

# There's a fine line between pleasure and pain: why students enrol in higher degrees in music and music education

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## Abstract

For many musicians and music educators, finding the time and inclination to undertake further studies can be stumbling blocks to engaging in a program of research. Without self-development of this kind, understanding and rejuvenation of teaching and performance practices are unlikely to occur. Furthermore, as the academy ages, there is a responsibility on the part of those who support research students to replace themselves. The paper reports on a qualitative study undertaken with students in research higher degrees at masters and doctoral level. As part of a larger study, students were asked about their motivation to engage with music research. Students in the sample included composers, teachers, performers and songwriters. Most were enrolled in traditional thesis-based programs, but a small number were enrolled in programs with multi-exegetical outcomes. Voicing the concerns of students in research programs, the paper touches on such themes as intrinsic motivation, relationship to content, love of learning, and the access the academy provides to knowledge, people and facilities.

**Key words:** music, higher degrees, research, motivation

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## Background

After 339 pages, 80,000 words (1 word for every hair loss), 1460 days, 3 wise men, 1 tolerant partner, 1 supportive mother, and heavy medication - I've been awarded my Doctorate of Philosophy. I wouldn't recommend it even to masochists. (De-identified Facebook post, April 2011)

In 1973, 55 percent of PhD recipients had tenure-track positions within six years of earning their PhDs. In 2006, merely 15 percent of recent graduates found themselves in this position. (Shaw, 2011)

These two statements beg the question - why? Why would any student put himself or herself through a doctoral program? This paper therefore aims to interrogate the question: "What motivates students to undertake programs of research in music?"

Government policy encourages students to undertake university studies as a way of stimulating the economy and build a knowledge-rich nation (Thorsby & Hollister, 2003). The current Australian government's plan to have 40% of the population with a degree is putting pressure on undergraduate numbers, and there is a flow on effect in the postgraduate research degree space. The broader international trend of the "massification" of higher education (Draper and Harrison, 2011) relates to all levels of study, yet the comments of the Facebook post and Shaw above are not uncommon in popular and academic text.

The OECD's (2002, p. 18) *Review of Career Guidance Policies* noted "many students in tertiary education appear to have little idea of why they are there or where it is leading". For the creative arts, the employment prospects for graduates

in their chosen field (regardless of whether it a Bachelors, Masters or Doctoral degree) have never been particularly strong. Speaking in relation to undergraduate programs, Bridgestock (2011, p. 21) suggests that

Students can enter creative courses with only the vaguest of notions regarding what they will do afterwards, influenced by unrealistic or romantic ideas about the world of work in their fields, or with an overly rigid, foreclosed and unrealistic career identity. These career identity issues influence their engagement with learning during the course, and also their career-related behaviours afterwards.

At the secondary school level and internationally, McPherson and O'Neill (2010, 132) comment that students actively engaged in music by learning an instrument or voice typically exhibit a much stronger commitment to music learning and that "their beliefs are reinforced by clear achievement goals." If students are motivated at the school level, perhaps this sense of direction carries them forward into undergraduate and graduate study programs? There comes a time, however, when students "hit the wall." At some point, students come to the realization that a fulltime music career may not be a viable option and begin to look for alternate career paths (Burt & Mills, 2006; Lebler, Burt-Perkins & Carey, 2008). One such path is teaching, and many highly skilled performers look to the academy and its teaching-performing positions to provide employment and stability. There is an increasing expectation of doctoral qualifications for tenured academic posts and this is posited as one of the triggers for teacher-performers to undertake a postgraduate research program (Schindler, 2009).

For music students who wish to follow a performance, composition or other creative-based pathway, the advent of practice-based research degrees provides an opportunity for intensive training, access to resources and, for some, a perpetuation of undergraduate one-to-one experiences at a higher level (Harrison, 2010). Even with a practice-based degree, employability can

be problematic exacerbated by the perception of doctoral graduates being over-qualified for the workforce (Draper and Harrison, 2011), except in academia.

Bridgestock (2011, p. 21) urges universities to "become serious about the graduate employability agenda in creative fields," suggesting that encouragement of intrinsic career motivations, and the development of skills for career self-management are critical. While Bridgestock is referring to undergraduate outcomes, similar inferences could be made regarding postgraduate research students. Towl and Senior (2010, p. 301) refer to this as the need for "authentic training in the form of hands-on research experience." In the process, they note that students are aware of the importance of the mentor/mentee relationship in becoming researchers post-graduation. Given that, as Lumadi (2008) notes, the research degree is the moment at which the "academic system replaces itself," the relationship of the mentor and student is critical for future development of the candidate beyond graduation.

There is a link between replacing the graying academic population and motivation to commence study. Prospective candidates typically fall into two categories in supervisor choice: those that come to an institution and are allocated a supervisor, and those who are attracted to the institution for the purpose of working with a particular supervisor. The motivation is, in some cases, driven by the culture, the access to people and the facilities universities provide. Returning again to evidence from the undergraduate arena, Loeber and Higson (2009, p. 158) found that "people and services" were among the most influential reasons as to why a student would want to go to university. The person with whom research study is taken is one of the significant drivers.

More recently, Wright (2010, p. 221) indicated that a desire to study at a most graduate level was related to two imperatives: "those who did not achieve well at undergraduate level and therefore

feel they have something to prove, or those for whom the status provided by the doctorate will lead to tangible rewards such as a better job/salary or promotion." For the musician, however, jobs, salary and promotion are seemingly unrelated to motivation to undertake a doctoral program. As Draper and Harrison (2011) point out, there is little need for a research degree to play in an orchestra, or band or any music role outside academia. One of the participants in the Draper and Harrison study gave the following reasons for undertaking a research program:

*... the notion that my own practice could be the subject of research, or could itself research was entirely new, and it was this that actually inspired me to undertake the DMA.*

Similarly, Harrison and Emmerson (2009) noted "it is clear that most students welcomed the opportunity and challenge to engage in practice-based research, to embrace innovative approaches." From this comment, the lack of job prospects and the anxiety are not deterrents. The aims for many PhDs seem to not about the qualification but about the "invitation to think... to absorb hundreds of arguments and opinions, and synthesize them into something (hopefully) original." (Jane, 2011)

The recent literature highlights conflicts in the imperatives to undertake a postgraduate research program. While there are government policies designed to create knowledge-rich nations, the musician has little reason to undertake a research degree to improve employment prospects, except if they are intending to take on an academic career. The literature also points to a misalignment between institutional perspectives and individual goals in a personalised program: the breadth of potential career possibilities and desire for some students to spend time and energy reflecting on practice are not always reflected in qualification frameworks and practices.

With this background in the literature, the current project sought to unpack the motivation to study for a group of music research students.

## Method

As part of a larger study, students were asked about their motivation to undertake music research. Students in the sample included composers, teachers, performers and songwriters. Some were enrolled in traditional thesis-based programs, while others were engaged in programs with multi-exegetical outcomes.

The students are drawn from the research higher degree cohort at the university where the author is employed. A pseudonym has been given to each student and his or her initial responses have been verified and supplemented via email exchanges (supervision notes). The data was subject to thematic analysis (Benner, 1985; Leininger, 1985; Taylor & Board, 1984) to identify any recurrent patterns. The themes chosen were the result of clustering linked categories identified in the student responses that conveying similar meanings. In this instance, the work of Taylor and Bogdan, (1989, p. 131) was employed to define the themes which were based on "... topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, feelings."

Student responses to the question "What motivates you to undertake a program of research in music?" varied widely in their length and a mixture of reasons was posited. To ensure the student voices are represented accurately, they are presented here in full, along with a short description of their background.

## Student responses

Andrew is a teacher working in an inner city school, close to the university campus.

*I undertook a Masters in Music Studies ten years ago and found the discipline of study was the only way to ensure that I did not rot away as a teacher. In spite of protestations about supporting the in-service needs of teachers, the school structures (especially for music departments in my home state) work strongly against the teachers staying competent.*

*I had developed what I thought was a good reputation as a teacher and conductor but was concerned that I was continuing to improve in my practice. I had reached my forties and did not want to start to slide into incompetence as a result of the tyranny of 'busyness' of school life. The constant round of teaching, marking, accompanying, planning, organising concerts, running ensembles, dealing with difficult students and parents, negotiating with school administration, and doing paperwork makes it very difficult to make time for personal reflection and improvement. In the Masters context, the ability to meet regularly with researchers, lecturers and supervisors formed a framework for continued personal professional development. The PHD experience is not making the school demands any less, but it is keeping the constant need to reflect on practice and to research to the fore. The fact that the PHD is based on my work at the school is beneficial in that it simultaneously encourages me to research what I am doing but also demands that I continue to do what I am doing well so that it is worth researching. It would be untenable for me to sacrifice my work at school in the interests of the research.*

*The second motivation is that, having found some success in my area, I wanted to document those aspects of my practice that might be useful to others. So much of my own teacher training was completely useless. In addition, so much of the advice that I read and observe being given to teachers is, in my view, likely to cause teacher failure. Many of the in-service sessions that I have attended have been so hopeless and I therefore hoped that I could document and validate some strategies and approaches that people might find useful. In my own career I have benefitted enormously by learning from the research papers and other texts of successful practitioners. In spite of the bad in-service experiences, there is a great deal of wonderful information out there. As such, as a beneficiary of this material, I feel a duty to try and give something back.*

Peta is a Brisbane-based schoolteacher who had an extensive performance career prior to entry to the program

*The motivation for me to undertake a PhD really came from a genuine love of the experience of learning. Education was always valued in our family but as I engaged in it as an adult, I found the process meant far more to me than the qualification. In undertaking the Masters, I found the experience of self-directed learning and research both satisfying and stimulating. During that study, it was recommended that I upgrade to a PhD but I turned it down because I wanted the joy and the excuse to go through the whole process again with a different topic. For me the PhD I'm doing now was never about if I would do it, but when I would do it. As for why, it's the love of the journey of learning, thinking, changing and being challenged.*

Marion is a Singapore-based primary music teacher with extensive experience in world music.

*I had very clear reasons for wanting to begin a research degree. Primarily I wanted to align my study with my work situation and my own professional growth. Previous attempts at gaining knowledge and skills in the area of cultural diversity in music education had left me with more questions than answers. The few postgraduate courses available to me focused more on ethnomusicological issues and less on relevant and meaningful activities for young students in the classroom. Being able to design my own research has allowed me to widen my understanding of the area that interests me most, and this has positively impacted my work as a teacher.*

Brianna is a recent graduate from an honours program, now enrolled in a Masters by research

*I have always been a very motivated person and student, and so choosing to continue my studies in a research program seemed like a natural progression. I enjoy having a time frame to learn repertoire, and the course I am enrolled in provides me with the opportunity to engage in practice-based initiatives, with repertoire of my*

*choice. The degree pushes me to work harder, so that I perform at a postgraduate level, ultimately preparing me for the professional world of music.*

Donald is a private studio teacher with an interest in contemporary music

*The motivation to undertake the journey of a doctoral program is one that I have held since I was a teenager. I think the central drive of this youthful desire was built out of a need to push myself to perform to the limits of my potential. I consider myself fortunate that the pathway of my life has afforded me the opportunity to realise the childhood goal of higher education. Yes, I have had to work hard, but my youthful motivation has coursed its way through the mountains and valleys of the doctoral process. Today, in my late thirties, I stand at the shore of completion with the journey of the doctoral landscape behind me and I am keen to thank my naïve younger self for being determined to tackle the challenge.*

Dianne is school instrumental music teacher who has moved into administration, taking responsibility for the music programs in several metropolitan schools

*The motivation for my PhD essentially had its origins in my work as a music teacher. The desire to know more about why we (teachers) do what we do, and the effect this has on student learning was a major driving force. Identifying an area of specific interest where there are gaps in the knowledge and available literature can be strong motivation to commence a focussed research project. Preparing the research path to ensure consistent and continual data flow helps maintain focus, interest and motivation through a long project. Knowing that you will ultimately add to the body of knowledge in your area and hopefully help others in your field also contributes to the "big picture" motivation.*

Arthur is an author, practitioner and late middle-aged PhD candidate

*With respect to both motivation and destination, my PhD, from the very outset right up to the present*

*time, was never perceived as being an end in itself; a means to political/academic credibility certainly not personal or aggrandisement: my motivation has been primarily intrinsic than extrinsic: energised more in terms of intrinsic personal satisfaction and fulfilment than extrinsic political or academic 'rewards': above all, it is motivated by and committed to something much more than myself alone; something, no doubt, dependent upon me, upon what and how I do yet, at its best, hopefully, much more than what I do.*

Narelle is a freelance composer, who teaches composition in several state and private schools

*There were a number of factors that motivated me to return to study, including the opportunity to connect with others in the field, to further my skills in composition and to broaden my influences and compositional language by studying under a different teacher. Also, access to visiting academics and musicians was a big motivator, as well as using my research project to answer some questions I had been contemplating and to improve my teaching. There was, of course, the opportunity to learn things that I didn't know I needed to learn.*

Janette is a Singapore-based piano teacher who also runs a successful music shop.

*The motivation for me to embark on a doctorate was my personal (in terms of professional growth and development), and nationalistic desires to improve the piano practice, learning and assessment in my country, Singapore. Considering the impact on more than 40,000 candidates and the staggering outflow of SGD9 million (AUD6.9 million) of exam revenue each year, the motivation is further driven by the pertinence for Singapore to reflect on the long-term endorsement of the British music exam system as the primary tool of assessment. Fuelling this impetus is the consideration of implementing Singapore's own autonomous music exam system so as to meet the needs of our music fraternity, and to utilise the revenue for scholarships, arts education and promotion in the Republic.*

Greg is a former opera singer who now runs a private voice studio

*After thinking about the idea of motivation for the research topic I'm undertaking, it occurred to me the subject of work, or career or portfolio career, has been a motif running through my musical life for a long time. A conversation amongst musicians or singers at the end of a year will often begin with the question "and what have you got lined up for next year?" More often than not, I would have nothing "lined up" and would wing it with the hopefulness that only a youthful, optimistic musician can possess.*

*More specific prompts or incentives for undertaking the action of research into the topic of classical singer's careers, life histories and narratives have been varied but ostensibly I have a desire to scratch more than just the surface of the little understood career of a trained and practicing musician who earns their living from their creative art, especially that of singing in the classical style.*

*A colleague mentioned her doctoral project that investigated the sort of skills 21st century musicians needed, apart from traditional Conservatoire training. This I thought was what singers needed to know too, especially when their careers would be widely divergent, suffer peaks and troughs, go on tangents they hadn't expected, or just plain didn't take off.*

*All the while a desire to include a creative aspect to the research, apart from writing, lurked in the background. Using stories, songs and artefacts associated with the research would be an interesting way of inspiring a sense of understanding.*

John is a graduate of the doctoral program and a flautist who plays new music

*Doctoral studies have become a most significant element in my life. They reflect a desire to learn, to communicate, to extend artistic and scholarly experience - in short, to immerse myself in my practice in a meaningful way and to connect to people and ideas throughout the (especially new music) world. I have often contemplated why a*

*musician would do a doctorate? Where will it take me? For me there have been three distinct phases and experiences:*

*In the beginning: a search for new experience and connections that vivify and extend thinking and practice – a new pathway that focuses on strongest individual professional interests.*

*In the middle: questionable outcomes, but still motivated by idealistic outcomes as work through labyrinthine processes.*

*At the end: personal questioning and a need to extend research . . .*

Agatha is a pipe organist in a city church based in a metropolitan area away from the campus of candidature.

*I am passionate about playing my instrument and the repertoire I select to play. Pipe organs are nearly always impacted by their physical and institutional environment - either moribund, too often like the institutions in which they are housed, or in an encouraging number of environments, at a leading edge of musical expression. My interest lies in the latter, and in the music which is determined to be a valid artistic expression unhindered by the too common descent into faux or simplistic religiosity as an excuse for musical revisionism but striving for the expression of and musical statement and gesture of our time. In achieving this, such music will speak to generations beyond our time, spaces and places. In parallel I am equally passionate about technology and its incorporation into the musical environment, but based on the same precepts as for the organ just noted.*

George is a performing musician who is undertaking studies that reflect on his experiences with new music.

*Doctoral study makes sense to me who, having worked in a musical area for many years, and spent time considering an issue or conundrum and potential musical practice, would like to see a resolution or some development of this. Green rooms are so often filled with these performing issues under discussion but they only remain beer soaked post performance arguments and ideas. A*

*doctoral program allows such topics of importance to practising musicians to be developed. I am in a practice-based degree that doesn't appear to emphasise an academic trajectory but rather a genuine (dare I say old fashioned) interest in the enquiry and topic itself.*

## Discussion

Four major themes to emerged from the participant stories above.

1. Love of learning
2. Access to resources
3. Connection to the subject matter
4. Altruism

There were several minor themes to emerge in from the data, and these will be explored as they occur in the discussion. They represented diagrammatically below in Figure 1.

### Love of Learning

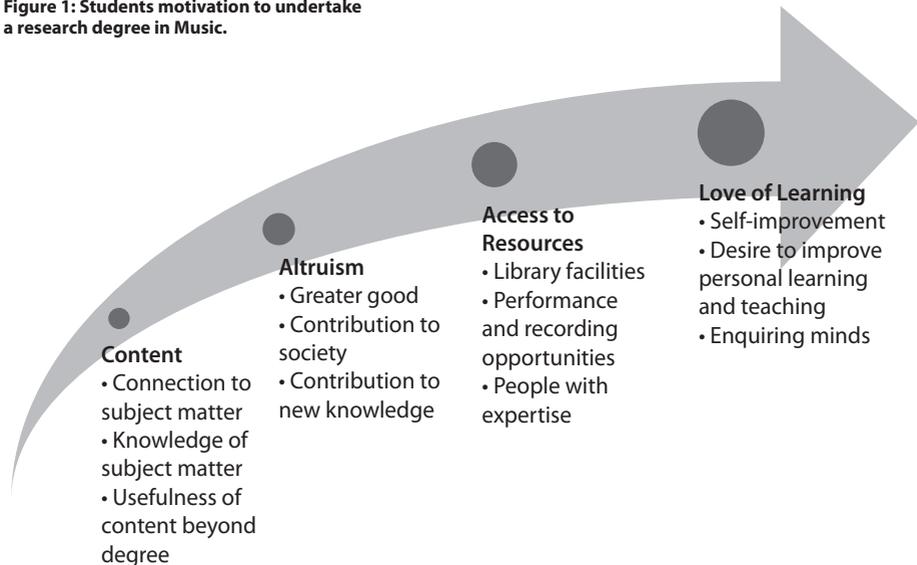
This theme is evident in a number of the cases. Firstly, as Peta notes, there has to be "... a genuine

love of the experience of learning" in order for her to maintain focus over a long timeframe. For her, a key factor was the satisfaction inherent in being able to self-direct. The end product is not significant, because it's more about "the love of the journey of learning, thinking, changing and being challenged."

For Donald, there is long-held ambition to "push myself to perform to the limits of my potential" while for Janette, this was only part of the story. Acknowledging the need for personal growth, she also had a sense of the greater good, the need to interrogate practices for the economic and cultural good of an emerging nation.

Marion also had an eye on the greater good through her expressed desire to improve the classroom experiences for her students. Her professional growth is tied into this, but she also wanted to make her outcomes more generalisable and applicable beyond the contexts she investigated. Dianne shared this desire, and through her love of reading the literature she came to the conclusion that her own experiences had something to offer others.

**Figure 1: Students motivation to undertake a research degree in Music.**



This theme is perhaps the most difficult to articulate and quantify. Anecdotally, these are the students who struggle least to fulfil program requirements because they are intrinsically motivated beyond their own personal ambitions. Related to this, the students in this category are more likely to move through what Nash (2011) refers to as Me-search to employ Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) as a means to position their research work in music.

### **Access to resources**

In a small number of cases the desire to undertake a research program was motivated by the facilities, knowledge and people to whom it provided access. For Narelle, it was a case of acknowledging the importance of connecting with others in her field on a regular basis through weekly colloquia and being part of the learning community. In her case this community provided "access to visiting academics and musicians."

Andrew similarly notes importance of meeting "regularly with researchers, lecturers and supervisors [which] formed a framework for continued personal professional development."

These two examples emphasize the importance of creating a culture through which research training can take place. In addition, the significance of having a community of both musicians and academics who understand the research process cannot be underestimated. There are resource implications for the academy, particularly for institutions that have recently gained university status and do not have a strong research culture. The sense of belonging to a Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998) was high a strong impetus expressed by these two students. This community is, in part, the source of knowledge around the subject matter.

### **Connection to the subject matter**

For candidates with a strong practice-based or performance element, this theme emerged

strongly. An opportunity to engage deeply with repertoire was critical for Agatha the organist and Brianna the flautist. Agatha's opening statement refers to the choice of repertoire, and she goes on to describe the importance of expanding the repertoire base through developing the instrument beyond its traditional basis. Brianna describes the space the degree gives her to explore the repertoire of her choice, at her own pace. She is the only candidate who refers specifically to the degree "ultimately preparing me for the professional world of music." Conversely, John doesn't see his program as driving towards an academic outcome; rather, he sees it as an "old fashioned interest in the enquiry and topic itself." The first part of this statement could be construed as love of learning described earlier, though the second points strongly to the content-specific stimulus behind his desire to research.

For Greg, it was a case of following a theme that had been part of her musical life for many years. Until this study, she had not acknowledged that this connection to the subject matter was, in a sense, her life's work.

Content is often the initial motivator for higher study. Supervisors describe the "gee-wow" idea that brings a student to the door and spurs them on to make application for study. It is also, along with academic credentials, one of the key selection criteria for entry. Academies make such decisions on the basis of students' proposals of subject matter that is original, sustainable and demonstrates a capacity to contribute to new knowledge.

### **Altruism**

Many of the participants referred to this theme in one way or another. While not the primary driver for study, Marion and Dianne mention it in addition to the love of learning as a significant factor. For others, this was the central motivator.

Agatha comments that it is her hope that her research into new music and innovative

approaches to old instruments will result in “music will speak to generations beyond our time, spaces and places.” Andrew, whose responses feature in the “love of learning” theme also expresses a desire to stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before when he states “the research papers and other texts of successful practitioners...as a beneficiary of this material, I feel a duty to try and give something back.” He also notes that, in the light of this literature he has a desire to “document those aspects of my practice that might be useful to others...”

Arthur offers perhaps the most erudite summation of this theme when he states:  
*...my PhD was never perceived as being an end in itself; a means to political/academic credibility certainly not personal or aggrandisement: my motivation has been primarily intrinsic than extrinsic: energised more in terms of intrinsic personal satisfaction and fulfilment than extrinsic political or academic ‘rewards’: above all, it is motivated by and committed to something much more than myself alone...*

The generalizability of research (along with the recurring mantras of validity and reliability) is one of the key components emphasized in the research training courses the students at this site undertake. Like “love of learning” it is not surprising that these students, despite not explicitly saying so, are more likely to succeed in both the program of study and in academic life beyond the degree.

## In summary

This paper set out to explore the motivation of students to undertake research programs in music and music education. The purpose was to assist those interested in undertaking further study, to help those who are already pursuing programs of study and unpack some of the issues for tertiary workers involved in advising research students. While a correlation between each of the themes identified and “success” in the program

of study is not possible (or desirable), the variety of views expressed is a rich source of information for these three cohorts. Furthermore, the four themes are not hierarchical and each is valid for those participants. Their accounts are, of course, a product of time and place. Alternative and equally valid responses may be put forward at different stages of candidature or if the central question was posited in a different manner. While the four themes are presented in a linear fashion here, there is some overlap between themes, and some minor themes from the raw data that have not been fully explored.

The last word here rests with John, the only graduate to respond to the study who draws together the themes espoused in this paper. John refers to “the desire to learn ... to connect to people and ideas ... to the integration of professional interests and the idea of struggling through labyrinthine processes, spurred on by idealistic outcomes”

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