ORPHEUS MANIFESTOS

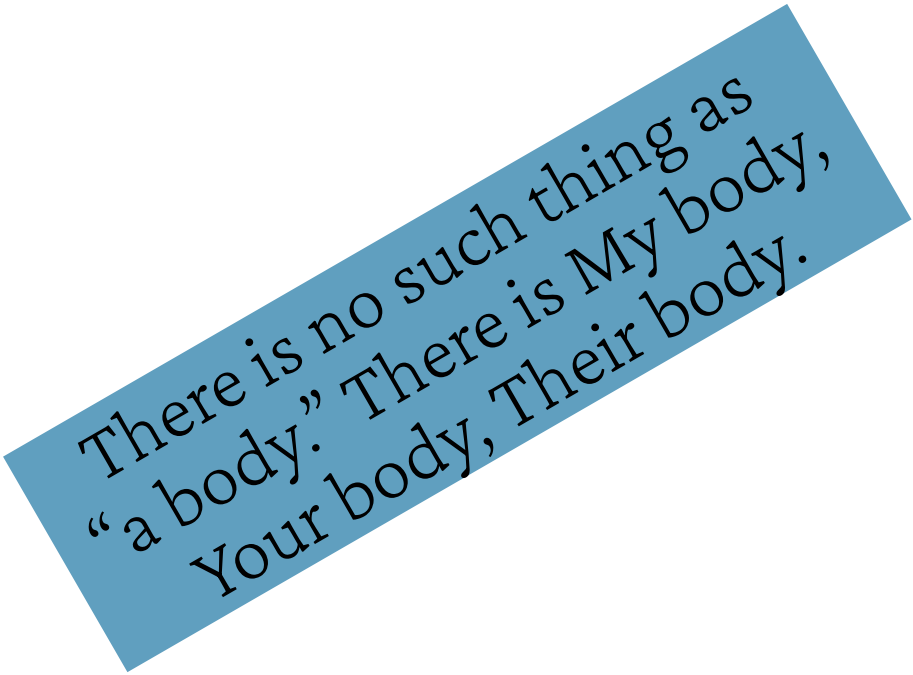
Embodied Knowledge in Artistic Research

Catherine Laws and Emily Worthington

O/I
Orpheus Instituut
Advanced studies and research in music

To mark the thirtieth anniversary of Orpheus Instituut, this series of manifestos reimagines knowledge through music as an essential form of understanding. The eight statements, written by the institute's principal investigators with rigour, humour, and artistic verve, situate musical knowing in the spaces between music-making and reflection. They trace the entanglements between performers and technologies, and the confrontation between archived fragments and virtual entities. Musical understanding here emerges as a makers' knowledge, built upon recursive feedback between minds, bodies, interfaces, and sound. What artistic research in music generates remains multifaceted, provisional, and alive: it can always be produced differently.

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There is no such thing as
“a body.” There is My body,
Your body, Their body.

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Read this text
as a body.

Hunch over it
Frowning

Lean in, to peer at it
Stretch away, to view it at a distance.

Feel its weight in your hands
Its reflection in your eyes
Its texture under your fingertips

Hold it. How do you hold it?
Are you touching it?
Or does it touch you?

Breathe it in as you walk around the room
Feel it land in your lap
Or rest on your shoulders
Or slide off your skin

Grasp it.
Grope for its meaning
in the semi-darkness of your soma

Do the ideas slide off you
like water droplets from a shiny rock?

Or do they start to wear a groove
that draws in more water
and deepens into a channel?

A body *IS*

Bodies are not objects

A body is not an object to be described
A body is not a conceptual canvas on which to inscribe meaning
A body is not merely a series of gestures
movements in space to be traced or mapped

Bodies are not vehicles for minds

A body is not a support system for a mind
Nor a set of sensors collecting raw data to be processed elsewhere
Before being returned as intentions to be enacted.

Phenomenological experience is not a methodological challenge
It is the essence of our engagement with the world.

Bodies are not neutral

There is no view from nowhere
The mind is not an escape from the body
A body is always, already, political.
It is a contested space.

Bodies are not irrational

A body is not more subjective than a mind
Feelings are data flags for our attention
Reactions are information directional nudges
Intuition links the present to a well of experience
And discomfort is a dissonance in our working paradigm

Bodies are not tacit

. . .
[The tacitness of the body is not a "problem"
At least, it is not a problem of the body.
Bodies disclose, but not in concepts.
Tacitness is a problem of language;
of logocentricity]

Bodies talk to other bodies

Embodied knowledge becomes tangible as soon as you engage it.
Just because it can't be put on a shelf
Or captured in figures and formulae
Or frozen, made static, fixed
Or repeated without variation
Does not make it mysterious

Bodies are not singular

Bodies are individual, different, but not singular
A body's experience is private—but in it lies connection to others.

Bodies are not users or operators

A body needs things
It is affected, changed, extended
by interacting with materials and objects
Together, a body and a thing form a dynamic system
They are lively, creative, productive, affective

Bodies are not transitory

A body is always in transition always becoming
Never merely transitory.
A body is an archive: it remembers
holding the residue of all that has been.
A body is resourceful: It already contains
the material for future possibilities.

There is no such thing as "a body."
There is My body, Your body, Their body.

Me, You, Them.

> I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. . . . I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity. —Donna Haraway (1988, 589)

In 2014, Crispin and Gilmore, writing on behalf of Orpheus Instituut, described the "role of the body" as "one of the most problematic aspects of artistic research" (2014, 126). They articulated this problem in terms of the tendency towards solipsism and the tacit nature of embodied knowledge. In the same volume, Catherine Laws argued strongly, drawing on both artistic and scientific research, for a "focus on embodiment—*not physicality, corporeality or simply the body*—in order to avoid persistent Cartesian tendencies" (2014, 131, my emphasis).

Despite a proliferation of research attending to different aspects of embodiment in the intervening years, the notion that the body and embodiment present a challenge to researchers—not just in music but across all fields—has proved resilient. To practitioners, the qualitative and quantitative approaches taken in disciplines such as psychology and cognitive studies can feel extractive, offering little help in understanding embodiment in practice or accounting for the significance of felt experience in the complexities of musical performance and reception. On the other hand, autoethnographic and phenomenological methods can still attract the derogatory charge of "me-search"—of eschewing analysis and rigour in favour of the experiential, personal, and vague (Atkinson et al. 2007, 35). Finally, much research addressing embodiment still approaches the body as an object of enquiry, rather than as fundamental to our perceptions, action, and thought.

This manifesto rejects the notion that embodiment constitutes a discrete subcategory of research. Embodiment is not a "problem" to be solved. Our starting point is embodiment as the precondition of all knowledge and practice: "embodiment itself is the first affordance" (Spatz 2016, 260). Through the projects described here, whose embodied nature is unavoidably present, we thus address issues fundamental to all research.

Musical Touch and Vicarious Perception

Catherine Laws

I would like us to pay more, and different, attention to touch in music and sound practices.

That touch is important in most music-making is evident. Its role varies considerably, according to bodily contact with and the mechanisms of the instrument, but it often demonstrably influences parameters of sound—intonation, dynamics, timbre, and/or resonance—with subtle refinement facilitating expressive nuance. Musicians work to refine the contact between body parts—fingers, lips, shoulders, knees, feet—and instruments, with that touch facilitated by whole-body positioning, movement, and proprioception. Then, in performing, we negotiate the unstable contingencies of tactile nuance in the moment, to creative ends.

But this does not get to it. Touching is feeling. Physical and affective. *Bodies are not vehicles for minds.* The dynamic experience of touching and being touched by an instrument produces sound but also changes, in the moment and beyond, the felt experience of those engaged in the performance—playing and listening. Touching affects how we are "touched." Its experience is central to the embodied intersubjectivity of performers and audiences, but also tells of the interdependence of humans and things.

* * *

There are important philosophical, phenomenological, and ethnographic accounts of touch, often dealing with the intersection of its physical and affective dimensions; Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling* (2003) is seminal. Only occasionally do these accounts focus on sound and music (notably in Nancy [2007] and Garcia-Mispireta [2023]), though there are many instances of composers, sound artists, and technologists exploring touch through practice, sometimes explicitly configured as artistic research. Most studies of touch in musical *performance* focus on its control and perception, either examining touch in instrumental technique, investigating empirically whether performers and listeners perceive qualities of touch in musical tones, or designing tactile interfaces for new instruments and sound controllers. This research is important. But the overarching narrative here is one of *mastery* (the gendered term no accident): "mastering" touch technique, or establishing what we can objectively measure in instrumental action and know about its perception. *Bodies are not objects . . . to be described, or on which to inscribe meaning.*

As a pianist I, of course, seek to refine touch for the control of tone. And I want to understand its operation, perception, and impacts—*technique* in Spatz's sense, as the "transmissible and repeatable knowledge of *relatively* reliable possibilities afforded by human embodiment" (2015, 16, my emphasis). However, doing so is about felt experience and ambiguity, as much as, if not more than, control or explicit know-how. Touch–sound relationships are mediated by complex instrumental mechanisms and the acoustic environment—they are fragile and contingent. At the limits of expertise, in the space where the actions and agency of performer and instrument are impossibly entangled, is an indeterminacy and exposure to the other that is characteristic of all touching.

Through artistic research we might attend to, without resolving, the uncertainties of musical touch; in my case, how I touch the piano, how it touches me, how those touches resonate through space and touch others and touch me again, and how this can be at once an experience

of fragmentation—a dispersal of body, of surfaces and organs—and of integration in an encompassing, dynamic, *tactful* environment.

* * *

Touch is how I *am* as a pianist.

It is how I control the things I care about most as a musician: the extraordinary qualities of timbral nuance in piano resonance and decay—and their affects.

It is also how I *can't* control these things.

I can—and often do—feel like I don't just activate but also shape sound with my hands, touching and moulding *sound* (beyond the keys, *what am I touching when I play the piano?*). I am far from alone in this. Susan Tomes describes the beguiling fantasy of piano haptics: "I was watching my own hands on the keyboard this afternoon, and I suddenly realised that I had completely lost sight of the fact that the sound does not come out of the keys. When I touch the keys I imagine that sound is created directly underneath my fingers" (2010, 128). Simultaneously, though, touch also registers the *distance*, even separation, between finger and sound, mediated by the instrumental body and complex mechanism. *Bodies are not irrational; not more subjective than a mind.* Expert control and extensive experiential knowledge of touch do not ensure a direct relationship between physical action and precise sound quality.

Touch is a site of tacit knowledge and yet hard to know.

Jacques Derrida (2005) critiques Western thinking about touch as focusing on mastery and assimilation. *(Bodies are not neutral, but always, already political.)* He tracks its configuration as the "master sense" (154) in a pervasive metaphysics of continuity and indivisibility—one countered by Jean-Luc Nancy's attention to "sharing, parting, partitioning,

and discontinuity, interruption, caesura" (ibid., 156). The "control and measure" studies of musical touch exhibit the same desire for mastery, but attending to the practice of musical touching tells a different story.

We need to pay attention to the limits of, and gaps in, "mastery"; to how performers *feel* their way, proprioceptively, through the intimate dynamics of the relationship with the instrument, sound, and space. Focusing on touch as embodiment in musical performance exposes the interdependence of body and instrument. But it also breaks apart the illusion of the *singularity* of performer and instrument—the ideal of absolute technical-expressive unity, rooted in a desire to experience the instrument as fully incorporated into the body, and hence to understand bodily action, including touch, as sublimated to the individuated, flowing, human, expressive moment. The idiosyncratic functioning of individual instruments, the acoustic response in the space, and our tactile navigation of these things . . . all of this is at once highly nuanced and specialist, but resistant and unstable.

* * *

Research rarely acknowledges musical touch not only as manifesting performers' conceptual, technical, and musical understanding but also as an agent of change in that embodied understanding. *Bodies are not transitory, but always in transition*. Notably, Mine Doğantan-Dack calls for more attention to "how the execution of various gestures actually makes the performer feel—both physically and affectively" (2011, 259), and Simon Waters notes the "ambiguity and fragility of the performer-instrument articulation" in the "vibrating complex" of body, instrument, and room (2013, 123). In the study of sensory-motor interaction applied to tactile interfaces and instrument design, O'Modhrain and Gillespie argue for the body–instrument relationship as one of dynamic exchange: energy is applied to an instrument by a performer, but also received from it, through their "springy" inertia (2018, 12). The sounding of touch and touching of sound emerge from a process of

vibrant contingency in which agency is hard to disentangle: a kind of intra-action, to use Barad's term (2007, 141).

In this way, I do not just touch, but am touched by, the piano. *Bodies are not users or operators.* Equally, instruments respond, but also resist, acting on us, with "thing power" (Bennett 2010, 2). In playing the piano, haptic instrumental pushback is felt through the keys into the body, affecting how and what a performer feels and hears, and what they do. The kinaesthetic experience of pressing or striking or stroking or tapping combines with hearing the sound, providing multisensory feedback—physical, with *affective* impact—that inevitably moderates subsequent action. I am changed, and what I will do changes, by touching and being touched, musically. As, or perhaps even before, I register the physical impact of touching the piano, there is an affective impact from the *becoming* of touch, the impulse producing an inner touchedness. *Am I feeling the touch or touching the feeling?*

Like all embodied experience, touch is simultaneously deeply private and always shared—differentiated in individual bodies, and experienced differently according to our neurodivergence, but distributed by and between bodies. *Bodies are not singular: individual, but not singular.* Touch research in psychology and embodied cognition—which has not addressed music—suggests that we use the same brain areas to process observations of other people's touch experience and our own (Bowling and Bannissy 2017; Smit et al. 2023). In music, Cox's "mimetic hypothesis" (2016) proposes that a subconscious *what is it like to do that?* occurs in listeners, causing covert and overt embodied responses (e.g., unconscious larynx adjustments when listening to singing; overt foot tapping). This does not examine touch. Vicarious perception research into cognitive "mirroring" responses considers their possible physical-affective empathic functioning (Lockwood 2016), but not in music. In parallel, approaches to the aesthetics and politics of tactility (Manning 2006) and the transmission of affect (Brennan 2004) offer important insights into touch as the foundation of our

connections to others. *Bodies are not tacit.* This occasionally addresses sound, but not musical practice. Touch research mostly ignores music and music embodiment research mostly ignores touch.

How can we unfold and disclose the experience and significance of musical touch?

* * *

The research project Musical Touch and Vicarious Perception asks how we can expose and explore the complexities and ambiguities of instrumental touch, to understand better its *doing*, its affects, and its significance. The project examines the role of touch in mediating musical nuance, the physical-affective dynamic between performer and instrument in musical touching, and how this two-way instrumental touching feeds into vicarious, affective responses to music. The core is artistic research, fed by, and back into, empirical and critical-theoretic accounts of touch. The methodology involves devising different experimental and improvisatory musical processes to disrupt apparently intuitive musical touch, attempting to catch it in its moments of becoming. The disruption is treated as productive: processes of interruption and intervention throw aspects of tactility into relief, and these are drawn into the development of new performance pieces. The resulting artistic outputs take touch as their *theme* but also aim to draw audiences into vicarious experience of the dynamics and complexities of touch. *Bodies talk to other bodies.*

* * *

Embodied Epistemology and Historical Practices

Emily Worthington

> If we don't embody what we find in the archive, do we even fully understand what we're reading? (Mancia 2025, 5)

I would like us to reconsider the field commonly known as historically informed performance (HIP) in relation to the epistemologies of practice and artistic research and, in particular, of embodiment.

What forms of knowledge are at play in research that takes place both *into* the embodied practice of past musicians and *into and through* the embodiment of current practitioners? I have argued elsewhere (Worthington 2025) that the very construction of the term HIP embeds the idea of embodied practice existing downstream of the often text-based research that "informs" it. As "applied musicology," as it is sometimes termed, it gives the impression that the mind does the thinking, makes the decisions, and the body, suitably trained and prepared, carries them out. Yet, *Bodies are not vehicles for minds.* Though the fallacy of this model has always been to some extent recognised (see for example Sherman 1997), we still underplay the embodied nature of our research, as though what presents as intuition or "mere" feelings cannot carry the same evidential weight as ink on a page. Yet to do so is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature both of practice and of historical sources. *A body is not more subjective than a mind.* What we are engaged in—historical practice research—would be better served and, moreover, more at peace with itself by embracing an epistemology grounded in an understanding of the nature of artistic practice and of the embodied knowledge that structures it.

SOURCES TRACE EMBODIMENT IN MOTION

> From this it will be clear that dots (like all other musical signs) had to be interpreted and that although they were always taken due notice of they were not looked upon as automatically determining what bowing you were to use, but this had to be determined separately in each individual case. (R[anken] 1939, 40)

The early twentieth-century violinist Marion Bruce Ranken (1884–1966) understood that musical notations are not representative models that, once understood by the mind, could be enacted by the body; rather, they are invitations to explore, to process possibilities, over and over again. This lack of specificity is not a failure on the part of the composer, nor whimsy on the part of the artist, but a characteristic of embodied knowledge. Whether notating a specific piece or describing generalised performance practices, the sources we deal with are partial reflections of embodied practices that were complex, unfixed, and constantly in a "process of becoming" (Mancia 2025, 17–18, quoting Bakhtin). *A body is always in transition.* The embodied knowledge traced in these sources is thus most fully and effectively accessed through a parallel "process of becoming" in ourselves.

As discussed by Butt (2002), our attempts to recover the details of past practices are not a case of uncovering answers, but of re-exploring the conditions and processes navigated by our historical counterparts. Incompleteness and contradictions in historical sources—and in our interpretations of them—are a defining characteristic of the embodied knowledge they seek to transmit. Any frustration with this on our own part should be directed towards the dismantling of the still-dominant conceptual paradigm that erroneously demands stable work-objects, definitive composerly "intentions," and codified performance practices. *Just because something can't be captured, fixed, or put on a shelf does not make it mysterious.*

> The issue here is not simply the familiar difficulty of framing embodied experiences in words: it's one of communicating to people who don't share the bodily experiences in question. (Cook 2013, 311)

> I am not mainly interested here in "experience." Instead, what concerns me is transmissible knowledge. (Spatz 2015, 9)

The clarinettist Carl Baermann (1811–85) published his *Vollständige Clarinett-Schule*, opp. 63–64, in 1860. It contains a theoretical volume on performance and a large number of etudes for clarinet accompanied by piano. Each etude is meticulously marked with breathing places that, Baermann states, also indicate phrasing ([1860–64], 28–30). The general principles laid out in his discussion of breathing and phrasing in the theoretical volume are logical, and mostly unchallenging to twenty-first-century concepts of musicality; however, the situations that occur in the etudes themselves are anything but. This is not the work of a wayward artist failing to adhere to his own rules, but of a thinking musician attempting to unfold an ecology of practice that was itself constantly in motion. Working with such sources involves engaging critically with the "process of becoming" that takes place when we reawaken them through embodied practice.

As I begin playing these etudes, I observe that these breaths are more frequent than are physically comfortable for me and often occur in places that contradict my musical expectations. *Discomfort is a dissonance in our working paradigm.* Aware of the historical contingency of my own musical judgement, I do not assume error or incompetence on the part of Baermann. Instead, I ask: What structures of embodied knowledge do these breath marks reflect? Is there a coherent paradigm in which they could make consistent sense, whose rules are different to the ones I have been formed by?

By sitting with my discomfort, I allow a new paradigm to emerge. *Feelings are data.* I discover that highly frequent breath points require a more relaxed physical-instrumental technique that affords the air and sound to be easily and flexibly stopped and started without having to overcome significant tension or inertia. Having to take breaths in places where the musical line appears continuous leads me to develop a new technique of rubato and flexible ensemble in order to create space in places where it appears not to exist. Through trying to make musical sense of breaths that do not correspond with structural points in the melody or harmony, I develop techniques of phrasing that allow multiple layers of structure and momentum to be shown simultaneously.

The simple instruction to "breathe here" thus becomes epistemic. Conceptually, my perspective becomes explicitly oriented around the idea of the breath as an expressive tool to be utilised, not a merely physiological necessity to be negotiated. Physically, discomfort and frustration in attempting to realise these markings become a kind of marker dye, tracing the gaps and conflicts between Baermann's embodied knowledge and my own. *Bodies disclose, but not in concepts.* Over the course of months and years, I explore my own ecology of embodied knowledge, noticing what affordances and understandings are activated, which do and do not serve the task at hand, where I have to find new solutions and build new technique, and where I feel I must resist reconfiguration to maintain the boundaries of my own artistic identity. *The body is an archive.* This work is undertaken in constant dialogue with tangible historical sources: early recordings that trace the embodied practices of others, texts that articulate the concepts that underpinned those practices, and of course the affordances of the instrument I am using, designed by Baermann himself. Baermann's breath marks thus become the scaffolding around which I create new structures of embodied knowledge that underpin fresh directions in my artistic practice.

* * *

> theory and research . . . continue to talk at cross purposes; the one insisting that the past is unknowable, the other unable to ignore the vitality of its sources. (Robinson 2010, 503)

Rigour in historical practice research comes not from avoiding subjectivity, somehow transcending the self, but from engaging critically with the self as the site of research. But what about the requirement for knowledge to be verifiable, repeatable, generalisable? In the realm of propositional knowledge, these are the gold standard; but in the context of embodied knowledge, they are nonsense. Embodiment cannot be repeated, generalised, or verified, in the absolute sense. Nevertheless, that does not mean that embodied knowledge is purely individual or subjective. *Bodies are not singular.* Spatz defines embodied knowledge as that which "structures our actions and practices by offering a range of relatively reliable pathways through any given situation" (2015, 26), which is "neither more nor less than concrete knowledge about the possibilities afforded by . . . the material world, including our own human embodiment" (66). *Bodies are not irrational.* Just as I have been able to trace the structure of Baermann's practice by identifying relative reliabilities afforded by the traces he left, so I can provide the means for others to retrace and re-explore these pathways through their own "process of becoming." *Bodies talk to other bodies.* An embodied epistemology does not place specificity, variation, and difference in opposition to knowledge. Rather, it demands that we account for these critically and transparently in our work.

* * *

> One must therefore know the *method of knowing* in order to grasp the *object to be known*. (Bachelard [1966] 1998, 56, quoted in Rheinberger 2005, 321)

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Embodiment should no longer be viewed as a discrete category of research, but rather as the pre-condition that defines all research, knowledge, and practice.

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