



## Special Issue: Current Issues in High Music Education

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## INTRODUCTION

### Special Issue: Current Issues in High Music Education

#### Background

This special issue emerges from a growing recognition of the need for research into music curriculum matters in higher education. From our perspective, this arises from a number of observable tendencies in the mainstream of music education studies in institutional contexts, as gleaned from a review of related literature and conference programming over the past few decades. First, there is a predominant emphasis on primary and secondary levels of ‘school music’, a situation that is hardly surprising given the overall scale of engagement at both of these levels which in many instances involves compulsory, statutory education; this is paralleled by a significant level of interest in research relating to instrumental and vocal education in conservatoires. Second, it can be observed that, to date, the bulk of music education research carried out in higher education settings has been primarily concerned with the sub-discipline itself, that is to say, with the education of future *teachers* of music in generalist and/or specialist settings. Increasingly though, this has come to be complemented by a growing scholarly interest in the education of the professional musician.

What has been lacking in our view is a substantial and sustained corpus of research investigating the content and experience of *music* teaching and learning in college/university and conservatoire contexts (notwithstanding, amongst others, the contributions referred to below). For the purposes of this issue, we consider ‘music in higher education’ to embrace curriculum design and pedagogy, for and of aspects that include performance, music writing techniques, aural skills, analysis, history, original composition, ethnomusicology, music education, music technology and recording, and in the varied contexts of western classical, popular, jazz, traditional and other musics. That said, we do not delimit our focus on music teaching and learning to content and pedagogy alone; as elsewhere, curriculum issues in higher music education must also extend to considerations of individual experience and development as well as to broader socio-political and cultural concerns.

The general tendency whereby research into music in higher education lags behind similar developments in primary and secondary fields is one that is shared with cognate areas in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (Canning and Gallagher-Brett 2010; Healey 2000; Neumann 2001). Historical (and residually influential) factors that have held back scholarly inquiries into curriculum matters at college/university level include: (1) the privileging of knowledge-as-content over knowledge-as-experience, an outlook that draws succour from an underlying classical-humanist epistemology; (2) socio-economic and ideological forces that previously gave rise to an elite status for university education; (3) linked to the factors (1) and (2), what might be described as a recalcitrant tendency on the part of many institutions and faculty towards evaluation and reflexivity vis-à-vis teaching and

learning. Additional historically inhibiting factors specific to arts departments/colleges and conservatoires have been: (4) perceptions of artistic development and creativity as alternative to and therefore somehow removed from the concerns of other education establishments – this contradictory, tacit distrust of education's role in nurturing artists was linked to a conventional modernist distinction along the lines of 'doers' and 'teachers' following Shaw's original maxim – a point of difference that continues to hold some sway in the popular imagination; (5) a conception of higher education in the arts as constituting 'talent education' (see Kingsbury 1988), with an inevitable focus on performative capacity and development without due regard to other aspects of intellectual and professional formation and integration.

Embedded beliefs and practices pertaining to higher education have been gradually eroded (though hardly obliterated) by a number of factors from both without and within the academy. First, changing socio-economic circumstances and demographic patterns along with more democratically and economically conceived notions of tertiary education have incrementally led to increased participation rates among general populations (although it would be erroneous to consider this as an irreversible trajectory, especially given the contraction of governmental subsidies in several jurisdictions for higher education in the wake of recent fiscal crises). The last two decades or so have further witnessed widespread institutional recognition for the centrality of teaching and learning in higher education<sup>1</sup>, with excellence in teaching now regarded as a key area of academic scholarship alongside research and contribution to community (Trigwell and Shale 2004). This has brought about more systematic inquiries into the interrelationships between these two sides of the pedagogical equation, as well as an increased focus on the *educational* training of those who teach at undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Gibbs and Coffey 2004; Trigwell, Prosser, and Waterhouse 1999). Alongside these developments have emerged various evaluative<sup>2</sup> and reflective initiatives for students, faculty and within whole institutions (Åkerlind 2004; Brockbank and McGill 2007; O'Neill, Moore, and McMullen 2005), sometimes on the basis of national or even international processes that have sought to foster these attitudes at all levels (as have, for example the Enhancement Themes coordinated by the Quality Assurance Agency in Scotland, or the various materials produced by the Polifonia working group as part of the Bologna process). Of course, while most such reforms can be appraised (and arguably, welcomed) on pedagogical grounds, they also need to be considered in terms of broader organisational change in increasingly globalised contexts (Vaira 2004) as well as critically evaluated in macro-social terms (see, for example, Becher and Trowler 2001; Giroux 2002).

Finally, in a development that mirrors the college and university sector's re-evaluation of the value of excellence in teaching, conservatoires across the world have increasingly sought to grow their own distinctive research cultures that reflect their practical and artistic focus (Coessens, Douglas, and Crispin 2009; Jørgensen 2009). Research in conservatoires to date has tended to be methodologically promiscuous (Borgdorff 2007; Coessens, Douglas, and Crispin 2009) but is typically centred on the *processes* of music, often including the processes of learning and teaching.

## Research

As noted earlier, prior research concerning music in higher education has for most addressed the professional development of future music educators or of performers.

Inquiries related to the former have revealed various insights into relationships between college courses and self-perceptions of identity/ability/effectiveness as future music teachers (for example Biasutti 2010; Hallam et al. 2009; Hennessy 2000), while scholarship in the latter category has focused more on exploring the processes of teaching and learning in performance that are rooted in (sometime centuries old) tradition and which are the core of the conservatoire's work (for example Burwell and Shipton 2011; Gaunt 2007; Jørgensen 2000; Pike and Carter 2010; Russell 2009). What might be described as more dialogic re-appraisals of performance education have also begun to emerge, as evidenced both in the literature (Burt-Perkins 2009; Carey et al. 2006) and in conference themes (notably, *The Reflective Conservatoire* series at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London, in 2006, 2009 and 2012).

While it might appear then that the conservatoire sector is somewhat ahead of the college/university sector<sup>3</sup> in terms of research inquiry into its own practices, other researchers have adopted a broader sociocultural view of the interface between student experience and tertiary-level music courses (Burland and Pitts 2007; Burt and Mills 2006; Dibben 2006; Kokotsaki and Hallam 2007). This has been complemented by a growing corpus of studies that contemplate the overall rationale and content of courses and by studies that investigate the relevance and efficacy of content and pedagogy drawn from varied scholarly orientations and stylistic and cultural contexts (Blom, Bennett, and Wright 2011; Burt et al. 2007; Ibarretxe Txakartegi and Díaz Gómez 2008; Joseph 2006; Joseph and Southcott 2009; Karlsen 2010; Krüger 2009; Lebler 2007; Sheridan and Byrne 2008).

Less developed to date have been inquiries that specifically address established components of undergraduate music degrees (other than music education and performance, as noted earlier). Composition presents one striking example of an area that has for the most part evaded scholarly analyses of its various pedagogical and contextual aspects (see, however, Flynn 2008; Mateos-Moreno 2011).<sup>4</sup> This situation vis-à-vis composition and other 'under-researched' course components may be in part accounted for by some of the residual factors identified in the previous section. From a critical musicology perspective, this could be interpreted as representing an adherence to ideas of musical autonomy that in turn act to negate the significance of any mediating influences. Under this way of thinking, the musical content of a university-level music course *is* the curriculum, and all teaching and learning will inevitably follow the internal logic of that content. A somewhat different fetishising tendency, but similar in its lack of reflective capacity, is what Thomas Regelski (2002) terms as 'methodolatry'. While Regelski's conception is more directed towards whole-scale 'methods' of music education on the scale of Suzuki or Orff, it also applies to tertiary contexts if we consider course components (e.g. music technology, solfège or species counterpoint) that might be successful in terms of skill-based learning outcomes, but which very often fail to address transferability and reflective issues in the holistic musical and professional development of the student.

### Articles in this special issue

Notwithstanding the breadth of topics explored, and the differing national contexts of the authors, a number of overarching themes emerge from the articles that are gathered together in this special issue of *Music Education Research*. The sense that

this is, internationally, a time of significant and speedy change in the cultural, technological and professional context for higher music education emerges from almost all of the articles here. Underlining the highly contingent nature of music education, the articles are united in revealing how these changes have a direct bearing on what, how and why we teach what we teach. So, while Helena Gaunt and her co-authors, and Karin Johansson, deal with how performer education can respond to meet the needs of changing professional contexts, Matthew Thibeault explores how the curriculum (in the widest sense) can evolve to engage meaningfully with creativity in a digital world. Joseph Louth proposes a model whereby musical practices can escape the ossifying tendencies of curricular orthodoxy, while Gwen Moore and Patricia Gonzalez-Moreno remind us that the uniquely individual experiences of each student are central in shaping their experience of higher music education.

The reshaping of pedagogical paradigms is another theme that recurs throughout this volume. For Gonzalez-Moreno, changing modes of study – in particular the growth of part-time and distance learning – are important features of the background against which her study is drawn. While a number of contributors, such as Moore, Johansson and Gaunt et al., explore the potential for enrichment of existing practices, others, such as Louth and Thibeault, propose innovative pedagogical responses to particular issues identified through their research.

A hint of reforming zeal inflects each of the papers, pointing the way towards a third area of common ground among the contributors – the desire to enhance the critical and reflective capacities of students and educators alike. While the development in our students of these two related but distinct capacities lies at the core of a truly *higher* education, the authors remind us to apply these skills to our own practice in learning, teaching and curriculum design. Indeed, they model these capacities for us, being both critical, in the sense of participating in an unceasing renegotiation of the value of particular ideas and skills, and reflective, in asking of themselves Peter Renshaw's deceptively simple but powerful question 'Why do I do what I do?' (e.g. Renshaw 2009).

Notwithstanding the thematic coherence of the articles, a broad range of methods is deployed, reflecting the methodological plurality of work in this area. The articles employ both quantitative and qualitative approaches, and music educational practices are explored within a number of different theoretical frameworks.

In an attempt to free jazz pedagogy from restrictive influences, Louth offers a conceptual framework for improvisation pedagogy that draws on Adorno's notion of a negative dialectic – an approach that will also be of interest to educators working in or across other musics. Gaunt et al. explore how a strong concept of 'mentoring' might offer a helpful critique of, and support for, practices in the one-to-one performance lesson. Johansson examines from the perspective of the one-to-one teacher the tension between established core skills (such as technical and expressive competence) and 'new' skills (such as those required to sustain a portfolio career). Using Bourdieu's framework, Moore examines the process whereby individual students' perceptions of higher music education are shaped by their musical experiences and background. Gonzalez-Moreno examines retention on postgraduate music programmes in Mexico by reference to Expectancy-Value theory and offers insights into the trends observed. Finally, Thibeault looks in detail at the implications for music education of 'copyright compliance' and proposes a radical pedagogy to meet the challenges of the digital age.

In preparing this volume, we were pleased and surprised by the number and quality of submissions received, and at this point we must also thank the network of *Music Education Research* reviewers who have contributed to the peer review process for this special issue. Clearly, a good deal of high-quality research on higher music education is currently being undertaken internationally. Nonetheless, the process has underlined to us the extent of the work that remains to be done, both at the micro and macro levels: as examples of the former, we would suggest the need for research in the teaching and learning of musicology, or of music technology. And with regard to the latter, we would propose the need for more work to foster a reflective epistemological approach, following calls by Delanty (1998) and Barnett (2000), in the light of some of the contingencies identified by the contributors to this volume.

We hope, however, that this small collection promotes further dialogue in this important and unjustly neglected area.

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### Notes

1. The publication of Ernest Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered* in 1990 is widely considered as a turning point in this regard.
2. One of the first major studies of peer assessment in higher education involved a university music department (Searby and Ewers 1997).
3. We recognise that the distinction drawn here between music conservatoires and college/university music departments may not be directly applicable to all situations – indeed, *The Reflective Conservatoire* conference series, in spite of what its title might have inferred, included submissions and presentations from participants working in a broad range of institutional settings. It is also acknowledged here that many music courses in higher education set out to integrate practical and academic components of music studies.
4. The titles/subtitles for these publications – 'Teaching the unteachable?' and 'Is it possible to teach composition today?' – suggest an area of practice that has come to be regarded as inherently problematic.

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