

# THE DOCTORAL JOURNEY FROM PASSION TO PHD

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Classical instrumental musicians: Educating for sustainable  
professional practice

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## *Abstract of thesis (abridged)*

The study identified the characteristics of musicians' practice, considering intrinsic and extrinsic influences and developing a non-hierarchical view of musicians' work. Drawing a retrospectively longitudinal picture of the working lives of over 150 classically trained instrumental musicians, the term 'musician' was redefined to reflect the diverse nature of musicians' practice. Having considered musicians' roles, career transitions, allocation of time, skills and attributes, the thesis proposed the collaborative delivery of generic

skills across the arts and confirmed the rationale for education and training that prepares musicians for careers beyond performance. The findings informed a curricular model that emphasised the development of individual strengths and interests in support of necessary skills and knowledge.

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It is a great time to embark upon research in music education. The discipline is flourishing and new areas of research are exposed all the time. My doctoral journey was an empowering, exciting, breathless adventure in which my passions for music, music education and sustainable careers came together for the first time. Taking a rather circuitous route to doctoral studies equipped me with invaluable life skills and experience, and also with something I really needed to say.

I will begin with a brief account of life before PhD, which will explain why I came to embark on a doctoral journey. I grew up in England and was accepted to conservatoire studies in viola when I was only 16. I would now question the wisdom of missing the final two years of high school, but back then the excitement of all concerned seemed to override the need for such a conversation. However, things began to unravel during the second year of study. Following the end-of-year recital, I was asked: “What do you intend to do with talent of yours?” I replied that I would like to teach and perform, to which the Head of Strings responded: “My dear, if you’re good enough to be here you should not want to teach.” This was a deciding moment in my life, which is why I can still narrate it word for word.

My mother is a violinist/violist who resigned a professional career to raise three children. Now in her 70s she still leads the local orchestra (37 years and counting), teaches and performs. Dad worked outside

of music despite once coming runner-up for a clarinet position with the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, but his life has similarly been inspired by music. He has played principal clarinet for the Huddersfield Symphony Orchestra for over 30 years. I regularly heard my parents perform solo, orchestral and chamber music concerts. They established and ran a fabulous music festival and they both taught. I joined a local orchestra as principal viola (well, the only viola) at age 10 and started to teach at 15. A hierarchy that placed teaching and other activities 'below' performance had never defined music for my family.

Needless to say, I had a very unhappy relationship with my conservatoire. Afterwards I began to take short teaching and business courses and eventually built a career that combined solo and chamber music performance, classroom and instrumental teaching, and a small music agency. After completing a Fellowship in viola with Trinity College, I auditioned for and secured a position with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra (ASO) and, in 1993, moved to Australia. The Head of Strings would have been very pleased.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time with the ASO, but whilst in the orchestra I sustained an over-use injury. This was traumatic, but it gave me the opportunity to take an objective look at my career and my life. Unable to play for several months I was permitted to take short teaching contracts in primary and secondary schools, and I realised how much I had missed teaching. I immediately undertook a Graduate Diploma in Education to bring my qualifications into line with Australian requirements, and I resigned my orchestral position. Many of my orchestral colleagues considered this a shocking move, which reiterated the hierarchy I had encountered during my studies. I began to think that someone should conduct research into what musicians actually do in their careers, and do something to topple the status quo.

Some time later, family life took us to Kalgoorlie, 600km east of Perth. With a population of about 30,000 at the time, I figured there would be little work. This would give me more time with the children and time to think more about musicians' careers. Three days after we moved, the local grapevine had been activated and I was asked to lecture in music history. Within a year I was running a music program that eventually included a teaching degree in music education. Seeing no reason why students shouldn't be able to move seamlessly through their education with equal emphasis on performance, teaching and career, I proposed a new curriculum and was promptly told to make it a PhD.

I was driven by the need to answer the question: "what is a musician?" I wanted to develop a curricular framework for undergraduate study and advocate for continuing professional development. More than anything, I wanted to dispel the myth of a musician being simply a performer. Excited by the prospect, I began the process of enrolment. The School of Education wanted me to base the thesis on educational theory, but that didn't feel right. The School of Arts suggested a practical component and an emphasis on practice, but that wasn't right either. Strangely enough, it was the School of Business at Curtin University that listened to what I said and offered me a place.

The first thing I did was to look up the word musician. Some dictionaries defined a musician as a performer, and others described someone who performs professionally. I turned to the *Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians* for a more holistic view and was shocked to find that the word musician was not included at all. Now I understood where my doctoral journey was headed.

After six months I was required to formally defend the thesis. Over 50% of candidates failed on the first attempt. As I flew to Perth to face the panel, I hoped that by 4.30 on a Friday afternoon at least some

of the business professors would have gone home. Not so – the room was packed. I walked in, raised my violin and played for 30 seconds. Explaining that to define a musician as a performer is both incomplete and inaccurate, I turned to the PowerPoint and described how my study would redefine what it is to be a musician, informing education and training, professional development, and policy. I passed.

Nobody in the School of Business had the faintest idea what I was doing: my study area was between music, education and business, and whilst I gradually developed networks of international scholars I found myself very isolated academically. People were generally supportive, but not to the extent that I was ever considered for a stipend. When we moved to Perth I returned to orchestral work and studio teaching to fund my research, playing with the West Australian Symphony Orchestra as a sessional violist. I moved to the University of Western Australia (UWA) for the final eighteen months and enjoyed the contact with other music students, but again found that my research topic was beyond anyone else's experience. There was, however, acknowledgement of the need for the research and this led to a completion scholarship. I set the submission date as April Fool's Day and gave up paid work for 20 weeks to focus, for the first time, entirely on research. The thesis was submitted at 2.30pm on April 1, almost four years after I had begun. I was the only person to have read the finished thesis from beginning to end and I had no idea whether it was good enough to pass.

There were many practical difficulties during my doctoral journey, such as the need to work in the absence of a stipend; finding the courage to make contact with potential respondents; and taking time away from my young family. As I reflect, though, the most difficult thing was the constancy of not knowing whether I was up to the task. I had never written a thesis and had nothing against which to

benchmark. At least, almost nothing: when I was newly enrolled I asked my supervisor what a doctoral thesis looked like. She told me that a decent thesis would prop open a heavy door, whilst a Masters thesis would never be up to the task. I am happy to say that my thesis managed this. I tested the examination copy against the door of the photocopy shop on campus!

One of the more memorable moments came in the final few weeks. I wanted to propose a new definition of the word musician and I was nervous about how this might be received, so I decided to run two final focus groups. The first was with academics and doctoral candidates at the School of Music. The second was attended by a group of musicians, including two performance-focussed musicians who I thought were the most likely to take offence. The reason I included them goes back to the rationale for doing the study in the first place: to give a voice to the profession and to legitimise all areas of practice.

I was understandably nervous, but what eventuated in that focus group empowered me to finish what I had started. One of the musicians noted that she had commenced undergraduate training wanting to become a violinist, not a musician. Everyone agreed that self-definition as a musician comes later, when other roles have been added. Another participant claimed that she was no longer a musician as she had ceased to perform for medical reasons. The group insisted that she was still a musician, she was simply no longer a violinist: 'being a musician does not [necessarily] mean performing'. The participants concluded that the term musician refers to engagement within the wider profession rather than to the specialisation of the individual.<sup>1</sup> With their agreement, the definition was put forward in the thesis: a musician is 'someone who practices in the profession of music in one or more specialist fields'.

A week later the musician called me to say that the loss of her performance role had led to the loss of her identity as a musician, to which she had no longer felt eligible. This had caused a significant amount of psychological stress. Having listened to the other musicians' comments in the focus group, she had regained her musician identity. Rather than identifying as an ex-performer, she now identified as a musician focussing on non-performance activities. The acceptance of my ideas by other musicians was the single most important endorsement. With their support came the confidence to call for change and write a strong final chapter. The message in this is to believe in your work and let the voices of your participants speak clearly.

The doctoral journey had been so intense that I had expected total euphoria when it ended. In fact I felt a great loss, and this wasn't only the post-PhD 'what do I do now' void. I had loved almost every minute of my doctoral research, and when it was over I reflected that I had been creatively engaged in flexible, challenging and rewarding work. I wanted more! The thesis was awarded a Distinction, only the second ever to be awarded to the School of Music. It was my birthday when we gathered for graduation and listened as officials began to call out names in alphabetical order. When they reached 'C' and I hadn't been called, waves of doubt began to crash. Perhaps there had been a mistake and I wasn't graduating at all. I thought of my husband and children sitting in the audience, cameras poised. Just as they reached 'Y' and the panic had spread, another graduand came over and offered his congratulations. "You must have been awarded a Distinction too", he said. "We go in last!"

Supervision and thesis examination are very much like teaching in relation to the terrific amount you learn from the process. I would have loved some of the knowledge I now have when I was a graduate student, and that is one of the primary objectives of this publication.

When I am asked to provide advice to people undertaking doctoral studies, the advice and discussion is often along the following lines.

First, choose a topic about which you are absolutely passionate. It will inevitably deviate, get too big and be defined along the way, but passion is the key to remaining motivated and excited about the project. I know someone who chose a Masters topic on the basis that it would be a challenging area to research. It held little personal interest and had little work relevance, so was an arduous process. If at all possible, relate the topic to an aspect of your work so that you are not living (and thinking) two lives. Consider how your research will create new knowledge and to what use that knowledge might be put. Most importantly, don't compromise your topic to fit an enrolling area or a supervisor. It's your PhD. Be strong about what you want it to be.

Find great supervision. In hindsight I can see that I should have had at least two supervisors from music and education, and possibly a third from business. Look at the research profiles of your potential supervisors and read some of their papers. Ask other students about their supervisors and don't be afraid to question academics about their ability to supervise your research.

Become informed. I remember pouring over my chapters towards the end, wondering whether I should be writing twice as much, whether there were enough respondents, or whether the methodology was sound. What I should have done was to read many more theses cover to cover. This would have given me an excellent idea of what was required, and I recommend this to all students. Few theses will be in your particular research area, but each will enable you to compare style, method and scale. You will inevitably be reading articles in your subject area, but if you are looking for ideas on style, phrasing etc., read articles not connected with your research. This way you can focus on the writing rather than the content.

Similarly, I advise students to create a 100-word project description and send it by email to scholars in their field. Tell them what you are doing and invite their comments and suggestions. Some of these scholars will become important parts of your professional network and others will put you in touch with events and organisations, or with other students researching similar topics.

Publish during your studies. This is essential if you want to embark on an academic career. Nobody told me that one could publish whilst a student, so I was behind many new graduates. It was some time (and many orchestra concerts) before I had established a track record good enough to focus on research as a career. Whether or not you aspire to life as an academic, publishing lets other people know what you are doing and enables you to look at your research in new ways. As well as academic journals, consider writing small pieces for music education magazines, listservs and professional associations. Some supervisors will co-publish, which is great as long as they do some of the work. Be aware that minor editing or a quick read though of a student paper is not co-authorship. There are strict ethical codes relating to supervision and the vast majority of supervisors are very ethical, but seek advice if you are unsure. This comes down to respecting your research and expecting others to do the same. Never accept anything less.

Many universities hold conferences for graduate students. These are often themed across the Humanities or even more broadly, but don't be put off by their breadth. They offer valuable opportunities to practice presenting a paper in a collegial atmosphere, and there is much to learn from watching how other people present. Some of these conferences offer the chance to publish a peer-reviewed conference paper. Attend seminars on abstracts and papers, referencing, ethics and presentations, and consider forming a writing and support group with other students. At my university,

students can attend workshops throughout the year to help them develop both their presentations and papers. If your School or Faculty doesn't offer anything like this, suggest that it should and then look further afield. Similarly, if you are facing unfamiliar tasks such as working with surveys, statistics or databases, don't limit yourself to the expertise in your School. When I was studying, I found a wonderful support program in the School of Mathematics. I met with a statistician for a number of sessions, and nobody in my School had previously known about the program. I suspect that he was inundated once word got around. There is all manner of student support within various schools. The graduate research office of each Division or Faculty will often know what is available.

Find a balance. It is very hard to balance work, doctoral studies and family. I think that superficially I managed quite well, but in hindsight I see that I should have given myself permission to relax and to turn off my research brain. This would have made my family time even more enjoyable. You need to have the support of your close friends, so find the time to explain to them what it is you are doing and why it is important to you. Your immediate family need to be a part of the decision-making process long before you enrol because you will need their support and understanding all the way through. In many ways, families earn your doctorate with you. They pay in time lost and stress levels encountered. Once you have their support, respect their involvement and heed their advice. Read the acknowledgement sections of a few theses next time you are in a library to see how important people's families have been. A frightening number of relationships break down during doctoral study. Be realistic about whether or not your relationship is strong enough to take the strain.

Goal setting and time management are essential to completing a doctoral project. If these are not your strengths, seek early support.

Establish both short-term and long-term goals, taking into account your whole life and not just your research. Review these regularly and push yourself to achieve them. Equally, reward yourself when they are complete. Goals can be small, such as an unexpected couple of hours that you dedicate to completing a particular task. Other goals can be momentous ones such as completing a chapter. Regardless of the size, they all require the same attitude and skills.

Some people find it hard to get going and others (like me) find it hard to stop. Schedule in both work and relax time, and learn to switch between the two. Physical and mental wellbeing are critical, and the period of doctoral research is no time to stop exercising. Rather than reaching for the nearest chocolate bar when your brain goes into overload, grab a jacket and walk around the block. The fitter and more rested you are, the better you will manage your workload.

Putting pen to paper can be a major hurdle for some doctoral students. If you find yourself overwhelmed, write a plan and work step-by-step. A good way to start is to write dot points as follows:

1. What is the issue or problem?
2. What have I done to address it or to understand it further?
3. What did I find?
4. So what? What are the implications of this?

Don't worry about being eloquent: this can come later. Once you have dot points, group them into themes and turn each theme into a sub-heading. Then start to write small sections. The plan works for anything from a 250-word conference abstract to a whole thesis.

Find a dedicated space where you can spread out, make a mess, find peace, talk to yourself and get emotional unobserved. Find somewhere

you can spread out 300 surveys and know they will still be there in the morning. I recall sitting on the floor at home the week the thesis was due. I was working on the concluding chapter and had decided to restructure it to reflect the opportunities and dilemmas raised by the research. Being the creative type I had used highlighter pens to colour code all of the text and was in the process of cutting up the pages with scissors so that I could play around with the order. There were post-it notes on the glass doors in front of me, and all around was chaos. The reason I remember this moment is that a friend entered the room unannounced and my train of thought was obliterated. Make yourself a 'please do not disturb' sign the day you enrol. If the thought of this makes you uncomfortable, add a smiley face. 😊

Find a mentor who is not supervising the project. Ideally this will be someone who has undertaken doctoral work, but not necessarily in your field. A mentor will rebuild your confidence when things go wrong, help you to find a path through contradictory advice from supervisors and/or peers, and give objective eyes to your project. I am lucky enough to now work in the same department as my mentor. He continues to be someone to whom I turn for advice and goal setting.

Don't be overwhelmed by methodological terminology. Begin by thinking about your goal, and then formulate a logical way to get there. Will you need to interview people? Will you conduct a survey? How will you find respondents? Who will they be? Who will they not be? How will you analyse the results? What other research or information will you draw on? In answering questions such as these and discussing them with your supervisor/s, peers and anyone else who will listen, you will get an idea of how to proceed. This is when the methodology books are most useful and relevant. Don't rush out and buy them: spend time in the library or research office and find the ones in plain English that

seem most relevant to your project. I recently examined a thesis that had quite obviously been dictated by a methodological approach decided upon early in the process and to which the candidate had desperately tried to adhere, despite the research having shifted to require something altogether different. It is quite normal for the research design to change, so remember that a methodology is merely an approach, or tool, to help you reach your goals. The method should meet the needs of the research, not vice versa. Keep looking until you find the right combination of approaches, and remain open to change.

The reasons for undertaking doctoral studies are many and varied. Whilst doctoral studies are for some people merely a means to an end, for others the period of enrolment represents the time to something they really want to do. I suspect that the best theses come from the latter group. For practising artists who include creative work as part of their research, candidacy can also provide justification for time spent on their practice. A dance artist once told me that her Masters enrolment had been the most stable period of her career and the only time she had not needed to justify what she was doing to friends and family.

Musicians make great researchers because we creative apply investigative, expansive thinking on a day-to-day basis. It is how we develop innovative lessons, create vibrant businesses and prepare informed interpretations of the repertoire. The seed of my doctoral journey was planted long before I embarked on the voyage. Whilst I was very happy to graduate, I hope that it will never end. After all, I have yet to make that addition to *Groves*.

#### Notes

- 1 This story is taken from the book arising from the thesis: *Understanding the Classical Music Profession: The Past, the Present and Strategies for the Future* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing).