Students at a UK conservatoire of music: working towards a ‘diverse employment portfolio’?

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Abstract

This paper reports research conducted as part of Learning to Perform: Instrumentalists and Instrumental Teachers, a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme in the UK. Learning to Perform researches musical learning longitudinally over three years and this paper focuses on a section of one strand of the project, which is based at a UK conservatoire of music.

Portfolio careers are seen as the norm in the professional musical job market. But how diverse are conservatoire students’ aims for their professional careers? How do they describe their identity at the current time, and what activities do they do to carve this identity? Twelve students took part in a semi-structured interview during January 2005, which asked about career aims, identity, and activities undertaken in day-to-day ‘work’ as a musician. The students reported a range of career aims that included working in an orchestra, as a soloist or as a teacher. The students all aim to work in more than one activity in their professional lives. Seven of the 12 students
described their identity as ‘musician’ and four as ‘student’. Two refer to ‘teacher’ in their descriptions. Students work most on individual practice and chamber music rehearsal, but activities also include teaching, singing, administration, academic work and concerts. We suggest that students should prepare themselves for the diverse employment portfolios that they expect and hope for by engaging in expansive learning that prepares them as musicians and not only performers.

**Five keywords**

Career; conservatoire; expansive learning; identity

**Introduction**

This paper reports research conducted as part of *Learning to Perform: Instrumentalists and Instrumental Teachers*, a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme in the UK. *Learning to Perform* includes a three-year longitudinal study of musical learning in higher and further education that tracks students as they progress through their tertiary education. The project is comprised of six complementary strands of research that aim to study how musicians learn in different contexts, and to consider ways in which learning may be enhanced across these contexts. The paper reported here focuses on one of these strands, which concentrates on students and teachers at a UK conservatoire of music.

The conservatoire is one of nine in the UK, all of which provide vocational higher and/or further education for musicians at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Students are admitted to the conservatoire by highly competitive audition, and countries from across the world are represented in the student body. The four-year
programme of study centres on western classical music, taught predominantly through one-to-one instrumental or composition lessons with a particular teacher. This core of study is complemented by lecture and seminar style teaching of musical style and history alongside optional courses such as psychology of music and film music. Students come to the conservatoire as specialists in one instrument (including voice) or composition.

Students entering the conservatoire are beginning one phase of their career as a musician. Throughout Learning to Perform we consider career broadly, as a blend of objective and subjective (Stebbins 1970; Cochran 1991). Objective facets of career include an individual’s job title, or the amount of time they spend doing a particular job, while subjective facets include how an individual chooses to identify oneself (MacDonald, Miell et al. 2002; Mills 2004). Career in this sense is an overarching construct that ‘people use to organise their behaviour over the long term’ and which ‘gives meaning to the individual’s life’ (Collin and Young 2000); it is much more than simply a job that someone does from nine in the morning until five in the afternoon. We can also see career as allowing ‘people to construct connections among actions, to account for effort, plans, goals, and consequences, to frame internal cognitions and emotions, and to use feedback and feedforward processes’ (Young and Valach 1996). This paper reports on students using feedforward processes – as they consider what they would like to achieve in their professional lives – and places this in relation to how they consider their identity, and the activities that they do to account for this identity, at the current time.

Learning to Perform has already ascertained that students studying at the conservatoire rank performer/composer as their first choice of professional career, and that different students go about rationalising this aim in different ways (Burt and Mills
submitted). We know, though, that these musicians will most probably go on to have a portfolio career (Mallon 1998; Youth Music 2002), which will include performing, but not exclusively. Indeed, 85% of 186 alumni who have left the conservatoire since 1994 combine performance with up to three other activities such as teaching, composing and music administration² (Mills, Burt et al. 2005). But how diverse are the students’ aims for their professional careers? Do they want only to be performers, or are they already anticipating the ‘diverse employment portfolio’ they will most probably adopt? How do they describe their identity at the current time, and what activities do they do to carve this identity?

This paper seeks to discover whether music students in higher education in the UK seek a diverse employment portfolio, and how their preparation for professional life reflects this. Specifically, we ask:

1. How diverse are the anticipated ‘employment portfolios’ of twelve students at the conservatoire?

2. How does this group of students describe their identity? How does their description of identity relate to the diversity of tasks that they undertake while in vocational education?

3. In what ways might students at the conservatoire prepare most effectively for the professional careers they aim for?
Method

This paper reports qualitative findings from the first year of *Learning to Perform*. Twenty-two students were interviewed in September 2004, using a semi-structured schedule that probed across the students’ careers, drawing on feedback and feedforward processes. This group (or a sub-set from the group) of students will be interviewed at nine points across the three experimental years of the project, once in every term of the academic year (Autumn, Spring and Summer terms).

As part of its development, *Learning to Perform* is experimenting with using different theoretical frameworks to shape the interview schedules, in order to provide multiple ways of tracking students’ progress and development. This paper reports findings from the second point of data collection, during January 2005. The theoretical framework for the interview schedule was drawn from research into informal learning in work-based environments, using an interview technique that requires respondents to think in detail about the work that they do, the skills that they need to do such work, and where they acquired the skills that they identify (Eraut 2004). We adapted this for our purposes by framing the students’ descriptions of their ‘work’ within their descriptions of their identity. This allowed us to consider the relationship between the different activities that students undertake and the ways in which they identify themselves, with the aim of building understanding of how different people rationalise and plan their learning.

Results will focus on three questions from the interview schedule that relate most closely to the research questions:

1. What do you hope to achieve in your career? (research question 1)
2. How would you describe your identity? (research question 2)
3. What work do you do as a [answer to question 2, e.g. musician, student, clarinetist]? (research question 2)

Twelve students were interviewed (eight female, four male). Seven are first-year undergraduates and five are third-year undergraduates. All interviews were transcribed, and the relevant sections coded.

Results

Results are presented briefly because of restrictions in space.

1) How diverse are the anticipated ‘employment portfolios’ of twelve students at the conservatoire?

The twelve students expressed a total of 28 aims for their professional lives, alongside marks of achievements that they hope to attain (e.g. well-known). Seven students voiced uncertainty as to exactly what they hoped to achieve, but only one indicated that she was considering working outside of music. Table 1 illustrates the diversity of students’ aims for their professional careers, and the ways in which they hope to be recognised for certain aspects of their work.

Table 1: students’ aims for their professional careers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of work</th>
<th>Number of students (n=12)</th>
<th>Mark of achievement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Element of uncertainty</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orchestral musician</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>IR, WC, PO, WK, S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soloist</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>IR, WC, PO, WK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding enough work in music</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chamber music</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental teacher</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>IR, WC, PO, WK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making recordings</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>WC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education projects</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducting</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not music</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: IR: internationally recognised; WC: winning competitions; PO: principal of an orchestra; WK: well-known; S: successful
Individual students expressed varying levels of diversity within their own anticipated employment portfolios. One third-year student, for example, told us “I want to be a successful musician and get work …I would like to play in an orchestra – a professional orchestra and that is pretty much it”. This student does not, then, anticipate a particularly diverse portfolio career. Another third-year, however, told us: I would like to be internationally recognised, whether as a soloist or as an orchestral musician…I would like to be the sort of person who wins all the competitions and goes around the world doing tours…I would like to have the sort of career my teacher has. He is a soloist here, and he does…recordings. He is principal of two London orchestras…he teaches [at the conservatoire] and…does film music…he just does all the sort of stuff that I really want to do – all these different areas. I don’t want to be stuck in just one kind of area…For this student, then, a diverse career involves performing music as a soloist and as an orchestral musician – in different styles of music, and in different venues across the world – as well as teaching. She appears to see such diversity as symptomatic of achieving success as a musician, and therefore being in a position to access such opportunities.

2a) How does this group of students describe their identity? The students’ identities can be grouped into four categories: those using the word ‘musician’ (n=7), those using the word ‘student’ (n=4), those using the word ‘teacher’ (n=2) and ‘other’ (n=2, ‘violinist’ and ‘performer’). Three students used two words to describe themselves – ‘musician/teacher’, ‘teacher/student’ and ‘musician and student’.
2b) How does the students’ description of identity relate to the diversity of tasks that they undertake while in vocational education?

Looking first at the seven students who identified themselves as ‘musicians’, we can see a wide range of activities that the students report they undertake in this capacity. The most frequently mentioned is individual practice (n=5), followed by chamber music rehearsal (n=5), orchestral rehearsal (n=3) and instrumental lessons (n=3). Other activities include teaching (n=2); playing concerts (n=2); singing (n=2); listening/concerts (n=2); administration (n=1); academic work (n=1), faculty class (n=1) and conducting (n=1). A third year student illustrates the range of activities that she undertakes:

I try and do a couple of hours practice…an orchestral rehearsal…a rehearsal with a pianist. I will do quintet rehearsals and I have a faculty class and I will do gigs, occasionally freelance things that I get through college…I sing in a choir…I have my [instrumental] lessons…

Those students who described themselves as students add ‘drinking’ to this list (n=2) and two refer to ‘teaching’.

Two third-year students explicitly use ‘teacher’ as part of their identities (‘musician/teacher’ and ‘teacher/student’). Both of these individuals add to the list of activities produced by the ‘musicians’, with one speaking of paid work that he undertakes, and the other spending time doing Pilates and going to the gym:

It [the work I do] is very varied which is why I love it. I have a job once a week teaching … I have two lectures in College…rehearsals, quartet rehearsals and quite often orchestra rehearsals…I have started doing a duet with one friend – one percussionist and sometimes we rehearse. My private lessons. As much practice as I can fit in …at the moment I am filling in for
my friend’s teaching because she is away... Sometimes I do gigs at the weekend. I have started doing Pilates once a week...and I enrolled in a gym...

For these students, teaching is clearly an important part of their portfolio, as they incorporate this into their identity. This reflects not only a time commitment but also a sense that it is something that is of benefit to them and their development - “I feel really at home teaching”; it is an important part of what they do as advanced music students.

**Discussion**

The group of students presented in this study anticipate that their careers in music will be diverse. For some, this appears to be something that is simply a part of the widely acknowledged competitive profession that they are entering. One first year student, for example, hopes “just to make a living out of music – just to be able to support myself from what I earn in music”, suggesting that, for her, a wide range of activities may reflect a need and desire to continue earning a living in music. Others, though – as we have seen – see a diverse career as a sign of success in music, so that being involved in many different activities mirrors demand for a particular individual. This distinction between diversity as a predictable or desirable facet of a professional musician’s career may well be a predictor of those who go on to excel in such a lifestyle and those who find it more difficult.

So how diverse are the students’ day-to-day activities as they prepare to become professional musicians? *Learning to Perform* has already ascertained that 80% of a sample of 54 first and third-year students of the conservatoire take part in activities outside of performance to ‘make themselves a better musician’ (Mills, Burt
et al. 2005), and that students come to the conservatoire with musical histories that go far beyond only performing (Burt and Mills 2005). This study has shown that seven of the twelve students refer to themselves as ‘musicians’, four as ‘students’ and only one as a ‘violinist’ (a musician defined solely by their work in a certain performance specialism). When we examine the ‘work’ that the students report that they do as musicians, it includes academic classes, listening to music, administration and singing. There is no sense in which being a music student at this conservatoire is only to do with performing in one’s specialism – this may be the focal point of a student’s career aim, but it is not necessarily the only thing that they hope (or expect) to do, and it is not necessarily the only way that they hope to achieve their aims.

In its modelling of expertise in musical learning, *Learning to Perform* has considered the ways in which students engage in expansive learning (Engeström 2001), hypothesising that those who do this successfully may go on to achieve a wider range of musical achievements, and achieve more highly on their specialism (Burt and Mills in press; Burt and Mills submitted). The career aims of this group of students, the way in which they describe their identity, and the activities that they conduct on a day-to-day basis suggest that as a group these students are certainly not displaying signs of the restrictive learning so often associated with conservatoire music students, and are in fact approaching their careers expansively. Clearly, different individuals will display differing levels of such expansiveness, and a distinction remains between those who are expansive in the range of *performance* activities that they undertake, and those who are expansive across a range of *musical* activities. Such a distinction ties in with the importance of teaching in defining the identities of those students who undertake this activity.
In a profession where it is anecdotally recognised that there are more students graduating from a higher education in music than there jobs to accommodate them as performers (see for example, Abbing 2005), it seems shrewd for music students to prepare themselves for their professional lives in a holistic manner, and through engaging with music expansively. Even for those students who aspire to become a concert pianist, there is no guarantee of success, and those who work around their skills – whether this is through gaining teaching practice, working with a musician in a different musical style or taking on administrative responsibilities for a chamber group – will undoubtedly be the best prepared for the challenges ahead. Indeed, individuals who have come back to the conservatoire to teach, alongside a distinguished performing career, typically report that their professional life has incorporated far more than only performance in only one style of music (Mills, 2004).

**Conclusion**

This paper indicates that students at the conservatoire anticipate a diverse career (whether as a positive aspect of a professional life in music, or as an eventuality in such a career), that they have already begun to identify themselves holistically as ‘musicians’, and that they engage in activities that stretch beyond their specialism as part of their training.

While institutions can do – and already do – much to prepare students for a diverse employment portfolio, the onus for true preparation lies with the individual students. We must ensure that while opportunities are provided for students to take, we are training independent musicians who are able to take the initiative, deal with the administration required of them, act professionally during their student years, and above all else, use the four years of their higher education as time to not only develop
their specialist expertise, but also to engage in many different aspects of music in order to present a portfolio that will set them ahead in a competitive job market.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1 A partnership between the Royal College of Music, Leeds College of Music, the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, University of London Institute of Education, and University of York Music Department. Co-directors: Janet Mills and Graham Welch.

2 See Working in Music: http://www.musiceducation.rcm.ac.uk/WIM.htm. Funded by the Prince Consort Foundation.

3 Students may mention more than one type of ‘work’.

4 Faculty class is an opportunity for members of the same faculty (i.e. woodwind) to perform to each other and a teacher. Constructive discussion is encouraged.

References


Burt, R., & Mills, J. (submitted). 'Music students at a UK conservatoire: building portfolio careers whilst in higher education'.


