STUDENTS AT A UK CONSERVATOIRE: LEARNING TO PERFORM OR LEARNING TO BE A MUSICIAN?

Rosie Burt and Janet Mills (Royal College of Music, UK)
email: rburt@rcm.ac.uk; jmills@rcm.ac.uk
Introduction
Research into teaching and learning at UK music conservatoires has, until recently, been scarce. Meanwhile, conservatoires have gained a reputation as somewhat elitist institutions, where talented and privileged young people spend their time in solitary practice. Media interest in conservatoires’ selection procedures and the diversity of their student population has made the need for transparency all the more evident. Here, we present findings from ongoing research at one UK conservatoire, opening the ‘secret garden’ and dispelling some of the myths that surround conservatoire education.

Key Findings
- Conservatoire students report that they seek diverse learning experiences;
- The majority of conservatoire students have engaged in instrumental teaching, as one example of such diversity;
- Female students may be more likely to embrace diversity of experience than males.

Aims of the research
This paper reports on one component of the four-year Learning to Perform project. Learning to Perform aims to understand how musical performers are created and how this could be more effective, drawing on data at the level of students, teachers and institution. In this paper, we aim to explore the diversity of conservatoire students’ learning experience. Specifically, we ask:
1. How diverse are the learning experiences that conservatoire students seek?
2. As an example of this, to what extent do students engage in instrumental teaching?

Methodology and Methods
Learning to Perform is mixed-method, in order to address our research questions most effectively. Over three experimental years, we track two cohorts of students as they progress through their conservatoire education. The research design centres on biannual questionnaires and triennial interviews. Analysis is quantitative and qualitative, working towards a theory of musical expertise that moves beyond previous modelling of expertise in music performance.

This paper reports on three slices of data collection:

1. In April 2006, 82 students completed a structured questionnaire, one part of which explored the range of their day-to-day activities. The questionnaire was developed from student statements, which were probed and collected in Learning to Perform interviews, and subjected to item and factor analyses. Students rated their agreement to 14 statements on a 7-point scale, where 1=agree strongly and 7=disagree strongly.

2. In September 2005, 74 students completed a structured questionnaire, one part of which explored the extent to which they engage, or have engaged, as instrumental teachers. 65 of these students also completed the questionnaire above. This set of

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1 Learning to Perform: instrumentalists and instrumental teachers is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme.
2 The questionnaires are presented in this order to reflect the research questions of this paper.
questions was developed through consultation with conservatoire students, and had been successfully trialled at the conservatoire.

3. Since September 2004, Learning to Perform has been conducting termly interviews with up to 20 focus students. Here, we present one student as a case study, exploring the ways in which she approaches conservatoire life, and the diversity of her experiences.

**Main research findings**
Research findings are presented in three sections, to reflect data collection.

1. Table 1 shows mean and median responses to questionnaire statements regarding students’ reported attitudes to diverse musical experiences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Median</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I go to masterclasses or concerts which are not based on my specialist</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am open to learning about lots of different musical genres</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am too busy composing or practising to do anything else</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would rather be performing or composing than doing academic work</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to play in as many faculty classes as possible</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic work is irrelevant to me</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy finding out about different people’s ideas and opinions</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer to have the same routine everyday</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other music students at my institution appear to be focussed only on music</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a musician is a lot more than learning my specialist</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I play in an orchestra or sing in a choir outside my institution</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I came to my institution for my lessons</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I go away from my lessons and investigate what my teacher has told me</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I came to my institution for my career</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: students’ attitudes towards diverse experiences

1=agree strongly, 7=disagree strongly

Results show that students view learning their specialist as only one part of being a musician, and that they consider themselves open to learning about genres outside of the predominant western classical tradition. Students report that they take time outside
of composing or practising to engage in other activities, and disagree that academic musical work is irrelevant to them. T-tests\(^4\) show that female students are significantly more likely to be open to learning about different genres of music and more likely to play in an orchestra or sing in a choir outside of their institution.

2. Of 74 students, 59 reported that they had been, or are currently, instrumental teachers. 20 of the 26 male students in this sample had taught, while 38 of the 46\(^5\) female students had taught. 19 female students were currently teaching at the time that they completed the questionnaire; 14 male students were currently teaching.

3. Finally, we present a case study student who has embraced an expansive\(^6\) approach to her learning. Silvia spends time during the term working on a research project and engaging in instrumental teaching, and during the vacation periods has worked in arts administration roles and as part of a summer school for teenagers. She describes her identity as a ‘musician’, referring to her use of this word as ‘an overall concept’. Silvia voices concern that her conservatoire education will not prepare her adequately for her career, and acts on this by seeking a range of opportunities and pursuing these inside and outside of the institution. We do not seek to generalise from this case study, particularly given that she is a woman, but present her experiences as an example of the diversity that conservatoire students are able to achieve.

**Conclusions and implications for practice**

The results presented here represent just one part of Learning to Perform. They show clearly, however, that conservatoire students are not only learning to perform, they are learning to be musicians. Students report a diversity of interest and actively engage in instrumental teaching, as one example of such diversity. Female students may be more open to embracing diversity than male students.

Potential applicants, who are aware that a particular conservatoire will offer a diverse curriculum, may feel more confident to be the first in their peer group or family to make such an application. Learning to Perform continues to monitor the impact of diverse learning experiences on students’ assessment scores, attitudes to learning, and preparation for their career.

\(^4\) p<0.05

\(^5\) Two students did not specify whether they are male or female.