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Ethos, Technique, and Performance: Rethinking Ensembles in Higher Education

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Citation

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Abstract

Ensemble performance curricula within UK higher education is primarily based on the assumption that mere participation in ensembles will catalyse students' development as ensemble performers. 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. As Patrick Freer notes, ensembles in educational institutions are simultaneously expected to yield high-level performances whilst being effective pedagogic environments, a paradox which persists 'partly because [ensemble] teachers rarely seize the opportunity to question what they do or why they do it' (2011, p. 172). Emerging from increasing amounts of research on ensemble interaction, this paper explores the question of how ensemble curricula might be rethought to encourage more holistic and effective student development.

Recent research on ensemble interaction (particularly work by Allsup (2012), McCaleb (2014), Tan (2014), and Shieh and Allsup (2016)) highlights the importance of democratisation in ensembles, alternating leadership, and meaningful musical decision-making within ensembles. Building upon these concepts, an ensembles curriculum for a three-year undergraduate degree programme is proposed which features three key areas of growth. The first of these areas is ethos: regardless of genre or repertoire, students take responsibility for the creative decisions made within an ensemble and critically reflect on the ensemble's progress. The second area is technique: students gain not only an understanding of rehearsal techniques, but also how those techniques vary based on musical tradition, genre, notation styles, and the roles each musician might play within their ensembles. The third and final area is performance: ensemble learning is not limited to what is happening when the musicians play together, but includes ways of effectively preparing for rehearsals, performances, and other events.

This paper explores how students' long-term development as ensemble musicians can be structured around these three areas. Throughout the 2017/18 academic year, the initial impact of this curriculum is being trialled across all three years of an undergraduate music programme, and assessed by looking at student work and outcomes. Two themes have emerged thus far. First, in order to teach effectively in this curriculum, ensemble lecturers will sometimes need to break from the traditions that they themselves were taught within. This highlights the need for staff to develop as reflective practitioners within their roles as lecturers and ensemble musicians. Second, the range of ensemble opportunities provided by universities needs to encourage student engagement not only with a range of repertoire, but also with a range of ways of working. Equipping students with the skills and qualities needed to be adaptable and effective in ensembles requires a range of experiences across modes of music-making, and thus the kinds of ensemble experiences they have may differ greatly from those which are currently being provided. Ultimately, this project envisions a research-led curriculum which provides students with the structured experiences and support to help them develop effectively as ensemble musicians.

Introduction

Traditional ensemble performance curricula within UK higher education is primarily based on the assumption that mere participation in ensembles will catalyse students' development as ensemble performers. In some institutions, ensemble performance is not always even part of the formal degree programme, and instead bolted on as part of the hidden curriculum. This approach to university ensembles 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 paper aims to rethink ensemble curricula in a way which encourages more holistic musical development in university students. To do so, however, it is necessary to recognise some of the current tensions present in ensemble pedagogy in higher education: the performance-pedagogy paradox, graduate employability, and increased research about ensembles.

One of the fundamental presumptions of practical music education programmes, Roger Mantie writes, is 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' (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). Patrick 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. Freer proposes that this paradox persists 'partly because [ensemble] teachers rarely seize the opportunity to question what they do or why they do it' (2011: 172). Although one could hypothesise any number of reasons why such critique does not take place (lecturers' workload, performance obligations of university ensembles, lack of flexibility in programme construction, tradition, and so on), the institutional lack of reflection has meant that ensemble pedagogy has remained unchanged amidst calls for higher education to become more student centred. Thus, a curriculum which acknowledges the performance-pedagogy paradox should be constructed in a way as to provide opportunities for students to evidence their learning through methods in addition to performance.

The emphasis on student experience applies another angle of tension on ensemble pedagogy, most evidently though an increased awareness of the role that higher education could (and should) play in

students' careers. Particularly in institutions which charge tuition fees, the admittedly controversial paradigm of student as consumer calls into question the degree to which universities can claim to positively benefit students' careers. Whilst this tension has regularly been part of how universities have been ranked globally, it has become a much larger factor in the UK with the introduction of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) in recent years. Thus, as universities are being held more accountable for preparing their students for employment, there is cause to consider the role ensembles curricula might play for our students. Although there are natural variations in what the graduate profile looks like from various institutions, the prevalence of portfolio careers suggests that preparing students for such mobility and flexibility in their employment is beneficial. With that in mind, a curriculum that is student-centred should exist for the benefit of *all* students, providing support for them to become independent artists capable of fitting into society in any number of ways. This recalls Eric Shieh and Randall Allsup's exhortation that 'independent musicianship is marked not simply by the capacity to creatively adapt to a range of musical styles but foremost by the exercise of critical and ethical judgment in that application. Students learn musical independence as they might learn civic participation, by *making musical decisions that matter*' (2016: 33).

In addition to the social and political context that university music departments exist within is the growth of ensemble research as a field. The volume of work on ensembles has significantly progressed within the last twenty years, encompassing areas such as interpersonal dynamics, synchronisation, joint decision-making, leadership, performance practices, pedagogy, and epistemology, amongst others. What was once a niche area of musical performance studies (itself once a niche area) is now an active community of researchers, as evidenced by the recent publications of *The Routledge Companion to Embodied Music Interaction* (ed. Lesaffre, Maes, and Leman, 2017) and *Musicians in the Making: Pathways to Creative Musical Performance* (ed. Rink, Gaunt, and Williamon, 2017), as well as the 'Together in Music' conference held in York this spring. With this growing body of research, it is increasingly possible to develop a theoretical framework to underpin ensemble pedagogy, rather than relying on tradition and habit. This field presents more than just a body of knowledge against which critical reflection might occur, however. As it often draws on artistic research practices, the methodology ingrained within could have implications for the activities that students engage in through higher education. Thus, a curriculum proclaiming to help students become artistically mature and independent cannot avoid reflection, and should provide support for students to become reflective beings within their craft.

It is against this backdrop that a framework for ensemble pedagogy might be constructed. The remainder of this paper covers three sections. First, I propose the key areas that make up this framework – the areas of growth that have been identified as being integral to high quality ensemble performance in related literature. Second, I look at an example of how this framework might be applied practically within a three-year undergraduate music programme. Third, I assess the viability of this framework as expressed via student work and discuss emergent themes.

Framework

The curriculum I propose is based around three key areas: ethos, technique, and performance.

Ethos

Musical ensembles – and, in particular, chamber groups – are often held in the public consciousness as models of advanced social interaction. Vivienne Young and Andrew Colman assert that musical ensembles are ‘an unusual kind of social group whose mode of interaction involves a degree of intimacy and subtlety possibly not equalled by any other kind of group’ (1979: 12). Recent trends in ensemble research have become increasingly nuanced in how that social interaction impacts group effectiveness, exploring areas such as alternating leadership (McCaleb, 2014), democratisation (Tan, 2014), and meaningful decision-making (Shieh and Allsup, 2016). In parallel with this, there is another (more established) body of work which explores the inherently critical nature of artistic practice (for example, Dogantan-Dack, 2015 and Österjso, 2016). This research highlights not only how reflection is built into professional musical practice and the nuanced decisions involved in crafting and realising interpretation, but also that artistic practice can act as a form of knowledge generation. Considering these two areas of research, there appears to be the need for ensemble musicians in training to cultivate an ethos which is conducive not only to their refinement of reflective practice as musicians, but also to their sense of responsibility and ownership of the group they are working within.

Over a three year programme, these themes would support students in progressing towards independence as artists. In year one, the focus would be on rehearsal rigour and discipline, including personal investment and responsibility, ownership over the quality of an ensemble, and agreeing expectations amongst stakeholders. Year two would introduce critical reflection, focusing on modelling experiential learning, identifying critical incidents, and situating students’ learning in a wider theoretical context. Year three would extend this to more complex problem solving and

adaptation, requiring more rigorous application of critical reflection, identification of long-term strategies, and the use of safeguards and alternatives in planning.

Technique

Rehearsal techniques have long been the purview of conductors and music teachers. However, in a context where ensemble participation is intended to benefit and challenge *all* students, the balance of responsibility across an ensemble is more democratised. As Leonard Tan writes, ‘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). Thus, it is important that not just the students who aspire to conduct engage with rehearsal techniques. The approach I suggest towards teaching rehearsal techniques comes with two caveats, the first of which has to do with genre. The close relationship between conducting and rehearsal techniques carries with it cultural baggage, in that the rehearsal techniques employed in such literature are (far more often than not) contextualised within a canon of traditionally Western art music. Considering rehearsal techniques in their broadest understanding emphasises the commonalities in strategy shared across genres and cultures; in this sense, a rehearsal technique is a strategy for addressing a specific musical problem. Building on the previous part of this framework, ethos, understanding and employing a wide range of rehearsal techniques would provide students the tools needed to address issues which arose from critical reflection. These tools might be potentially found in any genre or style. The second caveat is to do with the varying roles students play in ensembles. As I and others have written about previously, the instrument that a performer plays impacts their evaluation of group performance – as a bass trombonist, I have a specific set of trombone-based knowledge that shapes how I act in an ensemble (McCaleb, 2014). That knowledge grounds the logic by which I make decisions in rehearsal and performance. However, this means that the range of possible options I have in rehearsal is potentially limited by my experience *just* as a brass player, or one who plays melodic lines, and so on. Thus, in order to have a broader understanding of what potential strategies I might use in my musical decision-making, I propose that is important to have experience on a range of instruments and in different musical roles. Whilst multi-instrumentalism might run counter to the goals advocated by conservatoire-style pedagogies, it should allow for a much more broad understanding of how musical decisions are made across mixed ensembles, preparing students for a wider range of potential ensemble opportunities. This does not mean that students are expected to perform at the same level on a wide range of instruments, but that their understanding of different perspectives within an ensemble can be enriched through playing multiple instruments. Traditionally, this has been applied to

instrumentalists being encouraged to sing in choirs, although there is potential for this to be more critically applied across a broader spectrum of musicking.

Over a three year programme, rehearsal techniques would be treated as a range of configurable methods by which musical decisions might be addressed. Year one would provide a grounding in basic strategies and goals of rehearsal techniques, including basics in conducting and directing. Likewise, there would be an exploration of the key differences between individual practice and ensemble rehearsal. Year two expects the students to explore different ways of working, including varying processes across genres and variation in approach according to instrumental role. This includes exploring how variation in notation impacts the rehearsal strategies used. In year three, students apply these techniques within a leadership position, combining possible strategies into effective rehearsal planning, providing efficient and useful feedback and direction, and modelling best practice to younger students.

Performance

The third area upon which this ensemble curriculum is based is, perhaps, the most in keeping with existing practice. Performing in ensembles *is* inherently a practical activity, and it would be inappropriate to not engage students in a wide range of performance opportunities. That being said, it is important to clarify that my proposal of engaging students in performance opportunities extends beyond the act of performance. Bearing in mind the increased focus on employability within higher education, this is an opportunity to not only provide outlets for ensembles to perform, but also for students to gain experience in the mechanics of performing in society. This includes the supporting roles necessary for rehearsals to take place (equipment and room bookings, as well as other logistics), the creation of performance material (librarianship, arrangement, and composition), as well as event management and production. Likewise, this allows for a different perspective on research around musical leadership, particularly when it comes to managing ensembles. Performing in ensembles in this context should be more pedagogically grounded than it otherwise might be due to the ethos of critical reflection and awareness of a wide range of techniques used to improve musical quality.

Over a three year programme, students take on more responsibility in the performance creation process. In year one, the expectation would be that students gain a broad understanding of this process through participation in events and working with others. Year two increases the amount of supporting roles they engage with, where they explore some of the nuanced differences between

unique roles. In year three, then, that understanding is applied through their delegation of roles and long-term planning of multiple events.

Considering the curriculum overall, the expectation for students to participate in ensembles still exists, and would most likely take a significant amount of their timetabled activities for this subject. Thus, one could argue that this approach suffers a similar flaw as other 'participation is enough' curricula. However, two key changes shift the purpose of such participation. First, whilst we cannot dictate what students will learn through reflective practice (due to the variability of exact experiences they might have or what they recognise as meaningful), it is surely better to provide a larger pool of varied experiences upon which to reflect, rather than a limited range of experience. Likewise, increased engagement allows them to practise critical reflection multiple times, thus having opportunities to explore many iterations of the reflective process. Second, the curriculum supports students in expanding their ensemble experience in several parameters – the genre and style, the instruments students play within them, the kind and amount of notation being used, the use or lack of a conductor, and even the size of the group and the performance contexts. This range of experience is essential for cross-comparison between rehearsal strategies and contexts (which may prompt reflection), as well as an increased pool of potential strategies for future ensembles. Thus, grounding ensemble participation in the process of critical reflection and a breadth of ways of working should make that participation a more rigorous learning opportunity.

Curriculum in Practice

With the culmination of the 2017/18 academic year, this curriculum has been implemented across all three years of the undergraduate music degree programmes at York St John University. In this section, I will discuss the activities the students engage with, how students evidence their engagement, and the role of staff members. First, however, it is important to contextualise the music programme at York St John University and the work that had been done in this area before my time there.

When I was first employed by the university four years ago, I was struck by several key features of the music department. First, there was a refreshing attitude (to me, at least), regarding employability. As part of a teaching college which had been evolved into a university over the course of the last 25 years, the music department was under no illusions as to how it was best able to prepare its graduates for meaningful engagement in society. Looking beyond preparing students for auditions to more broad involvement in churches, schools, hospitals, and community centres, it has

close links to the city of York and the National Health Service, and is home to the International Centre for Community Music. In addition, the department supports students in the pursuit of holistic musicianship, where the activities of solo and ensemble performance, composition, and education are all interwoven. The emphasis on employability has preceded a number of other institutions, with specific modules addressing careers in music since 2001. The practicality of the department's ethos was also evidenced through its insistence that ensemble participation contribute towards students' degrees. In the period before I had arrived, David Lancaster, Ralph Bateman, Liz Mellor, and Chris Bartram had developed a model of capturing this participation through a combination of portfolio of evidence and a written critical evaluation. This model provided the basis upon which I was able to further evolve and support with my background in ensemble research. The academic freedom with which I have worked has allowed me to take the existing model and develop it into a more rigorous, research-led curriculum as outlined previously.

Student Activities

In this manifestation of the ensemble curriculum, students take part in a range of activities. Primarily, they participate in ensemble projects, which are led by staff and students. These projects run from a matter of a few rehearsals to term-long commitments, and include membership across all three years of the undergraduate degree. There are three key features of these projects:

1. It is expected that each ensemble project has an identifiable goal. Whilst in most cases this is a performance, it could also include producing a recording, running a workshop, providing feedback to composers about their works, learning a body of repertoire, developing new instruments, and so on.
2. With the varying goals each ensemble project might have, it is understandable that the duration and intensity of their rehearsals will vary. This has the side effect of making students keenly aware of their schedules, a practical skill some have not needed to exercise significantly before university.
3. Students are expected to participate in both staff-led and student-led ensemble projects. Staff consult with each other to determine what ensembles they will run each term and ensure that there is a breadth of provision across genres and styles. Students do not need permission to run ensemble projects, although they always have the option of seeking advice about what they might start if they are unsure. Third year students are expected to run at least one ensemble project, and are encouraged to take on a range of leadership roles.

Ensembles take part in a range of performance opportunities throughout the year, which vary in terms of externality and risk. On one end of the spectrum are workshops and weekly lunchtime concerts, which cater primarily to the university population. More public are biweekly concert programmes at York Hospital, where students have the opportunity to play in waiting areas as well as some wards. At the other end of the spectrum are more formal university events, which may take place on or off campus. Similarly, a number of our students take part in the local music scene in York, taking their ensembles to open mic nights and jam sessions.

In addition to the ensemble projects themselves, each year group attends seminars on the theory supporting their learning. These sessions are spread out throughout each term, and include topics such as critical reflection, rehearsal techniques, ensemble interaction, embodied knowledge in ensemble performance, and ways of working across musical genres and cultures. With their explicit focus on leadership, third year students attend leadership forums which occur roughly once a month. In these sessions, they discuss how their ensemble projects are going and what issues they might be having. Through staff facilitation, these present opportunities for reflection and sharing of best practice.

Evidencing Engagement

In order to demonstrate their engagement with these ensemble projects, students produce two types of assessments. The first is an online portfolio of evidence which includes a diary of their participation, recordings from rehearsals and performances, and other relevant material. This portfolio is compiled throughout the year, and includes commentary on how students have challenged themselves, contributed to the university musical community, explored a range of genres and sound sources, and supported ensemble processes. In addition to this portfolio, students produce a written critical evaluation which explores a key incident from their ensemble development in the past year. This is an opportunity for students to demonstrate how their understanding of how ensembles operate (or, perhaps more appropriately, how they operate within ensembles) based on their experience and in relation to relevant academic research.

Staff Involvement

Music department staff are involved in ensemble projects in various ways throughout the year. Most conventional are the (often larger) ensembles where the staff member is conductor or leader. Less conventional are the (often smaller) ensembles where the staff member is a coperformer with the students, a scenario that I have explored in other recent research (McCaleb, 2018). In addition to

more continuous engagement with ensembles in this way, staff members also act as mentors, stepping into student-led ensembles to offer advice and feedback. On a more informal level, staff members also provide feedback to students after performances or other showings, generally in the form of tutorials. Flexibility in the ways that staff members participate in different ensembles not only models different ways of working to students, but also demonstrates how staff as professional musicians are able to problem solve in different scenarios and contexts.

Student Outcomes

There are challenges in assessing the viability of this curriculum, as there are with understanding the impact of any multi-year programme of study. Given that this curriculum is designed to help students construct the strategies and toolsets they will use in their careers as ensemble musicians in a range of contexts, its implications may not be evident until well after they have completed their degrees. That being said, it is possible to provide some preliminary assessment of how students are engaging with the curriculum by looking at what they have accomplished over the course of this year.

Our recently-completed third year students have participated in this curriculum as it has developed over the last three years. From looking at their portfolios of evidence, on average each student participated in 11 ensembles throughout the year, covering a range of 6 genres. These genres included Western classical, popular, gospel, rock, blues, jazz, symphonic metal, bluegrass, experimental, and progressive rock. Each student played a range of instruments, ranging from three to eight, and a number explored instruments specific to non-Western cultures, including Javanese gamelan, Brazilian samba percussion, and West African djembe. The students led an average of two groups each, with some leading three or four. Emerging from this ensemble experience is more important information, however – the topics that they reflected on both in their portfolios and critical evaluations. These included:

- the impact of engaging with a range of styles and genres on their own learning, and a desire to continue doing so in the future,
- the relationship between leadership style, ensemble context, ensemble size, repertoire, participant demographics, and the leader's own social habits,
- the importance of understanding one's own tendencies and weaknesses as a leader and performer when making the best decisions for an ensemble,
- the effect of dealing with different learning styles within an ensemble, especially if they contrast those of the leader,

- evaluation of strengths and weakness as an ensemble performer, prompting purposeful further planning as the year progressed,
- the difference between leading and mentoring, and the challenges faced when transitioning an ensemble from one leader to another,
- different kinds of interaction that can occur within ensembles, and how that interaction may be affected by instrumentation and genre,
- the degree of formality of rehearsals, particularly in relation to genre and context,
- managing personal and professional relationships within ensembles,
- the challenges of motivating ensembles, and
- adapting as a leader in response to feedback and context.

This list is particularly telling, as not all of these topics were raised directly within class sessions. Instead, they were borne out of students' experiences within ensembles, either as participants or leaders. Although it is difficult to tell exactly how these reflections will impact the students' practice as they leave university, the fact that they are engaging in such critical thought around their current practice is promising. In order to assess this more thoroughly, it would be necessary to contact these students in future years to evaluate how their practice as ensemble members has evolved based on the skills provided them in their degree.

Emergent Themes

I propose that an effective ensemble curriculum is based around a framework which includes critical reflection and exposure to techniques from a range of genres in addition to participation in groups themselves. Thus far, two themes have emerged.

First, in order to teach effectively in this curriculum, ensemble lecturers will sometimes need to break from the traditions that they themselves were taught within. As Allsup and Benedict write, '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). By encouraging staff to develop as reflective practitioners within their roles as lecturers and ensemble musicians, they not only model the kind of reflexivity that should be engendered within our students, but also continually refresh their delivery of this curriculum.

Second, the range of ensemble opportunities provided by universities needs to encourage student engagement not only with a range of repertoire, but also with a range of ways of working. Equipping

students with the skills and qualities needed to be adaptable and effective in ensembles requires a range of experiences across modes of music-making, and thus the kinds of ensemble experiences they have may differ greatly from those which are currently being provided. There is a danger of confining students' resources in decision-making to those that exist within Western art music, what has been the dominant 'academic' music in European higher education for centuries. Thinking of the wealth of musics which exist in society, however, it would be remiss of music departments to *not* introduce students to the ways of working found within them. As Thomas Regelski writes, 'teachers' curricular and pedagogical choices require constant updating to meet students' changing needs and the ever-new developments in music and modes of musicking' (2012: 19).

Ultimately, this project envisions a research-led curriculum which provides students with the structured experiences and support to help them develop effectively as ensemble musicians. There are certainly challenges present in assessing the impact of such a curriculum, and implications for how universities and their staff may need to adapt in order to present a more comprehensive approach to ensemble musicking than they may be currently equipped to do. However, the purpose of this curriculum is to focus on the students' needs as independent, professional musicians in an evolving cultural landscape.

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