

In any discipline, a topic that arises early in the discussion of a research project is that of the research question. Articulating the research question is an important step in clarifying the project to others but also to yourself. The work you carry out may be grounded in a problem, an issue, a discovery, a leap of imagination or a guess, but formulating the question or questions is the initial stage of the research process proper.

At first, the apparent research question may appear quite straightforward in some circumstances, unanswerable or a distraction in others. In this section we aim to show how reflection on the research question – working with it – is a vital element in the framing, focussing and designing of a project.

I would like to introduce two notions at the outset. Firstly, that the question is an evolving, instrumental part of a process, not a static starting point. And secondly that – rather like musical objects themselves – it exists in multiple forms, multiple instantiations.

It evolves because as you explore, map out and navigate a new territory through your research the question will also be transformed. For some, the constant refining of the question is the essence of the research process itself, continuing throughout the project. Others see the generation of new questions as the mark of successful research.

It will probably take multiple forms because your investigations – the kinds of activity, knowledge, material and concepts you will deal with – will be of many different kinds. Previously we spoke of the inherent multi-disciplinarity of artistic research. We must also acknowledge its multi-modality. Multi-modality is a term from communication theory; it acknowledges that communication is about more than language. How much more so is that true for us? Artistic practices are at once embodied and culturally situated, intuitive and technical. They have rational, intellectual components and aspects that challenge explanation. The materials you are dealing with may be documentary, textual, historical, material, technical, conceptual or philosophical – and they may well concern the artistic practices of others. So your research question is a label on a toolkit – on a set of questions of which you will produce more as you progress. A blacksmith doesn't just have one hammer. A carpenter has many chisels. They are fundamentally related, but each one is shaped differently according to the material it will work on and the intention of the craftsman.

We might formalise this situation. Your highest level, most general research question produces more specific sub-questions as you view it from different perspectives and engage with different materials, different approaches. And as a result of this detailed

work you come back to your main question to ask yourself whether it has evolved or given rise to new questions.

So a research question is not a contract – it's a tool, an instrument.

The nature of the question also relates to the kind of knowledge you hope to produce. They range from very focussed questions to test a hypothesis or to fill a gap in knowledge, through broader questions that require a more exploratory approach – scoping the terrain and identifying the issues – to more speculative questions. These will not be the questions that can be addressed directly by musicology, music analysis, technology, psychology or philosophy, for example – although these may all play a part. They will not be questions that can be answered by an internet, archive or library search, nor by making lists or catalogues. We are dealing with questions that arise from our practice as artists and which require that practice in order to be approached. Questions that in their addressing bring new knowledge that both informs our practice and can be shared.

There is a balance to negotiate, therefore, between remaining constantly alert to the possibility of new possibilities – topics that arise through our research – and maintaining focus and coherence. This is why the constantly proliferating sub-questions feed back into the evolution of our main questions.

Another metaphor, then: our question is a torch. Focussed and directed by knowledge, expertise and intuition it allows us to find our way to areas of musical practice and understanding we would not have discovered by just doing what we do.

A research question has two more requirements: it must be useful and tractable. It must be useful because our practice exists in a historical and cultural context, however kaleidoscopic that may sometimes appear. As with art, how knowledge is recognised and understood is itself in a dynamic relationship with the world in which it is produced – we will look at these issues in more detail in later sections.

The focus of your question is at issue here. If it's too general, you may become a music philosopher, or you may risk saying nothing. If it relates only to a very specific issue in your own practice, then it becomes the search for a technical or musicological solution to a particular problem and you move on.

Your artistic research project will feed back into the development of your own practice and to the common body of understanding – perhaps among a limited circle of practitioners, perhaps shared very widely. What they find relevant in your work may not be its apparent content or topic, but wider issues of practice, method or understanding. Understanding the scope of this knowledge, the community through it will be distributed, is important in framing the question. The question itself does not need to fit into a 140-character online post – it may well require some sentences of context.

Then it must be tractable – that is, you must be able to envisage a path to addressing your questions through your project, and have access to the necessary resources.

So to summarise: your research questions will be focussed, but the sub-questions may take many forms and your main questions will evolve. They will arise from your own practice, experience and imagination as an artist, and require that practice in order to be addressed. And they will produce knowledge that both informs your own practice and that of others. They will be useful and tractable. And remember – a research question is a tool that requires you to exercise attention in shaping, using and developing it.

These general observations will make much more sense when we encounter specific examples from researchers' work. But let me remind you again: these are examples, not exemplars or models. Each project of artistic research poses its own questions or problems, addresses them in its own way and has its own integrity and consistency – from our perspective, we might almost view it as a compositional challenge. Your research project is itself a creative process.