

Inside, Outside, Downside Up

Conservatoire Training and Musicians' Work

Edited by
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Inside, outside, upside down : conservatoire training and musicians' work
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Published in 2008 by Black Swan Press
Curtin University of Technology
GPO Box U1987
Perth WA 6845

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Bibliography:

The National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Title: Inside, outside, upside down : conservatoire training and musicians' work / editors, Dawn Bennett and Michael Hannan.

Publisher: Perth, W.A. : Black Swan Press, 2008.

ISBN: 9780975751961 (pbk.)

Notes: Bibliography.

Subjects: Music--Congresses.
 Music--Instruction and study--Congresses.

Other Authors/Contributors:

Bennett, Dawn.

Hannan, Michael.

ISME Commission for the Education of the Professional Musician. International Seminar (16th : 2006 : Hanoi, Vietnam)

Dewey Number: 780.7

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MUSICIANS AS TEACHERS: FOSTERING A POSITIVE VIEW

Dawn Bennett

Andrea Stanberg

Background

Perceptions of success are critical to the career development of musicians. Juilliard School principal Joseph Polisi called for success to be redefined for Julliard graduates so that “more of them accept that a full-time performing career is ‘just not very tenable any more’” (in Freed 2002, p. 1). Aspirations of greatness 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).

Weller (2004) describes the education of musicians as having altered very little, in that performance students tend to view teaching as “a ‘fall-back career’ if they ‘fail’ to make it big in the performing arena” (p. 252). Reflecting on her own transition from the pursuit of a soloist career to that of a piano teacher, Huhtanen (2004) writes of the disappointment experienced when soloist aspirations are unrealised. She draws upon Freud’s theory of mourning to explain that, following a failure, the restoration of self-image and orientation towards reality requires the individual to release the fulfilment obtained previously from that which had been lost. Huhtanen categorises the piano teachers in her research either as realists who accept teaching as an integral part of their musical identities, or as dreamers who engage in teaching to meet financial obligations, and who possess a traumatic relationship with their playing as a result of not having moved on from their performance dreams.

The characteristics of work as a musician appear not to reflect the career ambitions of those entering the field; therefore it is interesting to consider the factors that influence a musician's perception of a successful career. Loebel suggests that most music performance students "are not made aware of the practical aspects involved in making a living as a classical instrumentalist" (in Poklemba 1995, p. 8). Conversely, Vetter (1990) concludes that students in general are realistic about the lack of performing opportunities and low financial rewards, but that the desire to perform overrides those concerns. Cellist David Pereira concurs: "most noticeable until very lately has been the assumption that if you do a B.Mus. in cello then the world is going to rush to offer you a playing job. ... Today's freshmen seem to have wised up to this game" (in Dempster 2003, p. 11).

Music students and graduates give the impression of having a very narrow view of success; most aspire to careers as soloists rather than 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 is like at the top: according to McDonald (1979), "a career just as a soloist makes demands that few can meet artistically, temperamentally or financially". 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).

In the year 2000, the Higher Education Funding Council for England requested English conservatories to justify their funding by ensuring that 75% of graduates work 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 portfolio careers (Bennett 2004; Gregory 2002; Rogers 2002). More alarming, however, is the narrow definition of success suggested by such a dictate, which threatens to limit the activities of conservatories to performance training at the very time when many are

striving to address the realities of work and the dichotomy between performer and musician. Do governments presume that graduates are (or should be) equipped only for careers in performance? Such a narrow definition of success is counter-productive to institutions, students and the communities in which graduates will work.

Ritterman (in Mark 1998) suggests that the likelihood of graduates undertaking at least some teaching activity ought to be reflected in conservatorium curricula. A study conducted at the Royal College of Music (RCM) (Mills 2003) found that only one per cent of RCM graduates undertake formal teacher training leading to qualified teacher status (QTS) despite the majority of students expecting to include teaching in their careers. One of the strategies engaged for a selection of RCM students was a ten-day teaching associate position in a secondary school, after which students were found to be much more positive about considering teaching as a career option. Participants reported that prior to the teaching placement they had rarely considered secondary school music teaching to be “doing music” (Mills 2005, p. 73), which illustrates the narrow boundaries within which students perceive musicians’ careers, and a hierarchical perception of success.

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 relate to a myriad of activities in areas such as performance, teaching, technology, administration or research. Mills and Smith (2002) suggest that conservatorium alumni often have a career identity that does not correspond with their income sources. Rather, 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. Logically, Mills and Smith (*ibid*) suggest that musicians become increasingly successful as the gap narrows between their objective work and their aspirations. Success is an individual concept and can vary for the same person at different times throughout their career.

The level of motivation and commitment required to achieve and sustain the standard required of a classical performer has long been recognised, and much of the research in the area of motivation and achievement of aspirations relates to failure rather than to success. Kun and Weiner (in Covington 1983) find that distress experienced by someone who has failed to achieve something increases in line with the amount of effort invested: a critical consideration for musicians. Maehr (1983) describes two different goal situations that have converse effects upon participants. The ‘ego situation’ is exemplified in competitive activities such as performance competitions in which one’s performance is compared to that of others, and which offers the potential for extrinsic rewards: for instance, prizes and money. In contrast, ‘task-goal situations’ encourage participants to attempt tasks for their intrinsic value, and to determine success based upon the realisation or development of personal goals. Task-goal situations can be effective tools in the education and training of musicians.

In light of these factors, this study sought to investigate how a positive interaction with teaching might affect self-image. A combined cohort ($N=38$) of second-year undergraduate education and performance students attended an introductory teaching unit, which was run over one twelve-week semester. The unit was designed to engage students in teaching and learning activities. It incorporated the development of a personal teaching philosophy, and the preparation and delivery to peers of a teaching artist collaborative program in which education, composition and performance students worked together.

Method

At the commencement of the unit, students completed a survey that included questions about career goals and the incorporation of a teaching role. At the end of the unit, and following the teaching artist program, students completed a second survey and reflected changes to their perception of teaching. Analysis incorporated the use of a simple database and colour coding, which led to the use of quasi-quantification to summarise emerging themes.

Results and discussion

Commencement survey

The combined second-year cohort totalled only thirty-eight and was a small sample; however, the results of the study reflect previous research in terms of career awareness and perceptions of success. Results indicate that performance students are aware of the likelihood for them to include teaching in their careers: 97% of respondents expect to pursue portfolio careers ranging from teaching and performance to librarianship, arts management and music therapy. Huhtanen's (2004) classification of teachers as dreamers or realists emerged clearly from the performance students, who cited a potential teaching role either because of a desire to teach and the acceptance of a teaching role (realist): "getting the sense of pride that you are doing something that is making a difference to people's lives" (R12); or to supplement inadequate work in performance (dreamer): "more reliable income" (R30).

Students were asked to rate how positively they felt about incorporating a teaching role into their careers, using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very positive), through to 7, (very negative) Education students had a mean score of 1.8 and performance students had a mean of 2.1, indicating that they accepted the potential for teaching roles. The composers, however, appeared to be fairly negative about teaching, with a mean score of 5.

Performance students raised concerns that teaching may result in a loss of technical proficiency and an inability to juggle the irregular hours associated with other creative work: “getting stuck permanently as a teacher” (R32). Given that this was an introductory education unit, it was not surprising that 75% of students were concerned about their level of pedagogical knowledge and skills. Specifically, participants raised concern about their ability to overcome a lack of student enthusiasm, and difficulties with classroom management.

Performance students were more likely than education students to have some studio teaching experience. Overall, 53% of students had some experience and 30% students had already undertaken some group or class tuition work. Surprisingly, only 33% of the education students stated that they intended to take a classroom teaching position after graduating, opting instead for portfolio careers with an element of primary or high school teaching. Development of the teaching artist programs involved students working in groups of three to five to develop a program suitable for delivery to primary school children. Students researched their target schools and devised programs including delivery strategies and materials, a budget, evaluation, and curricular links. Each group comprised students from at least two of the three different majors: performance, composition and education.

At an introductory level, the unit addressed learning theories, motivation, developmental and remedial teaching, performance anxiety, time management, and advocacy. Using a student-centred approach, students participated in workshops, seminars, discussions, classroom games, a debate (learning through music versus music for its own sake), and peer-teaching exercises. Programs developed by the eleven teaching artist groups included a marching band, a percussion program, a composition program, and an opera workshop resulting in a tragic opera entitled ‘the consumption of Rapunzel’, in which Rapunzel is eaten by a wicked witch who had been disguised as a prince. Figure 1 illustrates three sections from the graphic score for Rapunzel.



Figure 1 Excerpts from the tragic opera ‘The Consumption of Rapunzel’

Final survey and comparison of results

At the end of the unit, students were again asked to rate how positively they felt about incorporating a teaching role into their careers, using the same 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very positive) to 7 (very negative). Education students retained a mean score of 1.8 and the performance students had a similar mean of 2. Surprisingly, the composers were much more positive about taking on a teaching role; their mean score had moved from 5 to 2. Students reported that their first experiences with education had raised their awareness of difficult issues facing the profession, and of the potential for these issues to be overcome.

Initially, 53% of performance students cited inadequate performance work as the dominant reason for adopting a teaching role. In the final survey, every performance and composition student stated that their motivation to teach was a positive engagement with teaching together with, in 75% of cases, a stable income. This more positive view of teaching can be seen through comparison of responses made in each of the surveys:

Q: For what reason(s) would you take on a teaching role?

Respondent 14

Survey 1: The reality that I probably won't be able to get a job as a performer so I guess I'll have to teach.

Survey 2: It seems more exciting than before. I definitely think I would like to try it. It seems less like a career that would be boring but a fun and inspiring experience ... Definitely

I am now seriously considering doing teaching after I have finished my performance degree.

Respondent 5

Survey 1: Money to support myself.

Survey 2: This unit has definitely made me enthusiastic about continuing to do education. I was unsure before this unit.

Respondent 11

Survey 1: I'd rather perform, with teaching on the side.

Survey 2: [The experience] inspired me to be interested in teaching and different teaching methods.

Q: Has the unit altered your view of teaching?

Respondent 8

Survey 1: I am happy to take on a teaching role as long as it is not my primary occupation.

Survey 2: I used to view teaching as a negative necessity; however I have now realised that it can be a valuable tool to have. I have always acknowledged that teaching will be part of my career as a musician. I now see it in a much more positive light.

Respondent 13

Survey 1: [I would teach] to support myself as my main income.

Survey 2: My view has changed in seeing teaching as just as important as performance or any other aspect of classical music. It can be a highly enjoyable experience.

Thirty percent of students reported that their career goals had changed as a result of their first interaction with teaching. Most comments reflected a positive experience: “I have realised the exciting potential of education as a profession. It’s exciting and so [sic] important. I [now] come to inevitable teaching opportunities and positions far more enthusiastically and positively” (R32). One student (R23) indicated in the first survey that he was unsure whether to swap from a performance to an education major, and reflected a negative perception of teaching as a first option: “It [teaching] would be the thing I would do if I was not a

performer". Asked in the survey whether his view of teaching had changed, he responded: "At first, teaching was an uninspired thing with only drop-outs doing it. Now I see that it can be made fun for both teacher and student alike". The student changed to an education major by the end of the semester.

Students were asked to comment on the benefits of working as a joint cohort of education, composition and performance students, and 81% of students reported the benefits of encountering different perspectives: "[working together provided] lots of different ideas/views: different talents which open your eyes to things you weren't previously aware of" (R31). The advantages of a diverse skills base to their teaching artist projects was mentioned by 44% of students, who acknowledged that "the teaching artist is a valued asset and has a lot to offer" (R1).

Concluding comments

The benefits of working with a combined cohort of performance, composition and education students were felt strongly by the students in this study, who reported increased understanding of the roles of teaching and performance within educational and community settings. Education students reflected a growing awareness of the benefits of working in partnership with performers and composers. Crucially, performance students indicated a positive change in their perception of the role of teaching in their careers.

Career satisfaction is directly impacted by perceptions of success. The study demonstrates that positive teaching experiences within musicians' training increase the likelihood that students will plan a positive engagement with teaching. Likewise, exposure to a wide variety of music industry roles is likely to captivate students' interest, draw upon existing strengths, and broaden their perception of satisfying careers in music. It is imperative,

therefore, that the education and training of music students fosters such engagement and assists students to embrace holistic careers.

Acknowledgements

The researchers would like to acknowledge the second-year students who contributed to this study, and particularly the group who gave us permission to show an extract from their tragic opera, 'The Consumption of Rapunzel'. Special thanks also to the editors of the *International Journal of Music Education*, who released this paper for publication. The paper was presented at the 2006 CEPROM Seminar in Hanoi and is included with the permission of the International Society for Music Education and Commission for the Education of the Professional Musician.

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