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Musical ensembles and inclusivity

A creative response presented by

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Students' paths towards studying music in Higher Education are very different than they were even a decade ago. With fewer students able to study music for A-Levels, GCSEs, or BTECs, applicants are increasingly self-taught or educated informally. This challenges the Music course team to adapt our curriculum and delivery to become inclusive of a wider population of potential students and, consequentially, more sustainable.

Collaborating in ensembles is a fundamental part of the BA Music course. Although ensembles have always been part of the curriculum, they are providing increasing opportunities to interrogate the nature of musical learning, the relationship between lecturers and students, and how students' learning may be situated within their personal cultural contexts.

The performance and workshop presented at this event illustrate collaborative ensemble learning in practice. These contextual posters articulate key considerations around this learning and how it challenges both students and lecturers.





Ensembles as professional briefs

Musical ensembles are practical collaborations between musicians in pursuit of an aesthetic goal. The nature of this goal prompts the ensemble to calibrate its methods in specific ways and establish particular priorities. For example, an ensemble rehearsing for a festival will function differently than one preparing for a recording or one devising music to accompany a play.

Likewise, the type of music being performed impacts how an ensemble operates. An ensemble playing from precise notation will apply different rehearsal strategies to one where musicians are learning songs by ear; similarly, a band playing rock music will function differently than one playing folk or an orchestra playing classical music.

In essence, ensembles are intense social groups that work together in pursuit of a highly-nuanced end result. Effective participation in them requires musicians to demonstrate excellent teamwork, problem solving, communication, instrumental or vocal technique, and attention to detail.



Our current curriculum is interlinked with research on democratising the learning experience within musical ensembles—spaces which often strictly hierarchical (McCaleb, 2022). Key to this is giving students a large role in choosing the ensembles they want to run and participate in, therefore helping them to learn ‘musical independence [...] by *making musical decisions that matter*’ (Shieh and Allsup, 2016, p. 33)

Flattening hierarchies

Supporting students in making significant decisions around both the ensembles they participate in and how those ensembles are run cultivates ‘truly active pedagogic encounters [...] in which there is concern and care between parties, [placing] teacher and learner in a horizontal space’ (Allsup & Benedict, 2008, p. 166).

Beyond supporting students’ choices, lecturers have regularly become non-leading members of student ensembles. This challenges the staff to learn musics and repertoires they are not familiar with whilst modelling the transferable skills and experiential learning that will carry graduates through their careers.

As a sector, higher music education has been critiqued for the degree to which it is built around the historic canon and epistemology of Western Art Music (Stepniak and Sirotin, 2020). Contrary to this, our Music curriculum has increasingly embraced a broad range of musical genres and practices in response to decolonisation and gender equality agendas (McCaleb, 2018).

My current research explores the extent to which providing students' choice in ensembles they participate in impacts their perceived inclusion in the course (McCaleb, 2024). Ultimately, many pedagogical decisions around course and curriculum design are based in the fundamental belief that **the content of the course should be authentic to students' musical cultures.**

Embracing musical cultures

Please talk to my students and me about any aspect of our experience learning and making music together.



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