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Playing Together: developing ensembles through musical play

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Abstract
Group warm-ups are uncommon in instrumental ensembles within higher education, where rehearsals focus on preparing repertoire. Although mirroring many professional ensembles, the pedagogic benefits of this strategy have not been extensively interrogated. Research on ensemble interaction suggests that cohesive ensemble performance relies on the musical abilities of each performer as well as the emergent social state within the ensemble. One method to develop the skills needed for an effective performance environment can be found in group warm-ups and musical play. Whilst common within music therapy and parts of music education, these are rare in university settings. Students in an undergraduate concert band have participated in musical play in order to prime themselves for effective rehearsal, assessed via self-administered skills audits and interviews. This project encourages students to increase ensemble cohesiveness and musicality as reflective practitioners, informing not only pedagogy, but also the practice of professional ensemble musicians.

Introduction

Ensemble performance often plays a large role in musicians' careers and development. Thus, it is a key aspect of many music courses in higher education within the UK, either formally or informally (McCaleb 2014a). Often, it is an area taught throughout an entire degree, as at my institution, York St John University. However, although research on ensemble interaction has become increasingly common in performance studies, this has had little obvious impact on teaching methods thus far (ibid.). The more I research this area and develop my own performance, the less convinced I am that current models of ensemble education are effective means of improving students' abilities to play together.

This may be considered most broadly as a problem with tradition. When running university-level ensembles, the general unspoken assumption within Western education is that students will learn through mimicking the rehearsal and performance patterns of professional musicians: an ensemble prepares repertoire (either by themselves or under a conductor), performs that repertoire, then moves on to the next concert cycle. However, this model appears driven more by product than process, and may significantly suppress musicians' needs for individual expression (Atik, 1994, p. 22). This is how both I and my teachers were taught, and it is easy to assume that because this has been the status quo for so long, it must be a suitable teaching method. Difficulties arise once we compare

this with theories of learning such Harvey and Knight's critical transformation, which is 'not just about adding to a student's stock of knowledge or set of skills and abilities. At its core, transformation, in an educational sense, refers to the evolution of the way students approach the acquisition of knowledge and skills and relate them to a wider context' (1996, p. 12). In ensemble performance, critical transformation necessitates empowering students to confidently and creatively contribute towards the aesthetic development of an ensemble, and to use reflective practice to guide that development. I would argue that the present model of how ensembles are generally run within universities is not structured in a way to directly support critically transformational learning, and merits closer examination.

Method

In order to explore this area, I conducted three iterations of an action research project in collaboration with the Concert Band at York St John University.[1] Stephen Kemmis broadly outlines the pattern of action research in four stages:

1. To develop a plan of action to improve what is already happening.
2. To act to implement the plan.
3. To observe the effects of action in the context in which it occurs.
4. To reflect on these effects as a basis for further planning, subsequent action and so on, though a succession of cycles. (Kemmis, 1982, p. 7)

Each iteration involved weekly rehearsals in preparation for at least one public performance, reflective meetings with students following each rehearsal, and semi-open interviews with each ensemble member after each concert. The rehearsals and performances were video recorded as an aide-memoire, and the post-concert interviews were video recorded and transcribed by a student research assistant.[2] Given that this project spanned the course of an entire academic year, I was keen to ensure that I had the flexibility of adjusting my plan of action should the need arise. Thus, I repeated this cycle multiple times, allowing me to react to what I and my students observed. As will become apparent, this has led my research along different tangents than originally anticipated. As Mary Brydon-Miller et al. write, 'action researchers committed to social change necessarily have to

[1] I would like to particularly thank the members of the York St John University Concert Band, whose support, collaboration, and patience have made this project possible.
[2] I would like to express thanks to the York St John University Academic Development Directorate 'Students as Researchers' programme for financial assistance in hiring a student research assistant.

deal with messes; we are forced to follow the problems wherever they take us' (2003, p. 21). Running Concert Band as a performing ensemble, a learning experience, and a research project has not been free of tensions, a perceived conflict of priorities which has also informed how further iterations of the project have been organised.

At this point, I should clarify my position within Concert Band. At York St John, part of my role as lecturer involves leading a variety of ensembles for students to participate in. Traditionally, staff-led ensembles involve lecturers mentoring an ensemble, conducting or leading an ensemble, or performing with an ensemble. As a trombonist in an institution where there are not many trombonists, I tend to perform within a number of ensembles in order to fill a gap within the musical ecosystem. Whilst I've led smaller ensembles from within in the past, Concert Band is the largest group with which I have done so. My aim within ensembles I lead is to establish myself as a facilitator and mentor, rather than a didactic authoritarian. Thus, I can focus less on transmitting content (c.f. Brockbank and McGill, 2007, p. 62) and ideally become a transformational, rather than transactional, leader (cf. Felfe, et al., 2004). This allows me to demonstrate how I operate as a professional musician and lead by example: everything from how I solve practical problems within rehearsal to my basic mannerisms and professionalism. In this way, performing in ensembles with students is a collaborative artistic endeavour which allows for joint decision making, negotiation, and development.

In structuring the course of the ensemble over the year, I have focused on three key changes: identifying learning aims (and choosing activities and repertoire to support those aims), removing the conductor, and applying Socratic dialogue in rehearsal.

- **Identifying learning aims:** Acknowledging the significant questions surrounding the nature of performative musical knowledge, I propose that effective participation in musical ensembles requires performers to have three primary skills: awareness of oneself and one's surroundings, flexibility of interpretation, and technical fluency (McCaleb, 2014a). Essentially, musicians need to be aware of the performances going on around them and have the creative flexibility and technique to react to them appropriately. This is an extension of previous research I have conducted on interaction in chamber ensembles (McCaleb, 2014b). Using these as overarching learning aims allowed me to constructively align both the activities I choose to employ in rehearsal and the content which we explore (c.f. Biggs, 1999). Concert Band normally performs three times each academic year. In this project, I maintained that balance of performances, choosing repertoire that lends itself towards the learning aims I've identified. Thus, the core pieces of our repertoire this year

(Gavin Bryars' *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet* (1975), Terry Riley's *In C* (1964), and Louis Andriessen's *Workers Union* (1975)) each required students to carefully attend to what is going on in the rest of the group and react quickly and effectively. The pieces are written such that their successful execution hinges on the coordination and tightness of the ensemble, and bring to the fore the learning aims I have identified above. In addition, I commissioned three of our staff composers to write pieces in response to each of these works (David Lancaster's *Public Order* (2015), Rob Wilsmore's *And And And* (2016), and Ralph Bateman's *August 28th, 1963* (2016)). Working directly with composers on new works invited the students to take more interpretative ownership over these performances, as there was no perceived precedent as to how the pieces should be played. As the year progressed, other pieces were also added to the repertoire (including Chris Johnson's *The Bins* (2015), Aram Khachaturian's *Sabre Dance* (1942), and an installation performance of Gavin Bryars' *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet* (1975)).

- **Removing the conductor:** To further shift the responsibility for a performance to the ensemble itself, none of the three core pieces performed throughout the year required a conductor. In doing so, I hoped to elevate the students' roles in the group from followers to co-leaders, potentially imitating the model of alternating leadership found in some non-conducted professional ensembles (McCaleb, 2014b; c.f. Andert et al., 2011). This was not to diminish musicians who play in conducted ensembles; rather, to encourage the development of a learning environment which engaged students' critical thinking. Rather than deferring to a conductor, students were forced to take shared ownership of the interpretative decisions the group made and provide feedback on the quality of the ensemble. This presented possibly the most radical (and visible) shift away from traditional practice for larger ensembles. Only at the end of the year were conductors added back into the ensemble, allowing for comparison between leadership settings.
- **Emphasising Socratic dialogue:** Traditionally, many ensembles rely on a conductor or leader to provide feedback to the performers. Whilst that person is generally in a better position to listen to the entirety of an ensemble, over-reliance on them potentially sets the expectation to students that someone else will let them know the merits of a performance and how to address any issues. Additionally, it may undermine students' own knowledge base; our students are accomplished *listeners* in that they have experience observing musical performances and judging them (publicly or privately). I propose that acknowledging their creative sensibilities and recognising their potential to provide useful feedback is key to building their confidence and independence as artists. To encourage this, I drew heavily on

> Socratic dialogues within rehearsals.[3] These discussions allowed students to analyse their playing, identify issues, and address them via targeted exercises or interventions. Building such critical reflection into a habit should help them to become self-sufficient musicians who are capable of developing performances in an efficient and effective manner. This echoes educationalists Paul and Elder's sentiment that 'students should learn the *discipline* of Socratic questioning, so that they begin to use it in reasoning through complex issues, in understanding and assessing the thinking of others, and in determining the implications of what they and others think' (2007, p. 36).

Ideally, I hoped that I could help create a learning environment so robust and productive that my interventions were unnecessary. As Brockbank and McGill point out, 'our purpose, in supporting the transformational endeavour, is to enable persons to become critically reflective learners' (2007, p. 53). Professional musicians could be considered the consummate reflective learners, in that they regularly critique their work (from their execution of single notes to full programmes of music) and modify their future actions and strategies in response (Barry and Hallam, 2002). This bears resemblance to what Argyris and Schön describe as double-loop learning, an evolutionary approach towards developing new means of solving problems that is inherent in reflective practice (1996, p. 21). In this way, my students and I are on different points of the same developmental trajectory as musicians. Furthermore, as I reflect on the means by which students are able to develop the techniques and attitudes necessary to engage in double-loop learning, I personally engage in triple-loop learning, shifting up what Schön refers to as the 'ladder of reflection' (1987, p. 114).

Outcomes

Throughout the course of the year, this project uncovered a range of areas of interest, the majority of which were raised by the students themselves in post-concert interviews. Given the time constraints of this presentation, it is only possible to touch on some of these points, but there are many insights yet to be drawn. To clarify the ethical considerations of this project, the students who

[3] Examples of the ways I would initiate such dialogue is to ask students 'What happened?' or 'What did you hear?' after playing something. That would be followed up with questions such as 'What could work better?', 'What surprised you?', and 'What would you like to address if we played that again?'. These were not rhetorical questions — the students' responses drove further conversations as to how issues could be addressed. Along these lines, such dialogues could be initiated by taking a straw poll about their experiences: 'What happened in terms of dynamics? On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being no dynamic variation and 10 being the most appropriate dynamic variation, in your opinion), how number best matches how we just played?'. The differences in responses would highlight several issues, including the quality of the performance just given, differences of perception of quality, and differing expectation of quality across the ensemble.

I quote have agreed to let me use their first names. All students in Concert Band had the option of not engaging with the research project, yet still playing in the ensemble.

Warm-ups and musical play: The original aim of this project was specifically to explore how warm-ups and musical play could be used as a means of improving students as ensemble musicians. My initial intent was to help facilitate the students to develop their own warm-ups as an ensemble, but I found this to be particularly challenging to do either within rehearsals or set as tasks between rehearsals. Either through lack of confidence or fear of being put on the spot, it was difficult to elicit ideas directly from the students. What worked better, however, was for me to provide starting points for warm-ups (such as the *Breathing Gym* exercises devised by Sam Pilafian & Patrick Sheridan (2002) or long-tone exercises) which I could ask the students to modify to suit the current needs of the rehearsal. This became a key feature of the ensemble, with Lucy, a clarinettist, remarking that the warm-ups 'stand out a lot: one thing you focus on is warming us up, which I feel really does make us sound better. You make us think and listen' (LD, 1, 1:03). Likewise, Chloe, another clarinettist, said 'I think, had we done warm-ups [in other groups], practising being together and really just getting ourselves in the zone, we probably would have got a lot more done this year and probably sounded a lot better as well' (CR, 3, 11:38). The impact of warm-ups became particularly noticeable as the repertoire became more challenging, especially considering Andriessen's *Workers Union*. After the final set of concerts, Kitt, a guitarist, remarked that 'everyone says a great warm-up is key to good rehearsals and stuff, but I think over the years and over the rehearsal spaces and times, people get pushed and tend to lose sight of that. [Warm-ups in Concert Band] made a huge difference. Pieces that are […] incredibly difficult and strenuous have become a lot more attainable' (KD, 3, 1:51). Warm-ups could take as little as 10 minutes or as long as 30. The amount of time spent doing exercises and games which were not directly linked to practising repertoire met with a mixed response from students. After the first concert, Kyle, a trumpet player, noted that spending a lot of time warming up was fine when a performance was far away, but 'more towards a concert, I'd say make the warm-ups a bit smaller' (KS, 1, 7:25). However, Angus, a percussionist, points out later in the year that 'I think is vital to all instrumental ensembles, but nobody does it because they're worried about time constraints, but I think it makes us play more efficiently. […] I think the right amount of warm-up time makes you more effective in a small amount of rehearsal time, rather than the balance being the other way' (AW, 3, 3:56).

Leadership and ownership: The removal of conductors for the majority of the year was also a key point of distinction for the Concert Band. As Felicity, a flugelhorn player, comments, '[we have to] use our ears a bit more and our brains a bit more, rather than just following what's written and

following somebody's arms' (FD, 2, 6:31). Kyle remarked that 'usually, I'm reliant on the conductor, […] it's a comfort blanket. […] But without a conductor, you're thinking "It's all on me; we're working collectively, but my part is as important as everybody else's"' (KS, 3, 9:43). Adding in conductors for the final concert split the opinions of the ensemble fairly evenly, with some arguing that we couldn't have played the concert unconducted, and some saying it would have been better had we done so. The openness of rehearsal decisions, enabled in part through Socratic dialogues, meant that many students felt more ownership over the ensemble and its performances. Heather, a soprano saxophonist, commented that 'we all kind of own it to some extent. […] Everyone has that equal aspect within it instead of someone taking the lead' (HH, 1, 2:26). Later in the year, Chloe noted that 'everyone has the opportunity to have their input, and I feel like it's your choice whether you put that […] input in or not' (CR, 3, 5:38). Similarly, Lucy remarked that 'every single person that's in Concert Band [has] a vital role and their opinions are taken on board' (LD, 3, 7:52).

Concert Band in context: The changes in how Concert Band has operated certainly were not unnoticed by the students, who readily compared their experiences with those found in other ensembles. Angus commented that 'forget everything you've done in Concert Band previously, this is something completely different' (AW, 1, 9:20). Likewise, Daniel, an alto and baritone saxophonist, points out that Concert Band focuses on 'personal development and ensemble development, whereas I feel like some of the other ensembles are maybe just for [credit]' (DS, 1, 4:39). The use of Socratic questioning made a particular impact on some students. Laurie, a clarinettist, remarked that Concert Band 'has probably been the ensemble that I could be most reflective in' (LI, 1, 12:18), with Jonathon-Lee, a percussionist, saying that Concert Band rehearsals have 'made me think a bit more about what I'm actually doing and how I go about certain things […] as an ensemble member' (JLB, 2, 5:03). Richard, a clarinettist and saxophonist, highlights the key differences between what Concert Band became and other ensembles when he said it 'feels like a collaborative project towards an aim in which everyone is jointly responsible for the quality of what happens, whereas other rehearsals that I've been in feel a lot more focused on that kind of traditional, kind of a hierarchical model of leaders and non-leaders' (RB, 1, 14:23). Several students were quite conflicted as to the direction the ensemble was going in, including Thomas, a trumpet player, who remarked 'you're going one way [in Concert Band] which is perfectly good, perfectly okay, and then you suddenly shift into how it carries on [in] the rest of the world, it's like […] a little dream state within university' (TC, 2, 4:34). Sam, a bass trombonist, clarifies this when he said Concert Band 'may have pushed people out of their comfort zones, and I appreciate not everybody is going to enjoy every aspect of the music' (SQB, 2, 2:11). Whist there are larger professional ensembles who are unconducted (notably the Italian Spira Mirabilis and Russian Persimfans), the vast majority of employment for musicians

playing in bands and orchestras involves working under conductors. Thus, I am left with the following questions: is it better to provide an experience that mimics current professional experiences or one that, I believe, more comprehensively supports students' development as reflective artists? How useful is it to create a 'little dream state' of an ensemble which is built upon dispersed leadership in the wider context of a musical economy which does not, on the whole, follow similar tenets?

Conclusion

Recalling the problem posed at the beginning of this paper, to what extent has this project encouraged critical transformation in my students? I am unsure, but I believe that some progress has been made. The combination of Socratic questioning with post-concert interviews has certainly encouraged reflection amongst many students, but has that reflection contributed towards their development as ensemble musicians? The hitherto unmentioned elephant in the room is assessment. As noted earlier in this paper, my previous research on ensemble interaction suggests learning aims that I believe should ensure that students become more effective at performing in groups. However, these are still relatively broad. How would I assess a student's awareness of themselves and their surroundings? How about their flexibility of interpretation? Technical fluency is perhaps the most concrete of the three aims I suggest, but there may be little relationship between purely the technical ability someone has on an instrument and their ability to integrate into an ensemble (McCaleb, 2014b, p. 113). Additionally, there is the question of how to assess these elements in a way that is meaningful and practical. All of this is within the context of assessing a creative product, itself a particular challenge with regard to objectivity (Johnson, 1997).

Expanding the scope of my critique of ensemble pedagogy, I do not think that it is inappropriate to raise the following (potentially worrying) question: As a teacher, how do I actually know that my interventions into students' musical development are beneficial? I do not think that, as a profession, music teachers are in a position to provide an answer at this point. In order to have a better grasp of how effective our teaching is, progress needs to be made in identifying both the skills we wish our students to develop and means of assessing those skills. I would argue that this question is not only one of skill assessment, though, but also of assessing the quality of students' understanding and approach towards ensemble performance. Even more so, determining the beneficial impact on our students' musical development goes beyond assessing their acquisition of skills towards their progress in critical transformation. To borrow a phrase from non-musical research on reflective

learning, it is not enough to assess whether or not students are 'simply doing things right' but rather understanding if they are purposefully 'doing the right things' (c.f. Arévalo et al., 2010, p. 32). Unfortunately, this path does not yet provide clarity as to exactly the kind of knowledge and understanding we expect our students to gain. Research within the relatively recent field of musical performance studies has only just begun to explore the potential epistemology of performative musical knowledge, a pursuit which has raised considerably more questions than answers (McCaleb 2014c). Without greater understanding of the nature of the knowledge we hope our students gain (and underpinning the skills which allow them to make music together effectively), attempts to apply the lessons learnt from education studies to ensemble pedagogy may be limited. Regardless, I have gained a lot from running Concert Band as an action research project, and intend to continue along these lines in the pursuit of developing critically transformative musicians. A recurring theme this year was the potential inappropriateness of calling the ensemble a 'Concert Band', as it neither follows the usual power hierarchy of a concert band (one very reliant upon a conductor) nor plays standard band repertoire. However, considering 'concert' as a mutual agreement (a concerted effort) or in keeping with the Italian *concertare* (to harmonise), it might describe this collaborative ensemble appropriately, indeed. These are musicians who are in concert, exploring, developing and playing together.

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