

Reflecting on reflection-in-action: Supervising practice-based doctorates in music

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ABSTRACT

Practice-based doctorates are well established in many creative disciplines, but it is only recently that similar music programs have come under scrutiny. While such doctorates are now offered at many Australian universities, some argue that approaches and expectations may vary widely across institutions to the detriment of the discipline. Similarly abroad, there have been reviews within the Bologna Process to establish a coherent framework for 'third cycle studies' in music. In concert with these developments, this paper draws upon the experiences of its authors as supervisors centrally responsible for the direction of an Australian conservatoire's Doctor of Musical Arts, offering practice-based research pathways for music professionals. Emergent themes include: a lack of prior research-training experience; few established research project exemplars; and, the problematic nature of defining and implementing practice-based research exegeses in music. The paper concludes by offering insights which aim to improve the efficacy of the program and contribute to higher degree music education more widely.

Keywords

Exegeses, music doctorates, practice-based research.

BACKGROUND

Research higher degrees (RHDs) in music are a relatively new phenomenon in Western conservatories, once exclusively offering vocational training (Polifonia, 2007). The development of music research qualifications has taken place against a background of an equivalency struggle between established science-oriented approaches and that of so-called 'practice-based research', ie, "a collective notion that may cover any form of practice-oriented research in the arts" (Borgdorff, 2007, p. 5). While relevant methodologies are now well established in some creative disciplines (eg, art and design; see Gray, 1996), in music there has been little debate about the topic until quite recently (Tomasi & Vanmaele, 2007).

In Australia too, the landscape for practice-based RHDs has a relatively short history. With the amalgamation of music schools within universities in the late 1980s, degree program pathways began to mirror those of other academic disciplines, and doctorates in music are now offered at many Australian universities (see Schippers, 2007, p. 8). However, these programs tend to deliver a diversity of approaches, structures, exegesis weightings and designs.

Standards may vary widely across institutions where external examination may become problematic, as does the lack of dissemination of project exemplars or research methodologies. As Michael Hannan argues (2008), the sector would "greatly benefit from a dialogue about these practices and the issues surrounding them" (p. 1).

The Professional Doctorate

The Australian Higher Education Council urged that universities consider doctoral degrees with a focus upon a number of judicious concerns and "should provide extended and advanced training in certain professional fields where projects were applied in nature and oriented to practice in professions" (AHEC, 1989, p. 7). Subsequently, the 'professional doctorate' has become significant in Australia as a practice-based research qualification for disciplines including education, nursing, law and music.

In 2005, Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University (QCGU) established a professional doctorate program as the Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA) to offer a research pathway for music professionals by focussing on praxis-building and reflection-in-action, to

. . . redefine the process leading to performance in terms of creative research . . . the musician is a researcher . . . consult[ing] a vast database of information, partly external in scores, books, colleagues, and other sources, but largely internalised in the form of an 'aural library' created by many years of practice and experience. This research determines the choices the musician finally makes . . . The aim of these projects is to make an important step in making the choices . . . and the processes underlying them explicit, and in that way increasing our understanding of the creative process as a whole. (QCRC, 2005)

PROJECT AIMS

Current DMA projects comprise of a range of research undertakings, some with a creative 'product' exposition similar to that of art and design (eg, composition, music technology, and digital works), while others focus on tacit issues related to musical performance or education. With its first graduates completing in 2009, it is now timely to review the DMA design and outcomes, draw together common themes which may arise, and thereby offer findings which seek to improve the program overall.

METHOD

This methodology draws on the experiences of its authors both as RHD supervisors and as academic managers of the DMA program: one as QCGU's Deputy Director (Research), the other as its RHD Convenor. To evaluate the program's status, mixed method approaches were adopted to gather a broad spectrum of material for analysis (Creswell, 2003), including data from student surveys, interviews and discussion colloquia across the supervision community. Authors' notes and email correspondence were used to refine the emerging themes, as were meetings to discuss RHD projects, university policy *vs.* practice implications, and to validate the observations through research team member checking (Lincoln & Cuba, 1985). Overall, the process has aimed to proactively make sense of the authors' day-to-day problem-solving that went in the supervision of RHD music projects. As Donald Schön (1987) notably suggests – the outcomes represent the authors' "reflection on reflection-in-action" (p. 22).

EMERGENT THEMES

Three overarching themes emerged, some aspects of which were considered in the original program design, while other facets were unexpected. These are best summarised as:

1. A lack of prior research training experience.
2. Few established research methodology exemplars.
3. Designing authentic practice-based research exegeses.

Each of these themes will be now be explored in detail.

Research-training Experience

Given the DMA's recent introduction, supervisors are not always cognisant of the program's processes and requirements. While some understanding of traditional PhD structures is evident, modelling practice-based research may be problematic and there can be considerable variation in supervisor expertise, as described by Hannan (2008):

... many of the academics who supervise these degrees do not typically produce exegetical writings as adjuncts to their own professional outputs. (p. 4)

Similarly, prospective students commonly misunderstand the program's research orientation, as evidenced in many preliminary project proposals. The DMA is a government-subsidised program and 66% of the activity within the degree is research. Furthermore, the professional doctorate is designed to prepare graduates for leadership in an area of specialised practice through the provision of:

- an advanced program of study related to practitioner settings and responsibilities; and
- a supervised research project.

For professional musicians, admission requirements can present a hurdle in that applicants should hold a bachelor-honours, research masters or 'equivalent' research track record. At this point a decision has to be made on the nature of professional experience as research-comparable and the 'practice as research' debate manifests itself. Once

admitted, the students undertake a program of coursework designed to shape the project. Any lack of research training experience typically emerges at this point as students struggle to articulate their ideas within an academic setting:

As many students are working professionals, often with little recent experience of academic life, the supervisors are required to assist students in negotiating the academic terrain. (Harrison & Emmerson, 2009, p. 1)

In seeking to address this issue with students, supervisors are confronted with another concern: locating and adapting appropriate models to present as possible solutions.

Research Methodology Exemplars

The DMA community has welcomed the opportunity to be involved in exploring the potential of practice-based research. Students are allocated a minimum of two supervisors while the coursework exposes them to an academic team, each of whom bring suggestions for methodologies, designs and outputs. Many academics encourage students to consider innovative approaches and to look beyond the discipline for suitable 'templates', eg,

... in an area where research is traditional it's easy to say 'look here's a good model. How can I adapt that for myself?' With our area, those models are not really around at the moment, so I'm busy nicking proposals from people in other areas, and then trying to use my imagination, and saying to the student 'look you can adapt this'. (Hockey & Allen-Collinson 2002, p. 348)

22 candidates in the current DMA cohort present a range of research interests in performance, pedagogy, composition and technology. Projects include:

- The extended flautist: Techniques, technologies and performer perceptions in music for flute and electronics
- The adaption of Indian Karnatic rhythmic structures and improvisation methods into drum set language and performance practice.
- Education in contemporary voice: The development of multi-faceted media in the delivery of contemporary voice instruction.
- Spatialisation in music composition: The creation of an original multi-movement acousmatic composition exploring the spatial placement and movement of sound in a 5.1 Surround sound listening environment.

With such diverse topics, it is perhaps unsurprising that difficulties emerge as the projects progress. As submission approaches, finding the balance between the interface of practice and exegesis becomes a critical concern.

Practice-based Exegeses

DMA admission requires applicants to have at least five years professional experience. This is ideal in the sense of having a student cohort with high-level practical skills, but more often than not also brings a lack of experience with written argumentation. A first major challenge for students and supervisors is, as Cowley (2007) so eloquently puts it, "getting the buggers to write."

Unlike some other disciplines, music is yet to coherently address just what constitutes practice-based research, particularly in performance. Art, design and film often have a product-based exegesis, as does music composition with scored and/or recorded ‘folio’. Performers, given the temporal nature of their work, have not yet realised a summative item of the same ilk. This is problematic given that current university policy requires that doctoral work be examined as a complete, final submission.

Consequently, some projects incorporate digital media components to accompany the written dissertation. While recordings are useful in exegeses, it is also clear that these act only as a proxy for the live experience of real-time performance. Other works utilise web representations, but this too can be challenging, eg, Internet sites are not necessarily persistent or self-contained; embedded media may be plug-in dependent; and, there is no assurance that material cannot be altered during examination. University policy insists that doctoral exegesis must be autonomous, replicable, platform independent and remote-accessible.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has briefly examined a 1st generation practice-based research program in music. Its insights aim to contribute to knowledge about the issues surrounding exegetical formats for music research programs (Hannan, 2008) while drawing upon both local and international thinking (QCRC, 2005; Polifonia, 2007) to frame its conclusions as follows.

Given that DMA applicants often lack formal (or written) research experience and that in such a new undertaking there are few project exemplars – the design of exegeses, their examination and subsequent availability for scrutiny becomes core to the success of this program’s aims (and perhaps for others). Broadly then, an ongoing investigation will seek to address the relationships between “the generative act that brings a work into existence and the receptive act that is a proper appreciation of that work” (Davies, 2004, p. 9) in order to increase our understanding of the creative process as a whole (QCRC, 2005).

Thus far, the creation of the DMA has provided a valuable and visible means of enhancing the critical evaluation of musical praxis. In regular colloquia and corresponding web-based resources, the institutional space for reflection and analysis is opened up, thus assisting not only those directly involved in practice-based work, but also in helping to create “a culture of research, a climate of questioning, analysing and experimenting which will in the end benefit all members of the conservatoire and serve as a catalyst to the institutions’ development as a cultural engine” (Polifonia, 2007, p. 16).

The authors’ experiences also support the notion that the program must be increasingly focussed upon the students, empowering them to be co-creators in higher music education projects by highlighting their independent intellectual and artistic abilities, ie:

. . . the concepts, the technical terms and their related distinctions, assumptions, and theories that are handed down to us by the traditional disciplines . . . do not necessarily reflect the way musicians experience and think about their art . . . programmes may provide a suitable platform for young musician researchers to develop their own concepts that are truer, or a better reflection of their own perceptions and thoughts. Young researchers may be encouraged to actively influence the world of music research and to determine the research discourses as they see fit and not as they are told to see fit. (Polifonia, 2007, p. 17)

However, music schools need to not only encourage authenticity and innovation in the student body, but also must keep a pragmatic watch on institutional policy detail as it relates to the production and examination of practice-based research exegeses. This must be a two-way conversation: while serving to accurately advise students at any given point in time, there is also an essential obligation to reflect upon faculty and student reflection-in-action, to actively maintain relevant program structures accordingly, and to advocate and influence university policy in terms of the ongoing advancement of 21st century practice-based higher degree music education.

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