

Identity as a catalyst for success

Abstract

Success as a musician is most commonly assumed to be the attainment of a performance career; however, careers solely in performance are rare, often short-lived, and not desirable to everyone. This paper is drawn from a study which explored the perception of the musician as a performer, and which sought to find out whether practising musicians would support redefining their profession to encompass those working within non-performance roles. It presents the results of two focus groups held with musicians working in performance and non-performance roles. The musicians were asked: 'What is a musician?' The ensuing debate encompassed notions of success, career expectations, performance careers, and the importance of intrinsic career satisfaction. Participants suggested that musicians' careers continually evolve according to available opportunities and both professional and personal needs. The definition of the musician as a performer was found to lack specificity and to suggest an unrealistic perception of the profession of music. The results of this study support the argument that the term musician needs to be redefined; that redefinition has support within the profession; and that music educators have a crucial role to play in encouraging students to consider what kinds of musician they would like to be.

Introduction

Around the world, musicians work in protean careers which necessitate the continual development of new opportunities and the attainment of the skills required to meet each new challenge. Protean careerists consider their success in terms of personal career satisfaction rather than a pre-ordained hierarchy of success; however, for the profession of music this is problematic given the common use of the term musician to mean performer. Several issues are crucial to this debate, among them the issue of success. Previous Julliard School principal, Joseph Polisi, called for success to be redefined for Julliard graduates, and asked 'to see more of them accept that a full-time performing career is "just not very tenable any more"' (in Freed, 2002, p. 1). As he suggests, the characteristics of work as a musician appear not to reflect the career ambitions of those entering the field. Performance aspirations are frequently instilled before students commence university level training, and often the intensity of commitment is dictated by parents when training commences (Ellis, 1999). Sand (2000) hypothesises that it is often early teachers and families

who make these performers feel that they have failed if they do not make it as soloists. The unspoken threat of being a disappointment to these adults has loomed over them from the beginning and can remain a source of trouble throughout their lives (p. 139).

The performance bias can be seen clearly within examination systems and in school and tertiary curricula. It is also evident in general dictionary definitions of ‘musician’, which suggest something like ‘one who performs, particularly professionally’. Music students, graduates and practitioners conform to a hierarchy of success, aspiring to careers as soloists ahead of careers as orchestral players, teachers or other arts professionals (Arian, 1971; Metier, 2000). Perhaps students would not aspire so quickly to solo careers if they understood what life would be like at the top: according to McDonald (1979), ‘a career just as a soloist makes demands that few can meet artistically, temperamentally or financially’ (p. 42). Top soloists admit that the stress can be overwhelming: Isaac Stern (1999) describes the profession of the solo performer as ‘both simple and cruel’ (in Stern & Potok, p. 265).

A second issue is the increasing pressure upon conservatories to produce well-rounded graduates. However, performance measures and graduate data collection exercises do little to help conservatories offer a broader curriculum. For example, US data reported by MENC in the year 2000 focused solely on the number of graduates ‘gainfully employed’ in performance roles (Campbell, 2001). No data were collected about non-performance roles such as teaching, or about casual and part-time performance work. Likewise, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) requested English conservatories to justify their funding by ensuring that 75% of graduates are working principally in performance within five years of graduation. Firstly, it would be almost impossible to accurately measure the average proportion of performance roles over time given the tendency towards protean careers. More alarming is the narrow definition of success suggested by such a statement.

Self-identity is crucial to finding intrinsic success and to building sustainable careers. Rogers (2002) found that many musicians hold skilled or unskilled roles outside of the music industry and still identify as musicians. Mills and Smith (2002) concur, suggesting that conservatorium alumni often have a career identity that does not correspond with their income sources. For many people, as in the case of an accountant, professional identity is the same as job title. For a musician who engages in a portfolio career, the situation is much more complicated; self-definition as a musician could in fact relate to careers which include performance, teaching, audio engineering, administration or research. Career identity appears to stem from musicians’ aspirations and goals: for example, if, as in Huhtanen’s research (2004), a musician is teaching as a means of financial support whilst aspiring to a performance career, the individual is likely to have a subjective career as a performer

rather than as a teacher. Conversely, someone who takes on a teaching role as part of a portfolio career and who views teaching as a positive professional activity in which the majority of time will continue to be spent is likely to have a subjective career identity that concurs with their objective one. Overall, these issues support the notion that the term musician needs to be redefined in order to encompass the whole profession rather than the very few who work in performance. Logical though this argument appears, however, the question arises as to whether practising musicians would accept or support such a move.

Method

Two focus groups were held with practising musicians ($N=13$). Participants, who were aged between 18 and 65, worked in a variety of roles ranging from teaching and composition to the facilitation of community music, full-time orchestral performance and part-time performance roles. Two participants were members of staff at Australian conservatories. A pivotal aim of the focus groups was to ascertain how practising musicians would react to the suggestion that the definition of a musician as a performer should be replaced with a new and broader definition: that of a person who works within the profession of music within one or more specialist fields. Each of the potential respondents was contacted personally and invited to participate. Data were coded so that they were not traceable back to participants, and the focus groups were recorded for later transcription. An initial coding booklet was then developed, after which inductive coding was employed to extract and expand upon each of the themes.

Results and discussion

The first focus group centred its discussion on the proposed definition of a musician, which read: 'A musician is a person who works within the profession of music within one or more specialist fields'. Participants discussed changes in the role/s of the musician over time and within different cultures, according to the societal uses of music. Musicians for whom performance is the sole activity were recognised as being historically rare, and the group cited examples such as Telemann, who was well known for pursuing multiple roles. Diversity of genre was iterated, and it was agreed that the range of music to which musicians are exposed is greater now than perhaps ever before. Exposure to non-classical genres was considered beneficial to personal development, to the acquisition of a greater range of work, and to the enhanced understanding of classical music performance.

The terms 'vocational' and 'professional' were discussed at length, and although the group initially considered vocational activity to be essential to the definition of a musician, the notion was rejected on the basis of notable exceptions such as Borodin, who was a chemist, and Kreisler, who was a

doctor. Likewise, formal training was rejected as a criterion due to the commonality of informal musical training. The group then considered the term 'practising', and one group member stated that being a musician is 'as fundamental as being involved'. The conversation progressed to the question of whether performance is integral to being a musician, and this led to discussion about composers and musicologists who may not perform. The consensus of the group was that composers and musicologists are musicians; therefore, the inclusion of performance is not essential to being a musician, but rather to being a performer.

The group next considered background as a criterion. One group member, who ran an instrumental ensemble, was asked whether she would remain a musician if she ceased performing with her ensemble and focussed exclusively on the administrative role, to which she replied, 'of course I would. It's as fundamental as being what I have always looked at myself as doing'. The same participant noted that when she had commenced undergraduate performance training she was aiming to become a violinist and not a musician. Everyone agreed that self-definition as a musician comes later, when other roles have been added. One musician claimed that he was no longer a musician as he had ceased to perform for medical reasons. The group insisted that he was still a musician: he was simply no longer a violinist: 'being a musician does not [necessarily] mean performing, but if you say you are a performer, paid or unpaid, then that is your sole occupation'. A week later the musician called me to say that the loss of his performance role had led to the loss of his identity as a musician, to which he had no longer felt eligible. This had caused a significant amount of psychological stress. Having listened to the other musicians' comments, he had regained his musician identity. Rather than identifying as a performer, he now identified as a musician according to his non-performance roles. The group concluded that the term musician refers to engagement within the wider profession rather than to the specialisation of the individual. Self-definition is crucial. Involvement had been earlier described as fundamental to being a musician, and the group debated direct and indirect involvement with performance. Participants emphasised that musicians engage in multiple roles: 'how often is it that a musician only plays? That is very unrealistic in our society'. The inclusion of indirect involvement seems to underpin the acceptance of self-identity as a musician regardless of the regularity with which performances are secured.

Akin to the first focus group, musicians in the second group spent a considerable amount of time discussing the issue of definition. The societal role of musicians was considered with respect to Merriam's functions of music: emotional involvement, communication, societal contribution, and entertainment (1964). Following the suggestion that a criterion for being considered a musician is society's support for the musician's activities, the historical civic and community involvement of musicians was discussed. One group member suggested that both the dictionary definitions

referring to a musician as a performer, and the suggested definition, are both ‘correct but incomplete’. Her observation was that a performer is someone who performs, and a musician includes ‘whatever else we do that is attached to being a musician’. Thus the identification of specialist fields within the profession of music arose as a vital issue. It was noted that the new definition could result in a concert hall usher being defined as a musician, reflecting Small’s concept of ‘musicking’ (1998). This wasn’t popular, and led to the conclusion that it is crucial to identify specialist fields, all of which require specific musical skills and knowledge. The group suggested that specialist fields ought to include, but should not to be limited to, the performer, composer, conductor, teacher and artistic director. Another point of reference raised by the group was Elliott’s term ‘musicing’, which refers to music as an activity (1994). The participant who cited Elliott’s work suggested that musicians perform active work within fields of music, echoing the earlier discussion about being ‘involved’.

The presence of an active performance role was rejected as a criterion for being a musician on the basis that musicians such as composers may not perform, and it was agreed that a composer’s intimacy with the music is most often with the musical product rather than with the expression, or performance, of that product. The group agreed that a performer is a specialist within the profession of music: ‘All musicians can be performers, but performers can have the exclusivity of being a performer’. Echoing the first focus group, musicians noted that they trained initially to be a specialist such as a pianist or a saxophonist. Self-definition as a musician arose with the addition of roles other than performance, and the group reflected that very few musicians work solely in performance.

A mention of Yehudi Menuhin as one of the world’s most revered performers prompted the observation that many top performers include a teaching role in their practice. One group member observed a difference in the role of the elite jazz musician, who is often not a teacher. The point was made that the process of teaching and learning in jazz is evolving; whereas jazz was once learned informally, it is increasingly studied in a formal setting. As a consequence, the traditional role of jazz performers as mentor rather than teacher may also be changing. The participant described himself as a commercial performer on the basis that his performance activities are driven by the need to earn an income.

Concluding comments

It is incomplete to describe a musician as a performer. Musicians engage in multiple roles within and outside of the music profession, and success is meeting personal and professional goals rather

than a pre-conceived hierarchy of roles. The dictionary definition of a musician as a performer echoes the general perception of a musician's role; however, musicians in the focus groups argued that musicians' roles evolve according to professional and personal circumstances. It is not feasible to define someone as a musician based on a set of criteria such as performance, income or formal training: 'you can't lock one person into a narrow definition because that's the way music is: always evolving'. The term musician is 'an umbrella term under which all these other activities happen'.

Many musicians engage with the process or the product of music, rather than with its expression. A musician whose only role is in performance is a performer, and is more likely to self-define according to instrumental specialty: for example, as a violinist or a clarinetist. Likewise, a composer is most likely to self-define as a composer rather than as a musician. Musicians initially define according to their intended role, and self-definition as musicians occurs only when their practice includes more than one role. The research suggests that the proposed definition is acceptable to musicians as a starting point from which the perception of a musician as a performer may progress towards a broader and more inclusive understanding of the profession. Given the evolving nature of careers in music, the definition was welcomed because it positions the musician as someone working within a wide portfolio of activities. This enables musicians to adopt multiple identities as specialties, rather than having to redefine themselves on a regular basis. A broader identity is undoubtedly a catalyst for success, and needs to be communicated to intending and practising musicians as well as to the general public. Music educators have a crucial role to play in encouraging students to consider what kinds of musician they would like to be.

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