

# Prior Learning of Conservatoire Students: A Western Classical Perspective



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## ABSTRACT

*The accomplishment of excellence in performance has been the unequivocal goal and most highly valued measure of success in conservatoires. The master/apprentice model of teaching has traditionally been regarded as the sole way of achieving this. More recently however there has been much debate about the need to consider more innovative pedagogy in order to provide students with a diverse range of skills that will enable them to build a portfolio career. This paper reports on recent data from surveys about the prior learning of first year conservatoire students in Australia and England. It opens up issues around the prior learning experiences of a generation of young people and seeks to understand how student expectations and dispositions to learning in conservatoires are shaped at least in part by the pedagogical culture they have experienced prior to entering tertiary music institutions.*

## KEYWORDS

prior learning, western classical music learning, instrumental pedagogy, master/apprentice

## SETTING THE CONTEXT

There has recently been much debate among researchers and practitioners from a range of contexts regarding the importance of diversity in preparing music students for a portfolio career, a likely outcome for many graduates. Many (Burt & Mills, 2005; Johnson & Homan, 2003; Lebler, 2007b) argue that tertiary institutions should reflect the broadness of a portfolio career in their curriculum by offering skills development and learning experiences that are “musically inclusive and likely to produce multi-skilled and adaptable graduates who are self-monitoring and self-directing in their learning, [and] able to function across a range of activities...” (Lebler, 2007a).

Yet many teachers in conservatoires continue to invest in programmes that largely concentrate on developing performance skills required for a narrow career. While the value of traditional pedagogy in the conservatoire should not

necessarily be dismissed, young musicians who are likely to have a portfolio career will need to experience a range of pedagogical approaches in preparation for the music industry of the future.

Most students in conservatoires are trained in a traditionalist manner founded on a one-to-one teaching model, which is, as Uszler (1992, p. 584) describes, “one of the most enduring forms of tutorial teaching.” In this one-to-one setting the teacher takes responsibility for the transmission of the performance skill and “is the dominant source of feedback” (Lebler, 2006, p. 42). This is also the established model for teaching in private music studios where students prepare for conservatoire study. As Skaggs (1981, p. 275) argues, “teaching privately is so comfortable, so traditional, so accepted, and so appropriate... that it continues to perpetuate itself.”

Recent research (Carey, 2004) suggests that while the master/apprentice based model of learning has its initial seductions for students, it can have long-term negative consequences for the student as learner resulting in a dependency culture, limited employment opportunities and disillusionment (Carey, 2004; Daniel, 2005; Renshaw, 2001). It also has a tendency to restrict the development of skills which may enable students to connect with different contexts and changing cultural values (Carey, 2004; Daniel, 2005; Renshaw, 2001).

Given the diverse range of skills needed to prepare music students for the many challenges of the music profession and related industries, is not the most suitable framework for learning one which ensures that music students are equipped with a broad range of abilities? Even though teaching practices in conservatoires may relate well to the earlier learning experiences of students, the likely outcomes for students also need to be considered before judgements on the appropriateness of the process can be made.

## METHOD

Students enrolled in three Australian conservatorium programmes participated in this project. Although a Bachelor of Music Technology (BMT) programme and a Bachelor of

Popular Music (BPM) programme were also studied, this paper is focussed on a Bachelor of Music (BMus) programme which provides professional training for the classical and contemporary instrumentalist, vocalist or composer and a fourth cohort consisting of 209 third year BMus and postgraduate students from the Royal College of Music which educates undergraduate and postgraduate performers, composers and conductors, predominantly in the western classical tradition. A companion paper reports findings from the popular music perspective. The John Biggs 3P model of learning (1999) has been adopted to provide a structure for this study.

A survey was conducted with each cohort and is included in the companion paper. Table 1 shows the breakdown of participant numbers, the date that the questionnaire was administered and the cohort from which the sample was drawn. Because of the large international enrolment at RCM<sup>1</sup>, the results for this institution have been separated into UK students and students from other countries.

**Table 1: Number of students, date and cohort**

	QCGU: popular music	QCGU: music tech.	QCGU: western classical	RCM UK:	RCM International
Number	33 (85% of cohort)	14 (74% of cohort)	147 (90% of cohort)	39 (19% of total cohort)	28 (13% of total cohort)
Date	March 2007	March 2007	March 2007	July 2007	July 2007
Cohort	BPM Yr 1 2007	BMT Yr 1 2007	BMus/B Mus Studies Yr 1 2007	BMus, MMus, PGdip & one BSc	BMus, MMus, PGdip & one BSc

## RESULTS

Results are presented hereafter as percentages of the respondents for the QCGU Bachelor of Music students, RCM UK students, RCM International students and RCM students as a whole.

## Demographics

**Table 2: Demographic information**

	BMus	RCM UK	RCM International	RCM All
Male	44	38	46	42
Female	56	62	54	58
<20	81	15	11	13
20-25	14	72	61	67
>25	5	13	29	19

In the students surveyed there are more females than males in both cohorts. The Australian students are mostly aged under 20 while their RCM counterpart's ages range from 20-25.

## Learning History

**Table 3: Learning history**

	BMus	RCM UK	RCM International	RCM All
Private lessons	97	100	100	100
Other Bands	65	46	18	34
Classroom	93	90	68	81
School Bands	78	67	14	45
Friends	41	21	18	19
Bandmates	33	10	4	7
From Video	24	18	18	18
Records	29	18	36	25
Group tuition	32	41	29	36
Masterclasses	40	87	68	79
Orchestras	50	82	54	70

Differences between cohorts are most pronounced in the areas of band-related learning experiences and learning music from friends. International RCM students also frequently display marked differences from their RCM UK peers though all RCM students have much greater engagement with orchestras and masterclasses compared to Australian BMus students. There are only marginal differences between cohorts in relation to private lessons, group tuition and classroom music.

<sup>1</sup> 45% of the RCM cohort studied were international students, and 7% of QCGU BMus and BMT students studied were international students.

**Engagement with private lessons**

**Table 4: number of lessons**

	BMus	RCM UK	RCM International	RCM All
<10	5	0	4	1
10-20	2	0	4	1
20-50	6	5	4	4
>50	87	95	88	93

As evident in the above table an overwhelming majority of students from all three cohorts reported having had more than 50 lessons.

**What was learned**

**Table 5: lesson content**

	BMus	RCM UK	RCM International	RCM All
Popular	18	18	11	15
Theory	63	54	64	58
Jazz	33	28	11	21
Classical	80	97	100	99
Other	12	18	11	15

Almost all RCM students reported to have had exposure to classical training compared to only 80% of the BMus cohort. Both cohorts reported similar experiences in the learning of theory.

**Feedback**

**Table 6: sources of feedback**

	BMus	RCM UK	RCM International	RCM All
Own Opinions	88	95	93	94
Audience	49	62	46	55
Bandmates	44	28	25	27
Friends	42	51	32	43
Audio recording	41	44	46	45
Teachers	91	77	89	82
Family	44	54	36	46
Video recording	16	5	4	4

Students indicated a universal reliance on their own opinions as a source of feedback for learning. Not unexpectedly, both cohorts rated teacher

feedback as a dominant feedback source although the RCM cohort relied less upon this. The most notable difference between the cohorts was in the area of feedback from bandmates.

**Activities**

**Table 7: musical activities**

	BMus	RCM UK	RCM International	RCM All
Vocals	29	54	46	51
Guitar	13	3	14	7
Composition	20	21	25	22
Piano	25	79	68	75
Bass	7			
Computer	8	10	7	9
Other Keys	3	10	11	10
Drums/perc	10	10	7	9
DJ	3			
Woodwind	20	44	21	34
Strings	18	41	21	33
Brass	12	8	11	9
Conducting		15	11	13

Student responses demonstrate a sizeable difference relating to involvement with piano activities. There is also a substantial difference between the cohorts in terms of involvement in woodwind and string activities.

**Number of activities**

**Table 8: number of activities**

	BMus	RCM UK	RCM International	RCM All
1	71	13	32	21
2	12	28	25	27
3	7	28	21	25
4	5	21	11	16
5	2	8	11	9
6	1			
7				
8		3		1
9	1			

Substantial differences occur between the BMus and RCM cohorts with a large majority of the former listing only one musical activity. This single focus is more than twice as common in BMus students as it is in the RCM International cohort, almost six times larger when compared with RCM UK students.

## DISCUSSION

These data have been analysed for the purpose of identifying how students learned music prior to commencing their studies at tertiary level and to ascertain the likely impact of the prior experience on subsequent learning in conservatoires. As a method for understanding learning systems, John Biggs' 3P model categorises a system as factors in play

1. before the learning takes place (presage),
2. as the learning takes place (process), and
3. at the completion of the learning cycle (products).

### Presage

#### *Demographics*

The data reveal that the majority of BMus students (81%) are under twenty years of age whereas 67% of RCM students fall in the 20-25 year age group. This may be due in part to the fact that Queensland students typically complete secondary education at age 17. The equivalent age for completion in the UK is 18-19. Additionally, the Australian samples were all drawn from students commencing their conservatoire studies, whereas the RCM samples were drawn from students in their third or later years of their conservatoire studies.

#### *Learning history*

The learning history reveals that the majority of students in both the RCM and BMus cohorts engage with the master/apprentice model of learning with an overwhelming percentage reporting to have had more than 50 private lessons. Both cohorts also share heavy reliance on teacher feedback. However another dominant source of feedback common to both cohorts is "own opinions" with 88% of BMus students and 94% of RCM stating that they relied on this constantly or frequently.

While there are similarities in the above, there are however differences between cohorts in the other feedback categories. BMus students have substantially greater engagement in feedback from 'bandmates' and 'school bands' than do RCM students, 78% of BMus students having had experience with school bands compared to 45% of RCM students. Further, 65% of the BMus cohort have also had experience with bands other than school bands in contrast to only 34% of the RCM cohort.

Engagement with Masterclasses is twice as common among RCM students (79%) than with BMus students (40%). There is also a higher incidence of experience with orchestras in the RCM cohort (70%) compared to the BMus cohort

(50%). Differences in engagement with orchestras are also pronounced within the RCM cohort, UK residents (82%) and RCM international students (54%).

#### *Activities*

An area of substantial difference is in the number of activities in which students have engaged. Students in the BMus cohort have largely concentrated on only one musical activity. Their single focus is more than three times greater than reported by RCM students. Fifty-two percent of RCM students have engaged in 3 or more activities, while only 17% of BMus student report engagement with 3 or more.

#### *Process*

The focus and direction of most tertiary one-to-one instrumental teachers in conservatoires still largely revolves around preparation for exams, recitals and competitions. To this end, students are usually encouraged to concentrate on their major area of study through weekly one-to-one instrumental lessons with teachers considered eminent practitioners in their field. Wills (1997) believes that:

this [one-to-one] type of intense learning, based on an individualized, educationally interactive exchange between master musician and student is vital to develop the highly sophisticated blend of musical, interpretative, artistic, and highly technical skills an instrumentalist or vocalist requires to become a professional musician.

An emphasis on performance is also reflected in the curriculum design and credit point allocation where performance and practical components are awarded considerable weighting, normally in excess of 50% of a program (Carey & McWilliam, 2007). Thus, although students are required to enroll in other academic courses, performance is the dominant way they are supposed to experience music in their lives.

The performance culture is well entrenched not just in the classroom of conservatoires but in the selection process which is largely based on demonstrating an ability to perform in an audition setting. Academic achievement, although desirable, is usually a secondary consideration.

Most students who audition for conservatoires come from a background of one-to-one learning through private lessons. Many have undertaken annual external examinations where the tools for assessment are largely designed "to rank pupils according to what they know or can do" (Bridges, 1992, p. 51). Because of the need to produce quick results, rote teaching and authoritarian techniques are usually employed, resulting in a dependency culture rather than the fostering of

independent thinking and learning so necessary to the educative process (Bridges, 1992).

### Product

Previous studies indicate that whilst during their initial studies at the conservatorium, many students retain high expectations of a career on the concert stage. Initial expectations rank performer or composer first. However a substantial proportion of graduates will not achieve their primary goal and may well opt for their fallback position, teaching (Burt, Lancaster, Lebler, Carey, & Hitchcock, 2007).

Although both programs would appear well matched to the prior learning of their respective cohorts, it could be argued in the Australian context that the comparatively narrow focus of the traditional learning system in conservatoires may not serve all of its graduates well. Seen in the context of a diverse Australian musical sector, this narrow focus does not demonstrably produce graduates with a range of skills and abilities that equip them well for their inevitable futures. In prior learning as well as in conservatoria, the dominant focus is the one-to-one tuition model as central to achieving successful performative results.

### CONCLUSION

In light of the above it would appear that these students are a product of learning routines on which we have relied in the past. Instead of relying on past practices and saying 'this is the way we have to do it' we may need to 'rethink' our habits (McWilliam, 2005). While this does not necessarily mean that the traditional curriculum in tertiary music institutions should be discarded, it does mean that we should be considering what processes are necessary to best prepare students more effectively for sustainable learning outcomes that are required for a portfolio career. This cannot be achieved by the mere selection or application of one model versus another. Rather it needs to be considered in terms of the characteristics of a learning environment that provides students with a diverse range of skills which will serve them well in their likely futures: a model that provides a deepening of insight among students, exposing them to a breadth of experience appropriate to a portfolio career. To achieve this is to produce students who are 'expansive' learners thinking and working beyond a narrow focus, and therefore more likely to be prepared for careers as musicians.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the assistance of Rosie Burt who administered the

survey to RCM students and Helen Lancaster for her invaluable editorial assistance.

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