Musical and social communication in expert orchestral performance

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Background in music psychology
Previous studies devoting attention to orchestral musicians have predominantly used survey methods to measure stress and/or work satisfaction (e.g. Parasuraman & Purohit, 2000); studies have seldom used in-depth interviews to ask orchestral musicians to reflect on their own practice, despite a lack of knowledge about classical musicians’ working lives (Bennett, 2008). Recent work has considered orchestral musicians’ motivations, career aspirations, and performance experiences (Brodsky, 2006), but has neglected to elicit musicians’ perceptions of the processes involved in expert orchestral performance.

Background in music education
There is growing evidence that professional musicians require a range of skills (musical and extra-musical) in order to successfully negotiate the transition from higher education to the music profession. Recent studies have particularly highlighted the importance of interpersonal and communication skills (e.g. Creech et al., 2008; MacNamara et al., 2008), with calls for conservatoire training to become better aligned with the demands imposed by professional work.

Aims
This research aims to investigate performers’ experiences of working in a major London orchestra, focusing in particular on the skills and qualities they feel are required, and on how they negotiate challenges and sustain their careers. By focusing on the skills and qualities required for expert orchestral performance, this research seeks to produce findings which can inform the training of music performance students.

Main contribution
Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 20 members of a major London orchestra. The participants were recruited to represent a range of instruments, positions in the orchestra (i.e. principal players, those with a numbered seat, and rank and file players), ages, and length of time working in the orchestra. The interview schedule covered motivations for becoming an orchestral musician, the skills and qualities required for their work, strategies for maintaining their career, and aspects of work that they find particularly challenging and satisfying. The interviews were analysed thematically using a grounded theory approach.

Outstanding instrumental technique was viewed by the participants as a prerequisite for expert orchestral performance. More significantly, however, they emphasised a set of skills which they considered vital for achieving excellence in the orchestral context, encompassing listening to, communicating with, and adapting to those around them at all times during rehearsal and performance. In a context where high technical facility was assumed as a basic requirement, listening and then adapting was seen as a primary skill, and one which players often felt they had developed during their careers. This aspect of their work provided them with motivation, with fresh challenges at each performance, even when playing repertoire they know well; additionally, the cooperation and teamwork exemplified by this process was a major source of work satisfaction. Because orchestral performance is a group endeavour, strong social and interpersonal skills were also cited as important for orchestral work, with participants stressing the significance of maintaining good social relationships with colleagues in order to foster a conducive environment to achieving excellence on stage.
Implications
This research has produced preliminary findings on ensemble communication in orchestral performance on which further, more detailed, work can be based. The findings suggest that conservatoire training could more effectively equip students for music performance work by devoting greater attention to ensemble performance, collaborative work, and the development of interpersonal skills, and to exploring the relationship between these and the development of a strong artistic voice.

References

Melissa Dobson is a post-doctoral Research Assistant at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, where she is working on projects on the themes of orchestral musicians in the twenty-first century and understanding audiences. She received her PhD from the University of Sheffield in 2010, with a thesis investigating audience experience and enjoyment of classical music concert attendance. Her research interests lie broadly in the social psychology of music, with a particular focus on audience and performer perspectives on live music-making.

Helena Gaunt is Assistant Principal (Research and Academic Development) at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama. Her current research focuses on one-to-one and small group tuition in conservatoires, orchestral musicians in the twenty-first century, the role of improvisation (verbal and musical) in developing professional expertise, and on the motivation and aspirations of students in conservatoires. Alongside research, she is a professional oboist. From 2007-10 Helena chaired the Research group of the Polifonia project for the Association of European Conservatoires (AEC); she is also on the Partners Board of the London Centre for Arts and Cultural Exchange (LCACE).