

Intersubjective knowledge through artistic research: approaches to transcultural dialogue through stimulated recall

Panel discussion with Stefan Östersjö, Nguyễn Thanh Thủy, David Hebert and Henrik Frisk

Abstract

In this panel discussion we address the theme of “Working together” in relation to the following question: How can intersubjective understanding and new knowledge be drawn from artistic collaboration? The presentation explores the method of stimulated recall, such as it has been used and developed within the work of the Vietnamese/Swedish group The Six Tones.

The group was created in 2006. In 2009, the group took part in their first artistic research project, (re)thinking Improvisation. As part of their work in the project, the group studied their interactions through stimulated recall, using video documentation of rehearsals and performances as a source. The material recorded in 2009 has been coded and re-coded in several periods across the years, and most recently in 2019, when creating a new analysis of the working process for a chapter in Stefan Östersjö’s book *Listening To The Other* (2020).

The structure of the panel is based on sharing materials from earlier work of the group, in the form of video clips and parts of analysis produced. We provide a background to qualitative analysis of video through stimulated recall in music research, but the panel first and foremost aims to create a dialogue with the participants in the conference on these perspectives on knowledge and methods in artistic research. Video clips from previous analysis and earlier coding and annotations, as well as more extended analytical approaches will be presented, also by the participants in the panel again viewing some of these source videos and reflecting on them, thereby enacting a stimulated recall session.

How can the collaborative methods that we developed through this project be understood, in terms of the broader context of music scholarship, as innovative forms of knowledge development? Since the time of Pythagoras and Plato, scholars have theorized ways that the communicative nature of musical sound might best be explained. Even since Medieval times, empirical studies of music, such as those documented by Al Farabi in *Kitab al-Musiqa al-Kabir* (*The Great Book of Music*), were deemed sufficiently important to constitute a distinct

field, ultimately known as *musicology*, resulting in a division of music studies into *musica practica* and *musica theoretica* with its bifurcation of performers and theorists. From the late 19th century, many empirical researchers emphasized behavioral approaches, with a focus on documentation of the array of precise measurable actions connected to musical activity. Such approaches have produced many important insights, yet do not take into account the perceptions and experiences of performers. Other kinds of researchers, such as ethnographers and phenomenologists, made extensive use of interviews, sometimes in combination with observations. Interviews lead to insights of a different kind, but are notoriously unreliable for an array of reasons, including personal biases and tainted interpretations, self-censorship, memory issues, and researcher effects. The historical division of *musica practica* and *musica theoretica* started to be directly challenged in the mid-20th century with the rise of the “bimusicality” movement among ethnomusicologists, and – a few decades later later—the “artistic research” movement among academic artists of all kinds, as artistic and academic projects were increasingly intertwined, resulting in new perspectives regarding what counts as musical knowledge. It is within the context of artistic research and ethnomusicology that our project has introduced applications of a method known as video stimulated recall. Stimulated recall first began entering musical study as a method that was pioneered in the field of psychology. By presenting participants with video-recorded actions to reflect upon, stimulated recall as a method seeks to improve the richness and precision of interviews, so their capacity to produce deep insights is greatly enhanced by reference to automatically recorded behaviors. Depending on how it is defined, “stimulated recall” may be understood as associated with the use of images in therapy sessions as part of psychological research as early as the 1950s. However, in music research stimulated recall is typically understood today as a strategy that employs the use of audio or audiovisual recordings as a basis from which to stimulate precise discussion of musical techniques.

How exactly have previous music-related studies made new insights by pioneering the application of video stimulated recall strategies, and what has our project done to extend further with methodological innovation? As recent as 2009, a study in the international journal *Music Education Research* was able to identify previous studies in *education* that used stimulated recall method, but not any in *music* (Rowe, 2009). However, across the past decade various *music* studies have made use of video stimulated recall methods, including from the very year that Rowe’s study was published (Heikinheimo, 2009), a significant proportion of which are from the Nordic countries (e.g. Falthin, 2015; Heikinheimo, 2009; Soderman & Folkestad, 2004, etc.). Moreover, while the term “video stimulated recall” was not explicitly

used at the time, some innovative studies of musical interaction in *jazz* from the perspective of communication theory were developed as early as the late 1980s by Bastien & Hostager (1988, 1992, 1996) that might best be understood as pioneering the use of stimulated recall methods in music. In these studies, jazz musicians were videotaped in the course of improvised performance and later asked to explain the processes observed. More recently, notable studies have included doctoral dissertations in Europe (Falthin, 2015) on meaning-making processes among young music students, and in North America (Bell, 2013) on interaction with technologies in the music recording process. Articles using this method in major journals have examined such topics as the views of expressive performance among young music students (Meissner, Timmers & Pitts, 2020) and how music teachers and students view the role of creativity in music performance (James, Wise, & Rink, 2010). There have thus far been relatively few stimulated recall studies of *advanced musicians* and situations in which musicians are negotiating between *different musical traditions across a cultural divide*, yet stimulated recall methods promise insights in these areas as well.

Our work may be among the first to use stimulated recall methods to examine *intercultural music making*, although not the first to use these strategies for study of other aspects of music making nor intercultural issues. In fact, there are previous examples of this method being used for cross-cultural research in Vietnam, although not in the field of music (Nguyen & Tangen, 2017). Rather, what makes the approach used in our study unique is that the robust capabilities of stimulated recall strategies are used to explicate complex experiences and processes are brought to bear on *aesthetic decision making* associated in both traditional and experimental musicianship in the context of an intercultural project. In such a way, the work of the Six Tones in this project has extended significantly on previous methods and research findings. Our initial motivation for developing the methods for analysis of our artistic practice was the challenge we faced as a group of musicians involved in intercultural collaboration. In The Six Tones, musicians from traditional Vietnamese music would engage with musicians from the west, negotiating musical practices as the practice is unfolding. At the early stages of this process the language barrier highlighted the different perspectives and the need to make these perspectives a central aspect of the artistic process. At the bottom line, the challenge we experienced was rooted in how our listening, as professional musicians, is socio-culturally situated, and therefore biased. An extra effort is therefore necessary to move beyond stereotypical interaction, and the aim of the method we developed was to accommodate new forms of listening that engender more dynamic artistic exchange.

As developed for artistic research purposes by the group, it would be a mistake to see the method of stimulated recall as primarily aiming for the production of discursive analytical layers, i.e. the coding and annotations. In the practice of The Six Tones, it is instead the ways in which the shared listening, enhanced through the method, has created a new listening practice within the group: a transformed listening. The process of verbalizing and signifying the experience of repeated listening is an important part of the process, but not the final goal. Rather, it is this transformed listening, and the ability to establish modes of interaction with musical Others beyond cultural prejudice, which has been the central ambition. The panel discusses how such a listening practice emerged within the group, but also gives examples of how such forms of listening has subsequently been shared with other musicians in intercultural collaboration. Our reference is the work carried out in the ongoing research project Musical Transformations, involving master performers in a tradition in the south of Vietnam, and how they describe experiences of transformed listening, through the process of intercultural music making, and the use of stimulated recall.

We understand a musician's listening as embodied, and therefore situated in the interaction with their instruments, and other musical tools, such as tonal systems and forms of notation. A transformed performance practice can be seen as evidence of a transformed listening. We also argue that novel modes of listening can be evidenced in the interaction between musicians in performance. When artistic research is manifested in performance, its outcomes must also be assessed through its force and effect in an art world. In what ways do the artistic outcomes create difference?