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Published

2010

Conference Title

The Musician in Creative and Educational Spaces in the 21st Century. Proceedings from the 18th International Seminar of the Commission for the Education of the Professional Musician (CEPROM)

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Performance or learning? Reflections on pedagogical practices within the conservatoire

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Abstract

Student performance matters for Conservatoire students. The unequivocal marker of an excellent Conservatoire student, and by implication, the marker of excellent teaching of that student is the ability to triumph in events such as recitals, concerts and competitions. The excellent teacher, who 'produced' the excellent student, (certainly in the logic of the traditional Conservatoire) is presumed themselves to be an excellent musical practitioner – a model of what it means to perform at the highest level.

What follows in this paper is not a rejection of the value of performance or the value of master-apprentice pedagogy, but a reflection on the extent to which learning and performing may in fact stand in opposition to each other, particularly when performance is deemed to be the only measure of a successful education. This paper highlights some recent research and scholarship that opens up this idea more fully, in order to understand what the implications might be for academic teaching in the Conservatoire and make a case that 'master-apprentice' teaching might take its place in a more diverse field of pedagogical practice rather than dominating that field.

Keywords

Conservatoire; pedagogy; learning; performance; master-apprentice.

INTRODUCTION

Most Conservatoires are concerned with and commend themselves on their reputational management around excellent performance, measured by how well students perform in concerts and recitals, or win competitions and awards. Central to this purpose is what is commonly described as the 'conservatoire model', "one of the most enduring forms of tutorial teaching" (Uszler, 1992, p. 584). This Master-apprentice model is generally the most dominant and accepted mode of delivery for performance instruction in conservatoires. Harold Jorgensen (2000, p.68) states that historically, the predominant relationship between teacher and student in this instruction, described as a master-apprentice relationship, is "where the master usually is looked at as a role model and a source of identification for the student, and where the dominating mode of student learning is imitation." Uszler (1992, p.584) describes this form of powerful tutorial teaching thus: "the master is the model who demonstrates, directs, comments and inspires and the apprentice is the disciple who watches, listens, imitates and seeks approval". In this one-to-one setting the teacher takes responsibility for much of the

transmission of the performance skill and "is the dominant source of feedback" (Lebler, 2004, p.3).

The unique relationship in this model of teaching should ideally, according to Presland (2005), "produce rounded musicians showing a high level of instrument competence, a depth of musical understanding and a core of personal confidence that will allow them to express themselves with total commitment in any performing arena" (p. 237). However without a strong research tradition, and in the absence of pedagogical theory, there is little evidence to support or dispute whether or not this actually occurs, because although instrumental teaching has more recently been the focus of research for those who seek to learn more about its practices and learning outcomes (Burwell, 2003; Carey, 2004; Daniel, 2005; Gaunt, 2007; Kingsbury, 1998; Pickup, 2003; Presland 2005; Young 2003), it is still relatively uncharted territory (Kennell, 2002), particularly in tertiary institutions.

PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES OF THE CONSERVATOIRE

The focus and direction of the majority of tertiary one-to-one instrumental teachers revolves around preparation for exams, recitals and competitions. Indeed, the success of both the instrumental teacher and student is mainly judged by what Webster (1993, p.23) describes as 'the performance product myth' which has its roots in the idea that the real evidence of quality music teaching is how well a very small percentage of 'talented' students perform in concerts and recitals. In other words if teacher x has twice as many students winning important contests as teacher y , x is a 'better teacher' in the eyes of many. According to Webster (ibid) because of this long-standing tradition of performance as the major yardstick of quality teaching and the most outward example of what studio teachers are expected to accomplish, there continues to be a dominant trend toward 'teaching centred' learning' (Webster, 1993, p.23). This model of teaching tends to use a 'band-aid' and 'quick fix approach' where the teacher does the pupil's thinking for them in order to achieve quick results and often in order to meet a performance deadline (Schockley, 1987, p.22). As a result many students become dependent upon their teachers and many teachers find themselves victims of a system that stresses a pernicious competitive excellence via competitions and recitals. What happens to those students who do not pass the 'performance test'?

PERFORMANCE OR LEARNING?

While success at Conservatoires is often judged by results

in competitions and performance, the idea that we can and should measure the performance of individuals is one which some educators are questioning. In broad terms the logic is that we learn in order to perform so these two activities should nestle in together. Carol Dweck (1999) makes a valid distinction between performance goals and learning goals which challenges us to think again about this proposition. For Dweck, an individual's performance goals are focused on "winning positive judgment of your competence and avoiding negative ones", while an individual's learning goals are characterised by a desire to develop "new skills, master new tasks or understand new things" (p.15). While these two goals are "normal and universal", they can be - and are - often in conflict. Dweck (1999) notes that, when there is an overemphasis on performance goals, individuals are less likely to move out of their zones of competence, and more likely to blame their own lack of ability if things go wrong. They are more likely to worry much more about their lack of ability and thus to focus much less on strategy.

In Dweck's research on the performance and learning activities of young people, performance goals and learning goals were found to be present in most of these individuals in about a 50:50 ratio. This balance could however, be manipulated by an influential external 'other' (e.g., a parent or teacher). When this occurred, it was clear that those students for whom learning goals were paramount continued to seek new strategies and to tolerate error without self-blame, while those who were performance-driven were more likely to give up on the task set, berating themselves for their inability to complete it.

While we need to be careful about extrapolating from the 'self-theories' of the individual to the climate of an institution, there is nevertheless much of what Dweck is saying that might be usefully brought to an analysis of the performance culture of a Conservatorium. It raises at least the possibility that teachers, students and parents who are abnormally focused on winning positive judgment of their performance from external others might actually be putting young people in some jeopardy in relation to their capacity to learn. Conversely, leaders who seek to foster a healthy balance of learning goals and performance goals may well be more likely to be producing robust learners.

If, as Dweck points out, the tasks that are best for learning are those which risk confusion and error (p.16), then pedagogical work directed at improved learning outcomes would focus on creating obstacles that need to be overcome. Error would be welcome and explanation minimised (see also Zull, 2004). However, where error results in painful condemnation from external others who are marking, grading and measuring each move, then it is more likely that a student will avoid uncertainty at all costs, not embrace it for what it might conceivably offer in terms of a fresh understanding and a strategic search for meaning.

There is now empirical evidence to suggest that, while the capacity to perform is alive and well in the Conservatoire,

the capacity of students to make sense of their learning, or to imagine a desired future beyond performance, is much less robust.

A study conducted by Carey (2008) investigated one Conservatoire's capacity to respond appropriately to 'student needs' by better understanding issues about curriculum relevance. The study was conducted within a professional doctorate program and involved a qualitative analysis of a representative sample of keyboard student opinion across all program years and beyond graduation. The data collected was in the form of surveys of approximately 23 students in a population of 34 undergraduate keyboard students. Responses were also received from 5 out of six recent graduates. Follow up interviews were conducted with 6 students and 2 graduates. It was not the purpose of the study to find negativity by focusing on negative students, particularly given that the study was conducted by an academic and teacher within that institution. Rather the intention of the survey was to provide an account of a broad cross-section of student opinion about their needs across the three-year program. Because of the qualitative nature of the study it is neither possible nor desirable to extrapolate findings as 'typical'. Yet the findings are telling in relation to student experience of learning and performing in a Conservatoire. As part of the study, all undergraduate keyboard students, along with recent keyboard graduates were invited to respond to the open-ended question: 'What do you think Conservatoire keyboard students need to know?' The study revealed that many Conservatoire students were becoming increasingly disillusioned with the notion of performance training outcomes as their degree progressed. They identified a growing gap between what they had hoped to achieve through their investment in the Conservatorium and what they were likely to be doing as graduates.

The pattern across three years from entry to exit showed students' expectations moving from being trained for success in elite musical performance to graduate disillusionment about the dubious relevance of much of the program in relation to the reality of their future work. There was a profound sense that expectations of the performance-based training in which they were engaged did not align with their notions of student learning or student needs. Moreover, the longer students pursued their studies within the Conservatoire, the more the negativity became evident. The following is an overview of the responses from a representative group of students beginning with first year undergraduates progressing through to graduates.

The predominant focus of the first year participants was that of performance-centred needs in that the comments were primarily centred on the need for traditional classical performance training. One student commented:

As a pianist, I would like to see the curriculum include more piano lessons. One lesson a week isn't sufficient. Maybe two lessons a week would be much better.

For the second year students, it is clear that the concept of what students need extends beyond the first year's ideal of performance centred needs. In the Second year texts, there is evidence of a discourse of provision. One student asserts, 'we need to be taught' and 'we need to be given the stepping stones to learn'. Another student states that students 'need to have information available and be made known to us' and 'be told what job opportunities are available', rather than being 'left to our own devices to find them'. Such comments continue to be suggestive of an investment in the idea of a 'knowing' teacher and a passive student. Interestingly more than a year's experience within the academy does not seem to have increased student autonomy – indeed if anything it has increased their sense of reliance on the resources of the academy at the same time that these students seem to be more disillusioned about the possibility that their needs will be met.

There is clear evidence here of a desire to imitate the teacher predicated on the idea that imitation of the practices of the teacher will bring success in terms of the performance. Concerns however about the learning beyond the performance are also evident as demonstrated in the following:

[A] *lot* of students are saying well we'll have our B Mus and I don't know what we'll be doing or where there is work for us. For piano majors in particular, there are not too many opportunities... But it isn't made known to us where these opportunities can be found as such, and we're sort of left to our own devices to find them. ...I think the Conservatorium is a good place to let us know, you know some *life skills* – they should show us how to make it in the *real* world with a music degree.

Some students even begin at this stage of their experience to imagine a curriculum where they are able to learn what this real world might demand of them:

[The] undergraduate curriculum should include workshops, seminars or classes to help us realise our full potential...We also need more emphasis on developing ourselves as all round musicians, not just performers of our instruments.

Students need to be enlightened on how tough life can be as a musician out there in the world and need to be aware of the avenues opened to them.

By third year it seems that the trend to disillusionment has not abated: indeed it has increased.

[It] seems that, well you do the degree mainly based on performance...and...when you leave here, there just isn't [sic] any performance jobs...

Well, a lot of people (students) get the feeling that performing is really a dead end, however...that's the major proportion of what we are all doing (in this degree)... all performing and learning to perform.

Graduates made even harsher criticism in terms of a

perceived failure of the institution to provide students "with an idea of future prospects upon completion of their BMus degree."

Many students come into the Conservatorium feeling as though they will have a job, pretty much performance jobs, and it's not the case... and most people hit their third year and they have a big panic attack. Many of my friends have a complete rethinking of thought because they come to third year and go... I've spent three years at the conservatorium, what job can I have?

One graduate is also critical of the one-to-one system of teaching in the academy, arguing that students need to know that 'there is a hierarchy depending on who your [piano] teacher is, as to who is better than whom' and this 'occasionally reflects on student assessment'. According to this graduate, the hierarchical nature of teaching within the system is 'political' and 'depending on who you learn [piano] from, your [assessment] mark is *definitely* affected...' Other graduates had similar concerns about the hierarchical nature of their experience of Conservatorium pedagogy:

[We] come into first year and everyone is looking over their shoulders to see who is better than whom because it is very competitive in the arts and music. It is certainly noticeable in as much as who you learn from. There is a hierarchy depending on who your teacher is, as to who is better than whom.

[T]he general feeling among students is that students are used to promote the reputation of the [piano] teacher.

Another graduate appears to be equally critical of the hierarchical nature of the system of teaching within the academy:

The majority of instrumental teachers forget to ask the simple question What do you want to achieve from these three years of study and what is your lifelong plan? ... How can we achieve this?

As all of the above texts make evident, the Conservatorium students' articulated opinions reflect a growing view that performance pedagogy based on the Master as 'knower' and the student as 'ignorant apprentice' is one that has its initial seductions but has long term negative consequences for the student as 'learner'. It is not that these students are dismissive of the mastery of their teachers. Rather it is that the only knowledge that counts is the Master's knowledge, and that knowledge, while it has served the master well, is very unlikely apart from a few very exceptional cases to serve the student body in a positive way. In Dweck's terms the preponderance of attention given to performance seems to have a legacy of "denigration of intelligence, plunging expectations [and] negative emotions" whether or not they have resulted in "deteriorating performance" (Dweck, 2000, p.6).

There are real implications of this for the Conservatorium.

It is tempting of course to simply insist that the Conservatorium does a particular kind of pedagogical work which has never been intended to map directly onto industrial or commercial enterprise. However, attention does need to be paid to the student experience of the final year students – it is a moral imperative as well as a pedagogical one.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

In the light of student articulations of disillusionment with the overall experience of their program and in light of reflections on the changing nature of effective teaching and learning it could be argued that there is a strong case for overturning the dominant pedagogy in the Conservatoire, or at least having the Master-apprentice model take a less centre stage location in the pedagogical offerings of the Conservatoire. While this seems appropriate, it is not likely that such pedagogical change will be forthcoming at least in the short term. Many Conservatoires have enjoyed a long tradition of excellence in performance and the necessity to uphold this reputation remains the primary focus of the majority of staff who work within it. Maintaining the model of pedagogy that has ‘produced’ this reputation for excellence is therefore a more likely rallying point than the democratising of pedagogy in the interest of student learning.

The intention of this paper as indicated at the outset was not to argue that academic teachers should eschew Master-apprentice pedagogy altogether in Conservatoires. The paper has foregrounded empirical research on student *needs talk* and set out other contextual and institutional imperatives in order to provide a rationale for disrupting the dominance of the Master-apprentice model in favour of a wider range of engagements which allow students to learn more as well as to perform better. The stranglehold that Master-apprentice pedagogy has had in Conservatoires will become increasingly difficult to justify either in educational terms or in reputational terms and this is so despite the great commitment that Conservatoire practitioners have had to their teaching craft. Post-millennial times are demanding that a diversity of pedagogical practices is provided in order to increase the diversity of learning outcomes. It is clear that the students in the Carey study are in need of such outcomes. Whatever arguments might be made for leaving Conservatoire pedagogy as it is, there appear to be more compelling reasons for its disruption.

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