

## **Conference Review**

### **SEMPRE Postgraduate Study Day Developing the Musician**

**Institute of Education, University of Reading, 4<sup>th</sup> March 2011**

This was the first day of a SEMPRE event held at the University of Reading Institute of Education, offering postgraduates an opportunity to discuss their work among peers, and gain experience of the conference format in a supportive, participatory environment. It was well attended by students at various stages of their research projects, representing a range of British and international institutions. The broad, facilitative title of the conference ('Developing the Musician') allowed for a diverse assortment of research interests, ranging from the effect of singing in the relationship between mothers and pre-term infants to the distribution and marketing strategies of million-selling recording artists. Inevitably, an equally various number of qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches were demonstrated. Far from eroding the focus of the day, the variety of areas covered helped achieve the aim of providing a learning experience for new researchers, and the conference team successfully ordered the selection of presentations into a coherent programme.

The day was ordered thematically into four sessions: Improvisation; Identity; Special Needs and Aural & Vocal Development.

Yuki Mirijiri, from the Institute of Education, London, began the Improvisation session with a presentation of her case study research into two pianists' improvisation styles, focusing on their personal histories and musical backgrounds. She presented her findings, drawn from semi structured interviews with the performers themselves, their relatives and their tutors, and comparative formal analysis of the musicians' improvisations around prescribed melodies, and also of performances recorded in their youth. Audio excerpts and transcriptions were helpfully provided, and a clear methodological approach was outlined. Her findings demonstrated that while one musician's approach bore the trace of formal training he had received at the YAMAHA school, the other musician's improvisation was to a greater extent informed by a uniquely personal sense of music. In each case, their improvisatory styles had already begun to develop in their early teens.

The second presentation was given by Simon Rose, a Berlin-based saxophonist and doctoral student at Glasgow Caledonian University. It considered the function and potential of free improvisation within a range of educational settings. A summary account was given of an earlier research project (Articulating Perspectives of Free Improvisation for Education) which had followed a Grounded Theory approach, incorporating Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, to identify key pedagogical aspects of free improvisation: 'awareness', 'unknown', 'play' and 'social'. Expanding on each of the latter, Rose concluded that free improvisation offers benefits that extend beyond the field of music, with implications for such wider issues as personal development and social inclusion.

Rose's interest in free improvisation stemmed from his own background as a professional musician and drama teacher, and his enjoyable anecdotes enriched the theoretical discussion.

The day's keynote lecture from Professor Graham Welch from the Institute of Education, London, offered participants the opportunity to gain insight from a grandee of Music Education Research. Welch drew upon many high profile research projects to demonstrate the scope of methodological approaches in use within the field, ranging from qualitative methods such as interviews and observation to medical neuro-scans and computer software development. He warned against pitfalls that can derail novice researchers, and, through useful examples, highlighted the precariousness of research funding, and the susceptibility of education research to changes in policy and stakeholder motivation. In view of this he emphasised the need to present the value of research clearly and persuasively.

After a short break for lunch, a stimulating selection of poster presentations promoted enthusiastic discussion. Matthew Applegate's poster detailed the work of a *Pixelh8*-funded project researching the use of video game controllers functioning as musical instruments within specially designed software applications. The on-going study seeks to assess the effectiveness of the software design, in terms of the retention of musical information by participants in workshop settings. After Professor Welch's earlier example of recent research involving smartphones functioning as musical interfaces in primary classroom settings, it was interesting to see further research engaging with the possibilities presented by commonplace electrical items as tools for musical learning. Other research areas represented included: incorporating metacognition into the practice of novice musicians (Meghan Bathgate, University of Pittsburgh); the musical identities of music teachers (Naomi Kayayan, University of Reading); cello pedagogy at conservatoire level (Marianne Tyler Brown, Middlesex University); Oshaping Music in performance (Mats Kussner, King's College London) and the strategies employed by musicians to sell their music in an era of widespread digital piracy (Steven Brown, Glasgow Caledonian University).

The second session of presentations addressed issues relating to identity, and was opened by Claire Renfrew of Glasgow Caledonian University. Renfrew's doctoral research examines the musical identities of professional classical musicians, an under-researched area that she hopes to draw into focus and thus compliment existing studies into musical identity in areas such as jazz and music teaching. She introduced her current study of three Scottish Symphony Orchestra musicians, all of whom had participated in semi-structured interviews. As in Simon Rose's study, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to identify thematic categories; Renfrew acknowledged an institutional commitment to IPA at Glasgow Caledonian University, which raised the notion of institutional research culture. Renfrew considered the extent to which the musical identities of classical musicians were woven into their social and personal identities.

Shifting focus towards young children and the school environment, Anna Wong (University of Cambridge)'s case study research considered the impact of musical engagement on the psychological well-being of New Arrival students in Hong Kong. Wong helpfully explained the contextual background to her study, covering the historical and political circumstances leading to large-scale immigration into Hong Kong from mainland China, the socio-cultural motivations of new immigrants, and the educational policies impacting upon New Arrival Students' musical engagement. Her study employed questionnaires and interviews to compare the motivations and psychological

well-being of different cohorts of primary-level New Arrival Students (NAS), and their levels of musical engagement in and outside of school. The study revealed differences between first year NAS' and second year NAS' intrinsic motivation, suggesting associations between the level of musical engagement in students' first year and their psychological well-being. Wong's presentation provoked stimulating discussion of mixed methods approaches to data collection, ethical concerns associated with research involving children, and access to schools.

The third session dealt with the topic of special needs in Music Education. Maureen Mather's paper entitled 'Music as a learning support resource for children with special educational needs in mainstream education- attitudes and practice' presented the findings of a pilot survey of primary school teachers.

Lorna Carter from the University of Sheffield then introduced her research into the experiences of dyslexic students at British conservatoires. The study involved interviews with students at each of the conservatoires in the United Kingdom, and an investigation into the support mechanisms in place at each conservatoire for musicians with dyslexia.

Robert Fulford (Royal Northern College of Music) gave an overview of his doctoral research, begun in October 2010 as part of a joint project between the Royal Northern College of Music and the University of Liverpool, into the experiences of deaf and hearing impaired musicians. Fulford presented his analysis of interviews with deaf and hearing impaired musicians, conducted using Nvivo9. His study revealed similarities between deaf and hearing musicians' motivations towards music-making, the perceived challenges faced by hearing impaired and deaf musicians, and the strategies employed by the latter to enhance their sensory experience. Fulford's research project was unique among those exhibited on the day in that it was a collaborative project, undertaken by a group of researchers with different responsibilities. Such research is rare within Music Education at doctoral level, but is common at a professional level. Thus it gave participants an insight into the type of study they may undertake later in their careers.

The fourth and final session of the day concerned vocal and aural development. Colin Wright from the University of Hull outlined his research project, for which he is investigating the correlation between musicians' aural skills and their attainment at degree level. He drew attention to an apparent marginalisation of aural skills in tertiary music education, and considered whether this impaired musicians later in professional life. To establish the context of his study, Wright had conducted an online survey designed to gauge the relevance of aural skills to professional musicians' careers in a range of areas. Wright presented the results of the survey (the first set of statistical data presented on a day dominated by qualitative research), and went on to identify some theoretical issues pertinent to his study, notably the concept of giftedness.

Manuela Filippa from Universite Paris Ouest Nanterre presented her research project on singing interaction between mothers and premature (preterm) infants during the first weeks of life. Her research examines the interactions of 20 mothers and their infants, analysing the differences between sung and spoken communication in terms of their effect on infants' behaviour, measured according to various clinical parameters (such as heart rate variability). Filippa included audio and

video examples in her presentation, which showed clearly the effects of communication on infants' behaviours, and gave a helpful summary of existing research in this area.

A diverse mix of research areas and methods were in evidence at the study day, chiming with Professor Welch's overview of the breadth of research conducted under the banner of Music Education. The opportunity to see presentations by researchers at early stage in their careers, to discuss areas of interest and exchange experiences with peers, and to take advice from eminent figures in Music Education was invaluable, and the organisers are to be congratulated on ensuring the event ran so successfully.

Thomas Parkinson