Performance Studies in practice: an investigation of students’ approaches to practice in a university music department

Kim Burwell
Matthew Shipton

*Music Education Research* 13(3), 255–271
DOI: 10.1080/14613808.2011.603041
Final version for publication

**Abstract**

In higher education music, individual practice remains a unique and solitary activity, perhaps the least accessible to the scrutiny of either teachers or researchers. This study reports on an investigation of the variety among student approaches to practice, with reference to year groups, age, instrumental groups and examination results. Data were collected through a questionnaire of 101 items with verbal rating scales. The interface between research and teaching and learning is seen to support reflection in the ongoing work of students, tutors and the institution.

**Keywords**

music, student practice

In higher education music, individual practice remains a unique and solitary activity, perhaps the least accessible to the scrutiny of either teachers or researchers. A recent tradition of practitioner research within the Music Department of Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) has been focused on individual lessons, which we described as something of a ‘secret garden’ compared with classroom settings (Young, Burwell, and Pickup 2004, 144); and yet the student’s independent practice represents a far larger proportion of time spent and work undertaken (Burwell, Young, and Pickup 2004, 31). If we were to develop a more meaningful understanding of the teaching and learning process in the context of Performance Studies, we would need to know more about how our students perceived and approached this larger proportion of their work.

The role of the institution has been described by Jørgensen as ‘the most neglected area of students’ learning’ (2000, 67). Discussing the complex issue of responsibility for learning, apportioned among student, tutor and institution, he argues that student independence and responsibility should be an essential part of the institution’s agenda for reflection and discussion (2000, 75). At CCCU, we wanted to support opportunities for reflection, with research offering interfaces at three points: students developing their independent practice, tutors drawing links between practice and lessons, and the institution articulating its values through both staff development and curriculum design.
In investigating students’ approaches to practice, our lines of inquiry were supported by a quickly growing body of research, exploring this subject from a range (256) of perspectives. The student experience in higher education music has not been widely examined, but significant inroads have been made with reference to both university music departments (Dibben 2006; Pitts 2003) and the conservatoire setting (Burt and Mills 2006). Motivation and self-efficacy have been shown to be important components of student learning, influencing their approach to practice (Clark, Williamon, and Lisboa 2007; Nielsen 2004; Ritchie and Williamon 2007; Smith 2005). Particularly relevant to students in higher education has been the study of practice strategies, and their relationship to independent learning: salient themes include self-regulation (Nielsen 2001) and metacognition (Hallam 2001), found to be characteristic of advanced and professional musicians. The quantity of practice and its bearing on success has been highlighted with reference to expertise theory (Ericsson et al. 1993, Jørgensen 2002, Williamon and Valentine 2000), and issues of practice and health have been addressed, and shown to be a relatively neglected area for students (Kreutz, Ginsbourg, and Williamon 2009).

Turning to the perspective of the institution, the relationship between practice and individual lessons has been usefully explored by Koopman et al. (2007), using a multiple method approach of questionnaires, diaries, interviews and observations to characterise the work of a small number of participants in depth. Kostka (2002) found a mismatch of teacher and student views on practice, regarding quantity, planning and strategies, while Purser (2005) and Gaunt (2008) documented teachers’ views of how practice is addressed in lessons. Elsewhere, the investigation of the views of musicians from different cultural traditions – within and beyond the conservatoire – has suggested distinct approaches to learning that must inevitably affect practice behaviour (Creech et al. 2008; Kamin, Richards, and Collins 2007).

Individual differences among both students and teachers, and the confluence of musical traditions within the higher education sector, are further highlighted by the ‘widening participation’ agenda embraced at Canterbury Christ Church. This entails a commitment to ‘promoting access to students from a wide range of backgrounds and ensuring all students receive appropriate support and guidance to enable them to progress and reach their full potential’ (http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/support/partnerships-widening-participation/). The Music Department recruits student cohorts of increasing variety in terms of age, expertise, and musical styles and traditions, and their aims, ambitions and reasons for undertaking an undergraduate degree are correspondingly varied. We wanted to know how our students approach their
independent practice, how their approaches might vary with their individual characteristics, and how the influence of the institution might be affecting their work.

The setting

The research was conducted within the undergraduate degree programme in music (BMus/BAMusic) at the Canterbury campus of CCCU. The programme places considerable emphasis on performance; students are expected to have undertaken the Associated Board’s 8th grade instrumental examination before entry, and must also pass an audition. Among a total of 126 students in 2008/9, Performance Studies was the most popular subject, attracting 108 students (85.71%) over three year-groups. A generous provision of individual lessons from visiting experts lies, to the best of our knowledge, between that of the conservatoires and other university music (257) departments (Mills 2003). In spite of this emphasis on performance, the university setting is reflected in a corresponding emphasis on the development of a breadth of skills, with students expected to demonstrate ‘an increasingly informed and reflective approach to issues such as historical context, musicians’ health, practice strategies, and the critical evaluation of performance per se’ (Burwell 2009). The performance-based courses therefore include a significant written element, which encapsulates many of the institution’s ambitions for students. This is characterised in the handbook for visiting instrumental and vocal tutors:

The written component of the performance modules tests students’ ability to reflect on their work, but perhaps more importantly, it poses a series of carefully ordered tasks which provide a guideline for the kind of thinking students should be undertaking. Thus first year students for example are asked to give an account of their current stage of development regarding performance, and to outline the personal goals they have agreed on with their individual tutors. Later, more specific challenges ask them to interrogate their own standing in terms of the decisions being taken, in terms of practice strategies, repertoire choice, and critical self-evaluation. Some will be able to demonstrate a high level of independence at an early stage; others, less accustomed to the kind of thinking expected in higher education, will need to begin by examining the advice offered by their instrumental tutors, and trying to understand the judgement behind it. Certainly we encourage students to think that their individual tutors will welcome questions, and to negotiate with them an individually-tailored course of study. (Burwell 2009, 2)

At the core of the Performance Studies courses is a seminar series, supporting the development of a broad range of learning outcomes with reference to research literature on the subject and an emphasis on reflection through discussion. The questionnaire was administered early in the academic year before any seminar input had been offered: we hoped that this would encourage students to respond to questions in terms of their broad experience, without being particularly influenced by the terms of recent seminar discussion.
**Procedure**

The questionnaire was descriptive in design: our intention was to discover the variety among students and to characterise their approaches to practice, effectively opening an investigation rather than attempting to explain student behaviours or seek causal relationships among them (Oppenheim 1992, 12). The questionnaire began by asking for details about individual participants. Although Oppenheim warns against starting an inquiry with personal questions, which might be considered intrusive (1992, 108–9), we felt that so long as these were largely neutral in nature, they might help participants to feel that they were off to an easy start before proceeding to questions that would draw more upon reflection and judgement. Information requested included age, principal study instrument, number of years studied, and musical style, whether classical, jazz or popular. Students were also asked how many hours of practice they would expect on a ‘normal’ day during term, and how many days a week they would expect to accomplish that.

The main body of the questionnaire consisted of loosely grouped questions that explored aspects of student practice that had been highlighted in the research literature related to instrumental teaching and learning in higher education, as well as our own academic curriculum. These included planning and organising practice, repertoire, practice and lessons, performance preparation, practice strategies, affective aspects of learning, and health and wellbeing. Visiting tutors were invited in a session on their annual Staff Development day to test the draft questionnaire, to provide feedback on whether questions were framed as positive, negative or neutral, and to make suggestions about other questions that might usefully be included.

The final questionnaire included 101 items with verbal rating scales: 1 = very true of me; 2 = often true of me; 3 = sometimes true of me; 4 = occasionally true of me; 5 = rarely true of me. The order of these ratings – low numbers for agreement through to high numbers for disagreement – matched that of module evaluations, to which most of the students were already accustomed. Gathering data in this way would have the disadvantage of being relatively superficial in nature, and without large numbers of respondents, it would be difficult to argue that a significant contribution to the understanding of the broader phenomena being tested would be possible. However, it had the advantage of allowing us to gather substantial information that could be easily summarised, and which could reasonably be generalised to the population from which it was drawn (Kent 2001, 10) and this made it suitable for the purposes of the research.

The questionnaire was administered to students during normal class sessions, with a preliminary discussion of the research process and ethics. We told students that while we hoped the exercise
would be of interest in this and other similar institutions, helping teachers and students to reflect on the design and conduct of Performance Studies, participation was voluntary. Students were also told that their responses would be considered in the light of their examination marks, to see if any relevant relationships could be identified among them; they were assured however that their anonymity would be respected whenever findings were reported. When the questionnaire was administered there were 12 absentees from classes, and two further students attended but declined to participate. With 94 out of a potential 108 participants, this gave us a strong return rate of 87.04%.

Information about individual participants was collated and summarised in a computer database, and descriptive statistics and standard scores derived from the responses to each questionnaire item. Relationships among the various strands of data were then sought, particularly in the light of student age, year of study, instrument or musical style, and performance examination marks.

**Findings**

Information about individual participants is summarised in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average (M)</th>
<th>Standard deviation (SD)</th>
<th>Number of responses (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>23.11</td>
<td>9.96</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected hours’ practice expected on a normal day during term</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected days per week on which this amount of practice is achieved</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam mark from the end of the preceding year</td>
<td>59.69</td>
<td>10.18</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam mark from the end of the current year</td>
<td>60.64</td>
<td>11.25</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard (Z) scores for the responses to each questionnaire item produced no statistically significant results, but served the purpose of indicating the distance of scores for each item from the overall mean of 2.85, and the position of individual items within the group (De Vaus 2002, 171). The strongest standard scores, either positive or negative, were demonstrated for the items shown in Table 2.
Table 2. Strongest standard scores for individual questionnaire items

Items with which respondents tended to agree:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Z</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I practise more conscientiously when I have repertoire that I enjoy</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>-1.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I practise more when I have an upcoming performance</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>-1.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I expect to make progress between my weekly lessons</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>-1.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I spend more time on difficult sections</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>-1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consult my teacher about all of my repertoire choices</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>-1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy private practice</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>-1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upcoming performances affect the content of my practice</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>-1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My teacher gives me the tools I need for effective practice</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>-1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I leave my lessons with clear targets for the next lesson</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>-1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel that my private practice is effective</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>-1.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Items with which respondents tended to disagree:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Z</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When I have difficulties I am likely to ask other students for help</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have to adapt my practice schedule to cope with physical problems that are not caused by my musical activities</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I find it difficult to keep my room bookings through the week</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Z crit = 1.64, one-tailed α = 0.05

Insofar as they can be taken to be representative of the attitudes of participants, these responses suggest that the students on the whole have confidence in their practice and in their teachers. Enjoyment is given considerable emphasis, lessons are thought to be clearly related to effective practice, and progress is expected.

(259) Year groups

Evidence for the influence of the Performance Studies courses on student work was sought by dividing participants into year groups (N = 29, 32, 33). Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) showed that year groups differed significantly in their responses to the following items:

- I plan my repertoire at the beginning of the year. F (2, 91) = 13.54, p = 0.00; M = 3.15, SD = 1.41
- My approach to practice has changed since I came to university. F (2, 91) = 3.38, p = 0.04; M = 2.21, SD = 1.25
- Upcoming performances affect the content of my practice. F (2, 90) = 3.49, p = 0.04; M = 1.76, SD = 0.97
- I find performance stressful. F (2, 91) = 3.30, p = 0.04; M = 2.95, SD = 1.38
Post hoc comparisons using the Fisher Least Significant Difference (LSD) test revealed that first year students were significantly less likely than third year students to agree with the second, third and fourth statements listed above, suggesting that these changes take place fairly gradually as they proceed through their degree programmes. In response to the statement ‘I my repertoire at the beginning of the year’, first year students were significantly less likely than either second or third year students, to agree: this suggests that students adapt their approach to repertoire planning early in their degree programmes, with a change evident by the time they reach their second year.

**Age groups**

The students were divided into groups of approximately equal sizes, according to their ages (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics showing students divided according to age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Youngest</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Oldest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of students</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age range</td>
<td>18–19</td>
<td>19–21</td>
<td>21–59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age</td>
<td>18.45</td>
<td>19.84</td>
<td>31.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>14.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two points might be noted from Table 3. First, there will presumably be some overlap between the results for age groups, and the results for years of study, as previously reported. Second, the age range and standard deviation of the oldest group are very wide compared with those of younger groups, and this might suggest that it is unreasonable to regard it as being a coherent group of respondents. However, all students in the oldest group must have had at least one ‘gap’ year between finishing school and coming to university, and this would arguably give them a common perspective in some ways. Certainly, a number of the questionnaire responses suggest that older students tend to share some attitudes to their practice, that distinguish them from other groups.

A series of univariate ANOVAs showed that age groups differed significantly in their responses to the following items:
• I find performance stressful.  F (2, 89) = 10.22, p = 0.00; M = 2.95, SD = 1.38
• I have found it helpful to read about practice.  F (2, 89) = 5.66, p = 0.00; M = 3.06, SD = 1.33
• I have found it helpful to read about managing performance anxiety.  F (2, 89) = 4.36, p = 0.02; M = 3.15, SD = 1.38
• I regard practice sessions as part of my normal weekly timetable.  F (2, 89) = 3.12, p = 0.049; M = 2.12, SD = 0.83
• When I have difficulties I am likely to ask other students for help.  F (2, 89) = 3.94, p = 0.03; M = 3.99, SD = 1.06

Post hoc comparisons using the Fisher LSD test offered some further insights into these results. The youngest students were significantly less likely to agree than either of the older groups, that they had found it helpful to read about practice; but they were significantly more likely to agree than either of the older groups, that they might ask other students for help when they had difficulties in their practice. The oldest group was significantly more likely to agree than either of the younger groups, that they found performance stressful.

Instrumental groups

Dividing respondents according to their specialist instrument made generalisation less viable: the smaller the groups, and the more unequal their numbers, the more likely results would be distorted in statistical analysis. Even so, a careful examination of group responses gave rise to observations that were of academic interest, several examples of which will be described here.

In the institutional setting pianists and percussionists, combined into a group of 15 + 3 students, were clearly affected in their approach to practice by resource issues: although all students may book practice rooms in the Music Department each week, not all of the available rooms are equipped with grand pianos and percussion instruments. Thus, the piano/percussion group gave strongest agreement to the statement ‘I book practice rooms at the beginning of the week’ (group average M = 2.94, SD = 1.43; N = 18) whereas guitarists, who can presumably practice in any practice room, gave the strongest disagreement (M = 4.57, SD = 1.13; N = 7). Perhaps because of the perceived pressure on room bookings, too, the piano/percussion group gave strongest agreement to the statement ‘I am likely to practise longer than I should without taking a break’ (M = 2.78, SD = 1.22) whereas singers, perhaps more conscious of their health, expressed the strongest disagreement (M = 3.65, SD = 1.41; N = 26).

While the piano/percussion group are clearly at a disadvantage because of the pressure on resources, their situation may perhaps have a positive side. The students in this group give strongest
agreement to the following statements, which might arguably be linked to the assumption that their practice time is necessarily limited: (262)

- I regard practice sessions as part of my normal weekly timetable (group mean = 1.83; overall mean M = 2.12, SD = 0.83).
- I am able to predict how much practice I can do each week (2.44; M = 3.02, SD = 1.31).
- I have found it helpful to read about practice (2.83; M = 3.06, SD = 1.33).
- I have found it helpful to read about managing performance anxiety (2.89; M = 3.15, SD = 1.38).

The piano/percussion group also expressed the strongest disagreement with a further statement:

- I can become bored during my practice sessions (4.00; M = 3.67, SD = 1.18).

‘Extreme responses’ from other groups suggest different sets of characteristics. For example, string players (N = 12) gave responses that made the relationship between their lessons and their practice conspicuous. They gave the strongest agreement to items such as these:

- My teacher equips me to solve technical problems in my private practice (group mean = 1.42; overall mean M = 1.98, SD = 0.84).
- I leave my lessons with clear targets for the next lesson (1.58; M = 1.83, SD = 0.92).
- I expect to make progress between my weekly lessons (1.58; M = 1.79, SD = 0.77).
- I choose technical work that is related to the repertoire I intend to practise (1.58; M = 2.55, SD = 1.17).
- I leave my lesson confident that I can apply practice strategies (1.83; M = 2.01, SD = 0.85).
- My teacher wants to know about the preparation I have made for each lesson (2.33; M = 2.79, SD = 1.10).

Further contrasts were revealed when the students were divided into three groups according to broader instrumental traditions. These were singers (N = 26), ‘conservatoire’ instrumentalists, including woodwind, piano, strings, and brass (N = 53) and ‘non-conservatoire’ instrumentalists, including guitar, saxophone, percussion and accordion (N = 15). Compared with conservatoire instrumentalists and singers, non-conservatoire instrumentalists gave responses that suggested a relatively loose relationship between practice and lessons, giving the strongest disagreement to the following:

- I work more effectively in lessons than in private practice sessions (group mean = 3.64; overall mean M = 2.71, SD = 1.18).
- My approach to practice has changed since I came to university (2.53; M = 2.21, SD = 1.25).
- My lessons involve explicit reference to practice strategies (2.53; M = 2.34, SD = 1.03).

– and the strongest agreement to these items:

- I am able to invent ways of solving technical problems (2.00; M = 2.83, SD = 1.09) (263)
• I worry about whether my playing will be of an adequate standard in my lesson (1.73; M = 2.03, SD = 1.02).

There seems to be an element of independence here, which however might also imply a lack of flexibility, and even a lack of confidence in the relationship between lessons and practice.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed examination of every kind of group, and the strength of the findings must be qualified in the light of uneven groupings and groups of small numbers. A number of other findings however suggested group traits that might be of interest. Singers seemed to be the group most conscious and careful of their health and wellbeing, and singers and guitarists placed most emphasis on memorising music, while instrumentalists from the conservatoire tradition emphasised this least. Conservatoire instrumentalists, perhaps surprisingly, also seemed least likely to emphasise the communicative aspects of performance, which seemed to interest singers above all. While some of these implied trends were obvious in nature, and matched our common-sense view of student behaviour, others might be matters of concern for the institution, warranting further investigation and reflection.

**Examination results (i)**

Perhaps one of the most interesting findings regarding the students’ individual examination results was the lack of any significant correlation between the results and their reported practice time, measured either through the number of hours’ practice they expected to achieve in a normal day or the number of days each week on which they expected to achieve that. Some significant results were found when students were divided into nine bands of ten, according to their next examination mark, as illustrated in Table 4. Students with the ten lowest examination marks are represented by band A, through to the students with the ten highest examination marks in band I.

**Table 4.** Students divided into nine bands, according to their next examination mark

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>band</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>I</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average mark at the next examination</td>
<td>41.00</td>
<td>49.90</td>
<td>54.20</td>
<td>57.60</td>
<td>60.40</td>
<td>64.00</td>
<td>67.40</td>
<td>71.80</td>
<td>78.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For two questionnaire items produced statistically significant results, with bands of students differing in their responses to the following:
• I book practice rooms at the beginning of the week. $F(8,80) = 2.81, p = 0.01; M = 3.44, SD = 1.45$
• I find it helpful to practice slowly. $F(8,81) = 2.60, p = 0.01; M = 2.11, SD = 1.06$

Post hoc comparisons using the Fisher LSD test revealed that students in Band I, with the strongest examination results, were significantly more likely than students in bands A, B, C, E and H to report booking practice rooms at the beginning of the week. Of all the bands, Band I students gave the strongest average agreement to that statement ($M = 2.20; SD = 1.49$).

Band I students also gave the strongest average agreement of any band, to the statement ‘I find it helpful to practice slowly’ ($M = 1.30; SD = 0.48$). They were significantly more likely to agree with this than students in bands A, B and F.

Other features of the data are perhaps of more academic interest than these, even where they are not statistically significant. For example, the responses to the statement, ‘I regard practice sessions as part of my normal weekly timetable’ show no significant differences among the nine bands of ten students. Several noteworthy characteristics emerge, however, when the division of students into bands of equal numbers is compared to the division into examination class, as in Tables 5 and 6.

**Table 5. Average responses from 9 bands of 10 students, to ‘I regard practice as part of my weekly timetable’**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bands</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>I</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average mark</td>
<td>41.00</td>
<td>49.90</td>
<td>54.20</td>
<td>57.60</td>
<td>60.40</td>
<td>64.00</td>
<td>67.40</td>
<td>71.80</td>
<td>78.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean response</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6. Average responses from 6 examination classes, to ‘I regard practice as part of my weekly timetable’**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>39 –</th>
<th>40-49</th>
<th>50-59</th>
<th>60-69</th>
<th>70-79</th>
<th>80 +</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average mark</td>
<td>36.67</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>54.57</td>
<td>63.92</td>
<td>73.18</td>
<td>82.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean response</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Table 5, there are no trends across the nine bands but the highest-scoring band of students gives an answer quite different to the rest: these students on average agree far more strongly than the other groups that practice sessions are a normal part of their weekly timetable. In Table 6b, it becomes evident that this strong agreement from the most successful students is disproportionately driven by the top five, who scored exceptional marks of 80+, and whose response is noticeably different even from those who scored first class marks between 70 and 79.

At the same time, it seems clear in Table 6 that the three least successful students, who with marks below 39% actually failed their exams, show a surprisingly strong agreement to the statement about timetabling, second only to the top-scoring students. This surprise is not isolated, and among 11 questions related to organising and prioritising practice, this tiny group of failing students gives ‘extreme’ responses to no less than 6 items. They give the strongest agreement to the following:

- I am satisfied with the amount of practice I get each week (group mean 2.67; overall mean M = 3.79, SD = 1.22). (265)
- I find it helpful to include practice-free days in my weekly schedule (2.33; M = 2.92, SD = 1.07).
- I am easily distracted by activity outside my practice room (3.33; M = 3.87, SD = 1.13).

And they give the strongest disagreement to the following:

- I am able to predict how much practice I can do each week (4.00; M = 3.02, SD = 1.31).
- I find it difficult to practice at home (3.67; M = 2.97, SD = 1.53).
- I book practice rooms at the beginning of the week (4.33; M = 3.44, SD = 1.45).

These apparent traits distinguish the failing students from the passing, and even from the behaviour reported by other, passing students in the lowest-scoring band of ten.

*Examination results (ii)*

For 60 respondents in second and third year we were able to compare the examination result that followed the questionnaire with the result that had been achieved at the end of the previous year. Table 7 shows these students grouped as previously, in nine bands according to their next examination mark, with their previous examination mark shown for comparison, and the difference between them below.
### Table 7. Bands of students showing difference between consecutive examination results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Band</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>I</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average mark for previous exam</td>
<td>41.83</td>
<td>54.80</td>
<td>52.33</td>
<td>62.20</td>
<td>56.17</td>
<td>62.13</td>
<td>64.25</td>
<td>65.00</td>
<td>71.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average mark for next exam</td>
<td>41.00</td>
<td>49.40</td>
<td>53.50</td>
<td>57.40</td>
<td>59.67</td>
<td>64.13</td>
<td>67.13</td>
<td>71.50</td>
<td>79.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>-0.83</td>
<td>-5.40</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>-4.80</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>7.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With each year of study, examination criteria become more stringent, so students need to improve in order to keep their marks stable. It does seem clear however that marks for the weaker bands of students tended to remain stable or decline, whereas an improvement in marks is increasingly noticeable for the stronger bands of students.

To investigate this further, respondents were rearranged into five groups of twelve students, ranging from those who lost most marks between the two examinations (Band P), to those who gained most (Band T), as shown in Table 8.

### Table 8. Difference between consecutive examination marks, for students divided into groups of equal numbers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Band</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>Q</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>T</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>-12 to -4</td>
<td>-3 to -1</td>
<td>-1 to 3</td>
<td>4 to 6</td>
<td>8 to 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>-7.08</td>
<td>-2.08</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>13.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>5.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With high standard deviations, particularly at either end of the table, few statistically significant differences were found among the questionnaire responses given by these bands of students. It seems noteworthy however that ‘extreme’ responses to a number of questionnaire items were given by the bands who either lost or gained most marks.

For example, Band P students, whose examination marks fell most, gave the strongest average disagreement to the following statements: (266)
- I enjoy private practice (2.25; overall mean M = 1.78, SD = 0.96).
- I can feel frustrated in my practice sessions (2.92; M = 2.58; SD = 1.21).
- I find performance stressful (3.08; M = 2.85, SD = 1.30).
- I feel embarrassed about discussing performance anxiety with other people (4.58; M = 3.80, SD = 1.34).
- My approach to practice has changed since I came to university (2.50; M = 2.02, SD = 1.16).

The same band of students gave the strongest average agreement to the following statements:

- I worry about whether my playing will be of an adequate standard in my lesson (1.83; M = 2.00; SD = 1.04).
- My practice sessions incorporate exercises that I knew before coming to university (2.33; M = 2.95, SD = 1.34).
- I practice more conscientiously when I have repertoire that I have chosen myself (2.17; M = 2.78, SD = 1.01).

While some of these responses might be expected of students who appear to be struggling to make progress, there seem to be some puzzling contrasts among them regarding frustration and anxiety, which are denied in relation to private practice or performance and yet confirmed in relation to preparing for the weekly lesson.

The average responses of Band P students sometimes form strong contrasts with those of Band T students, whose examination marks improved most. Several examples are given in Table 9.

### Table 9. Comparison of average responses from Band P and Band T students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Band P</th>
<th>Band T</th>
<th>Overall mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am satisfied with the amount of practice I get each week</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel my private practice is effective</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I spend more time on difficult sections</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I expect to make progress between my weekly lessons</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The paradoxical impression that the Band I students, who lost most examination marks, are reporting most positively about these aspects of their practice, while the most improved students represented by Band T are reporting most negatively, is perhaps supported by the fact that Band T students also gave the strongest average disagreement to the statement ‘I am able to predict how much practice I can do each week’ (4.00; M = 3.05, SD = 1.38).
Discussion

The immediate object of the research was to characterise the behaviour of Performance students, by seeking the variety among their approaches to independent practice. Although the findings that are of statistical significance do not always represent the greatest academic interest, there are some broad impressions to be drawn from the research evidence. The items that engendered the strongest agreement among student respondents suggest a general feeling of confidence and enjoyment in their practice, lessons and teachers, although the combination of related items, and the division of students into different groupings, gives a more richly textured account of the issues involved. This has some resonance with the findings of Koopman et al. (2007) whose student subjects reported positively on the management of practice related issues in their lessons, although their reports were not always supported in the researchers’ observations. Student confidence plays a major role in motivating and directing their studies, and is not to be dismissed, even if it does not tell the whole story.

A number of themes from the findings will be of concern to the institution as it reflects on curriculum design and delivery. One is performance anxiety: findings regarding both year and age groups suggest that this is felt more strongly as students pass through their course of study and as they become older, with mature-aged students in particular finding performance stressful. Reflection on this issue might include a number of apparent paradoxes: the Performance Studies courses are designed with the intention of helping students to address performance anxiety, but although it seems clear that they find it increasingly helpful to read about it, they seem to feel the pressure more as their course goes on. Perhaps there is more at stake for students as their degrees near completion, and this is manifested in performance anxiety; if so, we might ask whether we can help prepare students for that, earlier and more explicitly. Certainly it seems that with widening participation, and increasing numbers of mature-aged students, this issue will need to be constantly addressed.

Other broad issues are related to what might be distinct traditions of teaching and learning among various instrumental groups. The evidence discussed above suggests that the lessons of string players might be highly instructive in nature, perhaps suggesting something of the relative complexity of the instrumental technique involved, compared with other groups. Within a single department, it also seems possible that this style of teaching might be due to individual personalities among teachers, more than to a tradition appropriate to the instruments involved. Even so, it might
be fruitful to consider that style in the light of student independence, as an avowed aim of the Performance Studies courses.

An apparent contrast in style is provided by the non-conservatoire instrumental group, whose responses suggest a looser relationship between lessons and practice. This might be a marker of independent and responsible behaviour among students; but the same group offers a relatively weak agreement that their lessons include (268) explicit reference to practice strategies, and a relatively strong agreement that they worry about whether their standard of playing will be adequate for lessons. Student independence is not a simple issue, and there must be a good deal of variety among students in all groups; but it might be useful to ask whether some of these students would feel better supported if their lessons were more highly instructive in nature.

Reading is felt to be more beneficial, by students who are in later year groups, who are older, and who have improved their performance examination marks most. This we take to be an encouraging sign for the course itself. More than this, however, examination success seems to be associated with issues of planning and organising practice. Although there are few broad trends across the range of examination results, there are distinct behaviours reported by the few students who were either most or least successful, and these are of equal interest and importance to their course leaders and tutors. Organisation would seem to be an aspect of practice that would lend itself more easily than most to adaptation and control. Information about how ‘high fliers’ manage their practice must be of interest to those who are still learning to manage it, while information about how struggling students might be mismanaging their practice must be of interest to those who have them in their care.

The information is complicated by the paradox apparent in Table 9, where relative to other groups, the ‘most improved’ students would seem to be reporting negatively on features of their practice, while the students who lost most marks between performance examinations seem to be expressing satisfaction with their work. The paradox perhaps highlights the limitations of collecting data through a questionnaire, since a more open-ended method would no doubt have allowed more exploration of the responses of individual participants. With the evidence in hand, we can only speculate on the meaning of their reported behaviour. For the most improved students, negative responses arguably demonstrate a high level of self-awareness and perhaps an aptitude for self-criticism, and might suggest that dissatisfaction is actually driving improvement. For the students who lost most marks, positive responses arguably demonstrate areas that need attention: in which
students need encouragement and support in recognising specific weaknesses in their approach to practice, and in learning to regard them as areas that can be constructively addressed.

**Conclusion**

The broad aim in this research was to open an interface between aspects of Performance Studies in our own department, and aspects of current research into instrumental teaching and learning. By supporting an engagement with the research process and product, we hoped to assist students, performance tutors, and course leaders in reflecting on their own work, specifically by exploring the variety among student approaches to practice.

For students, participation in the research process has itself had some impact. A number of individual students told us that they had found it helpful to complete the questionnaire; classes and coursework had raised already a range of issues concerning practice behaviour, but this specific inventory offered a more concrete and systematic way to reflect on their own behaviour. Subsequently, in isolated cases, individual tutorial support was sought by students who felt that participating in the research exercise had highlighted areas in which they needed help. In one instance this led to cooperation among the module leader, the instrumental tutor and the (269) student, who had failed the previous performance examination. Acting on a freshly devised a ‘plan of attack’ this student passed the subsequent exam, with an improvement of ten marks.

The findings, a selection of which have already been fed back through performance classes, struck individual students in different ways, as might be expected given the variety among them in terms of age, instrument, expertise, personal situation and individual character. On several issues however students seemed consistently impressed. All seemed to expect that the outstanding students who scored examination marks above 80% would report practicing more, but most were surprised to see how much more, even compared to those with first-class marks less than 80%. There was further surprise that there was not more difference in the amount of practice reported by students of all other grades, emphasising the evidence that on the whole, quantity of practice is only one factor of success among many; and that the distribution of practice through the week seemed at least as important as the amount of practice reported for each normal day.

The Music Department hosts staff development events for instrumental and vocal tutors, who otherwise – given that they are engaged on an hourly basis to give predominantly individual lessons – have few opportunities to formally discuss and reflect on their work. Information about student behaviour and results is always received with interest, and the questionnaire findings will provide
substantive food for thought. Specifically, too, the research findings should help tutors to develop a sense of where their own students are positioned, in the context of the course aims and learning outcomes and in the context of broad trends in reported student behaviour.

For module leaders the questionnaire has already proved a useful tool, in providing students with the motivation and the wherewithal to make meaningful connections among academic input, instrumental lessons and their own practice behaviour. Through the process of participating in the exercise, and the product represented by the findings, students are able to place their own work in the context of the shared knowledge on the subject, and – we hope – to feel that this context is keenly relevant to their approaches to independent practice.

Collecting, describing and analysing data have not served to define those approaches; rather, they have revealed some of the complexity involved when individual student characteristics are taken into account. Wittgenstein has helpfully questioned whether it is always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture with a ‘sharp’ one; and to paraphrase him further, we wanted to investigate the possibilities of the phenomena rather than reduce them to a clearly distilled picture (Wittgenstein 1953, 42). As the variety among student approaches to practice continues to evolve and as the institution continues to embrace the principle of widening participation, the investigation will be an ongoing one, of monitoring and reflection.

References


