

**Looking closely at the structure of embodied comportment  
in music playing experience: a phenomenological account of  
an Australian institutional band**

By

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**Abstract**

This paper is based on 18 months ethnographic fieldwork among the members of an Australian Institutional band. The paper explores what band members experience as the distinctly different moments of rehearsal and performance. Rehearsals are experienced as moments in which band members engage in a multi-sensory surveillance of the self as it engages with instrument, and are characterised by what band members describe as a lack of emotion. Performances are characterised by an absence of self-directed sensual surveillance, and are equally characterised by a kind of seraphic joy that band members describe as “the feel”. The feel cannot be reduced to a nameable emotional state (i.e., ‘happy’ or ‘sad’) but is best described as ‘meta-emotion’. An important quality of the feel is its restrictedness to the performers and its unavailability to audience members: band members and audience members each experience a different ‘order’ of emotion.

It is in opposition to Blacking’s notion, that audiences will feel what musicians felt in creating music, that this paper proceeds. This notion leaves little room to develop accounts that cast the structure of an embodied comportment in playing experience as central to the production of emotion. In such accounts, emotion is inextricably intertwined with embodiment. Emotional experiences of music are for band members precisely the experiences of embodied musicality.

**Some Ethnographic Context**

Band members describe rehearsals as occasions when they produce exclusively “technical music”. Technical music, according to band members, refers to the sounds that band members make when they are engaged in playing the music “precisely as written: pressing the appropriate keys, blowing at the level that is indicated...just playing it [the written score] precisely”. Technical problems with played versions of the score are corrected in a very particular way: the conductor seeks to correct the faulted playing by drawing the faulting player’s attention to the relationship between the player’s body and his or her instrument:

The conductor specifically asked William to notice if his tonguing was correct [because the sounds the conductor heard emitting from William’s instrument indicated that the tongue was flicking too hard against the mouthpiece, causing the passage to sound “too harsh” at the edge of the notes]. The conductor and William then engaged in an extended discussion over the course of several minutes in which William described in exhaustive detail the position and pressure of his tongue against the mouthpiece. The conductor then issued precise instructions about how William was to change the pressure and position of his tongue as it hit the instrument surface so that it could produce a technically correct sound, or the sound set down for the note in the score (Fieldnotes, 1999-2000).

Directing the players to notice the points at which their bodies intersect with instrument objects is the primary activity in which the conductor engages in all rehearsals. It is the conductor who directs, or redirects, the already directed players’ attentions to the points at which their bodies intersect with those of the instruments. As players come to notice the points at which they and their bodily processes ‘end’ and the points at which their instruments ‘begin’, their self attentions directed at these sites of intersection serve to place them as player subjects and their instruments objects on either side of a thick ontological divide that is maintained throughout the rehearsal period.

The process that band members go through in order to rehearse can be understood as a kind of invitation to reflection that ushers in what Langer (1989:32) has called the ‘present’ body. Present bodies invite reflection and allow a person to discover their own activity “in shaping the world as it is discovered through our perception”.

According to Abram (1996:52), a more habitual perception is characterized by:

reciprocity, the ongoing interchange between my body and the entities that surround it...[it is] *an*

*impoverished duet* between my animal and the fluid, breathing landscape that it inhabits (my emphasis).

Reciprocity here refers to an exchange between bodies and objects of the world, to the point that objects and persons come to constitute one another. This occurs precisely because the boundaries between persons and objects are necessarily blurred in order for people to live, habitually, at all. Merleau-Ponty [1964] (1968) and Polanyi (1962, 1966) for example, argued that the individual must keep invisible or behind him or herself the points at which body intersects with the world.

As they engage in rehearsal self-surveillance, band members also place not only their touch, but also their own hearing, under self-surveillance, and they do so in order to listen for the musical result of the highly reflected-upon touch they are making to the instrument's body. As they watch their fingers pressing down on the instrument body, or as they 'watch' their tongues moving against the instrument mouthpiece, they simultaneously listen for the translation of that touch into audible sound. As they create musical sounds with their instruments, band members attend to the expression, to the shaping, of the musical words they produce, and as they attend to listening focusedly to these discrete sound shapes, they simultaneously and consequently disattend to listening to coherent strings of musical sounds that each of their musical shapes produces. Band members don't hear strings of musical words during rehearsals, they hear tiny component 'letter' parts of them.

What band members don't hear as coherent, others do. If someone comes to listen to a rehearsal, for example, they can still hear the music that band members are playing — they can hear whole musical sentences, even as band members themselves cannot. Nothing is really different in terms of the musical production in rehearsal and performance playings of the music in the sense that the rehearsal and performance sounds are not different sounds, and the players make these sounds by performing the same kinds of manipulations on instrument bodies. What does change, however, is the band members' perceptions of these sounds, and these perceptions change according to the focus of the band members' self-conscious attentions, which are engaged in self-surveillance of instrument-player body boundaries during rehearsals. Clearly, band members experience their sensing bodies quite differently from members of the audience, who, I found, routinely heard complete musical sentences in the what band members characterised as discrete rehearsal noises.

When they stop subjecting the manipulations on instrument body to their own surveillance, a markedly different set of corporeal interactions with instruments begins. During performances, band members describe their corporeal involvement with instruments in terms of inextricable intertwinement, saying that the instrument “becomes part of me”, or that he or she is “part of the sound” or “part of the instrument”. These kinds of descriptions are not applied to rehearsal experiences of playing.

Players very often talked about the ways in which the edges of their bodies, their fingertips, tongues, palms, feet, lips, disappeared from each of their self-conscious views during performances, and about the ways in which their instruments came to be, during performances, invasive of their own viscera. Instruments and their players are in performance corporeally intertwined; instruments not only invade the respiratory process that includes activity in the guts, heart, lungs or throat, for, as band members constantly remarked, “an instrument is an extension of your arm [hand/finger/foot/mouth]”.

If rehearsal periods are characterised by the fact that players are self-conscious of their physical contact with instruments, they are also and equally characterised by the lack of emotional input from players, and the lack of emotional output in the musical products of rehearsals according to players. Rehearsals are all about producing what band members call “the technical sound” in a physical sense, and equally, in an emotional sense. The technical elements of a piece that mark it as “sad”, for example, are not, according to players, capable of making a listener “feel emotional”. Rather, they indicate a potential for sadness, in the same way, as one band member put it, that a recipe indicates the potential for chocolate cake. The potential is not realised, the recipe is not ‘made’, the music will not be sad for those who hear it, according to band members, simply because it has been played according to the technical prescription given in the score.

Band members understand that audiences can hear this emotional content during performances, but when band members say that performing music is for them highly emotional, it is not to the sad, happy or angry emotional content of the music that they refer. Band members do not feel happy or sad or angry in line with the music. They feel instead a kind of ‘meta-emotion’, a kind of specifically performance related emotion that comes from turning into an instrument, from becoming an instrumentalised person that cannot be specified

into specific emotion categories of sad or happy. This happens when band members cease paying self-conscious attention to the points at which they intersect with instrument. Only then can band members experience ‘the feel’, only then can band members turn into trumpets, only then can band members come to experience the meta-emotion that Serres (1998) has described in other contexts as ‘joy’. This joyful emotional experience is directly related to specifically performative corporeal-sensual experience, and is restricted to performers as opposed to the audience members. Band members describe it as “the best buzz ever”, as being “close to God”, and as being “something like orgasm”, or “like making great love”. Clearly, band members experience bodily and emotional experiences of playing music quite differently from audience members.

### **Music, Body, Emotion and John Blacking**

John Blacking (1985; reprinted with alterations in Byron, 1995:152) argued that:

[m]any sequences of body movement are not entirely neutral, in that they have physiological consequences and evoke a specific range of somatic states, feelings, and corresponding thoughts...moreover...a decision to perform music can lead people to share emotion through the link of their common participation in sequences of movement and its relation to what Manfred Clynes calls “essentic forms”.

Blacking, following Clynes and adding the grounds for cultural specificity, similarly argues that, “the collective movements of musical performance can generate collective feelings and collective thought, which is the basis of cultural communication” (1985; reprinted with alterations in Byron, 1995:152). It is worth noting that Blacking criticized Merriam’s important anthropological text *The Anthropology of Music* (1963) on the grounds that Merriam had treated music as if it were learned behaviour, a criticism he repeated with regard to emotion as conceptualised by Clifford Geertz (1975).

On several occasions throughout ‘The Study of Music as Cultural System and Human Capability’ (1984), Blacking cites Geertz’s famous line, that “art and the equipment to grasp it are made in the same shop” (1976:1497). Here Blacking brings his formulation of musical-emotional resonance to bear on the relationship between performers and listeners, arguing that particular emotions are experienced by listeners during musical performances as a result of the resonance between music and motor impulse. In particular he notes that:

[a]n intuitive grasp of music is possible because performers and listeners possess the same innate musical competence...as creators of music. When someone uses those very personal (but “universal”) human modes of thought and action to create new arrangements of culturally familiar musical symbols, there is a very good chance that some other human beings, in re-creating their sense as they hear them...will feel in their bodies what others felt in creating them (1984; reprinted with minor alterations in Byron, 1995:240).

This body-feeling is responsible for inducing a particular emotion-feeling (see Blacking, 1995) which is replicated in musical expression. It is in opposition to this idea in particular, that audiences will feel what musicians felt in creating music, that I locate this paper.

It is exclusively in experiences of embodied musicality - which includes embodied instrumentality and embodied sonority - that band members experience music emotionally, or in other words, experience ‘the feel’. During rehearsals, when instrument objects and sounds are disembodied, music has no feeling for band members, and does not make them feel. Audience members, on the other hand, will not necessarily feel unemotional when they hear rehearsal music and emotional when they hear performance music in the ways that band members consistently do. Band members can, for instance, feel elated and joyful when they have played a piece of sad music that has reduced audience members to tears, as occurred during a band performance of *My Heart Will Go On*, which made a female concert-goer seated near me weep.

The idea that musical producers and audience members feel similarly in their bodies has been dealt with by Katz in a peripheral way, in fact, in the endnotes of his most recent publication, *How Emotions Work* (1999). There he draws cursory attention to the idea that:

[i]f the emotional response to music is through a resonance of the structure of emotional experience and the structure of music [a position similar to that espoused by Blacking] then the audience response will not necessarily reflect the same emotion as is contained in the music, as understood by composer and performers...[many theoreticians do not recognise that this notion] does not look closely enough at the structure of comportment in playing (1999:369).

Katz’s concern, that researchers do not look closely enough at the structure of comportment in playing, and the band members’ understanding that their emotional experience is very different from the emotional experience is very different from the emotional experience of audience members as they listen to played music leads me to look closely at what performer

and audience bodies are doing as they experience music. Looking closely at bodies might provide clues to the difference between the emotional experiences of band members and audience members.

As Blacking (1987) suggested, the mournful whimpering cries of sad song music are very like the mourning whimpering cries of the sad body: instrument and body both might cry out the sounds of sad. But band members who produce these sad sounds do not cry out sadly, for they are not sad; they are close to heaven, they are experiencing the best buzz ever, they are engaged in sensual musical orgasm. These are the highly emotional experiences that band members say occur for them during performances: these are 'the feel'. This 'feel' is the experience of what Serres has called 'bodily joy', or 'ecstasy' (1998:455). This is the experience of self-extension, self-exceeding, which is to be found in the playing of instrument, the turning of oneself into a trumpet. Here, notes Connor, "the body becomes itself in playing with or transforming itself (1999:9), and the transformation, for band members, is joyful, seraphic. The ecstasy, the elation, the joy, is essentially a sensual joy that comes when the sense are free from their rehearsal sitedness in the body.

This is a joy, or meta-emotion, that my own listening body cannot experience. There is a crucial difference between my situation as a listener and that of the performing band member, even though we both hear the same music being played. The difference lies in the notion that, in order to play, band members must embody, and be embodied by, their instruments, which is an embodying and an embodiment that I do not have to make as a listener. I may see and hear the sax, but I do not see, hear, feel it, touch it, taste it, smell it as part of my own body as band members do, and they do because instruments are the sensual vehicles of the players' musical actions.

In one way, from an audience perspective, a visual way, the difference between audience members listening to music and band members performing it is akin to the difference between watching a love scene at the movies and making love. In the former case, one is visually presented with two bodies thoroughly intertwined and in the latter one experiences intertwinement. The latter kind of intertwinement is one that cannot be watched by its participants, for if it were, the whole act of making love would be vulnerable to breakdown, just as piano playing or typing would be. In any and all of these cases, intertwinement of hands and pianos, fingers and keyboards, and bodies and bodies occurs in the absence of

sensory surveillance of the intersections between subject and object. Intertwinement depends wholly on crossing a divide between subject and objects, and this is a divide crossed when the boundaries between them are wholly ignored. Audience members of any of these events, however, may direct their attentions to the boundaries between subject and object as much as they desire: for them, nothing is at stake. For participants, feelingful and corporeal competency -trains of feeling and motion -might be altogether lost should they focus on, *suveil* these things in such a manner. For band members, these trains are disrupted and derailed in the process of sensual surveillance.

## **Conclusion**

On stage then, are 36 instrumentalised humans, all of them orgasmically close to heaven, not because that is the emotional content of the music they play, but because leaving the body site to become instrumentalised is like leaving the body site to make love with a cherished, loved, partner. Seated in rows before them are listeners and viewers listening to and watching musical lovemaking without even recognising it as such: audience members can listen to words about love, they can watch as a finger strokes a sax key, but they cannot themselves make instrumentalised love. Metaphors of lovemaking are consistently used by band members to describe the process of becoming instrumentalised, as are metaphors of creating and eating food. These metaphors are apt indeed because they describe particularly penetrative experiences, in which matter moves into the body and circulates inside it. Similarly, band members take up instruments and in a sense, or rather, in many senses all at once, consume them, take them inside their bodies to become instrumentalised persons. As far as the work of John Blacking took us, it cannot take us to the place that the place where the instrumentalised people take theoretical explorations of lived experience. They take us to a place that is entirely sensually, corporeally different from the place where audience members are located: orgasmically close to heaven. Clearly, there are people who can listen to sax music and be transported to another place, another time, via an affective acoustics that audibly construct any place and time in a single experienced moment. Just as clearly, there are people who turn into saxophones, *who are saxophones*. There is a difference. Audience members do not feel in their bodies what musicians feel in theirs as they create music, because their bodies don't experience the making of the music. The production of music changes markedly over rehearsal and performance experience owing to changes in corporeal and sensual experience, and emotional experience changes accordingly for performers, but

not for audience members.

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