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Chapter 1. Introduction: a research-informed approach to vocal and instrumental music learning and teaching

Henrique Meissner, Renee Timmers, and Stephanie Pitts

Sound Teaching is a celebration of what can happen when music education practitioners, musicians and researchers have the opportunity to talk to one another. Ideas are shared, connections are forged, assumptions are challenged, and everyone leaves the exchange with food for thought. This should not be a rarity, but the practicalities of life as an instrumental teacher, a student, or a university lecturer all too often mean that we pursue our immediate demands and pressing deadlines without taking time to pause, think, and discuss.

This book has taken shape during 2020, when the pandemic lockdowns caused us as editors to miss our regular face to face interactions with colleagues, and the stimulus of incidental conversations that create a shared sense of academic, educational, or musical purpose. This was another reminder to us that many of our contributors know all too well the challenges of working in isolation: instrumental teachers often lack opportunities to exchange pedagogical and professional views with like-minded colleagues, and doctoral students crave the intellectual exchange of connections with others working on similar topics.

We believe that fostering communication between musicians and researchers can benefit music performance and teaching practices, as well as research in music psychology and music education. Traditionally, a lot of learning and teaching in European classical and folk music is based on practitioners' experience; tutors develop their pedagogy on what they feel works well, and what has worked for them in the past (e.g., Mills & Smith, 2003). Although

pedagogical practices evolve over time, it can be fruitful to deliberately explore new ways of teaching and investigate strategies based on systematic research and empirical evidence. In addition, collaboration with teachers and performers helps researchers to continue developing and refining research questions and directions. Thus, research can inform music education and performance practice and vice versa.

Indeed, the topics and questions that are explored in the chapters of this book arose out of the authors' teaching, performing, or conducting practice: for instance, Cláudia Braz Nunes's reflections on her everyday decisions as a classroom music teacher led her to examine music educators' attitudes to teaching (Chapter 2); Jonathan Ayerst's wish to improvise in classical genres motivated him to investigate learning improvisation skills systematically (Chapter 6); Mary Hawkes and Elsa Perdomo-Guevara's experiences with performance anxiety inspired them to explore ways for enhancing their students' confidence and joy in performance (Chapters 10 and 11). Each chapter originated from questions embedded in daily teaching or performing practice, and many chapters contain honest descriptions of the starting points of the authors. Thus, the book provides examples of practitioner research that could contribute to the professional development of vocal and instrumental music teachers.

Aims of the book

The main aim of this book is to show how a research-informed approach can help develop vocal and instrumental music learning and performing. The chapters address topics that are central to music education practices including musicians as teachers, the development of specialist musical skills, musical communication and expression, and performance confidence and enjoyment. By sharing our findings and explaining our own motivations and

the research methods that we used, we hope to develop greater understanding of the ways in which research can inform practice, and to receive feedback from practitioners so that this can inform future research. Growing understanding of the teaching and learning process, and of communication in lessons and ensembles can help to enhance the music participation of all involved: students, teachers, performers and audience. Feedback from our own students and the responses of music education professionals who attended the *Sound Teaching* conference (Sheffield, 2018) where initial versions of most of these chapters were presented, showed that there is an appetite for recent, practical research on effective musical learning and development in accessible language.

What is music psychology research and how is it relevant?

The development of expert performance of music tends to be surrounded by mystery, as most of the required practice, rehearsal and teaching happens behind closed doors. In studies in the field of music psychology, processes of learning and practice related to music performance take centre stage. These studies aim to develop greater understanding of, and as such demystify, what is happening in musical learning and performance. Music psychology research has developed rapidly in recent decades (for introductory review chapters, see e.g., Ashley & Timmers, 2017), generating enhanced insight into processes of learning, expression, and emotion¹ related to music education and performance, providing opportunities for the professional development of instrumental teachers² and portfolio musicians, and addressing debates about the purpose and impact of music education (see e.g., Pitts, 2017). The application of music psychology findings to music education practice can

¹ In this book 'emotion' is used in a generic sense, including affect, feeling and mood.

² In this book instrumental music teachers refers to voice teachers as well as instrumental teachers.

facilitate sound music teaching.

In our title, we have placed the emphasis on *Sound Teaching*, but the perspective of the learner is obviously strongly embedded in any consideration of effective teaching. When the characteristics and needs of the learner are at the heart of music education, learning can thrive. Teaching and learning are processes that develop over time and lead to change, so increasing the potential for improved performance, better teaching, and future learning (cf. Ambrose et al., 2010, p. 3). Music psychology research has a role to play in informing and enhancing these processes, and our authors demonstrate this in a range of musical and educational settings. Music education is also not confined to ‘sound’, as potentially implied by the title. Indeed, an active strand of music psychological research is to examine the varied ways in which music cognition and learning are embodied, emphasising the relevance of the body and its active interaction with the environment and others.

Context influenced teaching and research

The research reported in this book is based on studies that were conducted in England and Scotland, Spain, Portugal, and China. Naturally, the cultural contexts in these countries have influenced the research questions and findings and there might be cultural differences in attitudes to topics. For instance, in some Spanish speaking countries it might be taboo to talk about music performance anxiety in lessons, whereas this topic is usually openly discussed in The Netherlands. In some countries it is normal educational practice to ask pupils for their opinion while this might be highly unusual in other places.

Studies in this book include a range of teaching situations, from music learning in groups

common in folk traditions, to instrumental lessons with children or conservatoire students, and from teaching and learning in choirs and ensembles to self-teaching of improvisation skills. Much of the focus is on the teaching of notated European classical music, but there are exceptions: Chapter 3 focuses on the aural traditions of Scottish traditional music, Chapter 6 examines the processes of learning to improvise, while Chapter 9 investigates musical signing and singing for children with hearing impairment.

For all these studies ethical approval was obtained through the standard University of Sheffield review process. Participants and their parents (in the case of children and teenagers) received information letters, had the opportunity to ask questions, and gave written or electronic informed consent. It was our intention to make research participation as inclusive as possible within the practical limitations of the projects; specifically musicians with various abilities and levels of playing were invited to take part in these studies (see for example Chapters 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, and 11). The collection of chapters illustrates how these cultural, musical, and environmental contexts have influenced the research questions and approaches, but also invites connections across different settings, which we will return to in our closing chapter.

Research methodology

A wide variety of research methods were used by our authors, as the choice of methodology is related to the research aims and questions of each study. Several chapters report on studies that used individual or focus group interviews to learn more about participants' views on the topics under investigation (e.g., Chapters 2, 4, 7, 8). Participants ranged from young children to lifelong learners, and from new teachers to experienced music educators, who were each

invited to give their perspectives in age-appropriate ways, and sometimes in native languages other than English. Thematic analysis of this qualitative data helped to illuminate the stories of lived musical experience, sometimes identifying trends in behaviours and attitudes, but more often highlighting the diversity of pupil perspectives with which any teacher, in any teaching situation, is faced. Several chapters (e.g., 2 & 8) reference Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which acknowledges the role of the researcher in interpreting participants' narratives, deriving themes across multiple cases, and considering the broader claims that can be made from those findings (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

Chapter 3 reports on an ethnographic case study investigating traditional music practices in Scotland while Chapter 6 describes results from Jonathan Ayerst's autoethnographic research exploring his own learning of improvisation. Ethnography is a qualitative research method based on observation and interaction with people in a real-world environment. An ethnographic approach could be viewed as research exploring unknown territory approached with open-mindedness towards events and experience, awareness of personal interaction with data, and an awareness of the researcher's own role in the musical communities they study (e.g., Ruskin & Rice, 2012). In autoethnographic studies the personal subjectivity of the researcher is central and their relationship with their own practice and situation is explored (cf., Barr, 2019). This subjective and reflective approach is extended to include perspectives from research literature on learning and development, offering a dialogue between research and practice, as well as an opportunity for scaffolded learning (Chapter 6).

The research that informed Chapters 4 and 10 employed participatory action research. In this type of research practitioners investigate an aspect of their work to understand it better or to improve it (e.g., Feldman et al., 2018). According to Cain (2012), participatory action

research in education should fulfil the following conditions: it should include self-study; it should involve students; consider the influence of context; involve more than one action cycle; and engage with, and contribute to, the development of theory (Cain, 2012, p. 409).

Mary Hawkes worked with a group of piano teachers to reflect on their own practice, implement changes, and consider the effects of these on their pupils – a cycle that, in less formal ways, offers a model for reflexive practice throughout a music educator's career.

Development and process are central to action research, which differentiates it from research that aims to experimentally test the effectiveness of a certain teaching or learning approach.

Experimental comparisons were done in addition to more exploratory and observational work by Henrique Meissner (Chapter 4), and Shen Li (Chapter 5). Such a mixed methods approach is increasingly common and helps to document changes and developments over time (as in Pennill's work on socio-behavioural changes in ensembles), participants' perspectives on these processes, as well as verify some of their outcomes.

Overview and structure of the book

Each chapter starts with an introduction explaining the background of the study, followed by a summary of the research aims, a description of the methodology and main findings. In most chapters, the research findings are illustrated by vignettes or case studies containing practical examples or quotes. Chapters finish with a reflection on the practical implications of the research for musical development, or music learning and teaching. For ease of use, an overview of the main points is included near the end of chapters. In most chapters, 'student' is used to refer to learners at university or music college, while 'pupil' generally refers to children and amateur musicians who come to a tutor's music studio for their instrumental lessons. Whenever research participants are mentioned in chapters pseudonyms or codes are

used to protect the anonymity of the people whose views are represented, except in a few cases (e.g., Chapter 9) where naming eminent professionals (with their agreement) was more respectful of their expertise.

The chapters in this book are grouped according to four themes: (1) musicians as teachers; (2) developing specialist musical skills; (3) group leadership and interaction in ensembles; and (4) strategies for enhancing musical confidence and enjoyment. The first section of the book encompasses the range of activities often included in a portfolio career. In Chapter 2 Cláudia Braz Nunes reports on a study that explored how music educators' past experiences as students influenced their current attitudes toward teaching. Findings indicate ways in which musical learning experiences impact musical lives. In various ways, music educators function as role models, shaping their students' views on music teaching as well as music performance practice. Another example of this comes in Chapter 3, where Jo Miller shares her findings from interviewing, observing, and participating with musicians in Scottish traditional music groups. Tutors in these settings are often experienced musicians who teach alongside their performing career. This chapter focuses on how tutors act as role models by constructing activities which build the skills necessary for participation in community-based traditional music sessions and informal performances.

The second section of the book addresses research related to the development of musical skills such as expression and improvisation. Expressiveness is an important aspect of music performance as it makes musical participation more enjoyable and interesting for all involved, for performers as well as listeners. Performance expression is a complex phenomenon as it is a synthesis of various elements. In an expressive performance, musicians convey an interpretation of structure, character, and associated concepts to their audience.

Musical tension is also an important aspect of expressiveness; the listener should feel that the music is going somewhere (e.g., Fabian, Timmers, & Schubert, 2014; Meissner, 2018). The teaching of expressive performance is explored in Chapter 4, as Henrike Meissner offers a ‘toolkit’ of strategies based on her research with children and teenagers. In Chapter 5 Shen Li explores the teaching of timbre, drawing on mixed methods research which investigated interactions between body and sound for the communication of timbre in piano performances.

The last chapter in this section on specialist music skills focuses on learning improvisation skills. Although it is common for jazz musicians to improvise from the early stages of learning, there are relatively few classical musicians who learn to improvise as part of their professional education and practice. As a professional organist and pianist Jonathan Ayerst had ample performing experience and was knowledgeable in interpreting scores. However, initially, these musicianship skills did not enable him to improvise freely on Baroque models such as Fugues and Toccatas. In Chapter 6, Ayerst describes how he learned to improvise by constructing his own exercises and by using reflective journaling to structure this developmental process.

In the third section of the book the focus is on topics related to learning in groups, group leadership and interaction in ensembles. Playing or singing in groups is not only enjoyable, it can also be specifically formative. In Chapter 7 Nicola Pennill explores the development of communication and interaction in small ensembles across rehearsals. A longitudinal case study in a music college examined how two newly formed vocal ensembles developed towards a first performance. Pennill investigated the groups’ interpersonal interactions, and their developments, highlighting the relevance of interactional behaviours at the start of a rehearsal process as well as the rapid transition and change midway through a series of

rehearsals. Better understanding a group's progression towards performance can help teachers and performers to recognize and prepare for changing group dynamics over time. In Chapter 8, Michael Bonshor adds the role of the conductor to this consideration of rehearsal interactions, identifying the factors affecting confidence amongst adult amateur singers in a wide range of group singing activities, and using these research findings to extrapolate some practical recommendations for conductors working with amateur singing groups.

The final section of the book focuses on strategies for enhancing musicians' confidence and enjoyment. This section starts off with the description of an exploratory study with deaf and hearing-impaired (DHI) children who participated in singing and signing. Gail Dudson's study (Chapter 9) aimed to explore effective strategies for teaching DHI young people music skills of pitch, pulse, rhythm, and expression, and to investigate how British Sign Language can be made 'musical'. This research focused on the experience of participation, how engagement was enabled, and what activities were effective.

While many musicians have experienced music performance anxiety and there is a growing body of research investigating this phenomenon, Mary Hawkes and Elsa Perdomo-Guevara decided to focus their research on positive approaches towards performance. In Chapter 10 Hawkes considers practical applications of teaching pre-performance routines to improve pupils' performance experience. Her research shows how psychological skills training, commonplace in sport and researched in sport psychology, could also benefit musicians preparing for performance. On a similar theme of enhancing performance experience, Elsa Perdomo-Guevara investigated which factors may contribute to performance-related joy via a large questionnaire study with 625 professional and amateur musicians. The implications of this study for teachers are explored in Chapter 11, where Perdomo-Guevara examines

teachers' roles and their acting as a first audience for their pupils, in the enhancement of students' performance experience.

We end in Chapter 12 by exploring connections between several findings and applications discussed in the book. This chapter considers implications of the reported research for lifelong music learning and future research. Readers are invited to reflect on the potential applications of these studies in the various settings of their own teaching or performing practice. We offer some strategies and suggestions for developing research skills as a music educator and reflect on the benefits of a research-informed approach for teachers and their students.

Our hope is that this book will encourage music educators, practitioners, and researchers to find the points of connection in their work, to create new opportunities to talk to one another, to engage in research, and to be inspired in their teaching and performing. It is our conviction that research is at its most powerful when embedded in and scrutinised by practice.

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