

**Musicians as lifelong learners: Discovery through biography**, by Rineke Smilde, Delft, Eburon Academic Publishers, 2009, 279 pp., US\$30 (paperback), ISBN 978-90-5972-301-6.

Despite the difficulty of transforming a thesis into book form without substantial reworking, the thesis-turned-book is increasingly common. In this case, Rineke Smilde's doctoral thesis presents well as a book, and despite retaining a thesis format it makes an important contribution to the literature on music education. The book proves a little tricky to negotiate, but it is well worth the effort.

Three major research questions underpin Smilde's research:

1. What knowledge, skills and values are considered necessary to function effectively and creatively as a contemporary musician [in the sense of someone practising today]?
2. How do musicians learn, and in what domains?
3. What does the necessary conceptual framework of lifelong learning for musicians entail and what are its implications for education and learning environments?

It is the working hypothesis that gives us a true sense of Smilde's intentions: that "the outcomes of the biographical research ... could result in concepts of legitimate educational intervention ... models for adaptive learning environments ... and continuing professional development" (p. 100).

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of this study is the use of biographical research to synthesise the characteristics of musicians' lives, education, career trajectories and learning styles. Smilde investigates concepts of lifelong learning with musicians from a variety of musical backgrounds and locations, all of whom had engaged in both formal and informal learning. The importance of the latter is apparent within the biographies and adds further weight to Green's assertion that if we ignore musicians' experiences of both modes of learning, we "could be depriving our students of precisely some of the spark which attracts and holds so many..." (p. 7). Whilst Green was referring specifically to popular musicians, the biographies in Smilde's study highlight the equal import of informal learning to the initial and ongoing development of classically trained musicians. Smilde's sample includes professional musicians who work as soloists, educators, and in a portfolio of roles. Importantly, she also includes musicians in the formative through to the advanced stages of their careers. As such she is able to paint a retrospectively longitudinal picture of musicians' work in various contexts. Deeper retrospective analysis of these and supplementary biographies would be useful and valuable future research.

In reviewing this book I will present brief descriptions of each chapter and end with general observations. I begin, however, with the dilemma I faced in preparing this review. Smilde's doctoral thesis was bound in two volumes, the first of which is the book that forms the subject of this review. The second volume of the thesis contains the thirty-two learning biographies—the stories—that form the basis of the study. Smilde describes these as "a collection of narrative learning biographies, in which critical incidents and interventions that might be of exemplary value were described" (p. 3). Smilde rightly refers to these

critical narratives throughout the book, and yet their full text is absent. Investigation of the publisher's website reveals a second book titled 'Musicians as lifelong learners: 32 biographies', in which the biographies are presented as they were in the second volume of the thesis (Smilde, 2009). This second book is not mentioned within the book under review, but my experience was that I gained much more from my reading once I had both volumes to hand.

Following a brief introduction, Chapter II sets the context of the study with discussion of the reciprocal relationship between the global and local, drawing on aspects of post-modern life to explain changes in social structure, class, work and identity. Following this are short overviews of general issues such as cultural policy, technology and changing audiences. These overviews are short, and readers are unfortunately not guided to further reading. That said, their intent becomes clear within the section on future musicians, which draws attention to the key message that "musicians need to respond to the changing cultural landscape and as such probably revisit their priorities" (p. 23). As we see later in the book, the responsibility for enabling musicians to do this effectively rests with music education at every level.

Chapters III and IV provide a theoretical and conceptual framework for the research by considering both the substance and structure of conservatoire training. One of the ways in which the book suffers from its retained thesis structure is that it is not until Chapter V that particulars of the study such as 'age categories' are made clear. Indeed, discussion in this chapter of the working hypothesis for the study gives new meaning to the selection of material in the previous chapters. Analysis of the learning biographies, which are discussed in Chapter VI, leads to the conclusions and findings. These are many and varied, and they challenge music education in a number of ways – not only by confirming the important role of informal learning in the musical development of all musicians, but by implicating the role of formal and informal learning spaces in the development of personal and professional growth.

Nettl famously described university music departments as

"... institutions that abound in conflict and inequity, in which population groups and their musical surrogates constantly jockey for position, in which little is said that does not make comparative evaluations and where everyone keeps score" (1995, p. 144).

An enormous amount of reform has occurred within Higher Music Education over the past two decades. Much of this has been driven by a heartfelt desire to improve educational process and outcomes, and by the need to align with international reforms such as the Bologna process. However, a great deal of change has been prompted by an increasingly corporatised university environment within which the arts are an uneasy fit. Under such circumstances, reform beyond goal-driven *content*, *output* and *fiscal imperatives* can fall under the radar. Smilde's study serves to remind us that we cannot ignore necessary reform to the *processes* of musicians' learning, not least because students have moved into post-modernity and have, in many cases, left their institutions behind. Our challenge as music educators is to catch up to the students and find ways in which to accommodate and learn from their new ways of doing things.

In the words of Eric Booth, this is both “the responsibility and opportunity of teaching artistry” (2009, p. 267).

## **References**

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