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Expressive Gesture and Non-Verbal Communication in Popular Music Performance

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Summary

‘Sound is the greatest result of performance’ (Munoz, 2007, p.56), but music is not exclusively an auditory event because ‘sound is essentially movement’ (ibid, p.56).



The visual representation of current, live popular music performance can be considered to be more akin to many aspects of (music) theatre than ever before – not least through the physical embodiment of the persona of the performing musician, which has significant implications on how the music is perceived by both the performing musicians and the viewing audience. As a performing art, music relies on the use of the physical self and body in the communicative process, and may require more than technical skill and proficient instrumental handling to be truly communicatively effective – not least because, as stated by Juslin and Laukka (2003, p.774), ‘music is a means of emotional expression’. The areas of gesture and movement can be considered to allow the performer to express the meaning of the music through ways which are non -musical. On many occasions, these inclusions often become responsible for the nature of the musical sound and meaning.

One of the key questions in this PhD is to explore the nature of the relationship between the gesture and the musical performance.

Musical Gesture

In a musicological sense, the definition of the term *gesture* is wide-reaching and there are a number of different connotations depending on the intended meaning of the phrase, necessitating that suitable categories should be identified in order to establish an appropriate definition for this research. Delalande (1988) stated that there were primarily three gestural levels which encompass everything from the mechanical through to the symbolic;

- *Geste effecteur* (effective gesture) → the mechanical movement of producing the musical sound (striking a key, or moving a bow).
- *Geste accompagnateur* (accompanying gesture) → used to portray expressive information.
- *Geste figure* (figurative gesture) → specific musical characteristics and compositional motifs, patterns, and traits, which are embedded in the score of the work.

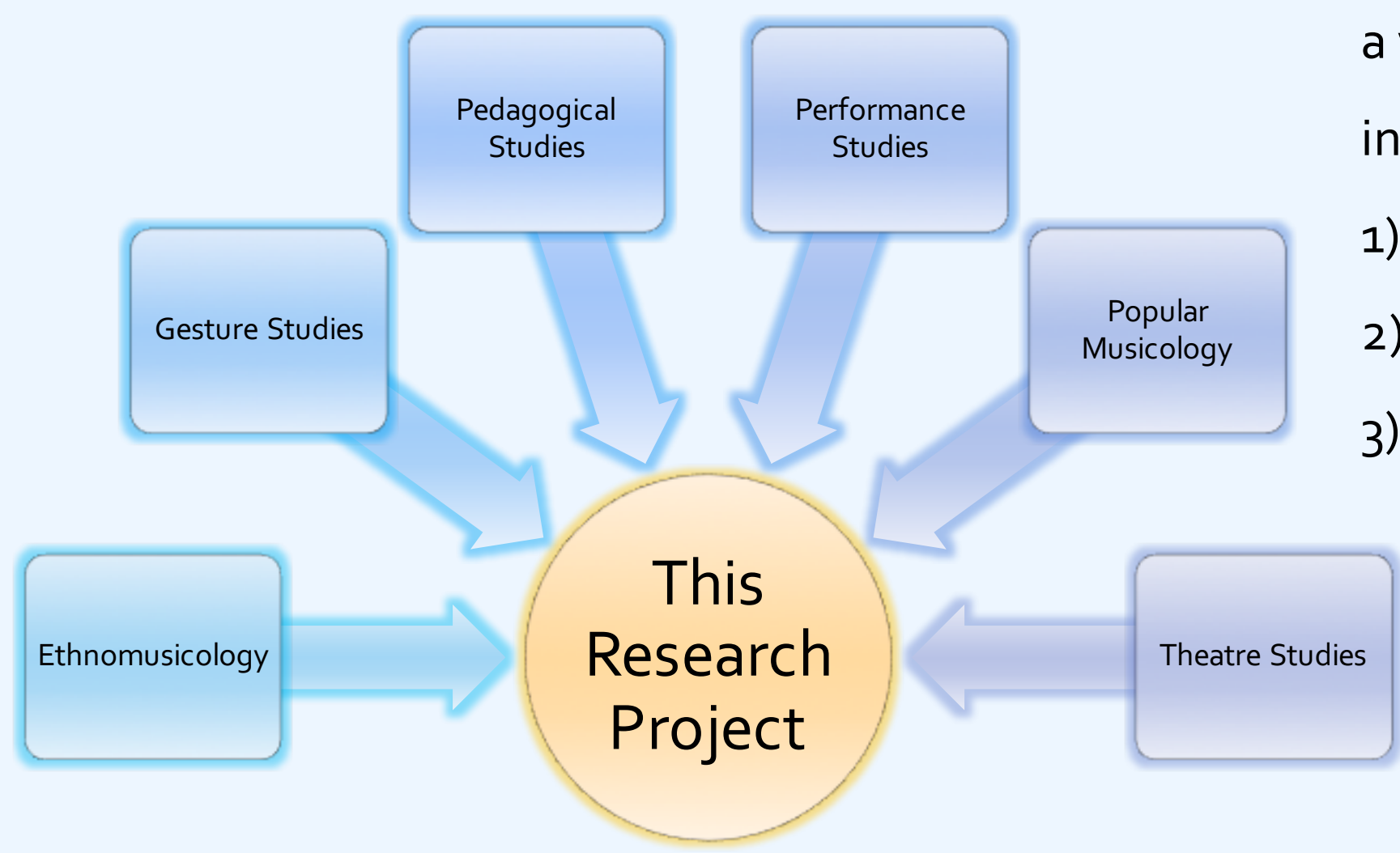


This research focuses on Delalande’s *geste accompagnateur*.

A performance gesture, they are described by Bahn, Hahn and Trueman (2001, p.2) as ‘engaging the whole body of the player but may not be directly involved in the sound production’.....



An Interdisciplinary Approach



Drawing on methodologies and theories from a variety of disciplines, this research investigates three main areas:

- 1) Expressive gesture
- 2) Character
- 3) Interaction

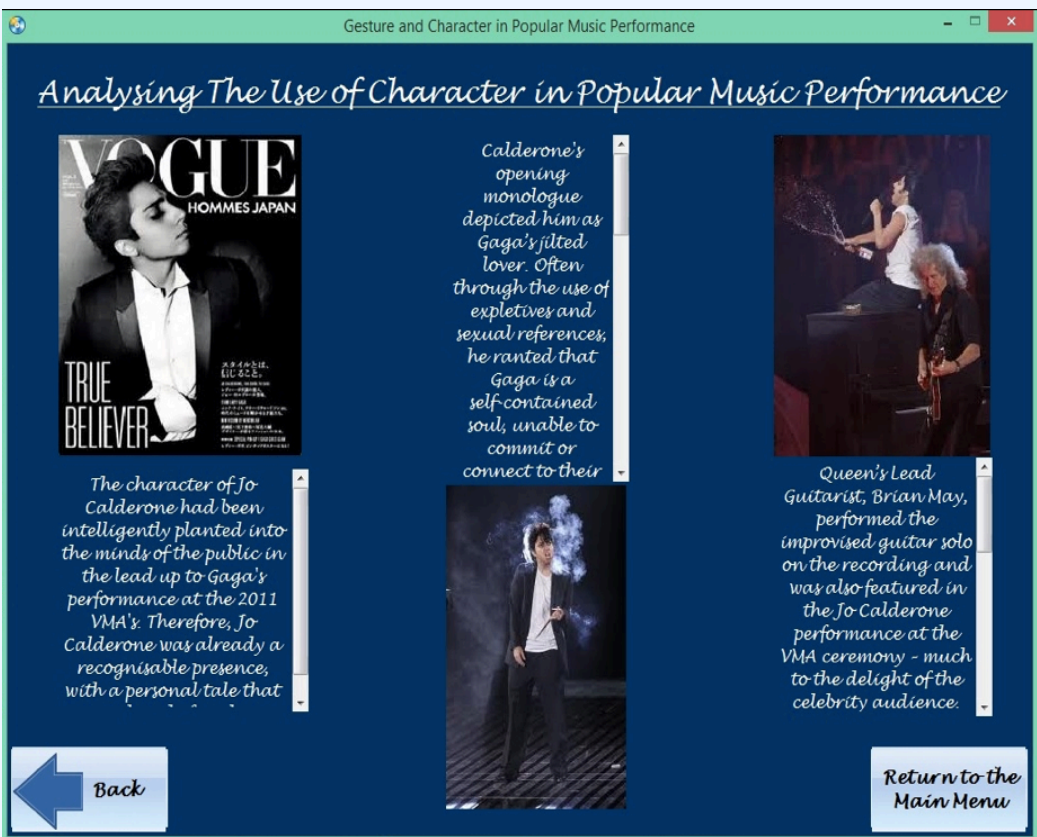
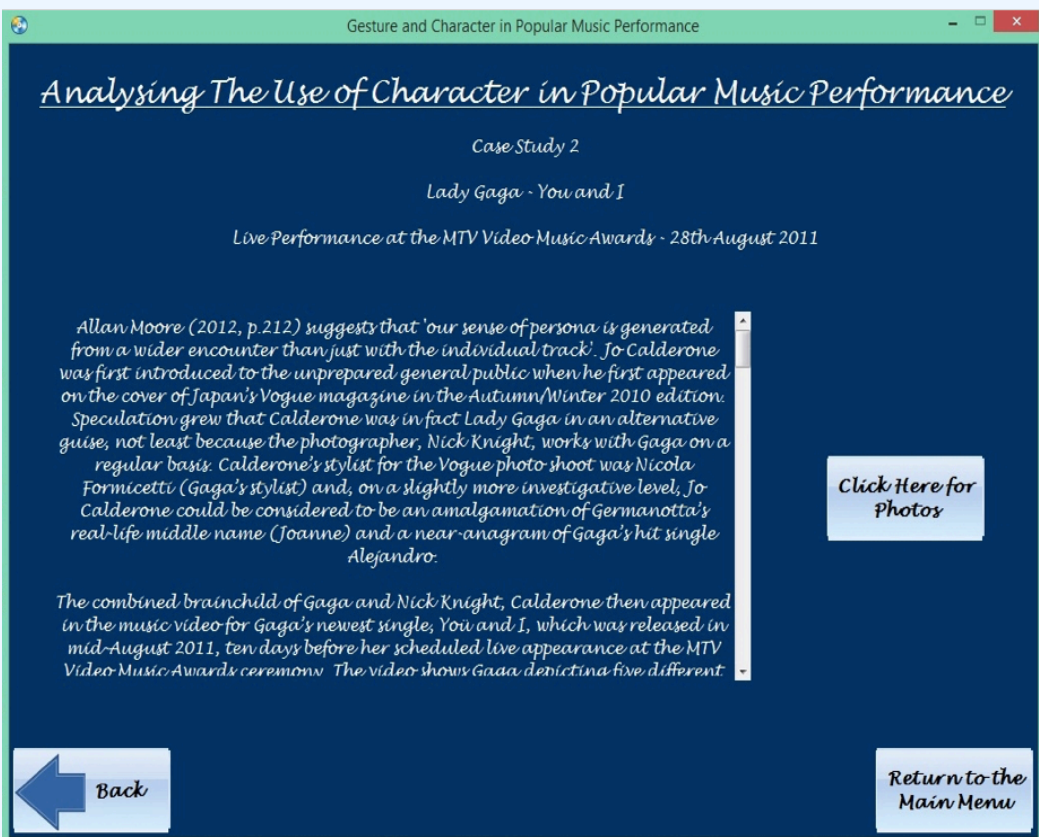
‘An interdisciplinary perspective offers the most viable and productive path to understanding how people make sense of music’ (Clayton et al, 2013, p.6 – 7)

Methodology

‘The study of processes of signification in music cannot elude the consideration that meaning is grounded in the particularities of cultural practice and social relationships’ (Clayton et al, 2013, p.7).

As such, ethnographic methodologies have played a key role throughout this research:

- Video recordings of ensemble rehearsals and live performances.
- Participant observation.
- Group and individual semi-structured interviews with professional and student musicians.



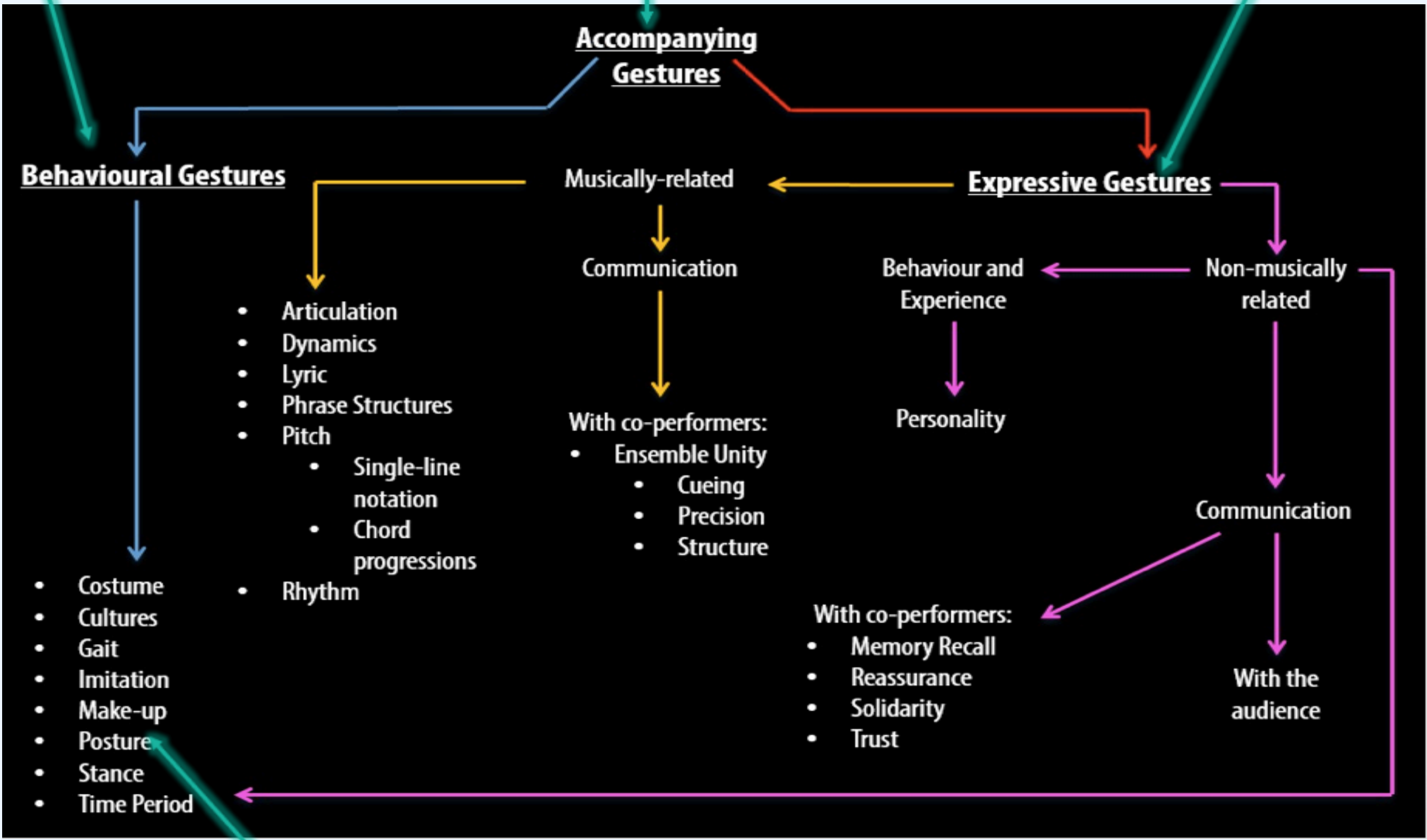
Transcriptions of gestures from extracts of original, and pre-existing, video footage have been compared to analyses of the musical outputs. In addition to specifically designed projects with undergraduate, popular music performance students, the research also investigates live performances by Adele, Lady Gaga, Paloma Faith, Paolo Nutini and Sara Bareilles.

Gestural Framework

In their *Viewpoints* concept, Bogart and Landau (2014) categorise gesture as being either *Behavioural* or *Expressive*.

Delalande’s concept of the *accompanying gesture* heads the framework.

Expressive gestures are metaphoric in meaning and ‘express feeling or meaning which is not otherwise directly manifest’ (Bogart and Lindau, 2014, p.49).



Behavioural gestures are ‘usually defined by a person’s character or the time and place in which they live’ and ‘can also have a thought or intention behind it’ (Bogart and Landau, 2014, p.10).

Findings



Evidence shows that the rudimental content of the music has clear links with expressive delivery. Expressive gesture can be triggered and delivered via the given lyric (Beyoncé, left), the dynamic content (Paolo Nutini, centre) and the pitch of the given melodic line (Sara Bareilles, right). Other notable musical triggers include articulation, phrasing and rhythm. Although vocalists have the added inclusion of the performed lyrical narrative from which to apply illustrative gestures, the configuration and the structure of the musical work is of equal importance; applying to vocalists and instrumentalists alike.

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Photos: Beyoncé: www.nydailynews.com

Paolo Nutini: www.mirror.co.uk

Sara Bareilles: www.tv.ie

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