

THE EMERGING ‘PERFORMER’ IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Theories of musical development have generally focused on childhood and adolescence, in line with theories of cognitive development (Piaget, 1959). However, the literature on life-span development suggests that we continue to change throughout our lives. This may have important implications for the potential professional musician. In examining the development of the professional musician, it is commonly understood that environmental factors, such as the support of significant others (parents, teachers, peers) and type or amount of practice, are significant contributors to musical success. However, alongside these elements, the identity of the individual and how the identity develops and emerges as they approach entry into the profession is crucial. The aim of the research project reported here is to better understand the transition from training as a musician to entering the profession. In particular, this paper focuses on the emerging identity of the musician and the role it plays in their professional development. The paper presents quantitative data from a two-year longitudinal study investigating the development of 35 undergraduate conservatoire and university students in their final two years of study. The focus of the current paper is on the conservatoire students, and the data collected in a fifteen-month period traces the progress and development of these musicians. Initial findings suggest that as the individual matures as a musician, so their identity changes. For example, they have developed a strong drive to fulfil their potential and have very clear ideas about how to achieve success as a musician. Additional findings suggest that the role played by key others changes as the individuals begin to enter the profession. The findings reported provide unique insight into the development of the performing musician and, as such, have educational implications for our understanding of how to maximise the potential of musicians in training and how to best aid their transition into the profession.

1. BACKGROUND

Musical development research has largely focused on the changes that occur through childhood and adolescence, coinciding with the theory of cognitive development proposed by Piaget (1959). Life-span development literature, however, proposes that we change and develop throughout our lives, and indicates that the most significant of the life-span changes is in fact the one from late adolescence to young adulthood (Erikson, 1959). During this particular transition, the individual has to accept and accommodate various lifestyle changes, and as such it is thought to be particularly stressful for both the individual and those around him or her (Gecas and Mortimer, 1987). Such transitions include the movement from school to work or university, and the development from relationships with parents and peers, to more

intimate relationships, for example. In the transition from school to work the individual has to develop new, independent ways of working, in opposition to the structured and teacher-directed work common in schools. Furthermore, they must learn how to work as part of a team, often a necessity in the work place. For reasons such as these, this period of transition is considered to be a crucial time for identity formation (Erikson, 1959).

With specific relation to music, very little research has considered the precise nature of how musical skill changes and develops across the life-span. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1986) use Erikson’s model of life-span development as the basis for their model of development in fine art, suggesting that our abilities range from scribblings in infancy, through to a unique and personal style in later years. Manturzewska (1990) investigated Polish musicians, and her findings suggest that the professional musician changes throughout the life-span: her six-stage model describes how certain skills are vital at different periods throughout the musicians’ development and career.

However, there is no investigation to the author’s knowledge that has examined the precise nature of the transition from training as a musician at University or Conservatoire, to entering the profession. One piece of research that directly led to the instigation of the work described in this paper, was that reported in Burland and Davidson (2002). Twenty musicians from the ‘specialist’ group used in the Davidson, Sloboda, Howe, and Moore research (published between 1995-98) were contacted eight years after the initial study, and interviewed about their experiences since the original interviews. The individuals were at this point between eighteen and twenty-six years of age, and the research showed that certain elements seemed to determine how successful they were in achieving a career as a professional musician. These factors included the importance of music to self-concept, the development of some form of strategy for coping, the presence of strong intrinsic motivation, and the vital role played by other people (parents, teachers, the institutions to which they had belonged). The small, and possibly unrepresentative sample, however, makes the findings difficult to generalise, and so a further project was needed to gain further insight into how and when the factors described above begin to play an important role in the musicians’ development.

2. aims

The aim of the current paper is to gain more detailed insight into the development of the professional musician, focusing in particular on the transition between training in a Conservatoire and entering the profession.

3. METHOD

The work described in this paper is part of an ongoing research project which has involved a now complete two-year longitudinal study investigating the transition of students at a University and a music Conservatoire in England. There are thirty-two respondents in total (18 from the former; 14 from the latter), and at the beginning of the study they were in either the final or penultimate year of their first undergraduate degrees. Each respondent has been interviewed a total of eight times, once every three months. The first two interviews, and the last interview were semi-structured, the middle five interviews were structured. This enabled the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. All interviews included questions about the centrality of music to their lives, their thoughts and feelings about their current music-making and their teachers/lessons, the role that music plays in their lives, what strategies they have for coping with any setbacks or difficulties they may encounter, and their hopes for the immediate and long-term future. Within the larger project the data have been analysed using both qualitative (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Smith, Flowers, and Osborn, 1997) and quantitative techniques. This paper focuses only on the structured interviews with the Conservatoire student since over 90 per cent of the students are hoping to pursue a career in performance, and therefore are the most suitable for discussion here. This paper reports some initial quantitative findings and refers to the Conservatoire students as musicians.

3. RESULTS

The data are presently in the process of detailed analysis, and so some initial findings are reported here. The first stage of analysis involves descriptive statistics: responses for each of the five quantitative interviews (conducted over a fifteen month period) have been plotted on line-graphs in order to determine which factors change significantly over time. Three main elements are discussed in the current paper – the musicians' increased awareness of how to independently achieve their chosen career as a professional performing career, the decreased dependence that the musicians have on their teachers, and the increased percentage of musicians who turn to non-musical friends for help and advice. Over the two years the musicians became increasingly focused on the specific factors that they felt would help them to develop. One important finding is that the musicians wanted to maximise all opportunities (Figure 1); by the final quantitative interview all respondents stated that they were working for specific events such as competitions and auditions, which provides evidence that they were taking those opportunities. Additionally, the musicians believed that they needed to either maintain or increase their focus in order to have success in achieving their long-term goal of becoming a professional performing musician. Interestingly, the musicians also recognised the importance of being flexible with their short-term goals, keeping their options open, perhaps to ensure that they do not miss new opportunities, or to maintain their interest and motivation.

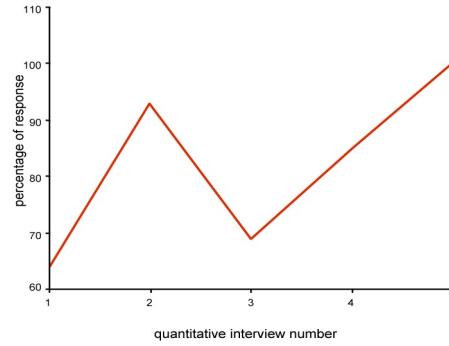


Figure 1. Graph showing the increased percentage of musicians who wish to maximise their opportunities over the course of the quantitative interviews

As mentioned above, the graph in figure 1 highlights an increase in the number of musicians who believed it important to maximise their opportunities. The descending peak which occurs at interview three is representative of a trend that occurs in many other factors as well (see figures 2 and 3 for example). Possible explanations for this may be related to the time at which interview three took place – during the middle of July. The final year students had recently graduated, and like the penultimate year students, were enjoying the summer vacation. Therefore, one explanation may be that the students were simply engaged in less music making and not thinking about their studies as much as when they were in the Conservatoire environment. However, the data show that at this time all musicians stated that they were extremely busy with other activities. It is perhaps more likely that the recently graduated musicians experienced a period of uncertainty and anxiety – they had to decide whether music is the career they wished to pursue seriously, and so it is likely that all aspects of their lives were under review. This is confirmed by the data, which indicate that the musicians experienced increased levels of nerves and concerns in their personal life at this time. Similar issues may also be true for the penultimate year musicians; they were about to enter their final year at college, and needed to begin thinking about whether music is the career they wished to pursue.

Towards the end of the interview period there is a clear decrease in the help the musicians felt they were given by their teachers; a high percentage of musicians reported how inspiring and helpful their teachers were in the early interviews, but by the final interview only a small number perceived their teacher as helpful or inspiring (Figure 2). This perhaps coincides with their own perceptions of how much progress they had made between interviews. In the early interviews a high number of musicians described themselves as having made either immense or quite a lot of progress between interviews, but by the last interview this had become more regulated, with descriptions of progress as either 'some' or 'none'. The musicians themselves described their feelings about their progress as 'extremely pleased' in the former instance, to 'ok' in the final interview.

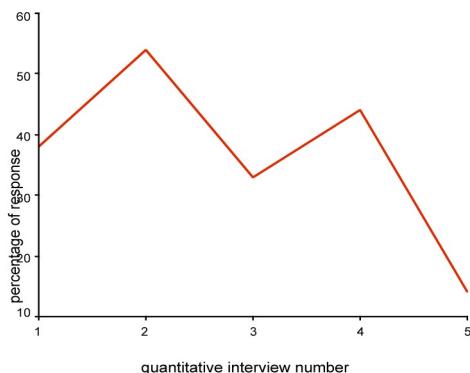


Figure 2. Graph showing the decrease in the percentage of students who identify teachers as helpful over the course of the quantitative interviews.

There is a large increase in the percentage of musicians who reported that they talk to certain others about their difficulties or struggles. In the early interviews, some musicians described talking to friends within the conservatoire and their parents, and as the interviews progressed so the percentages for each increased. The most obvious development here is that the musicians described how they increasingly talk to friends (typically non-musicians) who they don't study or work with (few reported this was the case in initial interviews, see figure 3).

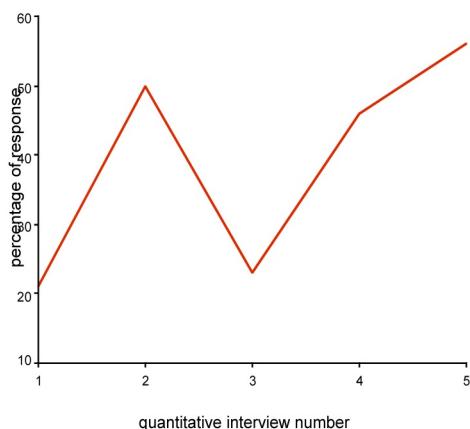


Figure 3. Graph showing the increased numbers of musicians who report talking to non-musical friends about their difficulties and struggles.

4. DISCUSSION

These preliminary results indicate some factors in the transition and development of professional musicians in training. The determination and focus of the musicians to succeed and take all opportunities is perhaps a key development during this period of transition: the recognition that it may be a struggle to achieve a career as a professional musician is characterised by their emphasis on the necessity to keep options open and being

prepared to change their short-term goals. That the musicians are prepared to be so flexible is perhaps crucial; by accepting any opportunities, rather than having a fixed route they intend to follow is more likely to result in the desired outcome of a performance career – to be fixed and inflexible is unlikely to lead to success, particularly in such a precarious industry as music performance. Following the low peak in interview three in a large number of factors, there is a steep line of increase in the percentage of musicians who recognise the need to maximise opportunities (among other elements). This suggests that the middle point of the study is a period of insecurity and reassessment; the result is that the musicians return to the conservatoire after the vacation with renewed focus and determination to achieve their goals.

The finding that the musicians have less dependence on teachers suggests that they have developed more autonomy in their learning, with more well-formed ideas of what they need to do in order to develop, and feel they have the tools in order to do so. As the musicians enter the profession it is unlikely they will have such structure to their instrumental/vocal development as they do within the conservatoire, and so the break from such structure is perhaps indicative of their readiness to enter the profession. Furthermore, the increased reliance on friends and family to help with difficulties indicates that the musicians are beginning to break away from the security and help provided by the conservatoire environment in the form of friends, teachers, and perhaps ready-made opportunities in the form of orchestras and competitions.

The fact that the levels of progress described by the musicians seem to plateau by interview five (twenty-one months since the beginning of the study) suggests that they have reached a stable level of ability, as would perhaps be expected of a professional performer. This may serve as a further explanation as to why teachers are perceived to be less helpful by the final interview: the musicians may feel that they cannot progress any further in the Conservatoire environment, and therefore begin to identify other elements that will help their development (such as maximising opportunities, changing goals, or talking to peers making the same transition). This is perhaps an indicator that the transition through music college has been successful, and that they are now ready to enter the profession.

5. CONCLUSION

The discussion presented above indicates some ways in which the identity of the performer begins to emerge during the transition from training as an undergraduate, to either entering the profession, or continuing studies at postgraduate level. Whilst the results discussed are only preliminary, there are clear indicators that a more thorough analysis will yield more detailed insights into this critical period of professional musical development. The potential implications for this work are directed at both educational institutions and the developing musicians themselves; by understanding the factors that characterise the transition between training and entering the profession, it may be possible to enhance the professional development of young musicians, although more detailed examination of the results is necessary before any detailed suggestions can be proposed.

6. REFERENCES

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