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<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9867-9909> (2017) Teaching Through Ensemble Performance. In: Together in Music: Expression, Performance and Communication, 12–14 Apr 2018, National Centre for Early Music, York. (Unpublished)

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Teaching Through Ensemble Performance

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Citation

McCaleb, J Murphy (2018) 'Teaching Through Ensemble Performance'. Paper delivered at the conference Together in Music: Expression, Performance and Communication in Ensembles, York, UK, 12–14 April.

Abstract

Strategies for teaching ensemble performance in higher education tend to draw on staff members as conductors or mentors. This approach to teaching can easily remain unexamined, either through habit or presumed beneficence, and thus music programmes and lecturers miss opportunities to explore potentially more efficient and effective ways of working. This research investigates a third path to lecturers' involvement in university ensembles – one where the lecturer rehearses and performs with their students.

In previous artistic research I have conducted on ensemble interaction, I analyse how different types of leadership arise and are exerted within small ensembles (McCaleb, 2014). The flexibility of this leadership amongst group members may vary depending on the repertoire, balance of expertise around the ensemble, and other circumstantial factors. Professional chamber ensembles exhibit qualities similar to the business model of alternating leadership, where members assume '*ad hoc* leadership positions [...] by temporarily and freely [alternating] back to be observers, followers, and so forth' (Andert et al., 2011: 54); adopting this framework for teaching ensemble musicians in higher education encourages students to engage more critically in the development of the ensemble. Playing a larger leadership role (even temporarily) in ensembles allows students to 'learn musical independence as they might learn civic participation, by *making musical decisions that matter*' (Shieh and Allsup, 2016: 33).

As part of an ongoing research project on ensemble pedagogy, this paper explores teaching strategies where a lecturer rehearses and performs within student ensembles to develop cultures of alternating leadership. Throughout this academic year, I am using rehearsal and performance observations, focus groups, and interviews to assess the effectiveness of this approach to small ensemble teaching across all three years of an undergraduate music programme. Thus far, two themes emerge: first, that regular engagement with the technical and interpretative decision-making that shapes the development of an ensemble is imperative for students to become effective ensemble musicians; second, that lecturers acting as co-musicians within ensembles can facilitate a flexible culture of leadership to allow students to alternatively lead and follow. In combination with my own critical reflection as an ensemble musician, this research will offer systematic strategies for helping students develop the skills required to develop as ensemble performers.

Introduction

Strategies for teaching ensemble performance in higher education have historically drawn on staff members as conductors or mentors. Mirroring the hierarchies and leadership patterns ostensibly found in Western classical ensembles, traditions of practice have solidified into approaches to teaching which can easily remain unexamined, either through habit or presumed beneficence. This adherence to tradition may prevent music programmes and lecturers from identifying opportunities to explore potentially more efficient and effective ways of working, not to mention ethical concerns over the goals of pedagogic ensembles.

Underpinning this approach to teaching ensemble performance is a presumption, as Roger Mantie writes, that ‘successful performance, in which students execute their individual part accurately in the manner dictated to them, is [...] evidence of successful learning and successful musicality’ (Mantie, 2012: 118). This prioritisation of product over process has been highlighted in pedagogical research over the last decade, in particular in choral and wind band performance (see Freer, 2011 and Allsup and Benedict, 2008, respectively). Freer describes this as the performance-pedagogy paradox, proposing that leaders of pedagogic ensembles are subject to tension between presenting a high-quality performance and providing a high-quality learning experience for students (Freer, 2011). Although these outcomes are not necessarily mutually exclusive, he suggests that this is the exception rather than the norm – and I am inclined to agree with him.

In previous artistic research I have conducted on ensemble interaction, I analyse how different types of leadership arise and are exerted within small ensembles (McCaleb, 2014). The flexibility of this leadership amongst group members may vary depending on the repertoire, balance of expertise around the ensemble, and other circumstantial factors. Traditional models of ensemble pedagogy mirror elements of transactional leadership and transformational leadership in accordance with which side of the performance-pedagogy paradox they are most subject to. Transactional leadership prioritises goal achievement whereas transformational leadership focuses on group members’ individual development. In this context, transactional leadership emphasises the achievement of successful

performances and transformational leadership is more concerned about the development of the ensemble members (performance quality aside).

However, just as Freer proposes that the performance-pedagogy paradox can be resolved through balancing both goals, these two kinds of leadership may be balanced in a third path. Professional chamber ensembles exhibit qualities similar to the business model of alternating leadership, where members assume '*ad hoc* leadership positions [...] by temporarily and freely [alternating] back to be observers, followers, and so forth' (Andert et al., 2011: 54). This paper presents my progress investigating a third path to lecturers' involvement in university ensembles – one where the lecturer does not conduct or mentor ensembles, but rehearses and performs within student groups.

Method and Pedagogical Approach

Throughout this academic year, I am using rehearsal and performance observations, focus groups, and interviews to assess the effectiveness of this approach to ensemble teaching across all three years of an undergraduate music programme. Working with thirty four students across five groups, these ensembles include

- three jazz combos (14 students, 9 students, and 8 students) where I play bass trombone,
- one soul band (12 students) where I play bass trombone and make transcriptions and arrangements, and
- one acoustic folk band (5 students) where I play accordion and sing.

My involvement in each ensemble is based upon two key tenets. First, I am a musician, just as my students are. Thus, I manage the ensembles in such a way as to be no more or less musically important than any of the students. To this end, none of the ensembles traditionally use a conductor, and I play instruments in them that traditionally are not used to lead. This mirrors Leonard Tan's description of democratic musical participation, where 'every player has to participate actively and thoughtfully in order to render the whole greater than the sum of its parts; there can be no "spectators." No one does everything, but everyone does something' (2014: 66). Second, it is not necessarily my place to provide answers or solutions to my students. In adopting a maieutic approach to rehearsals, I draw

on Socratic dialogues to encourage my students to make decisions for themselves. Thus, playing a larger leadership role (even temporarily) in ensembles should allow students to, in the words of Shieh and Allsup, 'learn musical independence as they might learn civic participation, by *making musical decisions that matter*' (2016: 33).

To gain the students' perspectives on this approach to ensemble pedagogy, I have conducted focus groups at the end of each academic semester. Thus far, I have gathered data from two of the five ensembles (Soul Band and Hancock Ensemble), and anticipate completing the final three focus groups following the culmination of the academic year next month. Having transcribed the information from the focus groups, I have coded the conversations and identified emergent themes. In addition to the focus groups, I have video recorded each rehearsal and performance as an *aide memoir* and to identify any key moments or conversations that happened over the rehearsal process.

Emergent Themes

Before discussing emergent themes, it is worth noting how students perceived my role in these ensembles. Whilst I may *think* I am acting in accordance with the pedagogic strategy outlined previously, there is a risk that that strategy is not evidenced in my actions. However, that does not appear to be the case. Within Hancock Ensemble, one student remarked that I was a 'very informal leader [...] in the sense that you were the one that was drawing our attention to things. [...] It was us as a group that decided what would happen and how we'd do it. [...] You let us take ownership over the pieces' (JP, Hancock, 23:59). Another commented 'you gave us the puzzle and we had to put it together' (VU, Hancock, 25:10). In Soul Band, one student said 'You made us actually think about what was wrong ourselves' (CR, Soul, 18:43), and another specifically pointed out that I 'ask more questions rather than statements' (IL, Soul, 18:50). Whilst the students were not privy to the motivations and research underlying my strategy as an ensemble leader, they clearly noticed how it had deviated from tradition.

At this point in my research, two themes emerge: first, the importance of shared decision-making processes within ensemble pedagogy, and second, the role of lecturer in creating flexible cultures of leadership.

Shared decision-making processes

It appears that regular engagement with the technical and interpretative decision-making that shapes the development of an ensemble is imperative for students to become effective ensemble musicians. As Shieh and Allsup remark, ‘decision-making is not an isolatable skill that might be taught or pointed to but is understood as a capacity or power, one that is cultivated with, through, and beyond a lifetime of thoughtful engagements’ (2016: 34). Engaging with a range of musical decisions in rehearsals allows for increased capability in dealing with technical challenges within ensembles, as well as boosting confidence and gaining artistic independence. Both groups were perceived to have improved over the course of the term, both in terms of ‘coordination in performance, on a technical level’ (IL, Soul, 14:58) and how ‘the feel of the group got more confidence and more comfortable’ (JP, Hancock, 22:00). Students remarked how they appreciated contributing to the ensemble sound, commenting how they would ‘listen out to everyone else playing and having [their] own ideas, [...] therefore contributing to [the ensemble development]’ (EE, Soul, 9:22). Likewise, they spoke of how important they felt it was to have the opportunity to voice their opinions, which would help them lead their own ensembles in the future (CP, Soul, 22:07).

The democratisation of the decision-making process was not unnoticed by students, who pointed out that Soul Band ‘feels quite equal, because if any of us said “hey guys, how about this idea”, it’s usually considered. [...] Everyone has a equal voice’ (JT, Soul, 38:43). A similar remark was made about Hancock Ensemble, albeit with a caveat: ‘Everyone there had the chance to input their own opinion, so everyone had the chance to have full ownership of [...] those rehearsal spaces. If they didn’t speak up, [...] it’s their fault for not speaking up. The chance for ownership there all the time’ (JP, Hancock, 43:52). Students viewed this democratisation positively, with one remarking that they thought that it was ‘probably what’s made this [group] more successful than if you did decide to just solely lead’ (SF, Soul, 22:16).

Not all decisions made within rehearsals are of the same importance or impact, however. As Shieh and Allsup clarify, ‘an appropriate standard for fostering musical independence might well be the exhortation that *students make musical decisions that matter*, an experiential process that is markedly different than conventional standards about what students should know and do’ (2016: 31). In Soul Band, two members from different sections pointed out that they wanted to have more say on larger interpretative decisions that went into the arrangements being performed. One pointed out that if she had done the arrangement, she probably would have made it fit more in the current range of her instrument: ‘I’m all for like pushing myself, but I probably would have made it a bit easier’ (EH, Soul, 31:54). Another student’s suggestion was to balance out the arrangement of vocal lines, so that harder harmonies were spread amongst the singers. This would have allowed the vocalists to feel ‘like we had more control over what we were doing’ (SF, Soul, 32:54).

Flexible cultures of leadership

Through regular participation in decision-making processes, students acquire and acquiesce leadership flexibly within each ensemble. As a lecturer playing with the students, I am in a position to mediate emergent leadership structures. One student remarked that they didn’t feel that I was the leader at all, but just part of the ensemble: ‘it didn’t feel to me like you were leading, it [...] felt more like guiding and us making the decisions. [...] It was more like [encouraging] us to [...] take control’ (SF, Soul, 21:26). My efforts to stay out of the spotlight were particularly noticed by one student, who pointed out that I was the only member of the Hancock Ensemble *not* to solo: ‘in the actual performance, you took a relatively [...] back seat approach, but in the rehearsals you were very much at the forefront’ (JP, Hancock, 25:14). This has taken some getting used to, both for me and the students. My background in performance (longer than some of my students have been alive) provides me with a plethora of resources and strategies to draw upon. It would be a lie to say that it is not frustrating to recognise an easy solution to a rehearsal issue but not to act on it immediately – instead, encouraging the students to identify and resolve the issue for themselves. This pedagogic strategy also runs counter to students’ expectations. Most have praised how helpful this maieutic approach is, particularly ‘in comparison to just going “you’re wrong” or

“let’s just do it again”, or [saying] what’s wrong in such a technical way that nobody could possibly understand, [because] that’s my experience of large groups’ (IL, Soul, 18:30). Levelling the playing field in this manner is reminiscent with what Allsup and Benedict describe as a truly active pedagogic encounter, ‘one in which there is concern and care between parties, [placing] teacher and learner in a horizontal space’ (2008: 166).

Although it may appear so when watching these ensembles perform, it would be naïve to say that my students hold the same amount of power as I within these ensembles. The hierarchy that lecturers and students inhabit is ingrained in higher education. Regardless of how democratically a lecturer sets up an ensemble, they still act as prime gatekeeper and validator – encouraging certain behaviours, expectations, and standards, and validating decisions and measures of quality. As the ‘validation of knowledge is inseparable from issues of power’ (Mantie, 2012: 107), the power relationship between myself and my students is imbalanced. At times, this is willingly accepted by the students, one of whom remarked that when they were ‘less familiar with the kind of music we’re playing, [...] I was kind of relying more on your judgement, because I felt you were the one who was familiar with the genre, so I was trusting you a bit more’ (JT, Hancock, 37:27). However, another student framed the power relationship in terms of compliance: ‘you feel as though that the decision made is the best decision for you at the time, so you [...] go along with it. Upon reflection you think “actually, if we had done this, it would’ve been more successful”’ (SF, Soul, 33:34).

As gatekeeper, I act as a special kind of assessor, in a way. The final product of an ensemble — most often, the performance — is assessed to varying degrees and in varying weights by the audience, peers, colleagues, family, lecturers, the performers themselves, and so on. These performances, as discussed in the introduction to this paper, are often viewed as one indicator of progress. The assessment of the product is then extrapolated to the process: if the performance went well, then the run up to the performance must’ve been at least broadly effective. The lecturer participating in rehearsals (observing, conducting, or playing) acts as a sounding board for the quality of the product at different stages of rehearsal. Even when engaging in Socratic dialogue with the students in rehearsals, I am validating the processes by which the quality of the product improves. Thus, if we want to encourage

independence and creative autonomy in our students, then there should be more situations where we give them space to be independent – with opportunities for feedback on what they do given that freedom.

Ultimately, the quest for democracy in ensembles might be flawed in a university context, but perhaps true democracy in a pedagogic group is counterproductive. As Randall Allsup writes, ‘the democratic classroom is indeed one where learners have a stake, a very large stake, in the outcome of their education; it is also a place [...] where power is shared and distributed. But having a stake in one’s learning is not the same as knowing all that one needs to know to secure a desired end’ (Allsup, 2012: 173).

Conclusions (for now)

Two thirds of the way through this project, I am optimistic that there is more to be gained from adopting a maieutic approach towards playing within student ensembles. Thus far, this work has prompted my students and I to reflect on the kinds of decisions made within ensembles, the leadership patterns that emerge, and the nature of the power relationships at play in university ensembles. I do not think that this approach to ensemble teaching is to be adopted in place of traditional transactional or transformational leadership styles, but might be used in addition to them in a broader spectrum of ensemble participation. In this way, tensions felt through the performance-pedagogy paradox might be eased, and our students might be provided with a learning environment more conducive to developing independent musical practitioners. To borrow a call to action from Allsup and Benedict, ‘Like it or not, we are role models for our students. We need to ask ourselves, “What is wrong with a particular educative model that perpetuates systems of domination and that serve less than transformative endpoints? Who does this model serve? And more importantly, who is not served?”’ (2008: 170). Ensemble teaching in higher education can serve all of our students better, but lecturers need to be willing to break from tradition to explore the ways in which we might do so.

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