

Est.
1841

YORK
ST JOHN
UNIVERSITY

McCaleb, J Murphy ORCID logoORCID:
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9867-9909> (2014) Developing Ensemble Musicians. In: From Output to Impact: The integration of artistic research results into musical training. Proceedings of the 2014 ORCiM Seminar, 19–20 November 2014, Orpheus Research Centre in Music, Ghent.. (Unpublished)

Downloaded from: <https://ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/1302/>

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. [Institutional Repository Policy Statement](#)

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorks.ac.uk

McCaleb, JM (2014) 'Developing Ensemble Musicians' delivered at the seventh international Orpheus Research Centre in Music (ORCiM) seminar 'From Output to Impact: The integration of artistic research results into musical training', Orpheus Institute, Ghent, Belgium, 19–20 November.

Teaching ensemble performance within universities is highly idiosyncratic. Whilst performing in ensembles is part of many UK degrees, learning outcomes range from developing 'skills relating to the effective preparation and performance of ensemble repertoire' (Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, 2012) to 'skills that are necessary in making chamber music work: the ability to listen to each other carefully; to know in detail your group's parts and not just your own; to plan effective rehearsals; to identify those elements of the music that require the most work and find a working method to overcome those difficulties' (University of York, 2014). Although delivery of these modules varies widely, reliance on students' experience within ensembles as the main pedagogical approach suggests an assumption that students acquire appropriate skills primarily through participation. Thus, we may ask:

1. What may comprise a systematic pedagogy of skills required for effective ensemble performance?

As the beginning of a larger project, this paper outlines my pedagogical method to develop fundamental ensemble skills. This work extends artistic research found in *Embodied Knowledge in Ensemble Performance*, an exploration of interaction within uncondensed ensembles (2014a). Applying these findings to pedagogy presents significant methodological concerns:

2. Should such a systematic pedagogical approach to ensemble development be constructed, how could its effectiveness be verified?

To begin, this presentation critiques the primary pedagogical recommendations found within performance studies. As will become evident, these do not provide a sufficient amount or quality of content to significantly impact ensemble instruction. Summarising my previous research, I isolate skills needed to encourage inter-reaction. From there, I propose strategies for developing those skills in ensembles (which are incorporated into my teaching at York St John University), providing a context to explore the issue of assessing musicianship.

Previous research

Within performance studies, there have been few attempts to establish ensemble teaching strategies. Elaine King recommends students 'obtain both further musical training and greater skills in social collaboration [through] 'role learning' education to expose self-insight and group awareness of team-role behaviour' (King, 2006, p. 280). Students may then identify the role they assume and the kind of leadership they display.

King's proposals are problematic, however. First, how are these roles expressed in performance? Musicians' social interaction allows them to be categorised in rehearsal discussions, but the same may not hold when playing music. Second, even if musicians could be categorised thusly, how would this benefit performance? Labels such as leader, deputy-leader, contributor, inquirer, fidget, distractor, joker, and quiet one (Ibid., p. 277) may reinforce students' characteristics, possibly even creating self-fulfilling prophecies. Third, such application of sociological findings to music does not acknowledge basic differences between ensembles and other groups. As ensemble performance requires interpersonal interaction to a degree rarely found outside of music, use of non-musicological research must be carefully contextualised.

King and Davidson propose strategies for rehearsing ensembles (2004) such as leaving time for unexpected difficulties (p. 108), engaging everyone to avoid exclusion (p. 109), balancing short sections and run-throughs (p. 110), and so on. Whilst all valid advice, this verges on common sense. Tips such as 'when time is short, [...] only work on passages that need attention, so as not to waste time going over parts that are sufficiently grasped' (p. 110) seem

particularly glaring. It is hard to envision their intended audience: those who play musical instruments well, yet lack ensemble experience?

It is hardly surprising that no systematic ensemble pedagogy has emerged from this. However, recent research on ensembles may allow for a new approach.

Inter-reaction, a framework for understanding a range of musical interaction in ensembles, emerges from topics such as the multimodality of musical information, the effect of musical content on performance actions, and the importance of both instrumental and personal familiarity within ensembles to the final performance (McCaleb, 2014a; 2014b; 2014c). It is grounded in the procedural knowledge skilled musicians have acquired and constantly apply through performance. This framework contains three stages: transmitting, inferring and attuning. Each stage is not discrete, but part of an ongoing process.

Transmitting: The ways performers operate their instruments directly relate to their musical intentions. The variety of nuanced techniques needed for instrumental operation demand physical changes which may be discernible to observers. Thus, the execution of different musical intentions results in noticeable changes to the sensory output of performers, regardless of any communicative intention.

Inferring: Musicians embody knowledge through extensive experience playing instruments, participating within and observing ensembles, and with conventions such as melody, harmony and orchestration. Through this, musicians may infer coperformers' musical intentions based on the sensory output they perceive. Depending on the degree to which musicians are familiar with the surrounding instrumentation and performers, conclusions can range from determining basic properties such as volume and tempo to nuanced shadings of interpretation.

Attuning: Ensemble musicians perceive individual contributions to the performance occurring alongside theirs and draw conclusions about them. Along with the characteristics of these performances, musicians apply the inferred intentions of their colleagues to their own unfolding performances. Thus, they constantly adjust their interpretation to recognise the ensemble's shared intentions (Sawyer, 2005).

Every action in performance begets another, creating an environment which constantly adapts to musicians' interpretations. Inter-reaction describes how ensembles may gain collective interpretative momentum, with musicians so attuned to one another and the emergent performance that creative decisions become cognitively distanced from them. Rather than alternately leading, the balance of input and adaptation encourages cognitive freedom and flexibility. Creation of the ensemble's interpretation is so distributed that it may feel like the musicians are tapping into something greater than their individual intentions and acting as a unified whole.

Developing inter-reaction

Inter-reaction requires performers to tangibly and abstractly engage with musical knowledge. This encompasses three primary skills: awareness of oneself and one's surroundings, flexibility of interpretation, and technical fluency. The following section explores the broad strategies I use to develop these skills. As these skills are closely related in practice, several exercises I outline target more than one. Understanding these skills independently, however, allows for focused critique of students' learning.

First, awareness of oneself and one's surroundings are key to fully engaging the transmitting stage of inter-reaction. Whilst it is hardly ground-breaking to suggest that musicians listen, I propose an holistic awareness where they are mindful of the aural and visual information they express through performance as much as the information expressed around them. This is reminiscent of Pauline Oliveros's instruction: 'Remember that others are listening for you and responding to you' (*Wind Horse*, 1989).

- Warm-ups provide opportunities to stretch students' awareness. For example, alternate who starts phrases of a piece, rotating through the ensemble, experimenting with starting with a breath, a nod, or some other indication. The same could be done at other structural changes, including the ends of phrases, tempo changes, shifts of dynamic or style, and so on. This forces students to focus not only on different musicians, but also on different musical elements. Also, it will become clear if students lack confidence expressing their interpretation or have technical difficulty doing so.
- In rehearsal, remind students of their individual responsibility for intonation, rhythm, timbre, phrasing, and so on. Someone is always listening to them, even simply for confirmation. This can be explored through a variety of exercises, including assigning musical elements to different players to encourage performers to listen across the ensemble; i.e. listen to the first part's dynamics, the second part's articulation, and the third part's rhythm. Although artificially balancing attention across performers is complicated, flexibility of awareness is important to inter-reaction. Increased focus on students' performances and those of the rest of the ensemble will subtly shift their attention away from notation.

Second, it is not enough for ensemble members to simply be aware of the performances around them; they need to actively respond. This is impossible to do effectively if they are unable to recontextualise interpretations.

- Warm-ups also provide opportunities to play interpretative games. Using a piece of known repertoire, one student becomes the interpretative leader. This is particularly effective when they have an inside part, as the resulting interpretation may not follow expected patterns. Students are encouraged to continually search for creative ways of interpreting their parts – and are prompted to do so by the explorative interpretations of their peers.
- Interpretative games are also useful in rehearsal. Encourage re-examinations of interpretation based on different musical elements, asking how harmonic movement/rhythm/texture/etc. may encourage certain interpretations and provide new directions for artistic development. Whether these interpretations make it into performance is irrelevant; it is more important to encourage a wealth of possibilities for students to be creative and prepared for unexpected events. Discourage students from letting their interpretations grow stale: it is their responsibility to re-engage with them, as others are listening for and reacting to their performances.

Third, technical fluency primarily affects musicians' attentions. As students' technique improves, they can afford to attention not to their actions, but to their resultant sounds (Leman, 2010). Similarly, increased understanding of their parts frees musicians to focus on the performance rather than notation. Instrumental fluency develops through extensive experience of the causal relationship between motion and sound. Although occurring in every interaction with an instrument, it is most focused within individual practice. The intimate relationship between performers, their instruments, and the music they play should be emphasised. Embedding this frees musicians' attentions to engage in the spontaneity and joy of playing with others.

These basic strategies should help students develop inter-reactive skills. However, there are significant methodological issues which need to be addressed to substantiate this claim.

Assessment

Without comprehending the *assessment* of musicians, ensemble pedagogies lack direction. Two significant problems arise from this. First: control groups. My teaching is heavily influenced by my experience in education, performing, and coaching. It would be absurd to try to teach 'unlike me' to provide a benchmark. Likewise, as individuals' teaching methods are similarly idiosyncratic, observing other coaches will not provide a reliable baseline against which to gauge students' progress. Second: how do you measure improvement as an ensemble musician? This is not a matter of quantifiably assessing speed, range, or even difficulty of repertoire. Instead, what needs to be measured is how well a student 'fits' within a group: their ability to reflect and contribute to the ensemble performance.

I propose a three tiered assessment strategy: self assessment, peer assessment, and audience assessment. Individually, none of these capture the entirety of performers' skill sets. However, combining these methods should provide a holistic view of students' progress. Self and peer assessments will take place at the start and end of each term to provide an individual benchmark. The resultant learning trajectories could provide the basis for a standard of musical skill, potentially alleviating issues about control groups. Audience assessments will take place after performances.

Self assessment will be as skills surveys where students are asked questions which may provide insight into self-perception and motivation, including:

- What do you feel are your strengths when playing in ensembles?
- What areas of ensemble playing do you feel need more work?
- What situations do you find challenging about playing in ensembles?
- What situations do you find rewarding about playing in ensembles?

I will conduct semi-open interviews with a sample of the students to explore their self-assessments, involving them in reflective practice.

Peer assessments will be conducted within each ensemble, using Likert scales to assess the following:

- How difficult/easy did you find playing in an ensemble with this performer?
- How likely would you recommend this performer to another ensemble?
- How creative was this performer in their interpretation and expression?
- How much control does this performer demonstrate over their instrument?
- How much musicality does this performer demonstrate?

There is a risk that personal relationships may influence people's judgments of their coperformers. If this becomes evident, it should be explored with the students who have filled out the forms.

Audience assessments will be conducted primarily by tutors and potentially audience members. These will evaluate the ensemble as a whole through questions such as:

- What elements of this performance were effective? Why?
- What elements of this performance could have been improved? Why?

In addition to these methods of assessment, I will draw on the peer observation scheme in place at my university and invite other staff into rehearsals I coach to evaluate my teaching.

Conclusion

As the beginning of a larger study applying artistic research findings to pedagogy, this paper presents my strategies for coaching ensembles at York St John University. Effective performance within musical ensembles requires the use of multiple skills, particularly awareness of oneself and one's surroundings, flexibility of interpretation, and the technical fluency required for both. These skills can be assessed by the students themselves, their coperformers, and their audiences. In combination with my own practice as a chamber musician, this preliminary research appraises systematic strategies for helping musicians develop the skills required for expert ensemble performance.

Works Cited:

- Csikszentmihalyi, M., 1990. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Davidson, J. and King, E., 2004. Strategies for Ensemble Practice. In: A. Williamon (ed.) *Musical Excellence: Strategies and Techniques to Enhance Performance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 105–22.
- Goodman, E., 2002. Ensemble performance. In: J. Rink (ed.) *Musical Performance, A Guide to Understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 153–67.
- King, E., 2006. The roles of student musicians in quartet rehearsals. *Psychology of Music*, April 34/2: 262–83.
- Leman, M., 2010. Music, Gesture, and the Formation of Embodied Meaning. In: R.I. Godøy and M. Leman (eds) *Musical Gestures: Sound, Movement, and Meaning*. New York and London, Routledge. pp. 126–53.
- McCaleb, J.M., 2014a. *Embodied Knowledge in Ensemble Performance*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- McCaleb, J.M., 2014b. Embodied Knowledge in Popular Music Performance. *International Festival for Artistic Innovation*. University of Leeds, UK, 10–14 March 2014.
- McCaleb, J.M., 2014c. Inter-reaction as Creative Process in Improvisation. *Performance Studies Network Third International Conference*. University of Cambridge, UK, 17–20 July 2014.
- Oliveros, P., 1989. *Wind Horse*. [score] Kingston: Deep Listening Publications.
- Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama, 2012. *BMus (Hons) Music course overview 2012*. [online] Available at: <http://www.rwcmd.ac.uk/pdf/bmus_%20course%20overview%20instrumental_vocal_april%202013.pdf> [Accessed 17 November 2014].
- Sawyer, R.K., 2005. Music and Conversation. In: D. Miell, R.A.R. MacDonald and D.J. Hargreaves (eds) *Musical Communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 45–60.
- Turino, T., 2008. *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- University of York, 2014. *Chamber Music - Music, The University of York*. [online] Available at: <<http://www.york.ac.uk/music/undergraduate/modules/2014-15/chamber-music/#tab-3>> [Accessed 17 November 2014].