



## **Book review: *Embodied knowledge in ensemble performance*, by J. Murphy McCaleb**

**MIEKO KANNO**

*The Scottish Journal of Performance*  
Volume 2, Issue 1; December 2014  
ISSN: 2054-1953 (Print) / ISSN: 2054-1961 (Online)

Publication details: <http://www.scottishjournalofperformance.org>

**To cite this article:** Kanno, M., 2014. Book review: *Embodied knowledge in ensemble performance*, by J. Murphy McCaleb. *Scottish Journal of Performance*, 2(1): pp.119–122.

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.14439/sjop.2014.0201.09>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> for details.

## **Book review: *Embodied knowledge in ensemble performance*, by J. Murphy McCaleb**

MIEKO KANNO

DOI: 10.14439/sjop.2014.0201.09

Publication date: 16 December 2014

*Embodied knowledge in ensemble performance*, by J. Murphy McCaleb. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014; ISBN 9781472419613 (£50.00)

This is the latest addition to the increasingly popular and sophisticated field of performance studies, under the auspices of the series by SEMPLRE (the Society for Education, Music and Psychology Research). The dust jacket says the author of this book 'explores the processes by which musicians interact with each other through performance' and the book 'provides an holistic approach to ensemble research in a manner accessible to performers, researchers and teachers'. Indeed McCaleb achieves these things, but I believe the book does more than that.

*Embodied knowledge in ensemble performance* originated as a PhD examining the role of physical gesture in small performance ensembles. Chapters are laid out to follow the development of the author's thought and experience through undertaking this research, and trace a journey full of interesting turns, which is a pleasure to read.

Chapter 1, 'A Question of Ensemble', lays out four main research questions and their context. From the outset, McCaleb articulates clearly what each question addresses, how the questions relate to each other, which existing research contributes to the understanding of each question,

and perhaps most significantly, how he defines his role within the framework of this research. There is a healthy amount of 'I' throughout the book, pointing to his personal viewpoint being an important feature of its research methodology. Chapter 2, 'Beyond Communication', addresses the first of the four questions—'how do musicians interact and share information with each other while performing?' (p.19)—and is a critique of the existing literature on themes of verbal communication, gestural communication, and different types of leadership observed in ensemble communication, from a variety of sociological fields. Chapter 3, 'A Question of Content', follows on from Chapter 2 in examining varied means of communication in ensemble situations, and asks what is being communicated there.

A dramatic turn takes place at the end of Chapter 3, concluding:

I have found that research that applies sociological models of communication and leadership to ensemble interaction is flawed and incomplete. Whilst there is a wealth of possible models and theories that may be applied to ensembles, a fundamental understanding of the phenomenology of performance is absent. When compared with practical experience, the research available does not sufficiently account for the complexity inherent in musical practice (p.60).

In the following two chapters, 'The Process of Performance' and 'Reaction and Inter-reaction', McCaleb identifies critical elements that constitute the phenomenology of playing any musical instrument, develops a new understanding about the information content, and demonstrates how such information content is communicated in performance ensembles. He is at his best in these chapters, skillfully drawing on concepts from psychology, sociology, neurology

and philosophy, as well as music theory. The distinction he articulates between ‘intention of action’ and ‘intentional action’ in musical situations is well-judged; the multimodal nature of learning process supports the argument persuasively. The argument developed in Chapter 4 (on the phenomenology of solo performance) expands logically to ensemble situations in Chapter 5, where communication is considered as a developed stage of the elements observed in the phenomenology of solo performance.

At the end of Chapter 5, McCaleb proposes a new paradigm of ‘inter-reaction’ for understanding communication in musical ensembles, consisting of three abilities: *transmitting*, *inferring*, and *attuning*. The implication and potential of the new paradigm is further explored in Chapter 6, ‘Reflecting on Musical Knowledge’. For me, the proposed paradigm of ‘inter-reaction’ bears a resemblance to the models proposed in literary theory (particularly the New Criticism, deconstructionism, and postmodernism) and practice theory in anthropology: time-dependent, iterative process between the object and subject generates unforeseen development and transformation in the products of enquiry. Such a process is often characterized as experimental in its nature, and considered a key methodological tool in many disciplines today.

Throughout the book, video clips from an accompanying DVD are used to problematise issues—McCaleb excels in drawing appropriate examples from real situations. It is his ability to refer to real situations of ensemble performance with sensibility, even when the argument is most abstract and remote from music, that makes this book most engaging.

While the book is exemplary in its scholarship and an invaluable addition to the literature on musical performance, this text is foremost a celebration of the

musical ‘information content’ as understood by musicians. By explaining the mechanisms through which musicians play alone and together, the book highlights the inimitable information content, the complexity and richness of which grows as people become more proficient as experienced musicians. Indeed, as mentioned earlier in the book, musicians hear the same things as others, but they hear differently—that is to say, information is formulated differently for musicians in order to act. The experience of playing, and getting better at playing, increases ways in which musicians gain access to this information. In describing the complexity via a paradigm of inter-reaction, the book sheds light on why playing an instrument is a fascinating activity, and why playing together with other musicians is even more so. The richness of information content revealed through the act of performance—embodied knowledge—may also explain other, global phenomena: why many young people want to become performers and get hooked, and why many others enjoy playing music regardless of their proficiency.

### About the review author

MIEKO KANNO is a violinist and Senior Research Fellow at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. She specialises in the performance of contemporary music and publishes her research through performances and written articles. She commissions and gives concerts internationally in solo and small ensembles, and is a member of the Netherlands-based new music group Insomnio.