1 Repetition in Performance

> We might think of performance as the art of the 're': from the labour of rehearsal and systems for remembering to the broad spectrum of restored behaviours that are 'not for the first time'; from tragic scenes of recognition and reversal to conventions of citation and recitation; from the dream of representation without reproduction to the ethics of reenactment and the care for what remains.
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> (Kartsaki & Schmidt, 2015, p. 1)

Repetition is central to the structure of performance, particularly for practitioners in the performing arts. Anyone who has learned to play a musical instrument, learned to dance or practiced reciting a monologue would relate to the hours spent focusing on a particular passage, trying to get the steps just right; the timing, the phrasing, connecting with the passages that come before and after, and then when everything is just about right – doing it all again. This search for correctness and consistency depends on a practice that informs and refines one's technique, memory (including muscle-memory), self-reflection and embodiment. In some cases, the practice of repetition also carries with it the expectations of others, such as teachers, peers, directors. Repetition can be daunting, tiresome, frustrating, and without a clear understanding of its process and value, it can even be perceived as a waste of time, which leads many to abandon their practice, sometimes giving up on performance altogether.

Research on repetition in performance unveils some of the hidden processes and suggests ways for these processes to become functions of effective practice. New insights into specific fields of the performing arts have emerged through practice-based, ethnographic and studio-based methodologies, offering practitioners, teachers and researchers new ways to think about, articulate and action their practice. The benefits are that this may result in more people remaining engaged with performance, not only satisfied with their work, but improving and aspiring to even higher goals. Efficiency in achieving a difficult task provides a practitioner with confidence, motivation, self-belief and perhaps an understanding of the value of repetition as a process. Externally, others identify this practitioner as an individual who knows what they are doing and who can be relied upon to work through the process, autonomously if required, and to deliver a desired outcome.

Learning a new *work* through rehearsal is laborious and requires systems for embedding new learnings into one's memory, deeply enough that they can be restored as behaviours during the next iteration, but not so deeply that further layers of 'things to be remembered' end up burying the original memory altogether. Repetition also reveals to the practitioner where certain limitations lie and where mistakes or particular decisions may have taken a performance off

course. It then provides the performer with an opportunity to recognise and acknowledge these moments, and to willingly reverse or 'backtrack' to a particular point and recite the performance one more time. Perhaps the next recitation will be simpler, clearer and more conventional, a re-enactment of an intention shared between the performer and the other participants. Or perhaps something will emerge that has never been seen before, something that represents the artist's individual expression, something that then becomes part of any future rendition.

These variations are an inherent and unavoidable trait of any repetitious practice. Chaffin et al. (2006, p. 200) observe that even in the most intentional and highly prepared repeat classical music performances, outcomes 'generally differ in small but musically significant ways' such as attenuations or exaggerations of tempo and dynamic levels. Accepting the inevitability that no two performances are the same, that something *will* happen but that 'something' is yet to be revealed, allows for the element of *risk* to be part of a repeat performance. The most cautious recitation balanced with an intention to take a risk (however small) might possibly be what produces the 'spontaneous decision-making that makes performance a creative activity' (p. 213).

There are many styles of music that welcome this kind of spontaneity and revel in the unexpected and unique variations that each repetition can bring. Studies of folk music created in Europe and the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries observed that due to the nature of oral transmission, songs were inevitably altered or varied by successive performances (Banyard, 1950, 1953; cited in Nettl (2014, p. 173)). Banyard proposed 'a singer . . . learned a tune and then, for reasons of personal creativity, failing memory, or a wish to imitate, sang it differently'. Singers also made decisions 'to make changes in the course of performance . . . changes that were sometimes remembered and memorized'. Lord (1960) identifies folk singers who 'learn, memorize, and then as qualified singers, manipulate, by introducing or omitting, changing order, lengthening and shortening, and varying in many ways'. Jazz utilises a similar array of variable elements – a 'range of freedoms' to depart from the score (Levinson, 2013, p. 35). Popular music singers make a performance personal and identifiable, by modifying existing songs to suit their own performance 'habitus'. As Neal (2009) remarks: 'singers can wrest artistic control of a song from a previous singer by virtue of a particularly sincere or autobiographically driven performance; hence the phrase, frequently offered as a high compliment, "that performer really made that song his or her own"' (pp. 12–13).

Soto-Morettini (2006) adds that this kind of variation is manifest through 'choice in the elements of style' such as sustain, phrase weight, placement, note

attack and voice quality as well as variation in melodic patterns. Ranade (2008) points to a similar array of elements in Indian music – melody, tempo, text, genre – and timbre which correlates to the notion of voice quality in popular music.

To the discerning listener, a 'virtuosic' performance might be regarded as one where the performer has full control over their chosen variations, where *intention* yields something *creative*. While some writers suggest that intention is required for creativity to occur,[1] others argue that creativity can also be influenced by the so-called happy accident, unintentional accidental variation that impacts a performance in a positive way (Kronengold, 2005). Keil (1987) proposes that 'the power of music is in its participatory discrepancies' (p. 275) – variations, inflections and creative tensions that arise from being slightly out of tune and slightly out of time. Identifying accidents in this positive way has led some to suggest that they could even be used as a device to give an 'impression of spontaneity' (Burns, 1987, p. 15).

Perhaps the answer lies somewhere between these differing perspectives, where both intentional and accidental variation can play significant roles in a creative performance outcome. What is certain, is that repetition and variation go hand-in-hand, and that the nature of their relationship can change depending on the performance environment.

Repetition in the Recording Studio

One performance environment that epitomises such concepts is the recording studio, in which popular music performers create, imitate and emulate, follow instructions and explore boundaries. During a recording session, musicians and singers often produce repeated performances, or *multiple takes*, using particular scripts, tools and tacit knowledge to vary outcomes in the search for the 'perfect take'. Recorded performances are usually followed by reflection on that performance by the participants. This reflection may be discursive and involve the studio personnel focusing on ways to vary and improve the performance of the next take, or it may simply involve repeating the action in the hope of producing a better outcome. This type of repetition (i.e. numerous variant outcomes in a relatively short period of time) is a signifying characteristic that distinguishes recording studio performance from live performance.

Within this process, musicians demonstrate expertise through their control of subtle variations in each successive take and are often heavily invested creatively, continually doing, reflecting, improving, transgressing and discovering what makes the perfect take. Sometimes outcomes might also be completely

[1] See Hickey & Webster, 2001, p. 21; Stokes, 2008, p. 116; Stokes, 2011, p. 658.

unexpected or even contradictory to the plans of the performer or producer. The qualities of such performances are often judged 'not simply "correct," but special, idiosyncratic, individual' by any one (or all) of the studio personnel (Williams, 2010, p. 60). Thus, repetition offers more than a chance to get something right or even perfect. It offers the opportunity to discover the unexplored liminality between what we expect to hear and what is performed.

In recording studio production, a singer will often work through a rehearsal or learning phase for remembering the structures being repeated. The first few takes are often disregarded, sometimes not even recorded. Howlett (2009, p. 31) states that 'all those apparently "wasted" takes are really the singer getting to know, and hear, how that vocal should go – what it's supposed to be', reflecting the common notion that repetition moves towards a fixed and permanent outcome – the more a musical phrase is repeated, the more familiar and set it becomes, ingrained in the performance and moving in the direction of inevitability; convergent rather than divergent (Webster, 1990), fixed rather than variable (Ranade, 2008), isomorphic rather than metamorphic (Ware, 2015). However, if variation is inherently tied to repetition, we must try to understand these two 'directions' as working together to continually hone, sharpen and shape the performance.

There is also the possibility that one of those early takes will be *the one*. In this way, the practice of repetition occupies a curious temporality that Etchells (2015) describes as being both expanding and contracting, simultaneously looking forward and backwards, and always in a state of partial re-creation. One can view the act of repetition 'as a means to understand and embody impermanence, change and transformation' (Daboo, 2015, p. 12), a discovery of the unknown through what we know, 'an echo, a message never sent . . . reverberating backwards from the echo to the ping' (Holman Jones & Harris, 2015, p. 42). Repeating sequences and ideas is a process of ordering and making sense of the performance, providing structure that enables us to not become overwhelmed by the number of possibilities (Burrows, 2015, p. 82), to translate the many meanderings and false starts of a performative discourse (Paterson & Shah, 2015, p. 72) and finally to sift through the many options and create a quality outcome.

In *The Perfect Performance of Music and the Perfect Musical Performance*, Lydia Goehr states that 'creative products – new problems and solutions, new activities and greater learning – may emerge precisely from the constructive recognition by a practice's participants of the precise points of difference between its conflicting conceptions' (1996, p. 22). These precise points of difference between 'performance of music' and 'musical performance' are difficult to untangle. In performance repetition, the performer oscillates

between learning new material and creating 'final' performances, wrestling with *H*uman[2] instructions, mentally stored and recalled at the same moment they endeavour to deliver a performance that is authentically *h*uman. In this way, Goehr's model may also be considered a balance of safety and risk-taking.

Every performer anticipates that the next recitation will be the perfect representation. Through each re-enactment, we aim to actualise the performance, making decisions *in situ* about expressiveness, tonality or other qualities of sound, energy, grain, rhythm, attitude and inhabitation, and the relationship between ourselves and our audience (Etchells, 2015, p. 89). We reach a point where there are so many options for what can be varied that repetition simply provides an indeterminate expansive context within which to produce 'difference' (Parry, 2015). So where is the 'perfect take' situated? Is it in the knowing of the structures, the discovery of new arrangements and interpretations of these structures or the actualisation of these structures? I suggest that each of these is a possibility and that repetition affects performance outcomes in all of these ways.

The aim of this Element is to demonstrate a particular way that the processes of repetition in performance can be recorded, analysed and discussed. As a professional session singer of over twenty-five years, I have chosen the recording studio as the site for this research. Observing multiple takes of my own recorded performance within the temporal limits of a vocal recording session yields qualitative data such as sound recordings, video recordings, photographs, field notes (including annotated lyric sheets) and recollections of other participants' experiences to create an ethnography of both the process through repetition and the *work* itself (Bayley, 2010). This study investigates how evolving external cues and internal cognitive scripts interact with technology and social conventions in the recording studio to impact a popular music musician's performance and, in effect, the creation of a new *work*.

The following section describes how the recording studio resembles a 'construction site'. However, on *this* construction site plans may change, and all of the workers play an active role in how the outcome is shaped. Section 3 presents on overview of the methodology used to document the processes of repetition in the vocal booth, while Section 4 presents an auto-ethnographic text describing a singer in the studio, recording a jingle for a commercial client. Section 5 reflects on the specific knowledge, skills and attributes used by the performer during the process of multiple takes, and describes some of the scripts, tools and 'tacit knowing'[3] applied by a singer in

[2] Italics and capitalisation are derived from Goehr's writing. *H*uman refers to technical execution of the Work, while *h*uman refers to the expressive qualities of the performance.
[3] For more information, see Polanyi's (1969) theories of tacit knowing.

this type of repetitive performance. The final section concludes with a summary that advances the notion of embracing Organisation and Risk in all aspects of the recording process, 'seeking out the slippery hills' to find rare and undiscovered passages to the many possibilities that await.

2 The Recording Studio as a Construction Site

> Meet Jennie. She's twenty-four years old, and she's in a cramped Dallas vocal studio working on the chorus of a pop song called 'Running Out of Time'. She is trying to hit the big finish, in which she turns the word time into a waterfall of notes. She tries it, screws up, stops, and thinks, then sings it again at a much slower speed. Each time she misses a note, she stops and returns to the beginning, or to the spot where she missed. Jennie sings and stops, sings and stops. Then all of a sudden, she gets it. The pieces snap into place. The sixth time through, Jennie sings the measure perfectly.
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> (Coyle, 2009, p. 13)

In popular music, the recording studio is not simply a venue to record a musical recital of a *work*, it also a site of construction and production, a place for contestation of ideas (McIntyre, 2008) where the outcomes are not always clear from the start (Greig, 2009). Repeated performances, or *takes*, enable participants not only to actualise their goals and expectations for a recording session (to capture the so-called 'perfect take'), but also to discover new possibilities, variations and outcomes that have not yet been imagined.

Repetition provides all of the key studio personnel, including the producer, engineer and musicians, the opportunity to construct a single performance by collaboratively creating multiple variations of a *work*, all of which inform the final outcome. Zagorski-Thomas (2020) describes a recorded outcome as a *sonic cartoon*, a limited representation of a live performance that 'places you [the listener] in some perceived physical and, therefore, social and psychological relationship with that phenomenon' (p. 10). Through the co-production process, each of the participants combines to influence the listener's 'perception, interpretation and appreciation of both the musical materials and the way in which they are represented' (p. 16).

At the heart of the recording process is the producer. In construction terms, they are the architect and project manager, engaged to ensure that the outcome is achieved as planned and on budget. They may be hired by a corporation, such as a record company or advertising house, to work on a particular musical project, or by the artist themselves, to guide the process for the creation of newly recorded *works*. They hold the plans for the recording session and as such, are a 'nexus' through which the artist's work, technology and commercial interests come together (Howlett, 2012). While they have the power to make decisions