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Moving towards excellence: Creating a teaching framework that challenges musicians to a pursuit of excellence

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Abstract

This paper presents a number of research challenges in understanding the physical, cognitive and psychological development of music performers and the way that these elements interact in a teaching and learning framework to take performance to heightened levels of excellence. The paper begins the process of defining these three areas of development through the lens of some key researchers in educational pedagogy such as Marzano and Pickering (1997), together with a number of researchers who have studied the process of optimising sporting performance and training, including Boutcher (1990), Moran (1996) and Horsley (1995). Finally, the paper suggests areas for future research to refine this framework in the context of the university environment.

Introduction

Students begin their tertiary music studies having already spent many years in training as instrumentalists or vocalists. These skills are not acquired without years of dedication to individual practice and an openness to and eagerness about all aspects of learning. The role of the teachers within the conservatorium is to challenge these performers to take their performance to ever-increasing levels of excellence through a carefully structured teaching and learning framework that takes into consideration all elements of artistic excellence. Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music (CQCM), within the Faculty of Education and Creative Arts at Central Queensland University (CQU), offers four undergraduate degree programs in music and the performing arts, three in Mackay and one in Rockhampton. Students may study one of these programs, the Bachelor of Music program, on campus or in 'virtual' mode, which allows them to make use of multimodal delivery platforms.

However, the main focus for all students is their practical study. Each student must audition in their chosen practical study area (voice, instrumental, dance or acting) and may undertake these performance studies in classical, jazz, music theatre or contemporary genres. Supplementing the traditional concepts of the classical conservatorium, staff at CQCM are developing a pedagogical framework that is

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holistic in approach and that considers the physical, cognitive and psychological development of the musician while drawing upon the theory that has been applied in the fields of education and performance training in music and sport. This paper engages specifically with the 2004 CQU Teaching and Learning Showcase theme in terms of the challenge of creating such a pedagogical framework presenting opportunities for ongoing research investigation. This framework underpins a number of important teaching strategies that represent best practice in learning and teaching research, enabling students to move their performance to increasing levels of excellence and creativity.

The nature of music performance

Live performance is, in its essence, a transient art form that occurs in real time and that is never truly repeatable. Furthermore, the ratio of time taken in preparation and the time in performance is enormously high in favour of the preparation time. The preparation involves a substantial commitment and it needs selfless dedication to survive this long and often lonely process of physical, cognitive and psychological groundwork. However, in order to achieve excellence, the performer must always keep in mind the public performance goal throughout the preparation process.

In addition, these performances are judged against very subjective criteria that, according to Rubidge (1996) and Taruskin (1995) and supported by Epstein (1996), are significantly affected by the times and culture in which the performances occur and are “inextricably linked to the work’s history, which is formed and informed by its previous performances” (Rubidge, 1996, p. 219). This complicates the learning process for the musicians as they use their cognitive skills to analyse recordings and performance practice of historic performances, develop their technical skills to try to emulate these high standards and master the psychological pressure that comes as a result of their increasing awareness of their strengths and weaknesses as performers. Hence, the work of creating a performer of excellence requires a curriculum that nurtures the whole performer.

With all this in mind, the challenge is to create a teaching and learning framework that allows performers to develop their physical capabilities as musicians, maximise their cognitive abilities to inform their music performance and finally gain some level of control over their psychological growth as performers in order to bring their total performance to ever-increasing levels of excellence. Each aspect of the performer’s development interacts with the other and an effective pedagogy will be informed by this understanding.

The physical development of the music performer

The very first issue that faces anyone in the performing arts is the development of technique, and the musician must address the whole issue of developing a technique that will enable healthy performance to continue unheeded throughout a potentially long career. The development of technique for musicians often begins at a very young age when young bodies are supple and gaining in strength, but an early or late start in the development of technique does not presuppose particular levels of success in later life. Anecdotal evidence bears this out even among students at the Conservatorium.

Dedicated and effective personal practice underpins the lives of all great music performers. Without adequate practice, no music performer will come close to mastering their instrument or voice. At CQCM, students are taught, in lectures, workshops and one-to-one lessons, how to gain the most out of their practice time through a range of physical, cognitive and psychological strategies. The great violinist Fritz Kreisler once stated that technique is more an issue of the brain than of the body. Lochner (1951), in his biography of Kreisler, recounts that Kreisler never practised before a concert performance as this was numbing to the brain and deadened his sense of alertness. Needless to say, this did not mean that Kreisler never practised, but rather that he was careful in the way that he practised so that it did not extinguish the flame of creativity in the process of endless repetition.

Salmon and Meyer (1992) add to this debate on the inextricable links among the physical, cognitive and psychological aspects of the performer and how this affects performance skills.

> Practicing [*sic*] when you are excessively mentally or physically tense makes those states more likely to recur when the music is performed later. In other words, we learn a great deal more than simply the music we're practising: feelings and sensations that become associated with the music can be evoked when the music is later recreated during a performance. (p.195)

Physical practice also requires students to master relaxation techniques so that tension is not built into the muscular development. Regardless of the particular musical discipline that is being studied, Gruner's work (1991) on voice production has significant application.

> The right relationship between poised breath and relaxation is one of the main features of voice production. In many ways the problems are similar to sports training. A good singer will have learnt how to 'support' his [*sic*] voice without involving other parts of the body which should remain in a state of relaxation. (p. 61)

The development of a relaxed technique underpins all performance pedagogy at CQCM, thus prioritising the physical health and well being of all music students across all performance disciplines.

Another key area that is important in the development of excellence in music performance is that of concentration and attention. This aspect of the performance development touches on all three areas – physical, cognitive and psychological – yet it impacts significantly on the physical development of performers as they are required to be able to perform several tasks at once in the process of creating a music performance. This includes the technical processes of playing an instrument, reading the music and controlling the muscular responses of the body to maximise the effectiveness of the technique. Moran (1996) asserts that "'divided attention' refers to the mental process which governs our ability to perform two or more concurrent tasks efficiently" (p. 49). However, people's ability to divide their attention effectively depends on two key factors (Eysenck & Keane, 1995; cited in Moran, 1996): the amount of practice or experience gained by the person in performing the tasks simultaneously; and whether the tasks to be performed use different senses. Moran (1996) goes on to say that we routinely use multitask performance skills and that they are integral to many jobs performed every day. The level of excellence in technique developed by music performers will depend

on their physical development and their ability to manage the concurrent physical tasks effectively and efficiently.

The cognitive development of the music performer

Students at CQCM also enhance their growth as music performers by engaging in cognitive activities integrated into their program of study. These cognitive activities focus initially on gaining some level of understanding of the music being studied for performance. A thorough preparation of a piece of music for performance will be based upon knowledge of the music in terms of its structure and stylistic characteristics. This is informed through the acquisition and synthesis of knowledge gained in the study of the history of music and engaging in an ongoing program of training in musicianship. Both courses integrate aural awareness with theoretical knowledge and the stylistic characteristics of the music being studied informing the practice of that music in solo work and ensembles. This approach has been researched by McPherson (1997), whose longitudinal study of high school instrumentalists over a three-year period found that "aural and creative activities, such as mentally rehearsing music away from an instrument, and playing music by ear, from memory and by improvising, may well be more important to musical development than has commonly been assumed" (p. 213). His work points to a strong cognitive and physical approach to the development of the music performer, incorporating musicianship and aural awareness.

Cognitive development has also been the focus of the research of Robert Marzano and Debra Pickering (1997) who, through the Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL), have developed a learning-centred framework for instructional planning known as the 'Dimensions of Learning'. Their model identifies five dimensions of learning that interact with one another.

> All learning takes place against the backdrop of learners['] attitudes and perceptions (Dimension 1) and their use (or lack of use) of productive habits of mind (Dimension 5). (Marzano & Pickering, 1997, p. 5)

This exemplar can be applied to a wide range of learning environments, including the one-to-one teaching model in use at CQCM. In order to encourage music performers to strive towards high levels of excellence, teachers need to incorporate strategies to allow students to maintain, throughout their period of study, the right attitude to practice, learning and performance, together with some level of understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses as music performers. Further pathways for learning can be opened up when affirmative ways of thinking and behaving underpin the physical and cognitive development of performers.

Superimposed upon these attitudes and perceptions are the cognitive processes of acquiring and integrating knowledge. Marzano and Pickering (1997) further state:

> When positive attitudes and perceptions are in place and productive habits of mind are being used, learners can more effectively do the thinking required in the other three dimensions, that is acquiring and integrating knowledge (Dimension 2), extending and refining knowledge (Dimension 3) and using knowledge meaningfully (Dimension 4). (p. 5)

The understanding of style is critical in challenging performers to levels of excellence and, as they compare and classify their pieces according to stylistic characteristics, they are applying inductive and deductive reasoning that increases their cognitive skills as a music performer (Marzano & Pickering, 1997). Subsequently, the full synthesis of this acquired knowledge is validated through the live performance of the work that challenges students to engage in productive habits of mind, helping them to develop the ability to think critically, creatively and in a self-regulatory way (Marzano & Pickering, 1997, p. 7).

The psychological development of the music performer

While the technical and cognitive development of music performers is being nurtured through one-to-one lessons and engagement in various academic activities, strategies to enhance their psychological and emotional development as artists need to be integrated through all their learning activities. Cognitive development may unlock the facts of a musical style and period, but in order to bring this music to life in a performance the performer must make an emotional and psychological connection with the spirit of the music.

Aside from discussions of the nature of practice and the importance of building a solid technique, the process of taking the work done in the studio to the public performance stage is still fraught with pitfalls for the music performer. One of the key areas addressed consistently by sports psychologists that has particular relevance to the music performer is the area of building confidence. Various studies have concluded that successful performance raises expectations for future success and that conversely failure will lower these expectations (Rodgers, 1997, p. 91). Accordingly, it is evident that the training for music performers needs to provide ample opportunities for successful performance in formal and informal situations so that the confidence in performance is strengthened throughout the study period at CQCM.

As students engage in workshops and master classes, they soon come to realise the importance of careful studio preparation and practice before embarking on a public performance. Bonetti (1997) asserts that there is no substitute for thorough preparation when facing an imminent public performance of any kind. She goes on to say that “performance fears are surely lessened when we have prepared securely and wisely in the months before the performance” (p. 61).

Another strategy for enhancing performance excellence that is particularly useful for singers is the combination of mental and physical rehearsal (Roland, 1997). Mental rehearsal involves the creation in the mind of the performance itself, bringing together all of the senses, but without actually performing. Roland states that it is possible to “train yourself to complete a performance perfectly even when you’re still not able to do it perfectly in reality. It can be used to enhance your memory of words, music or steps without having to go through them physically” (p. 43). Singers face specific issues with regard to practice, as their voice just cannot maintain the same number of hours of practice as an instrumentalist. This strategy of using mental performance can be used to great effect for singers and can be an effective way to build self-confidence, reduce anxiety and increase skill development without compromising the physical health of the voice.

Performers must also face the immediate concerns of controlling their thought patterns while in performance and thus achieving a successful transition from the

comfort and safety of the studio to the openness of the public stage. As stated by Horsley (1995), the dilemma that faces young athletes in performance is very similar to that of the music theatre performer: gaining control of involuntary and spontaneous thoughts.

> Positive self-talk and positive images are the hallmarks of confident athletes. They say positive things to themselves, imagine themselves being successful and in control, and keep their attention focussed on achieving the task at hand rather than worrying about the possibility of failing or of possible negative consequences. (p. 323)

The importance of self-talk applies equally well in the area of music performance. Horsley goes on to say that performers need to understand how the mind works and the significance of self-talk in relation to difficult performance situations.

In sport, many high level performers use a pre-prepared performance routine of thoughts and actions that enhance their forthcoming performance (Boutcher, 1990). Every performer will have developed their own tailor-made process for bringing their physical, cognitive and psychological preparation to fruition on the stage, often in the form of a self-developed pre-performance routine. For many, it is arriving at the theatre early to establish a feel for the space and the stage, and then working through a carefully paced warm-up routine for voice, body and mind. It is therefore the task of the teacher to help students to recognise and formulate their own personal performance preparation routine that will be responsive to the growing emotional and physical needs of performers and to the tasks that are set before them in musical life.

Measuring the learning outcomes

As the teaching and learning processes are refined through greater understanding of the physical, cognitive and psychological needs of the performer, it becomes clear that the measurement of the effectiveness of the pedagogy as applied in the pursuit of artistic excellence creates an even greater research challenge. The criteria for its measurement cover not only the physical and technical aspects of a performance, but also the level of emotional connection that the performer makes with the music being performed and with the audience who witnesses that performance. Within the context of a tertiary Conservatorium of Music, performances are measured against such criteria in a type of assessment known as high stakes assessment (Gregory & Clarke, 2003) that measures a student's success in one particular performance. The progressive work of students through the year is accounted for in other parts of their course grades, but the ultimate test of any music performer is always within the context of a one-off activity, whether as an examination or in a concert situation.

The issue of benchmarking the success of a performance against perceived standards of excellence is yet another challenge to be taken into consideration in the development of a teaching and learning framework that fosters artistic excellence in performance. Many of these performance benchmarks are intuitive, and this is certainly true for audiences. Each person in the audience measures the success of the performance against their own set of criteria as they bring to the performance their own levels of expectation.

Research implications and future pathways

This paper introduces the notion that performers need to engage in a range of interrelated teaching and learning strategies that will develop the total music performer and allow her or him to engage in a range of successful performance outcomes and situations. The teaching and learning framework adopted by staff at CQCM is based on understanding the ways that the physical, cognitive and psychological components of the development of the music performer integrate with one another as these performers strive to achieve ever-increasing levels of artistic excellence in performance. However, while this remains a challenge in the area of teaching and learning, this holistic approach to performance training is supported by many studies of the nature of musical performance (Bonetti, 1997; Dunsby, 1996; Hamilton, 1997; Roland, 1997) and is informed by some key researchers in educational and sports pedagogy.

The challenge of refining and measuring the success of such a pedagogical framework within a culture of high stakes assessment presents opportunities for ongoing research investigation, yet its current integration within the CQCM suite of courses in performance presents an example of best practice in learning and teaching, enabling students to move their performance to increasing levels of excellence and creativity.

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