Shaping the tertiary music curriculum: what can we learn from different contexts?

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Abstract

This paper arises from collaboration between colleagues at ISME’s1 Commission for the Education of the Professional Musician 2006, in which we seek to understand the learning of music students in different contexts and how tertiary education can best prepare students for a career in music. The research is based on Learning to Perform2, a four-year project investigating musical learning at a UK conservatoire that educates western classical musicians. Learning to Perform aims to understand how musicians learn, how this can be improved, and to build theory of musical expertise. Since 2004, Learning to Perform has run biannual structured and semi-structured questionnaires on students’ career aims, identity, attitudes to instrumental teaching and transition into the conservatoire.

This paper extends Learning to Perform research to three Australian contexts encompassing one traditional conservatoire setting, popular music and music technology. Learning to Perform questionnaire items were administered in these institutions from March 2007. Results from this round of data collection will determine the second stage of the collaboration. Here, we consider preliminary differences and similarities between cohorts, working towards an enhanced understanding of tertiary curricula across contexts.

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1 International Society for Music Education  
2 Learning to Perform: instrumentalists and instrumental teachers is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme
Introduction

In the context of educating tertiary musicians for a portfolio career (Mallon, 1998; Youth Music, 2002), researchers and practitioners from a range of contexts gathered at ISME’s Commission for the Education of the Professional Musician in 2006 to disseminate and build on examples of good practice. Recognising the increasing importance of diversity in preparing for a professional career in music – no matter what the genre – delegates worked towards innovative ways of synthesising practice and research to maximise the effectiveness of professional training for musicians (Blom, 2006; Burt, 2006; Huhtanen, 2006; Lancaster, 2006; Lebler, 2006a; Schippers, 2006). This paper presents ongoing international collaboration between four tertiary music contexts.

Setting the context

We base this collaboration, initially, on the work of Learning to Perform, a four-year project investigating musical learning at the Royal College of Music, London (RCM). The RCM educates undergraduate and postgraduate performers, composers and conductors, predominantly in the western classical tradition. Students are admitted to the conservatoire through a highly competitive audition process (c.11% of applicants to the undergraduate programme are successful), and are already highly accomplished musicians at the point of entry. The programme centres on one-to-one instrumental lessons with an instrumental teacher, an eminent practitioner in his or her field. Undergraduate students also select modules from courses including musical history.

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3 Royal College of Music (RCM), London (western classical); Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University (QCGU) (popular music); QCGU (music technology); QCGU (western classical)
4 Because this research is based on the RCM London Learning to Perform project, the English spelling of ‘programme’ is used throughout this paper.

analysis, theory, psychology of music, CD production, conducting, and instrumental teaching. The RCM’s *Music Education Research Team (MERT)* works within this context to offer research and curriculum development opportunities for students and staff.

*Learning to Perform* is just one of MERT’s research projects, and began in 2004. The project aims to understand how musicians learn and how this can be improved, focusing in the main on western classical musicians. Starting from the premise that expertise development in music is far more complex than ‘practice makes perfect’, the project seeks to build theory that embraces the complex social, physical and psychological nature of learning to be a musician. In so doing, *Learning to Perform* draws on, for example, sociological notions of career (Cochran, 1991; Stebbins, 1970; Young & Valach, 1996) as well as the concept of ‘expansive’ learning (Fuller & Unwin, 2003).

*Learning to Perform* tracks RCM students for up to three years, as they progress through their undergraduate and postgraduate career. Career is viewed here as a blend of the objective and subjective (Cochran, 1991; Stebbins, 1970), 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 & Valach, 1996). *Learning to Perform* encourages students to use their ‘feedback’ processes as they reflect on past experiences and learning, and their ‘feedforward’ processes as they shape their aspirations and aims. As the project unpacks learning it draws also on the concept of ‘expansive’ learning, defined by Fuller and Unwin as ‘participation in multiple communities of practice'.
inside and outside the formal educational setting; opportunities to extend identity through boundary crossing’ (2003).

Conservatoire students, perhaps especially those within the western classical tradition, are often assumed to spend their days in solitary practice (Burt & Mills, 2006a), undertaking what might appear a highly ‘restrictive’ approach to their learning. Psychological research (see, for example, Ericsson, 1996) has lent weight to such claims, suggesting that expertise in music requires achieving a prescribed amount of practice. Without entirely refuting such a claim, Learning to Perform argues that expertise in music reaches further than the practice room alone. Increasingly, for example, tertiary music education needs to be focused on preparation for a diverse employment portfolio. Given that students enter the RCM to undertake a vocational education (Burt & Mills, 2006d, in press), the institution has a responsibility to reflect the broadness of such a vocation in the provision it offers. Similarly, the students themselves need to recognise this broadness, and tailor their expertise accordingly. Learning to Perform starts from the premise that those students who are ‘expansive’ learners will be most prepared for their career as a musician.

This paper extends Learning to Perform to three other tertiary contexts, expanding the project’s investigation to include students studying popular music and music technology, and another group of students studying western classical music, to draw comparisons across institutional context. We ask: ‘in what ways do students learning in different institutional and musical contexts prepare for a diverse employment portfolio?’

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5 Western classical, popular music, music technology

Method

*Learning to Perform* has been mixed-method since its inception, drawing on a range of qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis. This paper draws predominantly on the quantitative strand, drawing from the project’s biannual questionnaire instruments. In order to focus on career preparation, we draw here on three main tenets of the *Learning to Perform* questionnaire:

1. The hopes and fears (‘feedforward’ processes) of students (Burt & Mills, 2006c). Students respond to open ended questions about hopes and fears, musically, as a learner and socially.

2. Students’ career aspirations (Mills, 2005): students rank 12 careers6 in order of preference.

3. Students’ attitudes to being an instrumental teacher (Mills, 2006). Students respond with 28 statements about their attitudes to being an instrumental teacher, on a 7-point scale (where 1=strongly agree, 7=strongly disagree).

These three components are not selected as indicative of students’ preparation for their career, but rather as a starting point for examining the ways in which this preparation differs, and the role of institutional and musical context in shaping this. Table 1 shows the breakdown of student numbers for each question, the date that the question was administered and the cohort from which the sample was selected.

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*6 Class teacher (primary school); class teacher (secondary school); instrumental teacher working in schools; instrumental teacher working at home; teacher in a university or music college; music projects in schools, youth clubs, prisons; performer or composer; agent; administrator organising concerts; concert usher or programme seller; critic; proof reading music or books for publication.*
Table 1: administration of questionnaires in the four contexts: number of students, date and cohort from which students are selected

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>RCM: western classical</th>
<th>QCGU: western classical</th>
<th>QCGU: popular music</th>
<th>QCGU: music technology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hopes and fears</td>
<td>n 62</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cohort</td>
<td>BMus pre-Yr 1(^7)</td>
<td>BMus/BMus Studies commencing 2007</td>
<td>BPM commencing 2007</td>
<td>BMutec commencing 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career aspirations</td>
<td>n 114</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>date</td>
<td>September 2004</td>
<td>March 2007</td>
<td>March 2007</td>
<td>March 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cohort</td>
<td>BMus 1 and BMus 3</td>
<td>BMus/BMus Studies commencing 2007</td>
<td>BPM commencing 2007</td>
<td>BMutec commencing 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes to instrumental teaching</td>
<td>n 114</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>date</td>
<td>September 2004</td>
<td>March 2007</td>
<td>March 2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>cohort</td>
<td>BMus 1 and BMus 3</td>
<td>BMus/BMus Studies commencing 2007</td>
<td>BPM commencing 2007</td>
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Results and discussions

Results are presented for each context, beginning with data already collected and analysed in Learning to Perform. We follow this with comparative data from each of the other contexts, before drawing the data together to consider key preliminary findings.

\(^7\) The questionnaire was sent to BMus 1 students prior to their registration at the RCM. A sub-group of students were then tracked longitudinally through interviews once they arrived at the conservatoire.
RCM: western classical music

The RCM students in this sample rank performer or composer as their first choice of career (median=1), followed by becoming an instrumental teacher at a university or music college (median=2.5). Table 2 shows that proof reading music and books for publication (median=9) or being a concert usher (median=11) are less favourable as career options (see Burt & Mills, in press for more information).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career</th>
<th>Median ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Performer or composer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher in a university or music college</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental teacher at home</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental teacher in school</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critic</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music projects in schools, youth clubs, prisons</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator organising concerts</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agent</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class teacher in secondary school</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class teacher in primary school</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proof reading music or books for publication</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concert usher or programme seller</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: RCM students’ ranking of 12 career options

Performance activities in which students hope to engage range from western classical solo careers (“I would like to be “internationally recognised as a top [player]””) to being happy in a musical career (“happiness through my work, whether that comes through performing or through my students or playing with great people”). Similarly, students do not expect to perform only in the western classical tradition. Brass players, for example, frequently play in brass bands and concert bands as well as in western classical orchestras and chamber groups (Burt, Oakes, & Mills, in press).
Moving to instrumental teaching, the students report that they both expect (mean=1.6, s.d.=1.1) and hope (mean=2.2, s.d.=1.5) to do some instrumental teaching when they graduate (Burt & Mills, in press). They would most like to teach in a conservatoire (mean=2.8, s.d.=1.8). Students disagree that a good performer will always be a good teacher (mean=6.2, s.d.=1.4) and that they do not need to be trained to teach others (mean=5.4, s.d.=1.8). Encouragingly, students would want the lessons that they give to be fun (mean=1.7, s.d.=1.2) (see Mills, 2006 for more detail).

When probed about their learning, the students display a wide range of interests. The 62 students who completed the ‘hopes and fears’ questionnaire prior to entering the conservatoire, for example, wrote of looking forward to working with like-minded peers (53%), studying with high-quality teachers (42%), chamber music opportunities (45%), developing as a musician (37%) and the opportunities that will be available to them (32%). Forty-five students also reported looking forward to meeting new people (Burt & Mills, 2006c). Later in their studies, students from the same cohort identify themselves primarily as ‘musicians’ (Burt & Mills, 2006b). In using this term, students are quick to point out the significance of their choice:

This is where the diversity of music comes in again because I don't think I quite focus on one particular aspect. I am not just an organist; not just a jazzer; not just an accompanist and certainly I am, not yet, just a conductor so I would have to go, probably, with the answer that you have been getting all the time and that is musician – all round musician – willing to look at all the different parts of music as opposed to just shutting one off or excluding a certain area of music. (BMus 3, male)

The demonstration of such diversity – in both approach and experience – paints an optimistic picture for this student’s career preparation. And he is not alone. Other RCM students give similar stories, embracing educational activities, summer schools,
administrative opportunities, orchestral work and so forth. Practice is certainly not the only ingredient for the development of musical expertise for these students. But what can we learn from those studying in other contexts? And how can tertiary institutions work best together to shape the curriculum in what is becoming an increasingly international platform?

**QCGU: western classical music (BMus)**

The Bachelor of Music (BMus) programme provides professional music training for the classical and contemporary instrumentalist, vocalist or composer. The need to uphold a long-established reputation for performance excellence remains the primary focus of the institution and the majority of staff who work within it. This philosophy is reflected in the criteria for entry. Students are selected via a competitive audition process demonstrating an ability to perform. Academic achievement, although desirable, is a secondary consideration.

The programme attracts a diverse range of students with an array of backgrounds and expectations including elite and non-elite performers and composers in classical and contemporary/jazz fields, students whose career aspirations might be in classroom or studio teaching, and students who will work in the broader arts and music industries. A percentage of all students will proceed to higher degree studies in performance, composition, research and other fields.

The programme encourages students to concentrate on their major area of study through weekly one-to-one instrumental lessons with teachers who are considered eminent.

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8 In this context, BMus refers to both the QCGU BMus and BMus Studies programmes

practitioners in their field. Students are also afforded exposure to diverse musical styles and idioms through courses including classical, contemporary and world music, and to the broadly accepted musical skills of aural awareness training, music theory and ensemble work. Nonetheless, the majority are expected to invest a large amount of time in solitary practice in preparation for exams, recitals and competitions.

The Bachelor of Music Studies (BMus Studies) programme offers a reduced focus on performance and is sometimes selected by students intending a teaching or academic career. For the purposes of this pilot study, data from this cohort of 20 students has been aggregated with BMus data.

The QCGU first year students in the BMus and BMus Studies programmes rank performer or composer as their first choice of career (median=1), followed by becoming a producer (median=3) and then teaching at a university or college (median=4). Less favoured teaching options include working in the secondary (median=6) and primary classrooms (median=7). Working in administration (median=7), as an agent (median=8), in publishing (median=10) and as usher/programme seller (median=11) are less favoured.

Students report that they expect (mean=1.6) and hope (mean=2.1) to engage in some instrumental teaching when they graduate, with teaching in a conservatoire the least favoured context (mean=4.9). There is general agreement that a good performer equates to a good teacher (mean=3.5) and that students do not need to be trained to teach others (mean=2.6).
Questioned about their learning, 56% agree that they hoped to improve and develop as musicians, and look forward to the opportunities available (29%), and chamber music opportunities (16%). Only 10% look forward to working with like-minded people. Interestingly, 32% of students expect to be making a living as a musician two years after graduation, compared with 47% after five years. Twenty-one percent of students expect to be making a living as a teacher both two and five years after graduation. There were no significant differences evident among aspirations for each timeframe.

**QCGU: popular music (BPM)**

The Bachelor of Popular Music programme (BPM) was implemented in 1999 and operates in a purpose-built facility on the Gold Coast campus of Griffith University. Places in the programme are offered after a highly competitive audition and interview process. Unlike most conservatorium performance courses, the BPM programme does not include any one-to-one lessons; relying instead on students' critical reflection on recorded performances to enhance performance abilities (Lebler, 2004, 2005, 2006b; McWilliam, Lebler, & Taylor, 2007). All BPM recording infrastructure is of a professional standard and all students receive ongoing training in its operation. Horizontal integration of course work, encouraging collaboration, and a range of assessment strategies including assessment of learning, for learning and as learning are characteristics of this programme (Lebler, 2006a).

The BPM students in this sample rank performer/composer as their preferred career outcome (median=1), followed by producer (median=2), events manager (median=3)
and arranger/copyist (median=4)\(^9\). Usher/programme seller and publisher are their least preferred options. About 70% expect to make a living from music, 40% expecting this to be as performer or composer.

Students report that they expect (mean=2.7) and hope (mean=3.1) to do some instrumental teaching post-graduation. They believe teaching will improve their own performance (mean=1.9) and that lessons should be fun (mean=1.3). They would teach improvisation and composition as well as performance (mean=1.7). Students disagree that a good performer will always be a good teacher (mean=5.5) and that they do not need to be trained to teach others (mean=4.9).

BPM students look forward to meeting like-minded people (48\%) and making new friends (61\%). More than 40\% look forward to the resources available to them. They are concerned about personal finances (48\%).

**QCGU: music technology (BMT)**

Implemented in the early 1980s, the Bachelor of Music Technology (BMT) programme operates in a wing of the same building as the BMus and BMus Studies programmes at QCGU. Significantly, this exposes BMT students to (and involves them in) a range of cross-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary projects. Places in the programme are highly competitive with 150-180 students applying for approximately 18 places.\(^{10}\)

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\(^9\) The three categories of producer, arranger/copyist and events manager were added to the options offered in the survey at the RCM to include career outcomes known to be present in QCGU students.

\(^{10}\) 2005-2007 application-intake figures.
Like the BPM programme, BMT does not offer one-to-one lessons. The cohort exists on a continuum from those with limited performance experience (but high proficiency in elements including electro-acoustic music, sound design, computer assisted composition and music production), to accomplished multi-instrumentalists. Graduates pursue an array of careers, including recording and production, acoustics consultants, audio forensics, film industries, education, gaming, performance and event production, and entrepreneurial artistic endeavours.

The BMT programme is characterised by a cross-year/cross-programme learning community and community of practice including industry, academic and peer support, allowing students to move from novice to expert in a variety of fields. As they become experts in diverse domains, they experience a range of peer learning/assessment approaches, strengthening inter-relationships between specialisation, collaboration and networking (Hitchcock, 2007).

In music technology professions, human networks are crucial, successful professionals are increasingly multi-skilled flexi-workers collaborating with like individuals, and the project is increasingly the business model. Where once one might have had three career changes over a lifetime, more commonly one has three or more ‘careers’ in parallel, moving effortlessly between them, seeking and creating synergistic opportunities (Draper & Hitchcock, 2006).

The BMT students in this sample rank performer/composer as their preferred career (median=1), followed by university teacher (median=3), and agent (median=5.5). There follows a range of options at median=6: teacher, critic, and
arranger/orchestrator/copyist. Usher/programme seller, publisher and events manager were the least preferred options. About 93% expect to make a living from music and about 86% expect this to include activity in performance and/or composition. Of significant interest is the disjunct between the high ranking of performer/composer as preferred career, but low anticipation of performance or composition options at either two or five years post-graduation. This anomaly demands further investigation.

Students in the sample display ambivalence toward teaching, with minimal expectation (mean=3.7) or hope (mean=3.9) of undertaking any instrumental teaching after graduation. The data do show limited confidence that teaching might improve their own performance (mean=2.9), indicating that further investigation needs to separate the views of those who perceive themselves as instrumentalists and those who do not.

BMT students place more emphasis on making new friends (86%) than in meeting like-minded people (21%), confirming that the individuality sought in potential students is inherent in their self-perceptions. Given the diversity of students’ prior experience, their concerns about “musical expectations” and “standards” are unsurprising.

**Discussion**

As is apparent in Figure 1, wanting to make new friends and to improve/develop is common among all cohorts. Meeting like-minded people is more important to BPM and RCM students than to BMus and BMT students, and their diverse backgrounds suggest that there may be different reasons for each cohort. Whilst ensemble

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11 In recording these data, the words “friends” and “colleagues” were considered interchangeable.

performance opportunities rank highly among RCM students, they do not rate at all with the BMT cohort, and are not highly regarded by BMus students (see Figure 1). It is hardly surprising that BMT students, as prospective sound engineers, show little interest in ensemble performance. However, for BMus students, access to pre-tertiary ensemble activities may colour their interests at tertiary level. For RCM students, the data suggest that it is the *quality* of this interaction that students seek in their conservatoire education. Focus groups would allow further exploration of these responses. Like other students in the study, most BMT students anticipate achieving musical goals, their sense of “musical” goals being interchangeable with goals in recording. The anticipations of students are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 1

Whatever other concerns students may have, it is their financial situation that worries them most (see Figure 3). Otherwise, the low level of study-related concerns would indicate that students generally feel well prepared for their chosen programme of study.
Students’ career aspirations are represented in Figure 4. For all cohorts, a career as performer or composer ranks highest. The response of the BMT cohort is possibly
reflective of student diversity, specifically those with a strong performance/composition background continuing to view this as contributing to their careers. Curiously, producer ranks low among this cohort, even though BMT students perceive producers as producing content, a role with which they identify more strongly than is indicated in these data. Further work will explore diversity within the choice of ‘performer and composer’, considering the genres in which musicians hope to perform/compose, the percentage of time that they anticipate they will spend on these activities, and their reasons for these decisions.

Figure 4

BPM students are less attracted to teaching as a career than the other cohorts (Figure 4), although they both hope and expect to do some instrumental teaching. They are less likely than their fellow QGCU students to believe that it is obvious how to teach, that a good performer will naturally be a good teacher, and they would feel less responsible for students’ failure to practise. Given its relevance to their genre, it is not surprising that they place higher emphasis on teaching improvisation and composing. RCM and BPM students have relatively similar attitudes towards teaching (see Figure 5).
QCGU students have high expectations of making a living through music within two-five years after graduation. This is particularly so for BMT and BPM students. Although financial stability was not ranked highly, presumably “making a living through music” might imply security for them, as “living solely from my musical exploits” would indicate. There were more direct references to making money among the responses from the BPM cohort, often tempered with the hope that they would be “doing something that I enjoy”.

Post-graduation, the BPM cohort places greater importance on developing industry respect than do other groups. Many indicate an interest in establishing a home-based studio. Further, some made specific reference to creativity and innovation: they want to “create fresh and exciting music”, “be working in an innovative recording network” and produce “works to be proud of”.

Among all Queensland respondents was a significant expectation that travel would feature post-graduation. For some, it was related to studying overseas, and for others it was associated with work as a professional musician or in a role within the music industry. Although travel-related study or musical activity was not extrapolated from the RCM data, it was sufficiently evident among the Queensland data to produce a separate calculation. It would not be unrealistic to expect that this trend may relate to Australia’s distance from European and American opportunities for professional musicians. These various data are represented in Figures 6 and 7:

Figure 6

![Graph showing hopes after two years](attachment:image)
Conclusion

This preliminary study intends to identify commonalities and variations among students in a range of locations and disciplines. The findings indicate that while there is much in common between cohorts, there are interesting variations. As we expand this collaboration, we seek to unpack these variations, drawing on ways in which we might learn from different contexts and different genres of music. Can we learn, for example, from the students’ differing approaches to teaching music? Does this reflect their own learning experiences, and does it reflect those that they go on to have in the future? Is there any difference by country on entry to the institution, and between classical students in each country compared to the BMT and BPM students? The answers to such questions, we anticipate, will enable us to better understand, and to thereby enhance, the shape of tertiary music curricula across contexts. Additional work-in-progress includes
surveys undertaken in the areas of student identity across all cohorts. Prior learning surveys have been applied in QCGU students, and there are plans to extend this to the RCM in coming months.

Acknowledgement

The authors acknowledge Janet Mills, Principal Investigator of Learning to Perform, who has led the project in the UK and been centrally involved in the development of the questionnaire schedules and analysis plans. This study is founded on her work.

Biographical statement

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References


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