

## **PREPARING SELECTED IRISH SAXOPHONE WORKS FOR PERFORMANCE**

**Kenneth Edge**

My doctoral research examines the processes involved in the preparation for performance and recording of selected saxophone works by Irish composers. To date, although a sizeable Irish saxophone repertoire exists, there has been no scholarly work undertaken in the field.

An artist's tacit or embodied skills are subjective, being generally considered inaccessible to theorizing, either through the spoken or written word. In this lecture-recital I will discuss the dualism between artist and researcher and discuss how a unification of these two seemingly disparate selves can engender unique and exciting methods of knowledge production.

Concepts from the fields of professional expertise, embodiment and flow are of relevance to my doctoral work, and I will illuminate this through live and recorded performance, examining how a metacognitive approach to the embodiment process has directly informed my relationship with the saxophone. I will discuss the cognitive embodiment of my own composition *Wait a While*, (clarinet and piano – 2015), from an initial sight-reading (cognitive) stage, through a deliberate practice (associative) stage, to a fully embodied (autonomous) stage. This will demonstrate an expansion of the auto-ethnographical model of the performer and researcher being the same person, to that of the performer, researcher and composer being the one, and will show how the field of artistic research can act as a conduit between the subjective and the objective. I will also perform two key works from the Irish saxophone canon - Michael McGlynn's: *From nowhere to Nowhere* (solo alto saxophone – 1995) and John Buckley's *Arabesque* (solo alto saxophone – 1990).

Presenting a conference paper is a novel experience for me. My natural habitat, my comfort zone, is that of the performing musician – happy enough talking about music by way of introduction to a performance, but a stranger in a strange land when called on to theorize at length, either through the spoken or written word. This evening I'm here as an artistic researcher, one foot in the art world and the other foot in the realm of the objectively verifiable. As a third-year doctoral student at the Royal Irish Academy of Music, what has become increasingly evident to me is that the truly exciting potential outcome of artistic research is the production of knowledge which is useful and valuable to theorists and practitioners alike.

My research examines the processes involved in the preparation for performance and recording of selected works for saxophone by Irish composers.

My doctoral thesis will include extensive multimedia documentation of the cognitive embodiment of this repertoire. Issues of technique, interpretation, notation, deliberate practice, expert performance, collaboration, rehearsal talk, memory and the aging brain will also be considered. Live public performances of the selected works will be included in audio and video format, both as a research artefact and as a commercial release, which I hope will be of some cultural significance. So far, but by no means definitively, the compositions included in this research are the following:

Raymond Deane: *Parallels* (1975)  
Frank Corcoran: *Variations with Air* (1976)  
Elaine Agnew: *Ballyvaughan* (1989)  
John Buckley: *Arabesque* (1990)  
Eibhlís Farrell: *Arioso* (1994)  
Benjamin Dwyer: *Tiento* (1994 rev. 2006)  
Michael McGlynn: *From Nowhere to Nowhere* (1995)  
Raymond Deane: *Excursus* (1996)  
Jenn Kirby: *Tripping* (2013)  
Micheál Ó' Súilleabháin: *The Brook of Donode* (2014)  
Conor Linehan: *3 pieces* (2018)  
Kenneth Edge: *Two Études* (2018)

The majority of these works are published by Ireland's *Contemporary Music Centre*, which is located on Fishamble street, Dublin (on the site of the world premiere of Handel's *Messiah* in 1742). This national repository of living music houses over two hundred scores featuring the saxophone as a solo instrument, and to date this repertoire remains un-researched. I'd like now to play Michael McGlynn's atmospheric composition *From Nowhere to Nowhere*. Michael McGlynn is an Irish composer and the founder-director of the popular vocal group *Anuna*. He composed *From Nowhere to Nowhere* in 1995. The work is scored for solo alto saxophone, and its title is inspired by a tragically failed famine relief scheme, adopted in 1846 by the Irish Board of Works. This scheme put starving people to work building roads, mainly in the rural west of Ireland. Sadly, the wages paid for this work were wholly inadequate in stemming the tide of starvation and emigration. Many of these roads are still there, unfinished, going 'From Nowhere to Nowhere'. Below is a link to a recording of this work.

<https://youtu.be/ZhEsP29zWnQ>

I recorded *From Nowhere to Nowhere* in 1996, and its inclusion in this research list reflects my desire to revisit an interpretation and to examine my subjective thoughts on the work nearly a quarter of a century later. But how can we examine the subjective? How can we excavate knowledge from the intuitive?

'Knowledge production in artistic research is situated in three domains: the artistic, the embodied, and the discursive'<sup>1</sup>

The title of the essay this quote is taken from, *thinking-through-music*, is a paraphrase of Paul Cézanne's comment that the painter thinks-in-painting, with its implication that artistic creation is by its very nature beyond words or description. In these three knowledge domains, artistic, embodied and discursive, the artistic refers to output, the artwork itself: the embodied refers to the non-intellectual, tacit, intuitive skills of the artist, while the discursive

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<sup>1</sup> Stefan Östersjö, 'Thinking-through-Music' in Jonathan Impett (ed.), *Artistic Research in Music: Discipline and Resistance* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017), 88-89

is the domain into which we would somehow like to translate this tacit knowledge for investigation.

In his book *Intelligence in the flesh*, the British cognitive scientist Guy Claxton quotes the Hungarian-British polymath Michael Polanyi's lyrical description of tacit knowledge as ...

‘... knowledge that is such a fine web of contingent possibilities ... The neuro-chemical loops and networks that underpin your expertise are orders of magnitude more intricate than any vocabulary, however technical, could hope to capture. It is not that you are inarticulate ... the knowledge itself is of such delicacy that it is in principle inarticulable’<sup>2</sup>

Claxton speaks of neuro-chemical loops and networks underpinning expertise. *Expertise in performance* is itself a fully-fledged scientific discipline, having its roots in the work of Swedish psychologist K. Anders Ericsson, most notably in an article written with Ralf Krampe and Clemens Tesch-Römer in 1993 for the journal *Psychological Review*.<sup>3</sup>

Anders Ericsson has conducted interviews and studies with leading practitioners in the fields of sport, medicine, music, chess, and the fine arts amongst others. He cites many statistics cataloguing extraordinary increases in human capacity through deliberate practice. He postulates that if one can explain how elite performers have attained such levels of achievement, this knowledge would benefit people hoping to maximize their performance levels in any chosen field. The key component is the amount of time spent on deliberate practice. Anders Ericsson puts a round number on it:

ten thousand hours. This is the first appearance of the ‘10,000 hours to master something’ catchphrase brought into the popular culture by Malcolm Gladwell in his best-selling book of 2008, *Outliers*. Anders Ericsson's contention that deliberate practice over a prolonged period is more relevant than innate talent in achieving mastery is a hotly contested assertion. It has been demonstrated in subsequent studies that there are people who become expert in their speciality in half that time or less, and people who will never attain expertise, regardless of the hours spent on deliberate practice. Of course, elite artistic performance or creation, unlike sporting achievement, is subjective and unquantifiable. So, what is Anders Ericsson's idea of deliberate practice and how does it differ from regular practice? He describes it as:

1. Engagement in highly structured activities. These activities are created specifically to improve performance in a domain, through immediate feedback from a teacher (or coach). This immediate feedback is the main distinguishing feature between deliberate and regular practice.
2. It requires a high level of concentration: This is best sustained in short sessions of intensive work: Anders Ericsson states that these practice sessions are not inherently enjoyable.

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<sup>2</sup> Guy Claxton, *Intelligence in the Flesh* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2015), 232

<sup>3</sup> K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Th. Krampe, Clemens Tesch-Römer, ‘The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance’, *Psychological Review*, 100 (1993), 363-406

3. It is not aimed at a vague improvement in overall performance but is goal specific.
4. It aims at improving mental representations: Such as visualizing actions to be taken. An example of this would be mental practice, away from tactile contact with a musical instrument.
5. It must continuously move the practitioner just beyond the edge of their current abilities.

Anders Ericsson's writings on expertise both compliment and contradict the work of the Croatian Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who coined the term 'flow' to describe what we intuitively experience as 'being in the zone', as we experience some or all of the following states of being:<sup>4</sup>

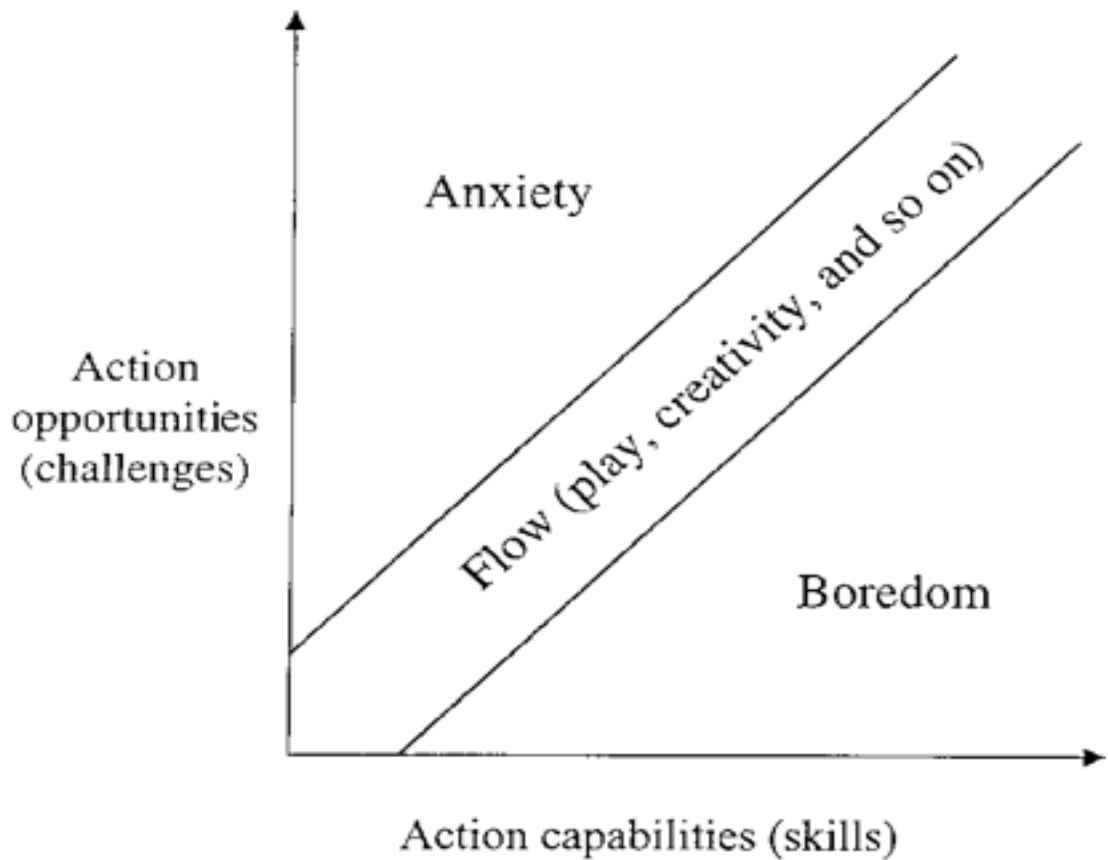
- Intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment.
- Merging of action and awareness.
- Loss of reflective self-consciousness (i.e., loss of awareness of oneself as a social actor)
- A sense that one can control one's actions; that is, a sense that one can in principle deal with the situation because one knows how to respond to whatever happens next.
- Distortion of temporal experience (typically, a sense that time has passed faster than normal)
- Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding, such that often the end goal is merely an excuse for the process.

These descriptions of flow exhibit certain similarities to Anders Ericsson's 'deliberate practice' model, however, the main difference in perspective is a stark one indeed. The 'flow' model's view that the experience of rehearsal activity is intrinsically rewarding, such that often the end goal is just an excuse for the process, seems far removed from Anders Ericsson's goal-specific repetitive practice, (which may or may not be enjoyable.)

Here is a pleasing graphic representation of the flow state

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<sup>4</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1990)



We see from this graph that in order to stay in flow we must constantly match our skills to appropriate challenges. As we overcome these challenges our skills increase, and we must therefore increase the challenge levels in order to stay in flow. Like deliberate practice, flow is concerned with the continuous improvement of skills.

Although my research focuses on the saxophone, I'd like to briefly discuss an essay I wrote in 2017, which has acted for me as a stepping-stone into the main body of my research. This essay documents me learning to play one of my own compositions, *Wait a While*

For Paul Roe

## Wait a While

Kenneth Edge (2015)

The image shows a musical score for 'Wait a While' by Kenneth Edge (2015). It is written for Clarinet in Bb and Piano. The score is in 4/4 time, with some sections changing to 3/4 and 2/4. The tempo is marked with a quarter note equal to 68 or 80. The Clarinet part starts with a quarter rest, followed by a series of notes with dynamic markings p, pp, mp, ppp, and mp. The Piano part starts with a quarter rest, followed by a series of notes with dynamic markings mf and lococo. The score includes first and second endings for the Clarinet part.

I composed *Wait A While* in 2015 for the extraordinary Irish clarinetist Paul Roe. As well as being a saxophonist, I also play the clarinet, but very much as a second instrument. I've never had formal clarinet lessons, but I possess a good knowledge of its technical and tonal possibilities.

I had a composer's mental construct of *Wait a While*, but as a performer I had no embodied concept of the work. I composed the piece away from any tactile involvement with the clarinet, as I didn't want it to be defined by my own clarinet-playing idiosyncrasies. To date Paul has performed *Wait a While* many times around the world, and I am delighted that he enjoys playing it. Because of its highly virtuosic and showy nature, the piece has also become popular with Paul's pupils who have programmed it in recitals, competitions and master's degree performances. During rehearsals with these clarinetists I found myself becoming slightly frustrated that I couldn't demonstrate my thoughts on the clarinet. Rehearsal talk constitutes its own field of study, but some of the comments I remember making, such as 'I would love this section to be more Coplandesque in colouration' and 'Here I imagine the wail of a banshee', aside from being subjective and a bit ridiculous were also of no tangible use to the performer.

As a way of attaining a physical connection with my composition I decided to set myself the challenge of learning to play the work over a two-week period, applying the concepts of deliberate practice and flow. I used audio recordings as a means of documenting the cognitive embodiment of *Wait a While*. I also used music technology as a rehearsal aid by recording the work's piano part into the software program *Logic Pro X*. This piano recording acted as an extremely useful advanced metronome for some of the sections with complex, rapidly changing time signatures. I recorded the clarinet rehearsal sessions onto a zoom h4n and spliced together an overview of my progress into audio files which I created links to on Dropbox.

Here is a link to a short example of that audio, compressing a two-week rehearsal period into a two-minute clip, as I attempt to learn the final section of *Wait a While*: from sight-reading to performance.

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/ks8wiklmxktomdw/wait%20a%20while%20for%20Lithuania%20publication.mp3?dl=0>

A question I considered was: Is a composer's vision of his/her own work necessarily the blueprint on which future generations of performers should base their interpretation? Opinions differ on this, but I tend to agree with Pierre Boulez when he says: 'The truth of any interpretation is essentially transitory.' I undertook this clarinet project to examine the learning process. In truth, that is the academic in me speaking – the performer in me wanted to learn to play *Wait a While* just to see if I could. While the academic in me wrote of 'an expansion of the autoethnographic model of the performer and researcher being the same person, to that of the performer, researcher and composer being the same', the performer in me was having a whale of a time achieving that which at the outset seemed impossible even to visualise.

This unification of two distinct selves in creating something new, is for me a good definition of what *artistic research* is, and the metacognitive approach to the embodiment process has directly informed my ideas regarding saxophone playing. For this lecture-recital I used a similar learning and documentation approach in preparing my final performance piece, John Buckley's *Arabesque*. John Buckley is one of Ireland's most esteemed composers and hails from the tiny, exquisitely picturesque town of Templeglantine in county Limerick, where he was born in 1951.

Here is a link to an excerpt of a new version of *Arabesque*, shifting the work from Alto to Soprano Saxophone. This is from a live performance in the Royal Irish Academy of music on 14 June 2019.

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/Oyeagutmxwjpsud/Buckley%20Arabesque%20for%20Lithuania%20publication.mp3?dl=0>