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Raising standards in performance

Robert Davis and Mark Pulman

r.w.davis@btinternet.com

mark@planetpulman.com

Over the past few years, instrumental performance has been subject to considerable research in this journal and elsewhere. A great deal of this research has concentrated on the practice strategies and individual lessons, which most students undertake in preparing as performers. Little has been done on raising standards of performance on a larger scale within the context of a large music department. This article describes the outcomes of a two-year programme undertaken with undergraduates at Barnsley College. It looks specifically at the scope for curriculum changes over that period and the way the various individual aspects of performance lessons are brought together through a weekly class which focuses on the demands of a public performance and the strategies required to prepare for that event.

Introduction

Many music students and teachers would agree with the view that performance should be central to the development of a musical education. The National Curriculum ensures that all children are provided with performing opportunities, while the Associated Board for over a century through its graded practical examinations, has done so much to foster musical performance.

Instrumental teaching in schools, colleges and universities is still predominantly based upon the one-to-one single weekly lesson. Pressure of time can focus much of this teaching on the preparation of pieces for public examinations, assessments or the next concert, plus the learning of technical exercises and studies. There is rarely enough time to learn a wider repertoire or to develop other performance experiences. Students typically learn in a vacuum: one-to-one lessons and individual practice – usually a solitary existence. These conditions are quite the opposite of what they are ostensibly being prepared for: a public performance.

Of course, students share their music-making with others through playing in large ensembles and bands, and singing in choirs. While this enriches their experiences, the focus here is usually on the ensemble rather than on the individual; for example, what is being rehearsed for performance is not normally the same piece that is being learned in the student's individual lesson.

Similarly, we can also recognize the loneliness of the long-distance visiting instrumental tutors: teach their students individually, prepare each for an examination in which they have no input to the assessment process, and usually not present when the student takes the exam. Within a limited number of lessons, they are required to prepare their

students for assessments often based upon a syllabus in which they have had no input. Their absence of any involvement or ownership of the assessment process or performing context contributes to their isolation. Not only is this an unsatisfactory position in terms of developing a team of staff to deliver a coherent part of a degree syllabus, but, more importantly, it often leads to confusion on the part of the student as staff either guess at examination requirements or provide interpretations of the syllabus which did not reflect the philosophy of the department.

In this general overview of performance studies, we looked closely at our own curriculum and attempted to focus and develop the following themes as a way of improving provision:

- (a) If, as we have found, there can be a feeling that the one-to-one instrumental lesson allows learning to take place in a vacuum, then we should be providing students with the means to share their learning and performing experiences.
- (b) Creating a forum for improving the performance standard of our students not only in technical skills but also in the contextual act of performing to an audience would add a sense of realism in terms of a performer's preparation, presentation and communication.
- (c) Integrating our visiting instrumental tutors into the assessment process to provide students with a more coherent message and clear understanding of aims and objectives of the course.

Context

Barnsley College currently has 240 undergraduate music students studying for the three-year BA in Popular Music Studies, Band Studies and Creative Music Technology validated by the University of Sheffield as well as an HND Creative Music Technology (Edexcel). A further thirty students pursue a four-year extended degree designed for mature students or those who lack particular entry requirements. Upon successful completion of their foundation year, these students can automatically progress to year 1 of the three-year BA. Performance Techniques is compulsory in the foundation year and in year 1 for all Popular Music and Band Studies students. In each of years 2 and 3, all courses contain a compulsory core that is combined with various options from a range of year-long self-contained modules. Year 2 students select three modules for study for that year; year 3 students select two. Performance Techniques along with some other modules is available in each year and in practice, the majority of students include performance in their second- and third-year module programmes. They receive weekly thirty-minute instrumental or vocal lessons given by twenty distinguished tutors most of whom are part-time visiting staff. Students are expected to perform in public concerts during the year. Assessments are held twice a year at the end of each Semester. In years 2 and 3 these assessments take place as public performances at out-of-college venues, an assessment strategy which has developed over the past four years to make performances much more realistic and meaningful.

With the decision to focus on public performance assessment, it became clear that a number of issues had to be addressed in the concept of the Performance Techniques module. It emerged through tutorials that several students were confused and sensed a lack

of connection between their work in the individual instrumental lesson and performing in public for their assessment. There seemed to be no forum for an interchange of performing experiences and ideas. The content of the individual lesson was based on preparing students to learn to play the pieces and developing a secure technique. Playing or singing in front of two examiners in private is different from giving a *performance* on the concert platform or in a local club or pub. As well as experiencing the context of the performance (the venue, audience and purpose of the performance) students and staff were rightly concerned with promoting and raising standards of commitment and confidence towards performing in public. We are all familiar with the experience of an inspiring musical performance. Equally, we have all attended performances where this does not happen. As music educators, we generally understand what is meant by a technical performance as opposed to a musical performance. Johnson (1997) asks of the performer who produces a technically brilliant but uncommitted or unconvincing performance, the purpose of acquiring and demonstrating a good technique if it cannot be applied to the demands of the music itself?

Which aspects of performance are involved here? What are the psychological, physiological or particular contextual factors that are significant to the preparation of the performance and which might bear upon the musician during their performance? What educational experiences could we provide which might promote a better appreciation of the context of a performance that could support the content of individual instrumental lessons?

The appointment of a lecturer in performance studies allowed for a significant reappraisal of performance work within the department. As part of the annual review, student representatives at course committee level had noted the decline in the number of opportunities for performance in recent years. Course co-ordinators decided that it would be their aim to place performance at the centre of its activities as a way of not only addressing student concerns but of providing a central focus for a range of courses which have a strong vocational ethos. As part of the review, all instrumental syllabi and assessment content were revised where necessary by the visiting tutors working in instrumental 'family teams' where appropriate. It was felt that the existing assessment criteria that were used for performance were too generalized and not particularly helpful in benchmarking performance standards across a range of instruments. After extensive consultation with tutors and students the assessment criteria for each year were revised to become more relevant to the aesthetic bases of *performing* music, taking into account technique and performance skills.

The performance class

In providing opportunities for students to develop further their performing experience to prepare for the performance context it became necessary to examine the most effective way of delivering an appropriate curriculum which was already expensive in terms of student-staff ratios. We decided to create a performance class session of ninety minutes each week for all students who had opted for the Performance Techniques module in years 2 and 3. Although attendance would be expected for all Performance Techniques students, the activities in the class would not count towards any formal student assessment.

The concept of the performance techniques class was based the following general principles:

- (a) Its activities should support the experience of performing. It should be a holistic programme, which would address issues such as the performing context and preparing to perform, confidence building, controlling stage fright, and other psychological and physiological aspects of performance. Many sessions should include a forum where students could perform in front of their peers but within an informal environment and supportive framework.
- (b) Students should contribute to the content and direction of the weekly class; it should develop upon a need basis, upon performing issues raised by the class.
- (c) It should complement and enhance the work of our visiting instrumental tutors, and wherever possible visiting staff with interests in a particular aspect of performance should be directly involved in the class in leading a workshop/demonstration/session.
- (d) The class should also allow for the achievement of objectives outlined in the syllabus, which until this point were given cursory lip service because of the time limitations of the one-to-one provision.

In 1998/99, we timetabled a combined class for BA2 and BA3 students in a team teaching context involving the two writers. The classes were carefully structured with a scheme of work and clearly laid-out syllabus provided in a handbook. Also included at the beginning of the year were the assessment briefs that outlined exactly what is required of the students. The module guide also included guidance on what was required of the students in practical terms and notes on the delivery of the module. For the year 1999/2000, the number of students who opted for performance was too large to accommodate a joint class. We therefore created separate second- and third-year classes. Nevertheless, we decided to allow the possibility of merger by timetabling the two classes to run simultaneously. Examples of the kind of activities that took place in the performance classes of 1999/2000 are given below:

Practice and rehearsal strategies

Management skills (self-management, time management, goal setting)

Contextual studies: venues, audiences, assessments

Relaxation techniques for performers

Controlling stage fright

An introduction to Alexander Technique

Visual aspects of performance through videotapes of student and professional performances

Health and Safety issues for the performing musician

Criteria for the assessment of performance

Stage presence, platform deportment, performance conventions and confidence building

Movement, choreography and costume

Continuity in performance; intros, segues, outros, audience communication

Isometrics and finger fitness for instrumentalists

Repertoire building or developing a 'set'

Working with your sound engineer
Communication with your accompanist
Peer assessment
Guest speakers on special performance interests
Preparing programme notes

The classes also allowed for additional benefits in developing a language whereby students could critically analyse performances (their own as well as others) and, through discussion, develop critical skills that could be applied to their own performances. The act of apprehending musical works aesthetically and otherwise is an experience that, at best, words can only partly describe. Acquiring critical verbal skills was challenging for many students and this is particularly formidable for music in view of its considerable capacity for sensory abstraction and its remoteness from natural language. In this way the curriculum developed in a more academic way, allowing students time to reflect on the nature of performance and what was required of them in giving a performance. This is not to say that classes were prescriptive: students of popular music are especially critical of any enforced doctrine. Guidelines were drawn from a number of performance practices and distilled so that the essential elements could be assimilated and ultimately incorporated into the performance context. It was recognized that at some point a certain level of knowledge is required for students to excel in performance. Through these sessions, it was hoped that students could take responsibility for their own independent improvement, and that as staff we could encourage values that would have an impact on motivation and standards.

Where certain topics were not thought to be relevant to particular students, it was agreed to make that session voluntary for them. Some classes took place at venues outside the college, such as in local pubs and clubs where we could take advantage of the facilities of a stage set-up and a ready audience.

An additional regular feature (which has become known as 'The Rota') is a semi-structured forum in which usually four students perform prospective public performance pieces to the rest of the class. Staff and students strive to create an informal and supportive atmosphere for the rota through which much useful discussion and feedback has been obtained and experience gained. Typically, the whole performance is evaluated: the presentation, as well as the music being played or sung. Evaluation often follows a pattern:

Student performance→*performer's immediate 'gut' self-evaluation*→*student audience feedback*→*tutor feedback*→*discussion by student with instrumental tutor*→*learning experience raised*→*preparation for next performance*

Support for instrumental tutors

Many visiting instrumental tutors have contributed to the development of their syllabus, to the assessment process and to the content of the *performance class*. This has contributed much towards integration within the performance techniques module. Several staff, however, are not in college at the time of the performance class. The problem of how to improve communication and create a sense of involvement (particularly visiting staff who

might teach for just a couple of hours or so each week) needed to be addressed. As a first practical step, it was decided to develop a performance techniques teaching file for each member of the instrumental staff. These portable files were introduced in 1999 and, at present, each contains the following:

- The register of their instrumental students and the appropriate instrumental syllabus;
- Course regulations and assessment details/criteria for each year/course;
- The performance class scheme of work for each year;
- The performance techniques module guide for each year and course;
- A brief write-up of each weekly lesson for every student;
- Student absence and cause-for-concern procedure;
- Calendar of music department activities.

The files remain in the department office when not being used by the instrumental staff. They are regarded as a helpful and practical means of improving communication between all music staff and for providing ready information about the progress of performance techniques students when required by academic or pastoral tutors.

The performances

With our attention focused on the context of performance, it was necessary to promote performing experience in a variety of situations. Most student performances now take place across a large number of public venues outside the college. The majority of performance assessments are held in local clubs and pubs for Popular Music and Creative Music Technology, or in Barnsley Parish Church for Band Studies students. During the 1999 academic year, the department mounted some 100 concerts in out-of-college venues – something of a milestone for us. Both the number and quality of rock bands in Popular Music Studies has risen. The recently established Barnsley Spring Music Festival – a celebration of music-making in partnership with schools, amateur groups, the business community and our music department – has led to some interesting performing contexts, including street busking (which is now an assessed assignment within Popular Music Studies). Many of our part-time staff are able to be involved in these activities thus furthering integration.

Increasing the opportunities for performing in public, however, has posed organizational and logistical problems. There has been a shortage of students experienced in live sound engineering and this is currently being addressed through additional PA training across courses.

Further developments

We are examining how the work in performance techniques contributes towards the vocational aims of the degree courses. The performance experiences are partly documented for portfolio purposes through video and CD recordings. Students also keep diaries recording their preparations for performing. Additional ways of building a portfolio or of developing promotional material for performers to interest concert promoters, agencies and record companies are being considered. Hunter & Russ (1996) describe the many

possible benefits to be obtained from peer assessment in performance. We are currently working on peer assessment of group-based performances and further work in this area is being planned.

Conclusions

This article grew out of our reflections on the programme we have developed to enhance student experience in Performance at Barnsley College. In many ways, the programme was underlined not only by our determination to improve standards but also by the students' determination to improve their own performance. Attendance at the sessions has been good, as has participation in all aspects of the programme.

What was particularly encouraging was that recent research has indicated a number of important considerations that the course was already addressing. Peter Cope (1998) argued that while active learning, the acquisition of skills through practice or repetition, is important for instrumentalists and that the 'capacity to acquire physical skills is extraordinary' for those motivated sufficiently to practise it will not allow for higher-order learning:

In higher-order learning, the outcome is understanding, rather than competence, and acquisition requires reflection through the medium of discourse, rather than repeated practice. (Cope, 1998: 264)

In his discussion, Cope recognizes the importance of physical and cognitive skills underpinned by declarative knowledge in playing an instrument. Yet, the case for 'declarative knowledge' (facts) seems restricted to music theory and related only to reading music. While there is little argument against what Cope says, the declarative knowledge involved in performance has been sadly missing from music teaching in any systematic way. One essential aspect of our course has been the provision of critical tools for analysis and raising awareness of the many aspects of the context of performance. By providing a strong underpinning theory or rationale, we hope to raise motivation and purpose and thereby stimulate individual responsibility for learning.

Jørgensen's (2000) article addresses the institution's role in student learning as part of a discussion of instrumental tuition in higher education. His discussion points to research from Norway, which indicates that instrumental teachers felt that the growth of a student's independence as a musician was an important developmental task:

With 'independence', most of them associated the students' ability to assume responsibility for their own learning and development. (Jørgensen, 2000: 69)

This idea of independence is built into our institution's *Learning and Teaching Policy*, which suggests that by level 3 students should be capable of independent learning. It raises questions about the responsibility of an institution to provide the right environment for this to take place, given the time constraints of instrumental tuition. By providing a structured and systematic course, we hope to equip students with the understanding, experience and opportunity for reflection that will equip them with the necessary skills for developing independent thought based on theoretical understanding or a rationale for what they are doing. Recognizing that most learning is done away from the teacher, we have to

recognize the role of the institution in supporting instrumental staff and students in attaining this goal of independence. The emphasis within the class is not upon product but upon process.

Jørgensen questions these aspects, especially:

the Dysfunctional aspect of life of many institutions: their neglect of the institutional responsibility for the development of the students as independent, responsible musicians and learners.

By addressing the issues which were constantly raised in feedback to students, we feel that we have moved somewhere towards the functional by providing a programme of study which encourages independence of learning. We can no longer write on feedback forms 'take care with presentation skills' or 'not a secure performance' and expect the student to work out what we were talking about – skills they had never been taught. More importantly, we no longer teach these skills by failing students or by responding negatively to their efforts in assessments. Our approach is centred on the knowledge that there will be a *public* performance and that we have to prepare our students for that event. Through our review of the course, we have seen performance standards rise, technically through the rewriting of individual instrumental syllabi and contextually through the active and academic exploration of the art of performance. There is a clear understanding of what is required at different levels of the course. As students move from level 1 of the degree to level 3, there is a clear shift in emphasis from technical skill to contextual skill, from getting through a musical piece to performing a piece to a high standard in front of an audience with all that that implies. The integration of instrumental staff has been essential in this venture, and their contribution to the assessment process has strengthened the credibility of assessments with students. Finally, the project has been delivered in a cost-effective way with the teaching of around sixty performance students devolved to three members of staff.

It would be foolhardy to suppose that this is a unique experiment in raising standards, especially since group activities and the emphasis on public performance has been addressed in different ways by different institutions as well as by lower-level courses such as the Edexcel National Diploma in Popular Music. What we offer here is our departmental answer to what we perceived to be a significant problem, which may become all the more problematic as benchmarking begins to take effect in Higher Education Institutions. We believe that as an institution we have taken a proactive and responsible approach to an important issue of raising achievement. We also recognize that there is no room for complacency: each new assessment period brings with it new issues which have to be considered for future years as students explore the performance context more and more, integrating live electronics, DJs and performance art into their final programme. Raising the expectations of performances does bring its own difficulties. Students develop creative and innovative ways of presenting their final performances as they respond to the demands of the course and the demands of what they perceive to be performance practice in the real world, some of these performances may actively challenge our concepts of performance in an academic or institutional environment. We are confident that our approach provides an effective forum for discussion on the changing nature of performance. This ensures that as an academic institution, we can be responsive to a dynamic, changing art, and by addressing issues of standards through discussion and dialogue with students, we can ensure that students can respond effectively to the expectations and demands of the course team.

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