

Keys to a Future: Prospects for Tertiary Music Graduates

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People are drawn to music for many different reasons and only a minority will choose to pursue it as a profession. For those who do, what employment opportunities are available and what can tertiary institutions do to give their graduates the best chance of success? The paper considers the diverse backgrounds, motivations and aspirations of tertiary music students and examines the nature of the career paths that are available. It focuses on changing employment patterns and shifting community expectations surrounding university education, noting some of the ways in which tertiary providers have sought to respond to this challenging environment. Approaches range from highly specific vocational preparation to a broader education that combines advanced technical and musical proficiency with intellectual agility and flexibility. The paper looks specifically at piano majors, reflecting upon the skills, understandings and attitudes that are needed in order to maximize career success. It makes the case that a committed and intelligent study of music can develop a wide range of generic skills that are relevant in a variety of personal and professional contexts. These may extend well beyond the discipline itself. Careers in the performing arts have always been demanding and competitive, and that is certain to continue. Many talented individuals will choose to follow a more certain or more lucrative pathway. But for those who simply cannot resist the call of music, we must assist them in reaching their optimum potential and provide them with the resources to make informed choices about their future.

Introduction

The last twenty years have seen far-reaching changes to the way in which Australians regard tertiary education. Whereas once it might have been viewed as a means of exploring knowledge and of extending human and intellectual potential, it is now often seen as a commodity which, once acquired, should immediately open doors to life-long and well-paid employment. Universities are seen by some as little more than service organizations. They are thought of in much the same way as an electricity supplier or an internet service provider – students pay a fee for which they expect to receive a specified range of services, including a degree parchment at the end of three or four years and a well-paid job soon afterwards. Institutions are assessed largely according to the level of satisfaction expressed by their clients, primarily their students, together with employment outcomes and remuneration levels of graduates.

Tertiary music schools are firmly embedded in this culture. Music is a minority pursuit; some would say an elitist one. It has little to do with national social or economic priorities and there are no professional bodies with the political clout to provide a strong public advocacy. Music grabs media attention only when a symphony orchestra is threatened with the axe or when an aging operatic superstar makes a farewell tour. It is a dispensable commodity when times get tough. It is expensive to teach but the earning power of graduates is relatively modest.

These and related problems are being confronted by every music school in the

country and indeed internationally. They may even prompt fundamental questions concerning the extent to which tertiary music study can be recommended as a realistic pathway for talented, intelligent and ambitious young people. Each institution has responded to these issues in its own way. Some have abandoned the traditional, broadly based approach to musical education. They have instead devised programs with a tightly defined vocational emphasis, geared towards direct employment outcomes in traditional branches of the profession. This has led to the development of degree programs specialising in such areas as orchestral training, studio teaching, church music or accompanying. Other institutions have identified newly emerging areas, such as music technology, commercial music or so-called “creative industries” (Arthurs, 2004, p. 10). A few have maintained a more traditional approach, aiming to produce highly skilled and adaptable graduates who can then choose how they apply those skills in the professional arena. Some institutions have simply ceased to exist.

This paper considers what the community in general and university music schools in particular have to offer piano students who may be contemplating tertiary level study. It looks at the typical backgrounds and aspirations of today’s students and examines some of the employment patterns that might be available to them. It then considers approaches to program content and pedagogical attitude that will maximize the opportunities for both personal satisfaction and career success.

Profile of tertiary music students

While the majority of tertiary piano students have been studying their instrument for many years, they come with a variety of backgrounds, achievements, aspirations and attitudes. Understanding this diversity is important if institutions are to develop the types of programs that attract students and meet their personal and professional needs.

Music students at university tend to fall into a number of broad categories. Some have already developed clear and specific career goals. They may wish to teach music in a school, to join an orchestra or to become a conductor. A few may be lured by that romantic but ill-defined notion of becoming a “concert pianist”. Many have simply come to love music and wish to continue their involvement in it. They are content, for the moment, to retain an open mind on where it might lead them. In a survey of music students and graduates conducted at the University of Adelaide in 2000/2001, 76 per cent of graduates identified the desire for continued involvement in music as being a “very important” factor in their decision to study music. A further 22 per cent regarded it as “important”. For those with a specific career goal at the outset of their studies, the figures were 50 per cent and 34 per cent accordingly (Lockett, 2001).

A significant and growing number of students wish to retain an involvement in music while simultaneously pursuing another career path. These students may not see music alone as providing them with a sufficiently secure or lucrative future and

have chosen instead to concentrate upon another academic area. Music remains important to them, however. Many of them choose to undertake a double degree program, linking music with arts, commerce or law.

There are some who simply drift into tertiary music because they have had some success in it at school and because they can think of nothing else to do. They may not have particularly strong intrinsic motivation and are unlikely to achieve success or satisfaction. By contrast, there are those who simply cannot resist the call. They may have attempted to follow other pathways but the call of music is too insistent. Music is deep within their soul and not being able to indulge that passion only increases their desire to do so.

Despite this diversity, most commencing tertiary music students have one thing in common – their experience of the discipline is very limited. They have little idea of the areas waiting to be explored and are largely unaware of the career possibilities available to them. Many have developed their love of music through solo performance. The lucky ones may have experienced the joys of accompanying or some other form of ensemble activity. A few may have had some involvement in composition but hardly any would know what the word musicology means let alone how it might potentially connect with their own musical experiences. The point here is that the vast majority of commencing tertiary music students are not in a position to make informed judgements about possible career outcomes. An important objective of tertiary study is to provide them with the opportunity to experience music in its broadest sense and to develop a mature awareness of where their skills and interests might lie.

Broad approaches to tertiary music study

Anyone who has decided to study music at university rightly expects an environment that enables them to develop their interests and abilities to the very highest level. It is to be hoped that they might also be open to broadening their ideas about music, exploring their relationship with it and considering the part that it will play in their future.

It is at this point that different educational approaches and philosophies begin to emerge. Some hold the view that university education should lead directly to employment, and that tertiary music programs should be very strongly influenced by the current state of the industry. Outcomes should be practical and immediate. Traditional performance-based training, it is argued, is anachronistic. How many solo performers does the community really need? Is it not more useful for educators to focus upon skills that are more directly and more immediately marketable? It is in response to this view that we have seen the emergence of courses that specialise in a market niche: contemporary popular music, audio production, multimedia, music management, pedagogy, orchestral training or accompanying.

The alternative view also acknowledges the career needs of graduates and recognizes the diversity of tertiary educational outcomes. Proponents of this view,

however, maintain that career prospects are maximized through a broad and comprehensive musical training, rather than a narrowly specialized one. A high level of skill, together with adaptability and acute musical judgement, will allow graduates to make real choices about their future. Their formal education should provide essential technical, artistic and intellectual resources that can then be applied in a variety of personal and professional contexts.

Both of these perspectives stem from positive motivations but each leads to fundamentally different approaches to curriculum design and delivery. The attributes of graduates are quite different in each case. We may well ask whether or not it is possible for a student with special gifts as a pianist to be employable after graduation. If so, what form might their career path take and what rewards might it offer? What sort of curriculum will best serve their needs and what sort of pedagogical approach will provide the most conducive context for learning?

Careers

In all probability, few people would see music, either classical or jazz, as offering a wide range of sustainable career options. The greatest success will always be reserved for those with a high level of ability, commitment, creativity and initiative. If a young person is seriously considering studying music at university, we rightly want to ensure that they have a realistic expectation of what might lie ahead. Are they really prepared for the long hours of solitary practice and study? Do they experience an inner passion for music that will lead them to ever higher levels of achievement? Do they have the perseverance and the strength of character necessary to ride the ups and downs that will inevitably be experienced as they pursue their chosen pathway? Do they have the independence and the ingenuity to recognise, create and respond to opportunities? If asked and addressed in a positive spirit, these questions can assist individuals to test the strength of their call and of their desire to respond.

If we think of solo performance as the only career path to which it is worth aspiring, then the outlook can seem dispiriting. Yet it is a mistake to over-react. For those gifted students with commitment, initiative and flair – for those who dare to dream – there are diverse opportunities available. There are a surprising number of pianists, even in Australia, who are receiving national and international exposure as soloists and chamber music players. It is taxing work and the competition is intense but there is, and always will be, a demand for the most brilliant and creative talents. Such people will almost invariably need to pursue a secondary career strand in teaching or some other area, but high-level performance is still a respected and valued professional pursuit. Having accepted that point, however, we need to focus upon the other professional activities in which piano graduates can find employment.

As part of the University of Adelaide survey mentioned earlier, the employment destinations of recent music graduates were tracked. The responses came not only from pianists, but also from other instrumentalists, singers and composers. They present a useful and interesting snapshot. Of 115 respondents, 90

per cent were in paid employment upon completion of their undergraduate qualification. Of these, 79 per cent were working in a music related area. Almost 50 per cent undertook some form of music teaching while 16.5 per cent pursued professional performance work, including positions in orchestras or other performing ensembles. A further 5 per cent were involved in the music retail industry. Another reasonably common avenue for employment was the area of arts management. A few graduates became self employed or established small music businesses providing a variety of musical services, such as teaching or live music for corporate events. Other employment outcomes included audio-visual technician, event coordinator and teaching English overseas. Nearly 70 per cent undertook further study at honours or postgraduate level, either on its own or in combination with part time employment. While in the majority of cases this further study represented an extension of undergraduate education, in others, it involved a sideways shift to a related area such as teaching, arts administration or music therapy (Lockett, 2001).

Varied as these outcomes are, they certainly do not exhaust the full range of employment possibilities. Other graduates have gone on to work as broadcasters, publishers, academics, librarians, recording producers, promoters, journalists or government bureaucrats.

From this brief snapshot, a number of key observations emerge. The first is that a basic undergraduate degree is the bare minimum preparation necessary for a career in music. Those who are serious about it will be prepared to extend their period of formal (and informal) study well beyond the initial three to four years. It is also clear that most graduates engage in two or more career activities concurrently. Very often, this involves some form of teaching, either in the studio or in the classroom. This portfolio approach to career building has become common also in Europe (HEFCE Conservatoires Advisory Group, 1998, p. 5).

Given that a large number of graduates teach, tertiary institutions have a critical role to play in preparing students for this important role. Each one will make a choice concerning the amount of formal pedagogical training that it offers – it may be a few elective courses, an entire degree or diploma program, a postgraduate offering or none at all. Whatever the case, we as piano teachers will exert a strong influence upon our students, and their approach to the art of teaching will be significantly affected by the methodology and the musical values that they experience through us.

Compared with many other instrumentalists, pianists are a particularly fortunate bunch. For one thing, our instrument is musically self-sufficient and enables us to engage in a complete musical experience. Furthermore, much of the repertoire that we play (including the vast amount of chamber music to which we have access) represents the peak of human creative endeavour. Even more significant in any consideration of career planning is the fact that the piano is the most versatile of all musical instruments. If pianists are as versatile as the instrument they play, then they have many professional choices available to them. These choices are limited only by interest and ability (Holt, 1997, p. 22). Even for those who wish primarily to play, there are opportunities as soloists, chamber musicians, accompanists, church musicians, vocal coaches and répétiteurs. The employable

pianist will be one who has a broad concept of musicianship, who is “skillfully diversified” (Pezzone, 1996, p. 20) and who has the musical and intellectual agility to cross boundaries of style and genre.

Generic skills

While the focus so far has been upon the varied nature of professional opportunities in the area of music, there is another set of outcomes from tertiary music study that is all too often ignored. It is not always appreciated that we as musicians possess many qualities, insights and abilities that go well beyond our purely musical achievements. Consider what is actually involved in musical performance. It is much more than the physical mastery of an instrument. In its highest form, performance involves the analysis of complex material and the development of sophisticated problem solving skills. It develops the ability to place small details into a bigger overall picture (Moe, Miller, Nowicki & Sutherland, 1997, p. 50). It requires a high level of self awareness and the ability to make refined critical judgements. It develops the ability to communicate confidently and effectively and to exercise creativity and imagination. In the case of ensemble playing, it requires sensitivity to the contribution of others and the ability to work as part of a team. Even at the most basic level, the study of performance enriches both the intellectual and the emotional sides of one’s being.

These skills, insights and attitudes are in demand in many different work environments and this means that, for some, a music degree can have currency as a stepping stone to a number of other non-musical occupations. What is required is an intelligent awareness of the skills one actually possesses and a willingness to apply them and perhaps to extend them into other professional arenas.

It is also worth approaching the question of generic skills from the opposite direction, considering the extent to which they enhance career opportunities in more traditional musical fields. The University of Adelaide survey asked graduates to indicate the factors they felt were most important in helping them to gain employment. Eighty-one per cent of them acknowledged the importance of generic skills in finding work. Communication, problem solving, analytical and IT skills all featured prominently in the responses. Others that were emphasized included administrative skills, marketing ability, reliability, personal organisation and independence (Lockett, 2001).

Implications for the curriculum

The entire discussion thus far has been nothing more than contextual material for the most important question of all. Given our understanding of the backgrounds and aspirations of our students, the nature of work opportunities and the broader skills required for professional success, what sort of curriculum approach will best serve the needs of students? Our response to this question will be influenced to a

significant extent by our own particular personal and professional experiences. Our views will in all probability move in one of two broad directions. We may seek to identify particular specialised career pathways for which there is a clear demand, and focus student learning experiences firmly upon those. Or we may take a more generalist approach that encourages students to make their own choices as they develop a mature awareness of where their strengths and interests lie.

While deciding early upon a specialised study pathway might seem like a realistic approach to career planning, it can in fact be limiting. Furthermore, a premature emphasis on employment outcomes may mean that core skills and concepts are ignored in favour of short term objectives. It takes time for any individual, but particularly one who has only just left school, to develop a sense of who they are, what they do best and where they want to go. Until they reach that point of self-awareness, they need permission to test the boundaries and to dream. Aaron Copland said it like this:

Living for music means hitching one's wagon to an ideal – an ideal of tradition, of achievement, of greatness...Certainly all historical perspective confirms the truth that man would not have attained the possible unless time and time again he had reached out for the impossible (quoted in Schenly, 1997, p. 20).

Of course the time will come when idealism and realism have to meet. But by then, decisions can be made on the basis of experience, self-knowledge and some understanding of broader professional opportunities. In the meantime, what specific outcomes should we be seeking for our students and what sort of experiences should the curriculum provide?

There would seem to be five main elements to an effective undergraduate education for pianists.

The first is excellence. Despite the contradictory community expectations about university education, we must never lose the focus upon excellence – both the achievement of it and the quest to attain it. Those who discount the importance of high level performance because of the limited career options for soloists completely miss the point. Success in any field demands lifting one's sights above mere necessity – it is the most demanding education that creates the most possibilities (Schenly, 1997, p. 20). The quest for excellence can bring immense personal satisfaction. It may lead us in unexpected directions but our inner being will be ever richer for the experience.

Notwithstanding this, however, individual performance should not become the sole focus of the tertiary music experience. If it does, then long term student interests may not be well served. It is important also to develop an awareness of other possibilities for music making. For example, functional skills such as sight reading, keyboard harmony and improvisation can break the tyranny of the printed score as well as providing a new perspective upon the creative process. Most importantly, they can help to generate musical independence, surely one of the most important objectives in tertiary education. Collaborative music making is similarly crucial – chamber music and different forms of accompanying. The old fashioned complaint of some teachers that such activities will detract from the student's primary pianistic

development is only valid if each activity is viewed in isolation, if the people concerned do not communicate or if inappropriate repertoire choices are made. The piano is the most versatile of all musical instruments. Pianists need to become as versatile as the instrument they play (Holt, 1997, p. 23).

These forms of performance activity need to be supported by a well-structured sequence of academic studies that encourages an awareness of connections between the different forms of musical learning. The principles of composition, harmony, counterpoint, style and genre need to be applied to the music that is being studied in performance, so giving a perspective of music from the inside. A properly integrated musical experience is clearly dependent upon a productive dialogue being maintained between the staff teaching the theoretical subjects and those responsible for the practical elements of the curriculum. This does not occur without effort on both sides. It is also necessary to acknowledge that the intellectual demands of the non-performance disciplines can enhance a student's personal and artistic maturity and develop their mental agility. Such studies will also contribute to an ability to speak and write about music in a coherent fashion.

Somewhere in the curriculum, there needs to be the opportunity to explore complementary areas of study, such as conducting, pedagogy, music technology, languages or musicology. The degree of emphasis will depend upon the overall objectives of the program, whether generalist or specialist in nature. It is an important way of developing a broader awareness of professional options and of allowing students to develop a sense of where their skills and interests lie.

The final component must be an introduction to the workings of the profession itself – both its nature and the survival skills necessary to make the transition from formal study to workforce participation. The involvement of key employers in this component can be an important way of developing and maintaining effective linkages with the profession (Hannan, 2004, p. 18).

Some pedagogical reflections

If student needs are to be an important driving force in our educational planning, then there are many important implications for teaching staff and for the institutional culture as a whole. Traditional approaches to curriculum design and pedagogical practice may need to be rethought and for some, this can be an uncomfortable experience. There are many traps for tertiary music educators and one of the greatest is the tendency to overcrowd the curriculum. It is extremely easy for staff committed to their discipline to identify essential areas of knowledge and experience that need to be taught. It is far less simple to incorporate these elements into a coherent sequence that balances breadth with depth while at the same time taking account of the changing backgrounds and expectations of students. At an institutional level, there needs to be a clear understanding of the dominant values that inform decisions about what students learn and how they learn it. Only then will the optimum mix be achieved between student needs and responsibilities, staff input and institutional culture (Jørgensen, 2000, p. 75).

In making choices about curriculum content and design, much depends upon how one views the place of an undergraduate degree within the bigger context of life-long learning. Vital though the formal curriculum is, it is only one element of the learning process. We sometimes forget that musical values and study habits are shaped well before a student arrives at university and that learning, both formal and informal, continues well beyond the period of undergraduate study. Trying to cover too much content within a basic undergraduate degree can be counterproductive by removing the space necessary for growth and reflection.

Other traps relate to the way in which we as educators regard the process in which we are engaged. Is our role to teach or is it to facilitate learning and to foster student independence and responsibility? Those of us who teach piano in a tertiary institution generally are (or have been) active concert performers. After many years of reflective practice, we have developed our own personal response to matters of technique, artistic expression and musical communication. The close and highly interactive relationship that develops between student and teacher is one of the most precious and distinctive features of a conservatory environment. It facilitates a distinctly personal approach to teaching and learning and provides students with unique opportunities to learn from their teachers' wisdom and experience. There is a serious risk, however, that the teacher might become the focus rather than the student, so inhibiting the development of an independent artistic spirit.

It is very tempting for us as teachers to set the agenda and to focus our teaching upon the communication of our own personal technical and artistic insights. We do not always recognise that such insights are, at least in part, a product of our own particular professional and life experiences. Some students may be greatly inspired by what we have to offer. But for others, it may not be what they need most at their present stage of development. They may simply not be ready to take it all on board. It may even prevent them from finding their own way through the key principles of technique and expression. Teaching can very easily get in the way of learning and a state of dependence of student upon teacher can be set up and perpetuated. If we are genuinely to cater for individual differences in background, aspirations, talent and learning style, the emphasis will be not so much on what we are going to teach as on what the student is going to learn.

Conclusion

Our task as tertiary educators is a complex one, full of traps, paradoxes and contradictions. The overall aim, however, is quite simple – to provide an education that enables students to take control of their future. No profession comes with a guarantee of lucrative and life-long employment and the economic and social environment can change rapidly. But the skilled and “skillfully diversified” musician (Pezzone, 1996, p. 20) will be able to exercise real choice about their future and will be able to adapt to changing circumstances.

A particularly attractive definition of a conservatory portrays it as a place where students can grow, blossom and flower. They will be given the best possible

care, including the resources and the time to develop the highest level of skill of which they are capable. But they will also be led towards an adaptable, independent and realistic way of looking at the professional world. They will develop a taste for learning and a realisation that learning is a life-long process. They will achieve breadth and depth of musical experience, enabling them to exercise genuine choice concerning their future. That choice may be to pursue the demanding career of a performing artist. If so, it will be based upon a well-judged assessment of talent and commitment and will be underpinned by a realistic notion of what will be involved. If their choice leads them in other directions, whether in the field of music or not, then that outcome too is valid. The future can take a variety of forms – success will derive not only from talent and skill but from open-mindedness, versatility, adaptability and the willingness to work as long and hard as is necessary to complete each task to the highest possible level.

About the Author

David Lockett has appeared extensively as a soloist and chamber musician throughout Australia and internationally. He has performed, recorded and edited the piano music of Margaret Sutherland and is currently recording her sonatas for piano and other instruments. He is in constant demand as a teacher, examiner and adjudicator and is an active contributor to numerous professional and community organisations. He is a recipient of a University of Adelaide award for excellence in teaching.

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