

Just listen! (Or can I also look at my chamber music partners?)

The idea that music can and should only be heard is a persistent one in western culture. To devote an entire research project to the topic of eye gaze might therefore seem an exercise in futility at first. Yet, verbalisations regarding gazing at the partner as a means of communication in ensemble playing are not uncommon and can be difficult to interpret. Three master students recently complained to me about a comment they received by their teacher in ensemble didactics. On the one hand they were told that looking at the partner was ‘unprofessional’. On the other, they were advised to make their intentions ‘visible’. Currently, the literature provides us with only little evidence of how gazing at the partner in ensembles usually takes place and how it impacts on the performance. Similarly, only few studies have inquired into the meanings musicians give themselves to the use of gaze as a communication channel.

Just listen! is a doctoral project whereby I, as the artistic researcher, investigate my own chamber music practice focussing on the aspect of gaze behaviour. In a first cycle I aim at uncovering my beliefs regarding gaze in ensemble playing and at becoming critically aware of particularly my views on communicating with the partner via gaze. This is achieved, first, by reflecting on ‘fresh’ incidents in my own chamber music practice and by exposing tensions between the written utterances during analysis. Second, my beliefs are challenged by data on my actual gaze behaviour, recorded with mobile eye-tracking glasses. Third, my gaze behaviour in my own trio is compared with that of others in other trios. The process, during data collection as well as analysis (which is still ongoing), is one of continuous negotiation: between own beliefs, utterances by other musicians, theoretical ideas in the scientific literature and newly gained eye-tracking data. In a second cycle, I intend to develop a personal view on how my gaze behaviour could, should or might function in my own chamber music practice (i.e. a ‘personal Theory of Practice’ (Argyris & Schön, 1974)) in accordance with my views on chamber music playing more generally.

The presentation will offer a peak inside the self-reflections and the analytical treatment of them. Additionally, it will be argued that the outcome of this artistic research project, a highly personal view on how gaze behaviour could, should or might function in ensemble playing, will be of direct relevance to chamber music teachers given the intention of the musician-researcher to deliver an account of her own practice that is recognisable and interpretable to other practitioners. Moreover, this type of research can be generally useful to bring together students and teachers in higher music institutions and can help them to discover and demystify some of the issues they encounter in the classroom. Although this is not the explicit aim of the current research design and although projects in this vein undoubtedly already exist, I hope that the presentation will trigger ideas for future research, particularly in the area of ensemble playing and teaching.

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Sarah Vandemoortele received musical training as a violinist at the Royal Academy of Music (London) under the guidance of Remus Azoitei and Mayumi Fujikawa, and studied musicology at KU Leuven - University. As a research assistant at LUCA School of Arts (Leuven) she contributed to the pilot project 'Into the Wild: Musical communication in ensemble playing. From multidisciplinary to interdisciplinary research strategies.' The study inquired into the gazing behaviour of musicians during ensemble playing and occurred in close collaboration with researchers from KU Leuven - University. Currently, Sarah is doing her PhD in the Arts, which follows up on the pilot study and integrates her own chamber music practice into the research. Sarah is also a board member of Euterpe, a nonprofit organisation in Kortrijk (Belgium) that promotes young musicians, ensembles and composers during five chamber music concerts each season.