

What's a Musician Anyway?

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Biography

Dawn Bennett has taught music performance and education in Australia and England, and has worked extensively as a professional orchestral musician and soloist. Dawn migrated to Australia in 1993 to work with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra and lectured with Curtin University from 1997 until 2002, after which she conducted research into communication strategies for the Music Sector, and the Education and Training needs of musicians. The recipient of a vice-chancellor's award and two teaching and learning fellowships, research interests include the management of sustainable careers in classical music. Dawn is currently undertaking full-time doctoral studies with Curtin Business School.

Classical music performance is a specialist field that demands exceptional levels of skill and commitment in preparation for a career that is unlikely to offer practitioners rewards commensurate with effort. Setting aside the reasons behind the selection of classical music as a career, it is interesting to consider graduates' preparedness for the successful management of a sustainable career in music, and factors impacting upon that success. For instance, what are the music and business attributes required by classical musicians for sustainable professional practice in the current business environment: What is a classical musician? What tasks do musicians undertake? What skills do musicians utilise in the execution of these roles? Perhaps more controversially, how similar are the employment and job-related task characteristics of classical and contemporary musicians?

To the observer, the world of a professional musician may seem somewhat romantic, comparable to that of athletes and actors, the superstars of stage, screen and track (McCarthy, 2001; Rosen, 1982). The reality of the musician's working life, however, is somewhat different. High earnings of the 'superstars' create an unrealistic picture of average earnings, and the superstar image serves to inspire naïve interest in the profession from future generations of musicians.

If the image of a musician as commonly understood is misleading, what, then is a musician? It is of interest to note that a search of specialist music dictionaries including the Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians (2001) failed to locate a single definition of the term 'musician', whilst general English dictionaries provided definitions that indicate a traditional view of a musician as one who performs; for example, The Macquarie Dictionary (2000, p. 264) defines a musician as 'one skilled in playing a musical instrument'. It is true to say that engagement with the performance of music is a fundamental part of life as a musician, yet for many this engagement will be primarily through teaching, directing, technology and management.

The requirement for musicians to have a broader base of skills appears to be widely accepted. Defining the composition of such a base of skills, however, requires understanding of the performance and non-performance roles of musicians, and the extent to which music-related activities occur or are supported within the wider business

environment. Numerous musicians would prefer to focus solely on engaging in performance; however, there is an expectation for musicians to be conversant with the role of business manager, and to utilise new technologies in order to achieve success in a global market place, with multiple job-holding and multi-tasking par for the course. Performing artists use a variety of different skills in order to secure regular work (Throsby & Hollister, 2003; McCarthy et al., 2001), and three-quarters of performing artists hold non-arts jobs either part-time or full-time (Alper, Wassall, & Jeffri, 1996). Performing artists are also more likely than other artists to work in low-skilled service industries (Throsby & Thompson, 1994), a factor that contributes significantly to a low average income. According to Throsby and Hollister, artists' combined income from creative, related and non-arts work is still 'substantially less than managerial, administrative, professional and para-professional earnings.' (2003, p. 46). According to the RAND report (McCarthy et al., 2001), musicians and composers in the United States earn half the amount of actors and directors, even though they work an average of 48 weeks each year and encounter low rates of unemployment. Low rates of employment, however, can be misleading - taking into account that 75% of performing artists earn at least part of their income in non-arts employment, the rate of unemployment calculated in terms of arts-related employment alone logically would be much higher than reported. 'Why train for unemployment?' as Margaret Thatcher remarked when asked about arts education at a time when 84% of registered actors were unemployed (Featherstone-Witty, 2001, p. 2).

Artists have a relatively short creative working life, and there are numerous factors affecting attrition. The rate of injury amongst professional musicians in Australia is high, for example 60% of orchestral musicians are injured at any one time (Archdall, 2002). The demands of professional practice in terms of sporadic work and multiple employers, travel and unsociable hours influence many people to leave the profession early (Alper et al., 1996; Throsby & Thompson, 1994). The impact that these factors have upon personal relationships can be compounded as practitioners, in particular women, respond to the demands of family commitment, with attrition occurring typically in the mid-thirties as career mobility declines (Menger, 1999). Higher levels of success equate to longer periods of travel, resulting in difficulties with the management of family responsibilities and meeting the commitment of non-performance roles that demand regular attendance. Many musicians, leaving to secure more stable employment outside of the music profession, pursue their artistic interests a-vocationally and contribute to the plethora of amateur arts organisations both performing within and supporting the arts (Guldberg, 2000).

Developing an understanding of the Music Sector within the context of cultural activities is similarly complex. The Music, Creative and Cultural Industries in Australia are each defined in many different ways due to a lack of consensus about what is encompassed within each category. Australian Government statistics on the Music Sector centre upon the four major performing art forms of Music, Dance, Theatre and Opera (Nugent, 1999). These traditional categories are problematic due to changes within the Arts Industry such as an emphasis on self-management, business and promotional skills, and new fields of technological skill.

The search for a definition of the wider Cultural Industries is relatively new, arising from the need to conceptualise cultural activity for the purposes of economic analysis and the compilation of data on issues such as participation and consumption (National Centre for Culture and Recreation Statistics, 2001). Cultural Industries, as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Cultural Ministers Council Statistics Working Group, 2001) include the traditional cultural activities of creation and expression, for example music composition and dance, and support services such as performing arts venues and sound editing. Also included are related occupations such as arts education

and music retailing, and those that contain some cultural content such as newspapers, multimedia and publishing, resulting in a much broader and more detailed definition reflective of the diverse nature of the Cultural Industry and the opportunities within it.

Due to the part-time, contractual and spasmodic nature of Music Industry employment, however, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data on Music Industry activity provide a limited evidential base on which to establish further research into career pathways and opportunities for musicians. In addition, the Federal Government's art funding agency (Australia Council) focuses 'principally on professional rather than amateur practice within art forms, and also largely excludes commercial activities such as rock and pop music' (Throsby, 2001, p. 1). Consequently, ABS data aren't representative of the broader industry roles assumed by many practitioners.

The non-performance aspects of a musician's career are often a welcome aside; in fact the potential for contracted musicians to play a greater role in their organisations is gaining recognition, particularly within classical orchestras. Musicians tend to be independent, self-motivated thinkers with skills far beyond their performance expertise. The often-mundane existence of life within an orchestra contributes to dissatisfaction with the role, and the involvement of musicians in artistic and strategic planning, educational and community programs benefits both the organisation and the musicians themselves.

For example, the musicians of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra accepted cuts in pay in May 2003 in return for a new organisational structure that places 'responsibility for core artistic decisions away from the artistic director and into the hands of a new "artistic vision committee"' (Perken, 2003, p. 1). The committee draws upon the expertise of musicians to facilitate concert programming, schedules and missions. Wichterman (1999) suggested that orchestras have 'neglected to provide ongoing professional development for musicians'. The involvement of musicians in the operational side of orchestras may assist with the facilitation of professional development opportunities in line with non-performance roles, adding to the stimulation of the role and to the skills and knowledge of the musician.

This article perhaps raises more questions than it has answered, namely:

- How is the music profession structured, and how does it relate to the wider cultural and business environments?
- What employment opportunities exist for musicians?
- How can the attributes of musicians be broadened to facilitate access to a range of skilled performance and non-performance roles?

A musician is not just a performer – musicians are business people, educators, conductors, performers, writers and managers. According to the National Association of Schools of Music (1998, p. 3), the prime objective of all music programs is to 'provide the opportunity for every music student to develop individual potentialities to the utmost'. As indicated by Rogers (2002, p. 4), evidence 'shows that significant areas within education, training and employment have yet to address effectively the changing realities of being a musician.' Furthermore, McCarthy states that 'it is not entirely clear how to achieve a balance between education and job training within the traditional educational environment' (McCarthy, Brooks, Lowell, & Zakaras, 2001, p. 45).

The reality of successful career management in classical instrumental music is the demand for a diverse range of skills that most graduates do not currently possess.

Consideration must be given to the potentiality of improving music profession retention by maximising graduates' attributes through the development of a broad base of relevant skills. The inclusion of business, management and technical skills in education and training programs will facilitate increased opportunities for the acquisition of secondary or alternative positions with higher levels of expertise, and hence a higher financial reward. Access to these positions would enable musicians to

diversify their roles within the music profession in line with family and other commitments. Likewise, the music profession would benefit from the incorporation of injury prevention strategies into music education curricula for both performers and non-performers.

And so to the final question (for this article at least) – can, in fact should Conservatories do it all? Helen Lancaster included the following in her recent Forum article:

‘Institutional leaders need to consider working together, reducing competition, developing and respecting individuality. More than ever, they need networks outside their institutions, strong connections with professional and social communities. Most particularly, they need a persuasive, united voice.’

The key is collaboration. Not just within genres and specialisations, not just within conservatories and universities, not just within the profession itself. A ‘united voice’ requires us to break down every ‘barrier’ that we encounter, to fully understand the profession, and to recognise and address the issues at hand. It’s an enormous task, and one that can only succeed through a collaborative effort.

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