

Composing in schools: Tertiary composers meet secondary students

Student composers are frequently confronted with the reality of writing works that are never performed by live ensembles. The problem is further exacerbated in tertiary institutions where composers are often isolated from performance students through organisational constraints. In effort to find solutions to this problem, student composers are encouraged to find musicians who are willing to be experimented on for the purposes of developing skills and knowledge in the compositional process.

This paper reports on the Composers in School project conducted with students from Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University. The aim of the project was to enable composition students to write for school ensembles with the intention of proving mutual benefits to schools students and composers alike.

The project placed composition students in schools, with a brief to write for specific instrumental or vocal groupings. Student composers were surveyed prior to their school experience in relation to their compositional process, reflecting on the effectiveness of the process, the inhibitions in the process and how the exercise of working with students in schools might benefit the overall approach to composing. Following the engagement with students in the classroom, composers were again questioned in relation to the advantage (or detriment) of working in this fashion.

The findings reported here are wide-ranging in relation to both parties involved in the project and provide a template for further work in this field.

Preamble

The aim of this research has been to examine compositional processes in action through the interaction of tertiary composition students in secondary schools, with the purpose of addressing three main questions:

1. How do teachers engage with teaching composition?
2. How does the “real world” provide additional opportunities for composition students?
3. How can the teaching and learning of composition be best addressed in tertiary and secondary education?

Research Method and Design

The complete study involved four phases of data gathering with teachers and students involved in the project. This paper reports on phases 1 and 2 and focuses on the experience of tertiary students interfacing with school classrooms. Schools were allocated by composition staff to tertiary students on the basis of willingness to participate and proximity to the student accommodation. Essentially two forms of gathering evidence were employed: surveys were used for the phases reported here and interview, based on survey response, was used for phase 4:

1. Questionnaire of composition students before the project
2. Questionnaire of composition students after the project
3. Questionnaire /interview of teachers during the project
4. In-depth semi-structured interviews with selected participants after the project

The questionnaires for phases 1 and 2 were administered via email. The researcher has employed this method of data collection on other studies (Harrison 2003, 2004) and found it suitable in this instance for a number of reasons: The asynchronous nature of e-mail communication allows the information to be readily obtained, with participants responses given at a convenient time, regardless of location. E-mail format allows the researcher to interact with the participant, ensuring clarification on issues arising from questions posed. Additional features of these type of interaction (as found by Im & Chee, 2003) include a higher response rate, financial cost-saving, “as they do not require long-distance travel and the expenses of paper, pencils, photocopying, and mailing fees.” Tatano (2005 p. 412) noted that costs could be further minimised, as this form of data collection does not require transcription. It is important to note that the method in this instance is not used in isolation, but in conjunction with other methods including empirical data, interviews, discussion and review of documents. The validity of the research is dependent on the interplay of each of these elements. It is

envisaged that the raw data will be analysed to identify which themes corresponded and differed between the statements made by the interviewees and the themes that emerged from the literature review.

The researcher provided questionnaires to the students enrolled in composition programs at Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University (n=14). Students age in range from 19 to approx 40 years of age. The group were invited to participate through an independent investigator who was not involved in course delivery or assessment anonymous procedures. Recruitment was voluntary and participants were informed of the processes. Participants represented varied experiences of composing for schools.

On completion of the data-gathering phase, the data were transcribed for “further comparative examination” (Bartel p.360), taking care not to “dissolve all complexity” (Shenk, 1997, p.157). The researcher collated the responses to find similar themes and trends. Ways in which the responses differed radically from each other and the factors that may have contributed to those differences were also noted. The data was subjected to content analysis (Cavana, Delahaye, & Sekaran, 2001) to identify themes, concepts and meanings (Burns, 2000). There is no intention in the research to hold the responses as “truth” rather as “accounts.”

Phase One Results

Prior to commencement of the in-school aspect of the project, composition students were asked the following questions.

1. Describe your current compositional process.
2. How effective do you believe this process is?
3. What are the things that prevent you from creating?
4. How do you know if the piece you are composing is going to work?
5. What do you expect to learn from the Composers in Schools experience?

Describe your current compositional process.

The impetus for composition was varied across the cohort. In some cases, students referred to a process of being inspired by extra-musical sources:

Bill: I am very visual and inspired by nature. I hear melodies in every day activities as I am walking around.

Beth: My usual compositional process involves me initially drawing ideas and inspiration, usually from visual art, landscapes, literature or dreams

Brett: Create a motif/cell usually from some sort of inspiration/theme such as love, loss etc.,

For others, it was born out of an improvisatory or less structured course of action:

Liam: I await the arrival of an idea. These ideas may come to me at all different times. Once I have the beginnings of an idea I draft out the format of the piece and then I get on an instrument and expand it. Generally I believe the music goes where it wants to go, you just have to let it.

Lee: I often improvise on piano or violin and come up with some sort of motif or theme. I collect these ideas and organise selected ideas into pieces. My style is more “on the spot” than thought out.

Liz: I get an idea in my head usually, but sometimes will muck around on the piano and find something cool. Whichever way I do it, I build from there.

A third approach draws on the intended instrumentation:

John: Think about what would work well for the combination I’m writing for

James: I use various processes depending on the initiation of the composition, whether it is for a particular group, singer or instruments.

From this initial phase, the student composers’ craft generally headed towards a more mechanical procedure.

Lee: Once I have an idea I write or draw a plan and research the instrumentation.

John: ...write the music on manuscript, then transfer to Sibelius and edit the work as I'm on the computer

For others, it is more organic:

Beth: ...begin the piece and then manipulate the motif throughout so that the piece is the way I like it. I don't want my compositions to adhere to a rigid form.

Brett: ...when I have a number of ideas together, I develop each idea, slowly looking into each aspect whether it be rhythm, harmony or just the basic symbolism.

How effective do you believe this process is?

Two responses indicated that the process was adequate for the development of the skill of composing at the time:

Bill: It seems to be working for me at the moment, but as I mature as a composer I am modifying my process. I have noticed that my process flows far better if I write and then correct what is not possible.

Beth: It seems to work, as people enjoy listening to what I have written

Another response reflected on the efficiency of the model of creating:

Lee: It's not very effective in terms of organisation of ideas and development of ideas, but my style is currently changing in order to fix this.

Liam: I aim to write the best I can, however, at present I am unable to work neither as fast nor as efficient as I would prefer to.

The vocational nature of these responses is interesting to note; that while it works in the "student composer" situation, the real world application may alter the process.

Liz: This process has served me well so far, but I have yet to be asked or commissioned to write a piece for anyone, in which case gathering inspiration may be my downfall as sometimes it takes a while for me to gather up enough ideas to develop.

Brett: I am yet to experience the many issues involved with working by commission. The quality of the piece will depend on the time restrictions provided.

What are the things that prevent you from creating?

Roadblocks to creativity ranged from an emphasis on aspects of time and space.

Bill: The physical space I am in, particularly 4 walls and no sight of outside. Sometimes I simply get stuck with where I am at in the creation and it becomes similar to pulling teeth. Other times a composition will flow and come to me easily if I am in the space.

Liz: Pressures of other subjects and being tired, especially at this stage of the semester. Time management is crucial, as I cannot compose in grabbed short periods of time. I need to dedicate an afternoon or morning or whole days.

John: Mostly uni assignments, gigs and other things that take time away from me prevent me from creating.

James: ...other work commitments, fearing that whatever would come out now would be not worthwhile

How do you know if the piece you are composing is going to work?

For many students, the response to this was straightforward. If the process outlined above was followed, the outcome was more reliable:

Brett: I believe that if I have followed the correct process and researched and planned what I am doing, the piece should work.

Beth: I know if it's going to work if I can see that there's direction in the piece. If a piece lacks in structure and direction and I've presented too many ideas and not developed them enough, I know its not going to work.

James: If it sounds good in my head and when I play it, then it can only sound better in reality... at least this has been my experience.

Occasionally comments were more cautious, dependent on the process outlined above. For Liz, who favoured a more improvisatory approach, the "success of the piece was sometimes not realised until the end of the task.

Liz: I really don't know for sure until it is finished if it will work or not, but usually after I start to expand the original idea I get a rough idea as to whether it will be any good.

Of particular relevance to this project was this remark:

John: The greatest learning curve for me is to have my pieces performed. Speaking to the performers gives me enormous insight from their perspective.

What do you expect to learn from the Composers in Schools experience?

Bill: I expect to learn about how to manage an ensemble. I haven't really done this before. They will probably not do exactly as the music says at first, so I will have to communicate my ideas to them directly as well, which I have only had a little experience with. I'll have to learn to jump in the deep end a bit.

Beth: I will endeavour to write a piece that the students of my chosen school will enjoy. My first aim is to create a series of sample motifs and ideas to receive feedback from. Judging from the responses of students, I will then collate the accepted ideas and use them for my composition. Furthermore, I will be emphasising my core beliefs of simplicity and clarity when approaching this task.

Brett: I am looking forward to composing for varying levels of ability especially as I will be involved with a primary school and the interaction between the students and myself and encouraging them to perform even the smallest of solos. It will be a challenge to keep it simple but interesting.

James: I expect to develop skills in communicating to other people such as the conductor and students, to learn about writing for younger instrumentalists and catering for their individual abilities and instruments and to also learn what life as a composer will actually be like when I graduate from the conservatorium.

John: I expect to learn how to work in a real work place environment and to write something for a specific group and circumstance. This is a lot harder because you have more restrictions than if you were just writing another piece. I am really looking forward to the challenge.

Lee: I hope that composing a tailored piece for a particular high school band will teach me how to write at different levels of playing ability, as well as working with others.

Liam: I would like to experience first hand, the challenges that 'real world' composer's face, when asked to write from a commission. I feel that there are many uncertainties, however, I would like to learn how to ultimately find the right compromise between balancing my own ideas with practical and workable solutions

Phase Two Results

After the Composers in Schools experience, students were asked to reflect on the way in which their compositional process had changed, if at all, using the following questions:

1. Has your compositional process changed as a result of the Composers in Schools experience? If yes, how; If no, why not?
2. What were the benefits of working with a school ensemble?
3. What were the pitfalls of working with a school ensemble?
4. What do you think the teachers and students with whom you worked learned from the Composers in Schools experience?
5. What did you learn from the Composers in Schools experience and how do these relate to the expectations you had of the experience?

Responses to these questions generally indicated a shift in process as a result of engaging in the Composers in Schools project.

Has your compositional process changed as a result of the Composers in Schools experience?

Some tertiary students found that little changed in the way in which they approached the compositional process, though their existing skills were honed by the experience:

James: I do seem to try and have my mind in the performers shoes (in a matter of speaking), as before I found myself writing things that altogether were slightly unrealistic in its performance value.

John: I now think my ideas out a lot more, often by creating a timeline which describes what will happen to the motif and when it will happen.

Liam: My compositional process has not been all that influenced by working directly with a group, except for occasionally considering parts due to the level of experience of each section.

For some, it was a more revolutionary experience:

Brett: Yes as I have never had to write for so many instruments before and the way I went about it had to change.

What were the benefits of working with a school ensemble?

There was a methodological flaw in this question that was only revealed once the responses were returned. The question is ambiguous in the sense that it doesn't specify *who* the beneficiaries were of the experience: the ensemble, the student within in the ensemble or the tertiary composers. As a result, a number of divergent and incompatible responses were received. Interviews in Phase 4 will help to clarify this issue. The intention of the question was to discover what the benefits were to the tertiary composers. Responses referred to the benefits in this manner:

Liz: The major benefit of working with children is they say what they think, which is often very helpful. There's no subtlety in what they say, and it's that type of criticism that is necessary when you're learning to write.

Lee: This project gave me the opportunity to feel what it is like to be a composer out in the world and work in a real life situation.

Some tertiary composers revealed in the opportunities to mould the composition to suit the ensemble and to have live musicians performing the work with the orchestration for which it was conceived:

Beth: Actually tailoring the piece to a group. Also, hearing an ensemble play what you have written, as opposed to playing it on the piano, or hearing a MIDI file, or just not hearing it out loud at all.

Bruce: I could write for specific individuals within the ensemble that I knew were strong players and could tailor easier parts for the less experienced sections. Every member of the concert band was slightly challenged.

What were the pitfalls of working with a school ensemble?

As with the previous question, there was ambiguity in the phraseology as to who experienced the pitfalls. Again the intended responses were to focus on the difficulties of tertiary composers working in the school environment as it related to standard and scheduling:

Lee: I was given a primary school concert band so I was unable to write parts that were overly difficult. Also, I was unable to create music that was exactly what I wanted expressed because the children weren't technically or even musically up to scratch. However, this type of experience is necessary, as one will not always be given the instruments or instrumentalists that one "needs" to create their vision, but we all have to learn compromise.

James: There were no pitfalls, but due to both my and the schools schedule, I didn't get to visit them as often as I would have liked.

What do you think the teachers and students with whom you worked learned from the Composers in Schools experience?

The responses to this question were only the perceptions of tertiary composers and it is anticipated that the interactions with teachers and other selected participants will further elucidate these remarks:

Liam: I think it gave them another perspective on music as I find many schools ensembles find themselves trapped in a narrow spectrum of repertoire

John: The Students are getting the opportunity to work with the composer of the piece and ask questions on how exactly the composer wants it.

Bruce: Teachers and students discovered that young composers are out there and willing to write for them.

James: The teacher I worked with probably learned more about the students' personalities in terms of their determination

What did you learn from the Composers in Schools experience and how do these relate to the expectations you had of the experience?

Tertiary composers generally expressed positive outcomes from the project that were beyond their initial expectations. Most remarked on the realities of meeting deadlines and writing material that was achievable for players with limitations. Others commented on the opportunity to extend school students' understanding of 'sound,' to use their instruments in unconventional ways and consider how a composer constructs their material. Many responses were refreshingly future-orientated:

Lee: I wasn't sure what to expect to gain from this experience, but I guess the main thing I thought I would gain was what I have mentioned a few times: compromise.

Bruce: Deadlines are good. They help me get the work done. Tell me that it's due in one day and it will be finished the next day.

Beth: I've learnt lots about deadlines and having to work with performers who aren't all child prodigies. All in all I have found it to be a very fun experience and would like it to continue for many years to come.

Bill: The kids were great, I enjoyed working with them!

It is envisaged that, through the final phases of the project, the benefits and opportunities for fine-tuning will be come more apparent.

Discussion

There were three central questions posited in this project. The first of these, relating to how teachers engage with teaching composition, will be answered more completely when the final two phases of the project are completed. There is some evidence already emerging in the responses to suggest a variety of approaches are necessary to engage students who come to composition with a multiplicity of skill sets and methods. The teaching of composition needs to allow for initial impetuses that range from the improvisatory and extra-musical to the more structured and/or motive-based methods. The results in phase one also provide suggestions for teachers of composition seeking to motivate their charges when they experience blocks at the beginning, or through the process. Skills in orchestration were clearly valued by tertiary composers.

The second question pertained to "real world" opportunities for composition students. Many students anticipated the experiment of working in secondary schools would be challenging at the same time providing a practical process for honing skills to make their craft more approachable. Others were able to see future employment opportunities through teaching composition and/or composing and publishing works for school ensembles. The project also gave insights into the capabilities of students in primary and secondary schools, along with an understanding of orchestration. Many tertiary students reported on the benefits of hearing their works in live performance situation and, in some cases, having the opportunity to direct their own music.

The final question sought to discover how composition could be more effectively taught and learned in tertiary and secondary education. A more extensive response can be given on after the final phases of the research but at this time it can be concluded that the interaction of tertiary students (and their mentors) provided a practical connection that was mutually beneficial. An unanticipated finding was that more composition students were in a position to consider school teaching as a career path as a result of this experience. A closer interrogation of the seemingly intangible aspects of the composition process will also help students of composition at all levels to construct processes for the content and delivery of composition courses.

Themes from this research will provide a basis for the development of the project in the future. The major themes of benefit to music education at this point are

- The interface of tertiary students with secondary classes
- The capacity of students to cope with conflicting deadlines
- The development of practical approaches to teaching composition in tertiary environments

Further research

The project is continuing with phases 1 and 4. Phase 1 will focus on the teachers' perspective of the Composers in Schools experience, while Phase 4 will take a more probing view of the process through interviews with stakeholders: tertiary students, school students and teachers.

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