

‘Musotopia.’ Is it Achievable for Music Graduates?

Background and Purpose

For the majority of undergraduate classical music performance students, ‘musotopia’ is a place where performance ambitions are realised in an international performance career. However, given that so few musicians achieve this ambition, should this ideal be redefined? The current paper investigates instrumental musicians’ careers by exploring the realities of professional practice, and reports from a larger study which asked, ‘what is a musician’?

Results

The findings reveal that over one-third of musicians hold employment outside of the music sector, only 40% receive payment for all of their work, and over two-thirds run a small business. Musicians were found to work in a variety of different and often interdependent roles throughout their careers. Performance arose as the second most common activity for musicians, of whom only a very small number worked exclusively in performance. Further, few musicians were found to engage solely with classical music: rather, musicians tended to be musically multi-lingual.

Discussion

There appears to be hierarchical inference in musicians’ self-report as a soloist, instrumentalist or teacher, with teaching and community work often viewed as back-up careers in case of insufficient performance opportunities. This paper highlights the realities of musicians’ practice in the pursuance of sustainable careers. It reveals the multiplicity of roles in which most musicians engage, and questions the concept of a musician as a performer: positing that a musician is someone who practises within the profession of music within one or more specialist fields. In summary, it would seem that the practising musician pursues a diversity of roles not considered by the majority of conservatories; thus there is enormous, largely unrealised potential for the transfer of music graduate skills into the broad cultural industries setting. Acceptance of, and preparation for a more holistic career will enable many more graduates to find their own musotopia.

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Background

There is global debate concerning the effectiveness of performance-based education and training in relation to issues such as continued transformation within the cultural sector, the creative and professional needs of practitioners, changes to funding strategies, and the enhancement of cultural awareness through improved arts advocacy (Create Australia, 2001; Grogan, 1995; Huhtanen, 2004; Metier, 2001a). For example, the seven commissions of the International Society for Music Education (ISME) include a Commission for Education of the Professional Musician, which first met formally in 1974. The initial objective of the Commission included reference to the ‘unknown future’ facing professional musicians. Since 1986 the Commission has focussed on interactions between conservatories and the profession, technological and economic facets of training, the role of music competitions, the musician’s role and place in global and changing contexts, reflective practice, course content and objectives. The 1996 summary report stated that “[e]ducational institutions ... should at all times take the responsibility for establishing a process of adjusting educational policies, goals and structures to the world in which future musicians will work (Aguilar, 1998, p. 3).

The need to develop a curriculum that encompasses the requirements of the music industry was described by Marcellino and Cunningham (2002): “[i]n so many ways, if the tertiary music institutions fail to address current demands of music as it exists outside of the University, then they themselves will fail” (p. 3). Peter Renshaw, previous director of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama noted that arts training institutions “are precariously poised between conserving the past and being swamped by the increasing constraints of public accountability” (in Lancaster, 2002, p. 2). Renshaw’s (2002) list of eight key questions for music training institutions included graduates’ preparedness for diverse careers, wide-ranging artistic practice, collaboration across the cultural industries, accessible professional development and advanced-level training, strategic partnerships, and diversity of courses.

According to Rogers (2002), evidence “shows that significant areas within education, training and employment have yet to address effectively the changing realities of being a musician” (p. 4). Furthermore, McCarthy et al. (2001) stated that “it is not entirely clear how to achieve a balance between education and job training within the traditional educational environment” (p. 45). The president of the College Music Society in the United States (US) suggested that “colleges, universities, and conservatories must deal with the real world of musical experience, not withdraw from it into ivy [sic] towers” (Seaton, 1997, p. 4).

Conservatories have not failed to change; in fact, they have changed considerably in response to both internal and external influences (Caird, 2002). As recently as the 1960s, diplomas in music focussed primarily on performance in western classical music, baccalaureate degrees were comparatively rare and formal postgraduate study was still less common. As conservatories reacted to change and as many amalgamated with universities, curricula broadened to include subjects such as composition, pedagogy, musicology, jazz, contemporary and world music (Pascoe, 1996; Schippers, 2004), and the academic study of music became still more prominent in the latter half of the 20th century with the advent of state-funded university education. At the same time, competition between conservatories led to the development of specialist courses in areas such as early music and ethnomusicology.

Principals of the seven music conservatories in England, all of which specialise in classical music performance, agreed on a range of initiatives to broaden the education of musicians. The results of these initiatives can be seen in projects such as the education program run by the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) in conjunction with Manchester Metropolitan University, and the RNCM professional access scheme that enables students to work as interns in the two Manchester-based professional orchestras: the Hallé Orchestra and the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra. Similar fieldwork initiatives can be found at numerous institutions in the form of placements for conductors and performers, internships, and business roles (Bartle, 1996).

The link between industry practice and the education of artists was summarised by Costantoura (2000, p. 65): “[s]uccess as a professional artist in Australia involves at least the same suite of skills expected of any person who chooses to set up a small business”. The need for business skills has been recognised internationally, and several conservatorium projects have attempted to increase the level of business skills for musicians: for example, the ‘Musikkyrittäjyyden Kebittämisbanke’ (MUSKE) project in Sweden was founded by the continuing education centre at the Sibelius Academy to develop entrepreneurship in music business (Suntola, 2002).

Ian Horsbrugh, previous principal of Guildhall School of Music and Drama, advocated an innovative community music program that developed communication, teaching and group management skills. In 1990, Guildhall introduced a compulsory teaching module for performance students, and a community development project followed in 1995. Guildhall later attracted funding from the National Foundation for Youth Music to take music into low socio-economic suburbs in East London. Gregory (2002) described the activities as enabling Guildhall to “redefine its role in the community without compromising its reputation for excellence” (p. 3). However, in the same year he described the performance and communication skills of trained musicians outside of the

concert hall as “second rate” (ibid, p. 2). The eclectic philosophy demonstrated by these initiatives is typical of the move towards a more multi-faceted curriculum; however Rogers (2002) suggested that only a small proportion of conservatorium students are exposed to these broader course options.

The National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) was created in the US in 1924, and with more than 550 member schools it is the agency responsible for the accreditation of music curricula in the US. NASM described the competencies, standards, guidelines and recommendations for Bachelor of Music degrees as emphasising “development of the skills, concepts, and sensitivities essential to the professional life of the musician” (in Poklemba, 1995, p. 7). There has previously been no formal identification of those essential skills, concepts and sensitivities; consequently the task of designing and maintaining vocationally-relevant curricula has been unenviable. This study sought to identify some of these essential aspects through an increased understanding of the working practices of musicians.

Method

This paper focuses on a survey which formed part of a larger, longitudinal study involving musicians new to the industry through to those approaching retirement or cessation of activities. The survey was followed by three focus group interviews in which key emerging themes were further explored. Musicians ($N=168$) were located through performance and education-related institutions, professional associations and peer networks. For the purpose of this study, and taking into account the composite nature of musicians’ careers, the term musician referred to an individual directly or indirectly involved in the performance of music. This included performers, instructors, directors, composers, and those whose supporting role is integral to the performance itself. The anonymity of a questionnaire “encourages greater honesty” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2001, p. 128), and it was hoped that the use of open questions with ample space and encouragement for comment would lead to a rich source of data. This in fact proved to be the case with many respondents using the available space to expand upon their responses. Analysis incorporated the use of a database within SPSS Version 11.5 (1997), colour coding of qualitative data, and quasi-quantification of some questions to summarise qualitative material. Survey respondents are identified with the prefix (R), and interview participants are identified with the prefix (I).

Findings and Discussion

Emerging Issues

Work Patterns. The study found most musicians to be wholly or partly self-employed, and to work in a variety of often interdependent roles throughout their careers. Musicians who participated in the study held an average of more than two music industry roles, and over one-third of survey respondents held roles outside of the industry. Musicians typically engaged in composite careers, which were found to be normal practice both for freelance musicians and for musicians employed in full-time performance roles. The findings are strengthened by United Kingdom (UK) findings that 77% of musicians earn over half of their income from teaching, and that almost 90% hold a secondary occupation (Metier, 2001b). Performance was a secondary role for over half of the UK respondents, indicating that many musicians combine teaching and performance activities within their careers. The findings also reflect a Danish study of contemporary musicians, which found only 6% of music graduates working solely in performance, and 50% of graduates working in a combination of teaching and performance (Traasdahl, 1996).

Of the 40.1% of musicians who were paid for all of their work, 41.9% ($N=26$) cited performance as their primary role, 51.6% ($N=32$) were primarily instrumental teachers and the remaining 6.5% ($N=4$) were primarily administrators. Data suggested differences in the primary roles of male and female musicians, with female musicians more likely to have a primarily teaching role, and male musicians more likely to work primarily in performance.

Time allocation. A significant finding was that most musicians spend more time teaching than performing – raising crucial questions about the relevance of existing curricular structures. Over 81% of respondents taught music, and performance was the second most common activity for musicians, only some of whom worked exclusively in performance roles. Few musicians were found to engage solely with classical music: rather, musicians tended to be musically multi-lingual.

Formal education and training was undertaken by 94.1% ($N=143$) of respondents at an average of 1.4 different study locations. Graduate or postgraduate study was undertaken by 39.8% of respondents. The most common course of study was a Bachelor of Music or its overseas equivalents, which was undertaken by 61.5% of respondents. Using a Likert scale from Ineffective (1) to Highly effective (10), respondents rated the effectiveness of their formal education and training in terms of their careers. Respondents who had undertaken graduate or post-graduate level education and training gave a mean rating of 8, and those who had undertaken undergraduate level education gave a ranking of 7. Almost 70% of respondents had engaged in informal education and training.

Respondents were asked what changes they would make to their formal education and training. Responses embraced numerous themes, the three most common curriculum areas being the inclusion of: (1) career education and industry experience (19.9%); (2) instrumental pedagogy (17.6%); and (3) business skills (15.3%). Career education and industry experience were also major interview themes. In particular, participants stressed that students should be made aware of the potential for them to achieve their goals, and should plan and study accordingly. Significantly, performance, pedagogy and business skills arose as: (1) the curriculum areas for which educational change was most often recommended; (2) the skills most used by participants; and (3) the most commonly pursued informal education and training. Interviewees suggested that effective curriculum should include as core components communication skills, pedagogy, psychology of performance, business skills, language (particularly for conductors), and physical fitness. Experience within the profession was viewed as an important way for student musicians to learn the potential for engagement in a variety of roles, and to understand the skills that they would need to take advantage of available opportunities.

Entry requirements for undergraduate performance degrees were criticised by participants, who suggested that students should be directed to take realistic streams of study at the commencement of their programs. Participants also suggested that undergraduate degrees need to be longer in order to effectively equip graduates for the profession.

Discussion

Data strongly indicated that far from making a living by making music, the majority of musicians finance music making by making a living. Dictionary definitions of a musician as ‘someone who performs’ are not supported by participants in this study. Rather, participants believe that musicians practice within the profession of music. To offer a comparison, the profession of geology includes geologists who specialise in areas such as exploration, mining or resource definition. No one would suggest that the sole role of a geologist is to look at rocks; neither is the sole role of musicians to perform music.

A musician typically practises within the profession in one or more specialist fields such as performance, teaching, composition and artistic direction; and in common with other business people, musicians sustain their practice by recognising and meeting the needs of the communities in which they work. In addition to performance skills, musicians require the skills to run a small business, the confidence to create new opportunities, pedagogical and communication skills for use in educational, ensemble and community settings, industry knowledge, and strong professional networks.

Globalisation has had a profound influence on the level of interaction between the music industry and the wider cultural sphere. The involvement of musicians in a plethora of musical genres and cultures leads to the conclusion that musicians need to be conversant in multiple musical genres. The study confirmed that musicians require understanding of their diverse cultures and communities in order to provide services relevant to community need. To achieve this, conservatories need to be an integral part of the communities in which they operate, and in which students will one day work. Involvement of this kind is essential to the societal relevance of musicians, and education will to a large extent determine whether this exposure will provide a wealth of new possibilities, or feelings of isolation and uncertainty.

The inclusion of a wide range of skills in conservatorium curricula would enable music graduates to expand the scope of their performance and non-performance roles. It is common for musicians to supplement their income with low paid, unskilled or unrelated work as available, and yet the wide range of activities within the cultural industries highlights the potential for suitably skilled musicians to diversify their roles in line with family and other commitments. A broad base of skills would increase opportunities for musicians to access skilled secondary or alternative positions with higher financial rewards and possibly more personal satisfaction.

Participants accepted that musicians could not possibly graduate with all of the skills required for their future career; however an erudite understanding of the cultural industries would inform musicians' selection of continuing professional development opportunities based upon the knowledge and skills required for their professional practice. Responsibility for conveying the realities of musicians' practice rests not only with the tertiary sector; it rests with those whose involvement at the earliest stages of musical development provides the catalyst from which musical aspirations grow.

The findings of this study create a strong case for musicians to recognise as early as possible the potential for success in a broad variety of professions, and bring to the fore the notion that career preparation and industry awareness should be contained within the performance degree; adding vocational considerations to artistic ones. A degree of reluctance can be expected from undergraduate performance majors who expend valuable time acquiring the broader skills needed to sustain a career in music, especially when the intended career is entirely in performance and students do not understand the relevance of non-performance skills. The development of positive attitudes towards non-performance study requires students to recognise their individual talents and interests as being personal strengths, and to develop them into realistic and achievable goals. It also requires conservatories to provide a realistic view of the profession, and to advocate and model a

positive interaction with non-performance roles. It is proposed that recognition of those strengths would most effectively be realised through experiential learning and contact with the profession. This study concludes that intending performers should be apprised of their skills and talents upon entry to a course, and regularly thereafter. To offer appropriate guidance to students, school of music staff need to be kept abreast of cultural industry knowledge and to maintain professional contact with the profession.

An important finding was the impact of rapid cultural industry change on arts practitioners. As the cultural industries will continue to change, artists need to sustain their careers by maintaining the currency of their skills and knowledge. Musicians have to continually foster and develop their personal strengths and attributes to feel secure in their abilities, and to accept that ability is an evolving suite of skills which develops as a positive result of both successes and failures. A lack of continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities for artists places conservatories in an ideal position to offer lifelong learning rather than only initial training. Significant CPD needs for artists were identified by the study to include a range of applicable skills such as business, conducting, pedagogy and new technologies. Time and money were the two most commonly cited barriers to CPD, which has to be flexible, and mindful of the hours in which musicians are most likely to be engaged in work.

The study exposed vast potential for commercial and active research activities that would increase the liaison between community and conservatorium in addition to making conservatories more financially independent. Research provides an additional and important source of funding, and the lack of recognition for creative research output remains a crucial problem for many conservatories; however the output of academic research would be improved by appropriately updating the skills of staff. Training student musicians without the necessary skills to direct research and commercial ventures is unwise when musicians are the most likely candidates to take future positions as conservatorium staff.

Study participants bemoaned courses not designed for the “real world” (R26), which resulted in a lack of career preparation characterised by insufficient industry experience, deficient skills in business practices, and inadequate awareness of the music profession. Graduates’ lack of preparedness arose throughout the study: “when I sub-contract a 23-year-old musician for a gig who has just graduated from a music degree and doesn’t even know what an invoice is let alone how to write one, I know there is something definitely wrong” (R2); “it’s so important to train people with the attitude of entrepreneurs right from the word go” (IA14).

The most common reason given by respondents for non-completion of study was an early transition to work, which is logical given that a performance degree is not required for performance positions. Data revealed the need for performance degrees to incorporate an accredited teaching qualification that is recognised by the professional bodies with which graduates will work: “all musicians will have to teach at some time” (R122); “[t]here isn’t so much a shortage of instrumental music teachers as a shortage of qualified ones” (IPS16).

The effectiveness of training and education for any profession is determined by the extent to which the profession is understood by educators and curricular designers. A significant finding was that musicians spend the highest average proportion of time engaged in teaching, performance, business, and ensemble direction. This is not reflective of the allocation of time within most Bachelor of Music degrees.

Concluding Comments

Performance-based education and training in classical music does not provide graduates with the requisite skills to achieve a sustainable career. This study proposes two solutions to the problem of insufficient positions for performance graduates. The first is to have fewer graduates, and consequently fewer conservatories. The second and by far the preferred solution is for conservatories to accept and to advocate a broader definition of the term ‘musician’ reflective of the profession, and to instigate a process of curricular change conversant with those realities. Of crucial importance is for students to see the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of pursuing a composite career incorporating a variety of roles and interests.

This study highlights to music educators the importance of designing programs that effectively equip musicians for sustainable careers, and making those programs accessible to practising musicians. The unmet demand for CPD offers an opportunity for conservatories to work with the musicians in their local communities through the provision of lifelong learning as a core activity.

During their initial training and practice, participants reflected that they had self-defined according to their instrumental speciality: for example, as a *pianist*. Self-definition as a *musician* arose once they had added additional roles to their professional practice. The intake into conservatories needs to consider the potential for candidates to achieve success as a musician rather than as a performer. On this basis the selection criteria applied by conservatories would include skills and attributes demonstrable by a wide range of students, and the potential for success (being the achievement of a sustainable career) would be much enhanced for each individual. The rate of employment would improve, and less reliance on performance skills alone would increase recruitment into music degree programs from a broader socio-economic base.

A musician is someone who practises within the profession of music in one or more specialist fields. It would seem that the practising musician pursues a diversity of roles not considered by the majority of conservatories; thus there is enormous, largely unrealised potential for the transfer of music graduate skills into the broad cultural industries setting. Musotopia is not a performance career: musotopia is the ability to sustain one's professional practice within a framework that meets one's personal, professional and artistic needs. Acceptance of, and preparation for a more holistic career will enable many more graduates to find their own musotopia.

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