and argued for;
- Use scientific research methodologies as a model for artistic research – researchers have a particular question in mind and design experiments that minimise interferences and modulations, yielding repeatable results. These assumptions occur even while seeking to place artistic and scientific research on a par by taking into account the work of Feyerabend, Kuhn and others (see Dombois, Bauer, Mareis & Schwab, eds. 2012). Within such discourse, characterisations of *what* knowledge *is*, *how* it relates to scientific and artistic research, and *which* methods yield it, tend to be dichotomous and definitions lack nuance, to the extent that it can seem contentious to describe music as containing or communicating knowledge. The discourse's breadth, however, is productive for this project, opening up fundamental questions concerning the relationship between music and knowledge, and demanding that the multi-faceted character of knowledge be taken into account.

What kind of knowledge do we have in mind when we speak about music? Do we mean theoretical, practical or emotional knowledge? Do we mean explicit, tacit or social knowledge? And what features of music enable different types of knowledge to emerge? This research project will clarify the idea of knowledge, and explore the many ways in which music makes contact with our epistemological powers by taking as its working hypothesis the idea that although the notion of artistic research is relatively recent, it has a long historical trajectory. It will examine forms of interaction between types of knowing and music through a selection of classical (Church 2015) music case-studies spanning from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first century. In doing so it will explore different ways in which music fits into the life of beings like us – humans who can learn things, be mentally changed by things, and come to understand things in new and surprising ways. In this way, it will:

- Cast light on music as a form of artistic research, contributing to the development of the area and to establishing its parameters;
- Advance the growing field of music and philosophy by examining epistemology – a topic fundamental to philosophy – in and through music.