

# Heritage and Festivals in Europe

Performing Identities

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## 2 On the relationship between performance and intangible cultural heritage

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## 2 On the relationship between performance and intangible cultural heritage

*Simon McKerrell and Kerstin Pfeiffer*

‘Performance’ is one of those terms that defy easy definition. It has become a particularly elastic term in English, where it has a wider range of meanings and applications than in French or German, for instance.<sup>1</sup> The term has a continuum of meanings that range from the utilitarian statement, such as, ‘The car performs well’, through to the affective when discussing the rich and plural meanings of aesthetic arts. A Shakespearean play, a football match, a shamanic ritual or even the way someone dresses can all be considered under the heading of ‘performance’. However, there is a crucial difference between looking at something *as* performance and saying that this action or event *is* performance (Schechner 2013: 38–40; see also Carlson 2018: 4–5). Looking at human behaviour *as* performance can serve as a way of studying the world around us, from everyday interactions to sociocultural, political and economic processes (Schechner 2013; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; McKenzie 2001). Yet any singular definition of what performance *is* posits a challenge because it involves cautiously tiptoeing through an epistemological minefield of disciplinary understandings of the term (Carlson 2018; Lehmann 2006: 134–138; McKenzie 2001).

This chapter deliberately ranges across disciplines because we wish to move towards a better understanding of the notion of performance in relation to ICH, where both terms are inherently transdisciplinary. We first examine the concept of performance as it is understood in Theatre and Performance Studies, focussing on those aspects which are pertinent to ICH – embodiment, liminality and efficacy. Second, we turn to Heritage Studies and outline how ideas of and about performance shape our understanding of heritage and its socio-cultural dimensions. Thirdly, and finally, we investigate aspects of the tension between the performance of and the research on ICH through the lens of ethnomusicology, a discipline that is shaped by the tensions between the wealth of tacit cultural knowledge acquired by learning to perform works of ICH and the need to communicate such knowledge in research outputs.

### 2.1 Understandings of performance

There are three elements that mark out, frame and heighten some events so they stand apart from examples of everyday life in action and become aesthetic

or social performances. The first is location, as a performance invariably takes place in a specific space. This can be a building, the wider or civic environment or, as Fischer-Lichte and Schechner have pointed out, sometimes between people (Fischer-Lichte 2008; Schechner 2013: 30, 2003: 14–19). The location of performance influences the second constituent aspect: the relationship between those who create and those who view, hear or experience. The roles of performer and spectator or audience member may be fluid, yet the performance emerges from their bodily co-presence and involves a cycle of interaction. This sort of interaction sometimes produces outwardly perceptible responses (e.g., laughter, snoring) which in turn trigger a response in the performer. Interaction between performers and audience(s) during performance is often highlighted as one of the key attractions of live performance, resting upon a shared, collective experience. Yet spectators or audiences also respond to one another. Fischer-Lichte uses the term ‘autopoietic feedback loop’ to describe this interdependence of performers and spectators from which performance emerges (2008: 179). Thirdly, there needs to be some action or thing that is presented, shown, heard or experienced. This can involve the (public) demonstration of a particular skill (Carlson 2018: 3) or ‘restored’ or ‘twice-behaved behaviour’ (Schechner 2003: 163): actions and behaviours that are rehearsed or practiced and which constitute a recognised, culturally coded pattern of behaviour.

In any case, performances always have an aim or overlapping aims: ‘to entertain, to create beauty, to mark or change identity, to make or foster community, to heal, to teach or to persuade, to deal with the sacred and the demonic’ (Schechner 2013: 46). Richard Bauman defines performance as a self-conscious process of demonstrating communicative competence to an audience and stresses that we should think about what is ‘conventionally performed’ and also ‘what range of speech activity is considered susceptible to performance, and what range is conventionally performed’ (Bauman 1975: 290–311). We suggest, that performance can usefully be thought of as the communication or display of consciously aesthetic behaviour.

As Thompson and Schechner observe, ‘performance [in general] can transform the practitioners, the participants, and the public’s existing knowledge and experience’ (2004: 13) because the experience they undergo in the course of a performance is considered to be a liminal one – one which opens up possibilities. The notion of liminality and the idea that performance itself is a liminal or liminoid activity, which does not merely involve a transition but a transformation of its participants, is based on Turner’s theory of liminality derived from his study of tribal cultures (Turner 1969, 1974; Schechner 2003).<sup>2</sup> Liminality, McKenzie posits, is the ‘spatial, temporal and symbolic “in betweenness” [of performance that] allows social norms to be suspended, challenged, played with, and perhaps even transformed’ (2001: 50). The notion of liminality and an understanding of aesthetic performances as liminoid activities has therefore come to be seen as one of the most important attributes of

performative efficacy, as the definition with which Carlson closes his section entitled ‘Conclusion: what is performance?’ exemplifies:

[Performance] is a specific event with its liminoid nature foregrounded, almost invariably separated from the rest of life, presented by performers and attended by audiences both of whom regard the experience as made up of material to be interpreted, to be reflected upon, to be engaged in – emotionally, mentally, and perhaps even physically.

[Carlson 2018: 253]

While Schechner (2003: 159–160) and McKenzie (2001) locate the transformative power of performance in its position between theatre and ritual, the German theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte emphasises the importance of the encounter between performers and spectators: ‘[L]iminality emerges out of the event character inherent in autopoiesis’ (2008: 179). In other words, collapsing the binary opposition between artist and audience, between body and mind, between art and life produces a potentially transformative experience of liminality. Studies in musical performance similarly emphasise the transgressive nature of musical experience in altering our conception of time and the Self. As Fischer-Lichte observes, this ‘can provide a torturous or lustful experience for the spectator’ (2008: 179).

Whether the experience of a performance has an effect beyond the moment (or can alter our somatic perceptions of the moment itself), and what this effect might be, is a matter for debate across the arts. For Carlson, theatrical performance is ‘one of the most powerful and efficacious procedures that human society has developed for the endlessly fascinating process of cultural and personal self-reflexion, experimentation, and understanding’ (2018: 253). Kershaw (1999) and Dolan (2005) are similarly optimistic about the power of live performances, especially those that fall into the category of applied theatre. Dolan argues in *Utopia in Performance* that live performances provide ‘a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world’ (2005: 2).

In musicology, there are different flavours of what constitutes performance study. As Simon Frith notes, in the musicology of art music, the notion of performance studies has, since it re-emerged in the noughties, largely been confined to forensic comparative analysis of live or recorded performances of classical music. This is an attempt to give even greater understanding of the musical work. And he goes on to observe correctly, that in popular and traditional music, the visual and other modes of communication are usually critical to the construction of a performance (Frith 2015). What is clear is that in any musical performance, from an aunt singing at a family gathering to a stadium rock concert, there are numerous elements of a performance that usually include a musical text, musical co-texts, a performance context and structural, sonic, visual, gestural, somatic and cultural intertextuality with what has gone

before (music almost always involves more than one mode of communication—sound, text, image, gesture etc). Key to all of these constituent elements of a musical performance is a social reading of their significance, that is to say, the social semiotics of a performance. Every audience (or analyst) of a performance floods their interpretative understanding with social signs and frames that help us to make sense and meaning out of what is heard, seen and felt. And all these different modes of communication have many varied possible social meanings: volume can be understood in terms of social distance of intimacy and publicness; pitch in terms of gender, age or social energy; instrumentation almost always signals aspects of authenticity and belonging; and the social understanding of melody and harmony can lead to interpretations of class, sexuality, race, ethnicity, indeed, almost any of the key social categories by which humans seek to belong and divide themselves.

Performance, then, provides a site of negotiation, of exploration and of (potentially) social and cultural resistance because it lets people imagine a different, putatively better future whether collectively or for oneself. Yet while a performance brings about a temporary community of performers and spectators who co-create the event, any such community can break down. As Snyder-Young cautions: '[W]hen the audience leaves, so does the moment' in which communication and a feeling of community is possible (2013: 139; see also Thompson 2009). Nevertheless, performances do significant cultural work as all societies use performance as a means to cultural ends.

## **2.2 Performing intangible cultural heritage**

The idea of performance permeates discussion of heritage and its possibilities in a variety of contexts, not least because it sits well with conceptions of intangible heritage as a set of practices or processes rather than a set of tangible things and because both heritage and performance are profoundly bound up with questions of identity (Smith 2006; Haldrup and Bærenholdt 2015; Nic Craith and Kockel 2015). There is an increasing interest in performative heritage practices such as re-enactments, living history events, festivals, musical styles or craft traditions (Barrio, Devesa and Herrero 2012; Howard 2012; Pfeiffer 2019), but also in engagement with heritage sites and museums as a performative bodily practice (Smith 2006, 2011). As Haldrup and Bærenholdt (2015) argue, we can broadly distinguish between performances *of* heritage, which revive the past in the present, people's performances *at* heritage sites, which shape the experiences produced at these sites, and, lastly, people's performances *with* heritage which draw on pre-existing scripts provided by the media and wider society. All of these can occur within authorised heritage discourses (Smith 2006) but can also provide examples of creative ways in which people make use of their heritage and give voice to a multiplicity of narratives and experiences that can challenge official heritage discourses. We would like to focus here on two aspects of performance that are particularly pertinent to the preoccupations of this book: firstly, the fact that performance *of* or *with* ICH is always

an embodied practice and an act of communication and, secondly, that this embodied practice has a function in the present. Not just *performing* the past in the present but *experiencing* it also.

Theorists have frequently emphasised the liveness and ephemerality of performance (Schechner 2003; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Phelan 1993). Peggy Phelan's famous privileging of performance's disappearance is one of the most frequently cited *dicta* to this effect:

Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations: once it does, it becomes something other than performance. [...] Performance's being [...] becomes itself through disappearance.  
[Phelan 1993: 146]

Yet as Auslander (2008) has pointed out, the stark binary between performance and reproduction that Phelan draws up is challenged by the development of mass media. Moreover, this understanding of performance as 'that which does not remain' is based on what Schneider calls 'the logic of the archive' (2001: 100), that is, the predominantly Western impulse to collect materials. For Schneider (2001), Kershaw (2011), Thompson (2009) and Taylor (2003, 2016) among others, a past performance event is not necessarily gone for good because it involves, impacts on and leaves traces in the living body.

In musical heritage performances, too, our bodies are crucially embedded in our responses to musical (and any) performances, and our only access to shared understanding is always temporally distant and rendered in talk and text. Hence, the key emphasis in ethnomusicology of understanding music from inside the culture (emically), so as not to drain musical sounds of their cultural meaning. But, importantly in recent years, scholars have begun to more fruitfully know and theorise the somatic, both through individual musical reflections, and more importantly, through others' descriptions of musical sound. It is astonishing how deeply embedded our bodies are in both the generative and aesthetic perception of musical sound, and how this emerges in language. People routinely talk about music in terms of the body: 'I just felt uplifted when the strings come in there', 'it's a punchy chorus', 'she has a wonderfully smooth voice', 'the fiddle sounds a bit scratchy to me'. Wittgenstein had it right when he suggested that:

Music, with its few notes & rhythms, seems to some people a primitive art. But only its surface is simple, while the body which makes possible the interpretation of this manifest content has all the infinite complexity that is suggested in the external forms of other arts & which music conceals. In a certain sense it is the most sophisticated art of all.

[Ludwig Wittgenstein in Shusterman 2012: 50]

Performance can thus be understood as a means of storing and transmitting knowledge because it involves a repertoire of embodied memory, conveyed in movement, gesture, words, dance and song. As Kershaw asserts, 'performance

can foster the sustainable durability of live events from the past' (2011: 141), as made manifest in the continued success of tribute bands or in the deliberate performance of strict sonic authenticity in early or folk music performances. Yet whether or not an artistic performance of historic traditions becomes meaningful to its audiences and spectators in the present depends somewhat on whether it is motivated by the desire for historical accuracy or social and cultural memory (Taylor 2016). The former carries the risk of fossilising the very practice it seeks to preserve. Reconstructing or 'reviving' medieval biblical plays, for example, can serve as a kind of archaeology of practice because it tells us a lot about the practicalities of staging such as the use of space and props. However, whether such biblical plays are meaningful to a modern audience does not depend on the accuracy or perceived authenticity of a performance but on the immediacy of the exchange between participants in live performance. Contemporary adaptations and re-imaginings of medieval plays, in other words plays that take place in the present tense rather than the past tense, can thus sometimes have more resonance with modern audiences (Tyler 2010).

We should remind ourselves here that performance is a communicative process: it is always *by* someone *for* someone. Consequently, any embodied heritage performance can only make a cultural intervention if the audience plays along. As Susan Bennett notes: 'A performance can activate a diversity of responses, but it is the audience which finally ascribes meaning and usefulness to any cultural product' (1997: 156), often brutally proxied in the commercial logic of the new song streaming services such as Spotify or YouTube. The participants in a performance, that is performers and spectators, co-create new or different meanings with each performance. In other words, any performance is an event, whose meaning, effects and outcomes are unstable, because each component of the performance (e.g., performers, spectators, materiality etc) has the potential to influence how the others unfold. This holds true for the theatre as much as for the battle re-enactment, the music session or the street festival.

When considering performance in the context of national or local heritage, there are numerous angles of study to better understand what we see, hear and feel in the performance of ICH such as a concert, play, festival, song or informal pub session. Simply put, the core problem for scholars interested in how performance relates to and enacts people's heritage is to understand how performance constructs and embodies belonging and identity in the communication and the relational understanding of symbolic historicism. Here we take 'symbolic historicism' to be the agent of performative heritage, that sense in which we share with other people in a sense of belonging or affect that is grounded in collective understanding of the past. The 'symbolic' nature of this simply refers to the powerful agency of shared narratives and could be as simple as the recognition of a particular language or dialect or cultural phrase constructions such as 'Her blood red hands' or 'down by the greenwoodside' (Scottish ballad tradition) or as complex as a shared sense of elation and belonging expressed in the recognition of a religious origins story such as the Israelites exodus from Egypt through the parting of the Red Sea (Hebrew: '*keriat yam suf*'). In the remainder of this chapter, we will turn our focus to the question of how performance of ICH can perform this symbolic agency.

One of the key problems of theorising the performative agency of ICH across different cultures is its lack of an internationally shared canon of repertoire and the strong sense of locality and regional or national specificity. What sounds like an authentic fishing song sung in Irish on the West Coast of Ireland is unlikely to be even understood by others elsewhere. This lack of a central shared canon of performance (such as found in the Western classical music canon, through religious narratives or in Anglo-American Christmas traditions, for instance) means that understanding the agency and symbolic historicism of performances of heritage, including authorised heritage discourses, usually means more than a passing familiarity with the cultural history and practices of a particular town, region or nation. In the case of musical sound as opposed to theatrical performance there are additional complex issues surrounding the semantic ambiguity of music set against the specificity of things like written words, pictures, pottery, buildings or films. Objects and language have a materiality and semantic intertextuality that affords analytical specificity (one can trace the history of a phrase such as 'blood red hand' or the historical authenticity of a costume or building). Musical sound was not recorded until the 1870s, and moreover, even early twentieth-century recordings are subject to numerous mediations of technology, commerce and representation, which often makes the scholarship of provenance a meaningless task.

There are therefore very few means for cross-cultural analysis that do not elide the local and specific situatedness of ICH performances. One of these however is understanding the embodied and somatic agency of these practices through ethnographic interview and close participant observation. This sort of research allows an understanding of the sense of shared symbolic historicism that emerges in performance and can be produced in widely different performances of different artistic or narrative traditions from around the world, founded as it is on the one true universal—our bodies. And in so doing we can understand how re-enactments, living history events, festivals, musical styles or craft traditions actually perform a sense of symbolic power and belonging.

This sense of the affective and the symbolic is at the heart of why people continue to perform old stories, plays, tunes and songs and to prepare meals or partake in ritualised festivals that celebrate their shared history. The task then of the analyst is to understand and to *feel* how this emerges in performance and to be able to translate or to explain these phenomena across cultural boundaries, and thus help us to understand our others and our selves through the way in which ICH is performed. This involves translating and understanding the sense of liminality, location (or 'place'), interaction and coded behaviour from the inside. It is with this in mind then that the research on ICH can serve the ideal of better understanding each other's own heritage, and of appreciating that local nuances are critical in that they communicate and describe the tacit or embodied knowledge and skills that lie at the heart of performance. However, this is no easy task, and as we know, our disciplines tend to privilege the textual over the tacit, the objective over the embodied, and the challenge of performance in research is to access and translate for those beyond the tradition just



what it is that makes a play, song or reconstruction so powerful for those taking part and for their audiences.

The emphasis in ethnomusicology has been on reflexive ethnographic understanding, as embodied in its methods that include thick description, interviews, participant observation, field notes, desk research and, ultimately, peer-reviewed publication. Essentially, the temptation has always been to place easily knowable and communicable facts or observations above the more slippery, aesthetic, performative and tacit knowledge, so critical to the performance of traditional music: why comment in an academic publication on the aesthetic importance of a narrow, nasal vocal timbre critical to the production of authenticity when the words of the song and performance context enable one to comment upon the importance of that social group and oral transmission to the wider national sense of Self (as in, for example, the case of the Scottish traveller singers). This privileging of textual knowledge is deep seated and is one of the key challenges of understanding performance in and through research. As Lucy Durán has noted elsewhere, she can have a far greater impact with a sensitively produced and detailed CD with liner notes than she can have with a peer-reviewed article published within the field (Durán 2011: 245).

Similarly, Larry Witzleben acknowledges this and insists that as part of the broader academy of scholars, ethnomusicologists, ‘...seem to be increasingly hesitant to acknowledge the profound differentness of music’ (2010: 151). Witzleben, relying on Charles Seeger and Kofi Agawu, takes musical performance and argues for a special ontological compartmentalisation from other forms of ‘performance-like phenomena’ which he bases on the shifting sense of temporal reality experienced in musical performance events. He argues for music space-time to be different to our general experience of the world and time passing. In this, he is on well-trodden ground: intellectuals as far back as Immanuel Kant (the Godfather of positivism) have been arguing the case for a link between temporality and music. Kant (1793: 225) suggested that music’s real aesthetic value lay in its ability to ‘play in sensations (of time)’. As a traditional musician, one can control the internal rhythmical nuances and stress within musical performance which communicates a lot of the really significant aesthetics to a knowledgeable audience. Playing with rhythm can demonstrate the difference in performance between a Donegal and a Clare fiddle tune and also has the power to communicate just what makes the individual performer unique and special in a highly stylised performance of tightly controlled traditional music. In other words, the temporal play, in both metre and rhythm and internal stress patterns is very much the stuff of musical performance that we have ignored in favour of more easily knowable understandings of music’s significance. The same can be said of dramatic, narrative and other traditions; we have focused on the easily knowable at the expense of the very stuff that matters to people taking part or spectating.

Importantly this does not mean that conscious performance of ICH cannot be a space for the production, dissemination and understanding of new knowledge – it absolutely can. In fact, performance itself can, and should be, an object

of study. However, there is an absolutely irrevocable ontological challenge that intangible traditional knowledge is simply not knowable in the same semantic way as textual knowledge, so that if we want something to be research rather than professional practice, then we must be able to communicate its symbolic agency through text. This always involves an act of translation and is very much the responsibility of heritage scholars. We would not expect to be able to understand the performative, affective or, for that matter, cultural or social significance of a new and innovative twenty-first-century ritual Navajo dance or Turkish maqam simply by witnessing its performance as an outsider. What is important however is that the previously underacknowledged, tacit, affective and downright emotionally powerful aspects of intangible heritage performance that have remained locked into performance and its reception without making the transition to the page emerge as the object of our research. The use of practice in research about ICH can then quite rightly be configured as an act of translational scholarship; exposing and translating insider artistic and aesthetic knowledge to a global audience, and potentially serving to stimulate understanding of others and potentially leading to new forms of performative expression.

### **2.3 Conclusion**

The performance of ICH is an act of communication that can support the construction and reconstruction of identity, place and a sense of belonging. Whether it is a fishing song or a performance of *Galoshins*,<sup>3</sup> the live performance constructs embodied knowledge through and for the participants offering powerful affective experiences of the past within our lived experience. To be able to understand the performance of ICH or to benefit from the performative turn therefore means that we have to be able to demonstrably share knowledge across social and cultural boundaries, which is one of the key reasons why disciplines such as ethnomusicology, theatre studies, heritage studies, literature and linguistics and ethnology are well placed to lead in understanding performance and its symbolic agency. The relativism at the heart of these disciplines challenges us to explain and translate the tacit knowledge acquired in highly specialised ICH contexts for our colleagues and publics elsewhere. We should be able to discuss the embodied understanding of place or location, liminality, interaction and coded behaviours that function at the heart of performance. This is an epistemological challenge across disciplines interested in ICH. What is required is an understanding not just of the contextual and the local but also the ability to put into words the embodied knowledge that emerges from re-enactments, living history events, festivals, musical styles or craft traditions and their significance. Only in so doing will we be able to have a deeper discussion about how it *feels* to perform the past in the present.

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## Notes

- 1 The German equivalent, *Performanz*, is used almost exclusively in the contexts of theatre studies and linguistics, where it refers to the act of performing (e.g., a play or the linguistic performance of an individual respectively). The performance event itself is usually referred to as an *Aufführung* (the performance of a play, an opera, a concert etc) or a *Vorführung* (show), *Darstellung* (the performance of a part) or *Darbietung* (e.g., of a musical piece), while performance in the sense of effectiveness is covered by the term *Leistung*, and performance as the execution of an act can be translated by a whole range of terms from *Ausübung* to *Erfüllung*. The French word *performance* is primarily used in the context of discussing results or data, indicating the capacity of someone or something to achieve a certain measurable standard, for example, a car's fuel consumption or an athlete's sporting performance. It is also used in the same linguistic sense as in German.
- 2 Turner distinguishes between liminal and liminoid activities and phenomena based on the notion of choice, using the difference between a tribal ritual and carnival to illustrate his point: participation in a tribal ritual is usually compulsory, but we can choose to watch or avoid or even to participate in a street-performance festival (1974: 74). Liminoid activities resemble liminal ones in that they, too, allow their participants to cross a sociocultural threshold. Yet while a social or religious rite, for example, results in a change of status for the participant, taking part in the carnival or watching a performance can – but does not necessarily have to – provide a transformative experience because participation is optional and because the liminoid, unlike the liminal, is a form of leisure rather than an integral part of the social process.
- 3 *Galoshins* is an old Scottish folk play with a tradition going back to the thirteenth century. It was regularly performed in the Borders and the Central Belt by young guisers (mummers) during Halloween and Hogmanay up until the twentieth century and is being revived in many places now.

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