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*Musical styles as communities of practice...*

**Musical styles as communities of practice: challenges  
for learning, teaching and assessment of Music in  
Higher Education**

## **ABSTRACT**

The last three decades have been marked by significant expansion of music education within Higher Education, the outcomes of which can be seen in the increased numbers of students studying music and in the diversity of activity and purpose within music courses. This paper interrogates the relationship between stylistic diversity and music provision, specifically in relation to teaching and assessment, and considers music styles as examples of 'communities of practice' into which students may be inducted through formal and informal means.

## CONTEXT

The Higher Education (HE) sector in the United Kingdom has experienced unparalleled change in scale, diversity and purpose over the past three decades. Numbers have increased significantly, nearly doubling in one decade (Thomas, 2002). The purpose of HE has become more instrumental, driven by political aspirations (Watson & Bowden, 1999) to increase the educational level of the workforce to maintain economic competitiveness (Tomlinson, 2001). The ultimate outcome of this process is the use by stakeholders of graduate employment as a key measure of 'quality' in higher education (Smith, McKnight, & Naylor, 2001).

Sectoral developments have had a major impact on Music. As student numbers have increased, so too has the range of Music degrees and the variety of focus and content. Music programmes have become explicitly linked to graduate employability and are sometimes named to reflect this purpose (e.g BA Applied Music, BEd Music).

Expansion stimulated a particularly musical development, namely the diversity of musical styles that are now studied in Music departments and conservatoires<sup>1</sup>. Consideration of 'musical style' in the context of performance education is complex; aspects of delineation and definition are concerned not only with the music per se, but also with the normative practices of performance and creation that are associated with the style. These can be described as the 'extramusical' aspects of a style.

## MUSICAL STYLES, LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The musical and extramusical aspects of musical styles constitute the elements of a 'community of practice'<sup>2</sup>. Just as each musical style has an identifiable set of musical features that provide its distinctive identity (for example harmony, instruments used, formats, structures and so on) they also embody a set of practices and behaviours in their creation, performance and consumption that are equally distinctive and defining. Therefore, musical styles can be usefully conceptualised as a set of culturally-situated cognitive schema involving both musical *and* extramusical concepts (Shevy, 2008).

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the term 'musical style' is used in reference to the performance and creation of music rather than its reception (e.g. through listening). Music students at university or conservatoire are usually (though not always) engaged in the development of skills in these former areas and it is this aspect of learning that I will consider in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> This concept was introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991) in part to describe the phenomenon that occurs when a newcomer attempts to join an existing community. They focus on the normative practices that define that community, practices that newcomers must accept and adopt if they are to be accepted within that community. These practices do not necessarily define the community (that may be more to do with its purpose), but they are a necessary part of membership.

### **Conceptual framework**

I wish to identify three aspects of these extramusical practices that have relevance to Music education in HE; (1) pedagogical practices, (2) performance practices and (3) practices of transmission.

Pedagogical practices reflect how learning and teaching has occurred historically within a particular musical style. While the classical music tradition uses the one-to-one instrumental lesson as the basis for virtuosic development, the approach in Scottish traditional music (Cope, 2005) and in popular music (L. Green, 2008) has been one of informal, shared teaching. Therefore, the manner in which the newcomer develops skill and knowledge itself becomes part of the community of practice. It is possible to become expert (in a technical sense) in other ways; however, it is the normative practice within the style, reflective of the historical traditions and social context in which learning has occurred (Kamin, Richards, & Collins, 2007).

Each musical style embodies a broader set of performance practices. Some utilise a formal approach to public performance while others are much more informal. Contrast the normative practices of classical music (e.g conductor entry) with the way that a rock band enters the stage. Audience response appropriate for one style (for example, in a Jazz concert, applauding in the middle of a piece) may be inappropriate in another. This has little to do with the audience themselves; they may attend both types of concert and conduct themselves in very different, but stylistically appropriate, ways. Each style has an associated set of normative behaviours and practices and to break these norms is to identify oneself as an outsider.

Practices of transmission are normative practices associated with how the repertoire of a style is curated and passed on to other musicians. This is an aspect of pedagogy, but goes beyond that to encompass the methodology of curatorship and how repertoire is preserved for the future. In classical music, for example, the repertoire is preserved through written documents (manuscripts, editions, scores) that carefully prescribe how works are to be performed. While performance practices change (for example with regard to tempo and pitch) most performances of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony will be very similar. Learning a new piece requires access to the score, which provides almost all the necessary information. In comparison, rock music presents significant challenges to accurate notation and its performance is usually dependent on spontaneity and creative 'flair'. Someone wishing to learn a new work in this style is more likely to refer to a recording, or by listening repeatedly to someone else performing the track, than referring to a score (Wemyss, 1999).

Active membership of a stylistically-allied community, such as would be required by an accepted ('authentic') performer of that style, requires both an awareness *of* and an ability to engage *in* these behaviours and processes (Frith, 2007). Effective

learning and teaching within formal contexts that aspires to produce professional-level graduates demands that these be recognised and embedded within pedagogical processes. In the following section I briefly discuss two areas in which I believe this to be most important - teaching and assessment - and reflect on how stylistic distinctiveness could be embedded.

### **Challenges for Learning and Teaching**

Given the historical dominance in performance pedagogy of Western Classical music it is unsurprising that the standard model of teaching performance is the individual lesson. Here, the more “expert” passes on their wisdom to the “less expert”, on the assumption that the less expert will themselves become more expert (Gaunt, 2008; Nerland, 2007). However, Westerlund (2006) argues that many musical styles are characterised by informal learning and the development of ‘knowledge-building communities’ rather than apprenticeship and transmission models. The first challenge, therefore is to consider the social context into which teaching is situated.

It is important also to consider the size and structure of the learning environment, as well as the learning style of the individual student (Zhukov, 2007). It may be stylistically appropriate for an aspiring classical musician to spend considerable time practicing by themselves and engaging in formal instruction within a restricted social context. For the aspiring rock musician this is contextually inappropriate because it fails to reflect how they engage musically in the ‘real world’. There may still be value in such students working in a paired or individual context. However, if most or all of their formal teaching takes place in such contexts it will be removed from the stylistically situated norms that define that community of practice, which in turn may diminish its impact (see below).

A third consideration is with the curriculum. The dominant master-apprentice model places responsibility on the teacher (the expert) to determine those aspects of a student’s competency and knowledge that require attention. If the student is working within the classical tradition the parameters are clear and are reflected in the range of technical exercise books, orchestral repertoire extracts and ‘standards’ from the repertoire of the instrument. It is accepted (within this tradition) that mastery is reflected in being able to accurately and fluently reproduce these materials, in an aesthetically pleasing way. This curriculum may be excellent for producing competent, employable orchestral musicians. However, it may not be appropriate to the needs of a future jazz musician.

There are consequences in failing to take account of these considerations. First, there is a danger that students do not receive adequate preparation for the future. An aspiring rock guitarist who has spent three or four years developing their technical skills through one-to-one lessons is unlikely to be fully prepared to enter that community of practice. Second, students who are already engaging in their community of practice in the external environment (and may have done so for

many years) may actively discount or disregard the opportunities for learning that are afforded to them; they may construe formal teaching as being disconnected with the emerging awareness of the norms of their chosen style or styles. Third, from an external perspective, programmes that appear to be based on pedagogical models that deviate from genre-based communities of practice may well be seen as ineffective, a waste of time, and an inappropriate training for aspiring professionals. The consequences in terms of recruitment, esteem and graduate employability may be significant.<sup>3</sup>

### **Challenges for assessment**

Stylistically-situated norms of practice also impact on performance assessment. Ideally, this should be viewed by student and teacher as part of the learning process rather than as a series of 'hoops to be jumped through' (A. Green, 2006). Assessment should be a source of information to the student *and* to the tutor about their strengths and weaknesses and an opportunity for students to judge the extent to which present capabilities *map* onto the normative behaviours of a stylistically situated community of practice (Smith, 2005). However, the extent to which assessment can perform such an active role in learning depends on how students perceive it. It has been argued that students choose the extent to which they allow feedback (grade, comments etc) from formal assessments to influence their own self and task perceptions as performers (Hewitt, 2004).

There is a demand for stylistically-appropriate feedback that students accept and integrate into their learning but which is also honest, robust and equitable. In this context, programme teams should consider the format and structure of assessment (Barratt & Moore, 2005). The most powerful and relevant form of assessment is one that replicates most closely the authentic performance environment for any particular musical style. For the classical musician, the recital format of soloist plus accompanist is fairly authentic; for the Scottish traditional musician this is an altogether more alien mode of performance. It may well be true that the student's level of performance is not diminished by the lack of authenticity (see below); rather, there is an increased risk that the experience will be dismissed as an institutional requirement, and the information about their performance (which may be of great use) will be ignored (Hewitt, 2004).

There is a further question of who undertakes the assessment. Conventional practice has been to utilise a panel of university staff, perhaps supplemented with one or two external experts. Students may raise concerns about the stylistic expertise of those assessing them (Hewitt, 2004), especially in those institutions whose staff come from a predominantly Western classical background. Little research has been done to investigate potential biases in panels, or to investigate whether those non-expert in a particular musical style grade more or less

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<sup>3</sup> I am not suggesting that opportunities for learning will not occur for the student, rather that the majority of learning may occur outwith the formal context, which raises questions about why it is being offered in a formal context in the first place!



generously (though Bergee (2003) reports strong correlation in evaluations among assessment panels). What is likely, however, is that students themselves are less likely to give credence to feedback reports and grades provided by assessment panels whose expertise they do not recognise. The literature has some reports of innovative practice that may go some way to addressing these concerns, for example through the use of peer (Blom & Poole, 2004; Hunter, 1999; Searby & Ewers, 1997) and self (Daniel, 2001) assessment within music courses in HE.

When formal assessment of musical performance is carried out, it is usually within a context of assessment criteria (Stanley, Brooker, & Gilbert, 2002). These set out the parameters for the assessment and draws the examiners' attention to particular aspects of the performance that are considered important (Coimbra & Davidson, 2001). I would argue that effective assessment will use criteria that are consonant with the those used to judge 'quality' in a performance by the stylistic community itself. After all, these are the same criteria by which students will be judged when they participate in that community outwith the university context. This applies to the inclusion of criteria (i.e. the aspects of the performance that are considered important) and the exclusion of criteria (i.e. the aspects of the performance that are not considered important).

Finally, it is important to consider what is performed. Anecdotally, there is considerable variation between UK institutions in the level of prescription over performance repertoire and duration. It seems reasonable to assume that, for assessment purposes, students will perform repertoire that is appropriate to their particular stylistic affiliation or specialism. However, the particularities of the assessment procedure may lead them into selecting repertoire that is more appropriate to the assessment, but less appropriate in terms of the community of practice.

If these issues are not taken seriously, the quality of provision for students will be put at risk. Where the outcomes of assessment are not internalised and accepted by students, a significant opportunity for development is lost. Students who discount the feedback they receive from an assessment panel may miss important and worthwhile input and continue to think they are better (or worse) than they actually are. They may disregard advice on aspects of their playing that, unaddressed, will ill-prepare them for the future. Conversely, students may give their attention to feedback that itself is less than useful because it lacks style-specific contextuality. It may, for example, focus on aspects of their performance that are less highly valued within the community of practice and say nothing about those aspects that are more important.

Finally, where the mode or criteria for assessment fail to achieve consonance with the performance practices of a particular style, it is possible that students will be obliged to produce behaviours in which they are less skilled. They may focus on demonstrating behaviours they perceive as consonant with the style associated with the assessment modality, rather than those consonant with their own area of

expertise. Their development and achievement may be undervalued because it cannot be exemplified within a formally assessed context.

## **CONCLUSION**

Music in Higher Education in the UK is now studied by large numbers of students and for a variety of reasons (Burland & Pitts, 2007). The traditional hegemony of the Western classical tradition has been replaced by a multiplicity of musical styles. This poses significant challenges to pedagogy and to assessment. Failure to provide learning opportunities that address the extramusical aspects of stylistic diversity, and embed the normative behaviours and expectations of those communities within degree programmes, risks failing to engage students in the learning process. It risks failing to produce employable graduates who are accepted and competent members of professional communities of practice. There is much good work going on (see, for example Lebler, 2008) but there are limited opportunities for staff in the UK to discuss and develop their practice together.

I conclude with two caveats. First, it is tempting to assume that students wish to belong to one particular stylistic 'camp' and are therefore to be habituated only into the community of practice associated with that style. My own research suggests that this is too simplistic. Second, empirical research into a range of cognitive and social psychological constructs with music students lends limited support to the notion that students who specialise in different musical genres are significantly different on these constructs (Welch, et al., 2008), though the same team have identified some significant differences in terms of what is valued in a performance (Creech, et al., 2008). It has not been my argument in this paper that students are 'single style' musicians, nor that specialising in a particular musical style gives rise to a defined set of distinctive psychological characteristics (though see Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003). Rather, it is more likely that music students learn to negotiate between different sets of normative practice, and such stylistic flexibility may be an essential component of successful employment. To that end, it is vital that the practices of learning, teaching and assessment that are embodied within higher education are consonant with the range of musical practices utilised in the external world. Not only will they be recognised as having validity by our students and the professional community; they will better act as a stimulus to learning and development.

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