

PIXERCISE: PICCOLO PERFORMANCE PRACTICE, EXERCISE AND FEMALE BODY IMAGE

Kathryn Williams

Abstract: *PIXERCISE* (2017–) is an open-ended collaborative work written by Kathryn Williams and Annie Hui-Hsin Hsieh. The piece involves an ongoing process of physical training, and in performance combines specially tailored physical exercises with piccolo performance. This article describes the unusual composition, preparation, and performance of this work and is concerned with exploring the shifting collaborative relationship. It also explores some of the aesthetic and social ideas that motivated the piece and have emerged through critical reflection and have been further incorporated, including the process of self-improvement and overcoming expressed as a performance artwork; entanglements between physical transformation through exercise; attitudes to female-body image and exercise; and how this piece connects with a growing tradition of experimental musical performance practice and performance art.

This article considers the process of writing, preparing, and performing *PIXERCISE* by Kathryn Williams and Annie Hui-Hsin Hsieh (2017–), a work for solo piccolo that connects elements of musical performance, performance art and physical exercise. This piece, prepared and performed by me and collaboratively devised with composer Annie Hui-Hsin Hsieh, was born out of a spontaneous and deliberately comical response to my commissioning project, *Coming Up for Air*, in which pieces are limited to a single breath. Annie publicly challenged me to attempt as many sit-ups as possible while sustaining a very high note for the duration of one breath. I had recently recovered from a sinus operation which was necessary for me to continue pursuing my performing career. Before the operation I was unable to breathe through my nose and this was exacerbated by my asthma so the physical exercise options available to me were quite limited. I was already exploring my improved breathing capabilities through *Coming Up for Air* and this spontaneous moment, caught on video (see [Figure 1](#)), marks the beginning of another committed process exploring how real-life improvement can be made visible through performance.

PIXERCISE has developed into a 20-minute work where high intensity interval training (HIIT) collides with piccolo performance practice. The piece also represents the development of a new



Figure 1:
Still from the original experiment,
Royaumont Abbey, 4 September
2017. Photo by Annie Hui-Hsin
Hsieh.

collaborative relationship, has provoked my own development as a composer and provides a visible and accessible parallel to the permanent physiological and psychological changes that come about when training to a high level as an instrumentalist. Throughout its development, we have also been considering the work as a multi-textural metaphor for attitudes towards female body image, including apparently self-inflicted, unrealistic personal expectations, and the possible relationships between personal expectations and professional expectations placed upon orchestral musicians.

Training, collaboration and the making of *PIXERCISE*

Despite the unusual performative nature of *PIXERCISE*, our collaborative process started with me as performer and Annie as composer in relatively traditional roles. The impetus to exercise came from Annie, who wanted to monitor what would happen to my piccolo sound as I became significantly fitter, particularly when performing and exercising simultaneously. As I was initially uncomfortable with the perceived scrutiny and posturing of people exercising in public spaces and was not naturally drawn to this kind of fitness regime, the exercise process began with a series of tailored individual sessions with a personal trainer. The initial sessions were painful and affected me outside the training sessions but I did start to feel happier and more confident with the process as I noticed physical changes and experienced reduced pain. This aligns with Karen Throsby's suggestion that 'pain and discomfort may come to feel differently as the body becomes cultivated and transformed physiologically, functionally, and sensorially'.¹ This also describes my experience of learning an instrument or learning new pieces that require a radically new performance practice.

Annie and I had originally planned to undergo the same physical transformations and the same exercise regime but because of a cross-country move she was unable to train in this way. This changed the nature of the collaborative experience, as reflections on the process shifted from a shared experience to a diary-like exchange (a method that has proved successful in other performer/composer

¹ Sara Malou Strandvad, 'Under Water and Into Yourself: Emotional Experiences of Freediving Contact Information', *Emotion, Space and Society* 27 (2018), pp. 29–52.

collaborations²). This also shifted our notion of the ownership of this piece as we discovered and agreed that the training was, and is, part of the creative process and part of the piece itself. As my baseline fitness improved we reincorporated the piccolo into exercise routines. The creative decisions about the material and structure of the piece were emergent from the exercise and transformational physical experience of training. There were also practical considerations: the two main categories of exercise we settled on are those in which I can safely hold the piccolo (crunches, sit-ups, leg raises), and those in which the piccolo is fixed to a crate where I can blow towards the piccolo intermittently (plank, push-up, burpee). Both approaches, particularly the latter, produce highly indeterminate results.

In abandoning our plans for a shared exercise routine I might argue that Annie was attempting, subconsciously or otherwise, to maintain our traditional roles in the performer/composer dynamic and its attendant power dynamic. It seemed that she wanted to decide what should be done but not to do it herself, despite our agreement that the piece would be as much about the process as the result. This is not to trivialise her generosity in acknowledging the shared ownership of this piece which became more apparent as the training fed into the score and performance. As I was also reflecting on my changing confidence as I became fitter, I was aware of being keen to contribute creatively to the piece and was more likely to be assertive where I felt my creative contribution was already apparent. This has proved a vital tool in reflecting on other creative collaborations.³

The structure of *PIXERCISE* is based on a typical exercise routine, starting with a warm-up and becoming increasingly active. In the first performance this took 12 minutes⁴ and in the second 20 minutes,⁵ an increase that reflected inclusion of new collaborative ideas, our growing confidence with the piece and my increased physical fitness. Central to the piece is the measurement of duration, partially based on the amount of time I can sustain a particular exercise, partially on the amount of time typical for a HIIT workout (30 seconds of activity and 10 seconds of rest), and, in one more playful case, the amount of time it takes to perform a section of Maurice Ravel's *Bolero*. This extract was chosen for its familiarity, its notoriety as an orchestral excerpt in the flute and piccolo repertoire, and for the physical demands required to play it (the abdominal support required to play so high and quietly naturally emphasises the struggle when exercising and the consequent sonic transformations). The forward momentum in the piece is, therefore, dependent on the physical struggle of performing and in the extended version of the piece we took this further. The new section, *PIXERCISE ADVANCED*, is faster and tougher and introduces a competitive element; at times I am required to play with a recording of myself with all the difficulties of coordination and tuning in these intense circumstances. Part of the soundtrack was created with a laryngophone (a contact microphone attached to the throat) to highlight the internal physical reactions of heavy breathing and tightening throat typical of this exercise. Our impression was

² For example, in Fabrice Fitch and Neil Heyde, "Recercar" – The Collaborative Process as Invention', *Twentieth-Century Music* 4, no. 1 (2007), pp 71–95.

³ Including operating as a composer duo with Andy Ingamells and co-writing *Vagus Correspondences* with Jessica Aszodi.

⁴ Eavesdropping Symposium, Oxford House, London, 18 March 2018.

⁵ Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, University Sports Hall, 18 November 2018.

that this intimate recording of usually private or elusive sounds further exposes the difficulties of performing the piece.

Some theoretical influences

Accepting Judith Butler's notion that gender is a performative act as well as a construction that regularly conceals its genesis,⁶ *PIXERCISE* provides a case study for exploring this in the context of exercise and instrumental performance practice. Instrumental performance practice seeks to normalise behaviour regardless of gender, yet orchestral musicians' stories of everyday sexism could 'fill libraries many times over'.⁷ It is noteworthy that the introduction of 'blind' screened auditions to American orchestras from the 1970s resulted in a considerable rise in the number of women with full-time orchestral jobs.⁸ Similarly, *PIXERCISE* presents a performance scenario in which gender is apparently not relevant but, because of the ubiquitous association between exercise and female body image, gender is placed centre-stage in the work.

PIXERCISE offers a perspective on the relationship between personal and media preoccupations with body image and the commodification of fitness. Frederickson and Roberts' 1997 Objectification Theory states that 'women's bodies are viewed as objects to be evaluated and this societal objectification may lead to self-objectification when women view their own bodies as objects'.⁹ Research suggests that 'exposure to mass media depicting the thin-ideal body may be linked to body image disturbance in women'.¹⁰ Likewise, 'the female body is often framed as failing in myriad ways so as to encourage adherence to an always shifting, idealized "feminine" form.' Continuous development of "bodily lack" by multinational corporations of course proves profitable.¹¹ At the same time, 'physically strong and competent women pose a threat to ideologies of male physical superiority [and] in order to contain this threat, the media tend to erase such women from view'.¹² *PIXERCISE* introduces a further perspective on failure: the effect of the exercise on the quality of sound is, from a traditional perspective, detrimental and this is framed in a situation of unremitting vulnerability. Yet the exercise is also a demonstration of strength, personal improvement, and achievement and the piece is intended to make visible 'the reassurance that one can overcome all physical obstacles, push oneself to any extremes in pursuits of one's goals ... the thrill of being in total charge of the shape of one's body'.¹³

⁶ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988), pp. 519–31, here p. 522.

⁷ James Rhodes, 'Sexism is Rife in Classical Music', *The Guardian*, 4 February 2014, www.theguardian.com/music/2014/feb/04/sexism-rife-classical-music-marin-alsop-james-rhodes.

⁸ Claudia Goldin and Cecilia Rouse, 'Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of "Blind" Auditions on Female Musicians', *American Economic Review* 90, no. 4 (2000), pp. 715–41.

⁹ Rachel D. Petersen, Karen P. Grippio and Stacey Tantleff-Dunn, 'Empowerment and Powerlessness: A Closer Look at the Relationship Between Feminism, Body Image and Eating Disturbance', *Sex Roles*, 58, nos 9–10 (2008), pp. 639–48.

¹⁰ Shelly Grabe, Janet Shibley Hyde, and L. Monique Ward, 'The Role of the Media in Body Image Concerns Among Women: A Meta-Analysis of Experimental and Correlational Studies', *Psychological Bulletin* 124, no. 3 (2008), pp. 460–76.

¹¹ Shari L. Dworkin and Faye Linda Wachs, *Body Panic: Gender, Health, and the Selling of Fitness* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), p. 107.

¹² Dworkin and Wachs, *Body Panic*.

¹³ Susan Bordo, quoted in Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

The relationship between the transformation associated with personal goals in diet and exercise and that of musical instrumental training is also examined, demonstrating how this might in turn inform the diffuse territory of experimental performance practice. Philip Thomas, when exploring post-experimental performance practice, argues for experimental performance practice as:

founded on the idea of ‘work’ – of doing the job required. An experimental interpretative approach might be considered non-interpretative, as the emphasis is upon actions rather than ideas, upon sound and their qualities rather than notions of continuity, cohesiveness and the projection of a narrative upon a sequence of sounds.¹⁴

PIXERCISE shares many of the qualities associated with this definition: the explicit nature of the physical exercise as ‘work’ and the focus on the relatively minimal musical material processed through the prosaic act of exercise, even the usually expressive/interpretative content associated with the orchestral excerpt in the piece. In this case, the conventional interpretative mechanisms are compromised and parodied. And the process of preparing this piece also shares a different narrative, one far removed from traditional interpretation: it has become embedded in my social behaviour, because its performance requirements are a representation of my holistic wellbeing. Any break to this exercise regime makes it much more difficult to get ‘back into shape’ for a performance. This reflects and possibly extends Jennifer Torrence’s observation that ‘just about anything can be considered preparation as long as the activity is done with the intention of cultivating a particular work or is retrospectively reflected upon as providing such creative input’.¹⁵ In the case of *PIXERCISE* essentially everything can be considered preparation as any behaviour might affect the performer’s overall health and fitness.

PIXERCISE was initially intended as a statement about personal overcoming and empowerment, but as my physical fitness has improved I am aware that, ironically, this piece may be becoming part of the intimidating body-shaming, and perhaps, by extension, instrumental-performance-shaming, that I was seeking to overcome in my own life and highlight publicly. The preparation of *PIXERCISE* is a real-life situation. Performing *PIXERCISE* is an unglamorous, sweaty experience distinct from the theatrical polish of most music performances. Figure 2 shows an image taken during a performance at Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival. This echoes Marina Abramović’s emphatic distinction between performance art and theatre:

To be a performance artist, you have to hate theatre. Theatre is fake . . . The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real. Performance is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real . . . I test the limits of myself in order to transform myself.¹⁶

The next stage of the work was *PIXERCISE: PRO* in which I undertook a professional piccolo orchestral audition, exercising as I practise

¹⁴ Philip Thomas, ‘The Music of Laurence Crane and a Post-Experimental Performance Practice’, *Tempo* 70 (2016), p. 11.

¹⁵ Jennifer Torrence, *Percussion-Theatre: A Body in Between*, IV: Preparation & Training; or, What becomes of “practicing”? Research Catalogue, 2019, www.researchcatalogue.net/view/533313/533314.

¹⁶ Sean O’Hagan, ‘Interview with Marina Abramović’, *The Guardian*, 3 October 2010, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/oct/03/interview-marina-abramovic-performance-artist.



Figure 2:
Performance at Huddersfield
Contemporary Music Festival,
University Sports Hall, 18 November
2018. Photo by Brian Slater.

the requisite audition materials and thus further developing the relationship between exercise and standardised instrumental performance. In the spirit of a more discreet approach to both exercise and instrumental performance. I will not share the result of the audition here.