Riffs or rigour?

Arts practice has gained the upper hand over scholarship

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Studying the development of late Elizabethan and early Jacobite theatre, the *Commedia dell'arte*, music-hall, pantomime, operetta or *zarzuela* for instance, one can draw upon scholarship in literature, music, theatre, history, sociology and more. But that is distinct from learning to become an actor, singer, dancer or some combination of the three.

Traditionally, there were different institutions for these things. There were universities for the academic study of each discipline and conservatoires, stage and dance schools, pop music training institutes and some polytechnics for the practice of performing arts. There were also dedicated centres teaching sound recording, lighting, stage management and so on.

Vocational training was a distinct phenomenon, different to a holistic and contextual approach involving dispassionate inquiry and critical thinking — as is still largely the case in continental Europe. Furthermore, vocational courses were delivered in a variety of ways, sometimes short courses or diploma qualifications, not thought necessarily to require the usual prerequisites for undertaking a degree.

There are a range of benefits in crossing some of these boundaries, developing meaningful interactions between scholarship and practice. Some high-powered practical postgraduate courses, such as the MA in creative writing established at the University of East Anglia in 1970, have nurtured a large number of novelists and poets who went on to develop major international reputations.

Practice has also long been integrated into academia in various health sciences, psychological and legal professions, though in most there remains a distinction between a degree and a professional qualification. For years in music it has been common to include some practical skills — aural, sight singing, keyboard harmony and basic compositional techniques — not least to prepare those who might become music teachers or choir directors.

But in the UK today boundaries between artistic scholarship and practice have become blurred. Degree qualifications are awarded for most forms of study and those in academic arts positions are often certain types of practitioners distant from the broader values of academia. In an uneven playing field, particular varieties of practice rather than scholarship have gained the upper hand in many institutions, and practitioners can be the most aggressive advocates of the marginalisation of scholarly study.

This is a major reason for the declining reputation of degrees in various arts subjects. Where once a degree in music or English literature was highly regarded by employers and would equip graduates with a wide range of transferable skills, the extent of these can vary when they are grouped together with practice-focused courses in commercial music-making, sound recording, elementary creative writing, acting, dance, graphic design, and so on. These courses are certainly important in other ways, but do not always confer the sorts of broader skills and attitudes associated with a degree.

At a fundamental level, notwithstanding the fact that a minority can excel as both scholars and practitioners, it can be argued that sustained scholarly study and creative practice in the same art can entail opposing values. The former requires acceptance of intrinsic value of historical and contemporary examples, to be studied in depth rather than merely used as inspiration for one's own practice. The latter requires a degree of self-confidence in one's own work — and often adherence to the aesthetic and political norms of one's artistic circle — that can jar with the dispassion and objectivity typical of historical study.

Reasons for this situation include the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, which allowed polytechnics to become universities without necessarily requiring significant changes to their offerings. This and the later growth of private providers brought many practical courses into the university sector.

The trebling of fees and removal of recruitment caps, together with the decline of the arts (especially music) in primary and secondary education, has created a more competitive market that has discouraged traditional skills. Changes to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) from 2001 facilitated the submission of practice-based outputs, which enabled more non-academic practitioners to have full university jobs. Higher Education Standards Authority (HESA) figures from 2022-23 show 283,335 undergraduates studying creative and performing arts, media and communications, language and literary studies and the history of artistic fields. That is 16.4 per cent of all students.

More than 80 per cent of music students were taking vocational courses in music technology, musical theatre, commercial music and performance. A small minority engaged with the wider historical/technical/aesthetic study on "pure music" degrees. A 2023 head count of faculties at UK institutions (excluding conservatoires and private providers) found that almost 54 per cent of staff were practitioners and 44 per cent were scholars. In post-1992 institutions the figures are 71.2 per cent and 26.3 per cent while at Russell Group institutions, there are 79 historical musicologists out of a total of 314.5 academics; at mid-ranking ones (neither Russell Group nor post-1992) 23 historical out of 152; at post-1992 institutions 17.5 historical out of 395.5 posts (some teach across diciplines).

In an ideal world, practitioners and scholars could work in synergy and produce research and teaching that is more than the sum of its parts, or at least coexist peacefully. Even then, both would require considerable goodwill and constant negotiation. This is not always easy in British arts departments, particularly those in music, with small faculties precluding the creation of autonomous "sub-departments".

All need to work together to service students of increasingly diverse musical backgrounds and interests, while many staff are also required to promote their individual careers and research. Competing pressures, territorial clashes over curriculum and research funding and a high workload, leave little time and energy to square the circle of theory and practice.

In Britain currently, historical musicology, analysis, aesthetics, contextual study and anything relating to Western classical music are beleaguered, not only from without but also within academia. Leading the assault are often a range of those involved with practical commercial music, which is to be expected, but also contemporary composers (working in atonal, experimental, studio and sound art traditions) and ethnomusicologists, whose attacks on other forms of musical scholarship may ultimately be their own undoing.

There are few more niche areas than contemporary composition, and indeed plenty of prospective students and others would consider some such work not music at all. While some post-1992 and private providers do employ commercial composers, on the whole those looking to score well in the REF tend to go for those in modernist traditions.

Only a few such composers have significant reputations outside academia, usually within the rather sealed realms of “new music”, a minority field of practice compared to wider classical music. In the Russell Group, only at Manchester, York and Queen’s University Belfast do these make up a sizeable proportion of faculties, but they have significant representation at a range of other mid-ranking and post-1992 institutions.

The differences between avant-garde music theatre and musical-theatre as seen on Broadway or the West End, or between experimental studio composers and commercial sound production, are not always obvious to university managers. Yet some succeed by eliding these distinctions and convincing managers that they represent more popular, representative, and inclusive forms of music-making which will attract more students.

However, populist arguments for niche music constitute a ruse. Audiences for music in the Western classical tradition may have declined in number in part because of decreased teaching of such music at all educational levels.

As a result, there may be more students right now potentially interested in Taylor Swift, Adele or Ed Sheeran than Bach, Mozart, Chopin, Wagner or Debussy (or Louis Armstrong, Billie Holliday or Chuck Berry). But what is the evidence that almost any university composer would attract more or a similar number of students?

Nor is there evidence of sustained student interest in non-Western musical traditions as a primary aspect of undergraduate study. The only institution offering undergraduate degrees of this type, SOAS, no longer offers a music-only course, after chronically low numbers over a sustained period.

The research interests of academics are at odds with those of students to a remarkable extent. Earlier avant-gardists pursuing ideals unconcerned with or even dismissive of popular success, who might find shelter in university departments in a manner similar

to theoretical, non-applied research in some sciences, would not have found this situation problematic. But it belies the populist talk which latter-day contemporary composers use to dismiss the classical tradition as “elitist” and more.

One contemporary composer who is virtually deified in parts of academia is John Cage. After the verdict of Arnold Schoenberg that Cage had no feeling for harmony, Cage pursued a compositional language founded upon noise and duration rather than pitch relationships.

By the 1950s he sought to dissolve the distinction between music and any other type of sound, including that not made by humans. Some teaching uses Cage’s pronouncements as an axiomatic basis for other knowledge or shows disdain towards students who respond negatively to his *Williams Mix* (1951-53), a 4’16” piece for eight tape recorders simultaneously playing various categories of sampled sound, organised using random procedures — a work even some Cage aficionados find difficult.

Cage’s work has always been and remains contentious, including to some other avant-gardists, such as Pierre Boulez, who was once close to Cage, but sharply criticised the anarchy of the American composer’s approach in his essay “Aléa” (1957). The cult around Cage features a carefully manufactured persona at odds with his professed aim to remove himself from the process of composition and an arcane politics mixing a type of classical anarchism barely distinguishable from extreme right-wing libertarianism with flirtations with Maoism, while also welcoming unemployment and denying any positive role for the state in alleviating poverty and deprivation.

Whatever one’s view of Cage as a composer and thinker (and there should be alternatives to worship or outright dismissal), wider reasons for his academic status should be clear. If all sounds are equal, there is no real need to teach students about melody, harmony, rhythm, counterpoint, orchestration, structure, and more: fundamental building blocks of composition teaching. And furthermore, musical study can become subsumed into the niche subject area of “sound studies”.
In its place comes rhetoric about “creativity” and (as Cage would have hated) self-expression, even authenticity. This ethos is fundamental to the de-skilling of composition teaching, summed up in a common sentiment: “We don’t teach boring things like harmony and counterpoint, we teach students to be creative instead.”

“Creativity” is one of the most overused terms today, applied to everyone from designers of road signs to coffee-makers in hipster cafés. An infant can “create”; what matters is the quality of what is created, not the fact that someone has done so. Technique is a non-exhaustive means of achieving this, for composers, visual artists, film-makers, writers, choreographers, every bit as much as musical performers, actors and dancers. But to posit hierarchies of value relating in part to technique offends some faux-egalitarian sensibilities, from those who prefer to praise students simply for existing rather than pushing them to realise possibly untapped potential.

If some in academia still subscribe to Lewis Carroll’s Dodo’s “Everybody has won, and all must have prizes”, then students who absorb this will in no sense be prepared for the competitive world of professional careers in the arts. Courses based upon this ethos can certainly be called Alice in Wonderland if not Mickey Mouse degrees. It is

no surprise that degrees predicated upon self-expression and creativity are often at odds with much historical or critical study.

The study of artistic history often proves that nothing is completely new: even those most lauded for their revolutionary stance or their unique language developed such qualities thanks to a profound understanding of what had gone before, enabling them to identify where a tradition might be stretched, subverted, taken further or re-appropriated.

Some practitioners may simply not wish to accept that in the context of a wider history they are no longer necessarily central. How many contemporary composers want to compete with Beethoven or Duke Ellington for student attention? But the contemporary will become historical, and sooner rather than later. It could then seem very ephemeral when no longer validated by its newness.

Arts degrees are under great scrutiny at the moment, and not always for the wrong reasons. There may be too many of them, and too little work available for those with practice- based qualifications. It is time to look again at ensuring that university arts departments provide a rigorous, intellectually meaningful and broad education — including on practical courses — that stretches students, rather than exist as a social security for contemporary practitioners who render music an esoteric concern.