



## Dreaming, doing, knowing

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Image: Leslie Downie

In a recent visit to Australia, the Director of a notable UK conservatoire glowingly presented examples of student success. His graduates could make music at the highest standards and he reeled off a list of attributes and accolades accordingly. Almost in passing, he grumbled about 'those music tech types' who *had a problem with literacy* then pressed on with more good-news PowerPoint. A few puzzled audience members were quick to raise hands and through further interruptions he eventually revealed that his comment had meant simply, *a lack of ability to read music score*. In typical Australian style someone shot back at now startled presenter, 'A problem for who? The students or the staff?' Underpinning this rather sardonic remark lie preconceptions and collisions which I want to explore briefly here in this article.

At the heart of this fracture are those on the one side who adore and believe in the classical traditions which continue to bring great works of art into the world. In the other camp, there are those who are equally as passionate about contemporary culture and the technologies that allow for intimate interactions between craft and expression, collaborators and audiences. However, this glimpse of opposing viewpoints is not simply a bifurcated debate and the further we zoom out, the more we see that in 21<sup>st</sup> century music-making there is an evolution and merging of a plethora of traditions, from music concrète to commercial record production, from expertise on the violin to the turntable, from world music on cell-phone to an iTunes 'Urban' search field. Any idea of 'good music' can be vastly customised and highly personal, as Evan Eisenberg puts it,

All in this hall are experiencing the same event. Yet each is hearing it and seeing it from a slightly different angle, through a different screen of memory and desire. If the music is a palace or cathedral in time, it is also a gem of two thousand facets, one for each mind in the hall. Each mind sees its own reflection, dreams its own dream. If music is a cosmos, then contained in this room are two thousand parallel worlds. (2005; p. 237).

### **The idea of 'contemporary music practice'**

Individualism has encouraged genre prodding in industrialized society, driven by a desire to market and sell more products. More recently however, the web 2 platform has accelerated a different kind of knowledge transfer across social networks which share musical artefacts and ideas that fall outside the traditional value systems of mass media culture or boomer preconceptions. In music education, students arrive increasingly equipped with access and attitudes about all kinds of cross-over musics (and implicitly, from all kinds of cultures and traditions). So-called 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) now bring alternately confusing, irreconcilable or demanding expectations to challenge their teachers about what constitutes contemporary music practice, craft and literacy.

Meanwhile, there is a kind of sub-disciplinarity that perpetuates amid institutions and music schools (Draper, 2005) – jazz, classical, popular music, electroacoustic and recording traditions all have their own distinct methods and imperatives which can compete for resources that otherwise might be considered as common. Across the Australian higher education sector, value arguments continue in rivalry for scant funding, for example, while we hear about the plight of performing arts providers (which some view as outdated ivory towers), we also see creativity and industry branded as the way forward (which some distrust as appropriation of art to bolster corporate profits).

And so, how might we begin to reconcile these complex viewpoints and how do we teach any coherent idea of just what music is? In attempting to respond to these questions, it may be wise to retain the significant assets we already have and therefore neither throw out 'the bathwater' of global digital ecologies nor 'the baby' of career musician craft, but rather, seek to explore the form that an authentic 'bathtub' might take. By extension then, contemporary music practice will be less understood via newer imperatives to innovate or by older graspings at genre, but more so through an examination of the underlying creative processes which remain timeless.

### **Looking back to see forward**

It is only very recently that music might be considered as an object which can be replicated and that scores or sound recordings actually 'are' music. Before this, music was unique for millennia. Ephemeral, non-capturable, it worked powerfully in tribal settings and in the advancement of societal structures. This *musica practica* was music by ear rather than by the book, a creative activity that lived and breathed and which generations modified according to their own needs by building on the shoulders of ancestors (Channan, 1994). In such histories of creativity, I was struck by how often that music practice was used as an exemplar in fields apparently unrelated to the arts. In the business management literature I came across this interesting tale:

A well-known Congolese drummer, TaTitos, was asked how new compositions are created in that culture. TaTitos replied that there are three methods. In the first, a new piece of music is presented to someone in their dreams; in the second, musicians notice and build on mistakes they make while they are playing and generate new variations from those errors; in the third, someone consciously constructs a new composition. However, TaTitos added, there are no known examples of successful composition using the third method. (Tosey, 2006; pp. 29–30).

Perhaps amusing to many composers, the parable also outlines three useful approaches to creativity. The first offers intrinsic, personal ownership of vocabulary as 'dreaming', the second as the repetitive action and exploration in 'doing'. The third indicates the use of theoretical information as 'knowing'. Here now I want to use this example of pre-industrial tradition to examine its methods in the light of the modern environment.

#### **On dreaming**

Many believe that the real work of creativity goes on in the sub-conscious (for example, Claxton, 1997), working like a machine in the background to daily tasks. This feature implies a growing ownership of data where the brain judges what is useful, what is not, and what has personal meaning. In the case of musicians, this includes sifting through the works they hear and see in all of their exposure to music: from concerts to television, in scores and collections, CDs and MP3s, to pieces presented in the classroom. In essence, musicians build an implicit, highly personal vocabulary throughout their lives, an 'aural library, which, for a mature musician, would typically consist of 20,000 to 50,000 hours of listening, learning and playing' (Schippers, 2007; p. 36).

Dreaming then, is likely the most important tool for high level engagement with practice because at any given point in time, in the mind of a musician this is an authentic indicator of what has true meaning. An advantage of the modern pedigree is that in only the last hundred years or so has there been such access to vast and portable collections of sound recordings. Until this point in all of history, *artists never the opportunity to re-listen to their own performances*. Recorded sound forever changed musicianship and essentially altered how musicians re-approached their craft to mimic style and technique, to appropriate form and structure, to develop new styles and instruments based on virtual representations in sound recordings (Sterne, 2003).

#### **On doing**

Here, practical craft evolves where the reverie of right brain activity (artistic, empathetic, and contextual) begins to work in concert with the actions of conscious left-brain thinking (functional, literal and analytical) (Pink, 2005). From Indian raga improvisation, to blowing across jazz changes, from prodding the loops on Ableton Live, to scratching at the stave with pencil and eraser (or undo and Sibelius), all of these traditions have something in common: musical agency exists 'within the possibility of a variation within a repetition' (Lather, 1996; p. 3).

In practice, musicians play phases repeatedly in an attempt to perfect, to find new meaning and expression through mistakes which do not indicate failure but invite a repositioning within another cycle. In performance, musicianship is put to the test by playing variations on themes, in monitoring the audience, and in finding new pleasures in each exploration. In composition, improvisations are loosely structured, progressively rearranged and the final results variously notated, performed and recorded. Digital audio software greatly leverages this. The VDU brings *extended audio visual literacies* where sound can be directly manipulated on screen through score, waveforms, pianola-roll, synthesis and DSP parameters. More significantly, *random access allows improvisation, composition, performance and evaluation to become one fluid and interactive process.*

### **On knowing**

The Congolese story appears to offer little support for a conscious approach to creativity, inferring that information in itself cannot produce good music. The key word here is 'conscious'. Information recall (which is easily tested) we know is vastly different to artistic wisdom (which must be lived). And so, theoretical principles, the mentor's instructions and historical records can only be transferred as knowledge through the artist's own modification of their meaning and in a personal round trip through dreaming, doing, to truly knowing. What survives then is music practice which lives, breathes and communicates in the present by indeed, 'building on the shoulders of ancestors'.

In the modern western world, access to information is friction-free. With inexpensive PCs, broadband infrastructure and the ranking 'intelligence' of data-mining, anyone can google an answer for anything. Web 2's networks provide countless spaces for its denizens to spend second lives in collaboration, discussion, sharing, peer review and formulation of value systems. This essential shift in access to information and socially-constructed ways of knowing undermines the traditional Cartesian premise of knowledge bytes as objects that are sequentially transferred to the student via various well-worn pedagogical strategies. A 'learning 2.0' perspective of knowing declares, *we participate, therefore we are* (Brown & Adler, 2008), thereby shifting the focus from content delivery to better facilitating interactions around which the content is situated.

### **Coda**

To stay within the story's register while returning to the question of what form the contemporary education 'bathtub' might take, here I offer Alexander Solzhenitsyn's thought-provoking expansion on the 'shoulders of ancestors' thesis. He says,

No new work of art comes into existence (whether consciously or unconsciously) without an organic link to what was created earlier. But it is equally true that a healthy conservatism must be flexible both in terms of creation and perception, remaining equally sensitive to the old and to the new, to venerable and worthy traditions, and to the freedom to explore, without which no future can ever be born. At the same time the artist must not forget that creative freedom can be dangerous, for the fewer artistic limitations he imposes on his own work, the less chance he has for artistic success. The loss of a responsible organizing force weakens or even ruins the structure, the meaning and the ultimate value of a work of art (1995; p. 3).

The compounding limitation of fast knowledge production rhetoric is that ultra-rich access to infinite resources forces the mind to act as a filter which defensively shuts down information overload, effectively hearing only what it wants to hear. The role of music institutions will therefore evolve in designing thoughtful boundaries that steer the student's capacity to select, adopt, do and 'dream'. In the highly empowered technological environment, this will be implemented much less so by drawing upon an obvious array of already accessible information, but more so through teachers extending their own aural library and theoretical vocabulary to silhouette knowing in 'respectful engagement *with* students rather than doing work *on* them' (Lebler, 2007; p. 217).

Given the so-called 'information revolution', e-commentators clamour that educators may stand to lose their privileged position as expert practitioners and theorists. I doubt this. While it is true that 21<sup>st</sup> century music practice has access to extraordinary advantages never available to those before us, the meaning of 'contemporary' remains timeless as authentic teaching, learning and knowing forever lives in the 'now'.

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