

A young person's guide to the orchestral profession

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Through interviews with ten conservatoire students and ten professional orchestral musicians teaching at conservatoires, this paper seeks to establish whether young people regard the orchestral music profession as a worthwhile ambition. If so, are teachers preparing students sufficiently for their careers and passing on the benefits of their considerable experience? While interviewees express deep enthusiasm and love for the orchestral profession, both students and professors seem less sure about the consistency and quality of career preparation at the conservatoire level. Professors explain the difficulties of prioritising multiple agendas during lesson time, while students, though determined to pursue their dream of becoming orchestral players, reveal only partial understanding and knowledge of the profession.

Introduction

A great deal of time, effort and money is spent in training classical musicians. The age of six is a frequent point for beginning studies, and the system of exams established in the UK by the ABRSM and Trinity/Guildhall provides a steady route of progress from beginner to advanced. In addition many schools, counties and local authorities fund youth orchestras and ensembles to enable young musicians to enjoy the rewards of finding an ensemble context for their studies.

At this stage many discover other areas of interest for their enthusiasms and talents, and devote their energies to developing non-musical careers while perhaps applying their acquired instrumental expertise in the enjoyment of amateur music-making. Some put down the instrument in earlier years never to pick it up again, perhaps having been subjected to excessive parental ambitions or inadequate teaching, or suffering from a loss of motivation or self-confidence (McPherson, 2000, 2002, 2005; O'Neill & McPherson, 2002).

Others feel, or are encouraged to feel, that their vocation is that of a practising classical musician, and for them the most common route is through study at one of the UK's nine conservatoires where the system continues, though somewhat more intensively: weekly one-to-one lessons, musicianship classes, ensembles and orchestral repertoire, recitals and examinations, and opportunity for a great deal of personal practice. Thereafter for orchestral instrumentalists there will be opportunities, through personal recommendations, auditions and trials, to seek a place in the music profession in, or associated with, one of the country's full-time orchestras.

Set down like this it seems a straightforward process, but the anecdotal evidence of many older professionals is that despite some of the reportedly best teaching in the



world a large number of able youngsters seem otherwise unaware of the rigours of a demanding profession. As a practitioner-researcher who teaches in a conservatoire while holding a position in a professional London orchestra, I was keen to establish whether the post-concert band-room references to the music business not being as good as it was in the old days, and today's young not possessing the character or understanding of the older generation, were merely symptoms of 'grumpy old men'. My conversations with senior conservatoire students, however, seem to suggest some unpreparedness and a lack of awareness of the challenges and difficulties of being an orchestral musician.

Part of the attraction of this research was the chance to speak to students away from the lesson or class environment, and to discover some of their inner feelings about music and their careers. It was enormously encouraging to hear their optimism about the future and in particular their love of music and their understanding of its power to move and stimulate. Furthermore my conversations with colleagues, usually confined to brief exchanges and civil pleasantries, became extended, often to in-depth discussions and revelations about their musical beginnings, their professional struggles, their remarkable experiences at the highest levels of orchestral music-making, and their hopes and fears for the new generation. By the end of the interview period my respect and admiration for my fellow musicians had increased beyond expectation, and the taped evidence is a striking witness to their personal and professional stories.

Most of human history has until recently been compiled from the point of view of monarchs, dictators, politicians and others in positions of power; the stories of entire social layers went unrecorded and geologists now occupy themselves in unearthing the evidence of their lives and completing the historical picture. In musical circles some useful work was done in the 1980s and 1990s in the transcription of taped oral accounts of musical life by Jon Tolansky of the Music Performance Research Centre (now Music Preserved), but again a great deal of this is interviews with musical 'names' – Claudio Abbado, Colin Davis, Thomas Allen and so on – and very little with those at the 'sharp end' so to speak – the musicians whose daily routine is making the sounds that constitute 'music'. For a complete narrative of British musical activities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries we need to record the voices and examine the primary evidence of those with first-hand experience of the enormous variety and extent of UK orchestral life. There are still alive those who have played under Beecham, Klemperer and Karajan, and who worked with Britten, Walton and Copland; their stories and those who now work with Boulez, Maazel and MacKerras are fascinating and are invaluable historical records that need to be set down. But it needs to be done soon, otherwise future generations will understand only the world depicted by Lebrecht in *The Maestro Myth* (1991). Indeed, it is because there has been little research in this area – the setting down of the views of 'ordinary' musicians – that this paper has been undertaken. These people are worth listening to: they provide practical insights and the realistic, unofficial version of performance and the musical experience from within the organism that international soloists and conductors from their often remote stance cannot.

The results and conclusions of this paper will neither encourage nor deter young musicians: matters of financial reward and a sociably amenable life do not feature as priorities for those interviewed. Nevertheless, it may help those bent on such a career to be better prepared for it. After all the trouble taken – the years of practice and the investment

in a good instrument – it is a pity to see it undermined by a lack of knowledge about one of the noblest human activities: the daily recreation of some of the world's greatest works of art.

Research method

Over a period of 4 months from November 2004 to February 2005 I interviewed ten professional orchestral musicians, most of whom teach or have taught at one or more of the UK's conservatoires. The sample comprised three string players, four woodwind and three brass, and these proportions reflect the relatively low numbers of orchestral string players that teach at conservatoire level. A traditionally under-researched area, conservatoire professors and their identity, careers and ideas about teaching have received some attention in recent years. Through interviews, 'Teaching Performance' (Federation of British Conservatoires, 2003), focuses on professors' job satisfaction (generally found to be high) and employment conditions. Mills (2004) uses quantitative and qualitative data to consider the role, career paths and mental outlook of 37 conservatoire teachers. She finds the professors to be highly accomplished teachers and performers, who value their function within the conservatoire, have a high commitment to their students' progress, and retain a wide-ranging and enthusiastic attitude to their own continuing learning and development. Purser (2005, this issue) explores the influences, approaches and beliefs of eight brass professors with regards to their teaching, but pays less attention to the professors' performance activities outside the conservatoire, while Presland (2005, this issue) concentrates on the students' perspective on the personal and professional implications of individual lessons. Those I interviewed are drawn from similar communities to the ones referenced in these studies. My concentration on orchestral careers differs though, exploring a little-considered area within music education, and encouraging not only a technical information exchange between conservatoires and the profession, but a lively interplay of ideas about music and its professional and cultural context.

In the way of musical life in the UK, the orchestral musicians I interviewed are enormously busy both playing and teaching, and it is a tribute to them that they not only gave up valuable time to be interviewed, they were also very forthcoming in their views and opinions, without exception showing great support for their students' musical and professional welfare. The respondents were chosen for their knowledge, expertise and clarity. I know each of them professionally, yet as far as I could tell the replies seemed disinterested in our acquaintance and focused on recounting their experiences.

Over the same period of November 2004 to February 2005 I interviewed ten students who intend to pursue careers as orchestral musicians. Students were also asked to participate in a short, informal quiz to give some indication of their knowledge of the British music profession. These students are full-time 4th year or post-graduate (all, with the exception of one, have spent the previous 4 years at the same conservatoire) from London's Guildhall School of Music and Drama, the Royal Academy of Music and the Royal College of Music. They also represented all four disciplines: three woodwind, three brass, one percussion, and three string players.

Both students and professionals seemed interested in the research project and happy to give their time. Everyone consented to being recorded, and conversations were later transcribed. Quotes, particularly from students, were often brief, even hesitant, reflecting the difficulty of expressing an adequate response to an emotional topic, whether the love of music or the availability of work. Many of these quotes have been included in the paper.

The relationship between teachers and students at conservatoire level is an interesting and complex one. On one hand students may be in awe of a teacher or other professional who has superior abilities and knowledge as well as a secure professional position: qualities and ambitions to which students aspire, yet which at age 18 can seem distant and even impossible goals. On the other hand, the best students will eventually and inevitably equal or outshine, and certainly replace, their mentors (meanwhile maintaining respect, teachers hope), and they may realise this process is taking place even before graduation. Nevertheless, there exists in most students a consideration that any musician they speak to may be able at some time to influence their career in some way, perhaps on an audition panel, or as a section principal. It was important therefore that the students felt safe and confident enough to open up to questions from a veteran. Thus, to avoid the risk of their 'wanting to say the right thing', I made sure as far as possible that they were interviewed on 'home territory' – their practice room or college canteen for example. Also I assumed a degree of body language and choice of words that would as far as possible put them at ease: the use of casual clothes; speaking with a quiet, non-professorial voice in a low tone; frequent nodding of the head in appearance of agreement with their views; occasional fumbling of the cassette controls. This was done without condescension as a simple way of putting students at ease, counter-acting the inescapable power dynamics of this sort of interview situation.

I had considered distance response – sending out forms requiring boxes to be checked and other text – as a method for eliciting information. However it is my experience that a significant feature of the orchestral community – despite observations from a respondent claiming a certain social exclusivity amongst the present generation of music students – is that it consists of people from widely varied educational and social backgrounds, and while some feel at ease filling in forms, others do not. Furthermore, it may be that questionnaires sent by an unknown researcher would tend to be completed and returned only by those with an interest in the subject or at least those for who form-filling represented a stimulating activity. By targeting individuals – no one refused an interview – responses were assured from a group selected from a breadth of background, gender and instrument.

In addition, the cassette recorder was used to give a more personal depth to the replies, to note the subtleties of stress in spoken replies that add meaning and that would not be found in a written form, to allow prompting for more developed answers, and provide a greater dimension to the conversations.

The interview

Questions centred around three principal areas: musical background and current situation; experiences and ideas about the orchestral profession; and the preparation (received or believed to be required) for students to build a successful career as an orchestral

musician upon graduation. While there are some shared experiences between students and professionals and therefore similar questions – the value they attached to the life of an orchestral player, for example – there are many differences that required questions reflecting points of view from both ends of the career span. The full list of questions for students and teachers is provided below.

Students

Musical background:

- At what age did you begin learning a musical instrument? (This applied to all instruments as well as their main one.)
- Did you play in youth orchestras or similar ensembles?

Experiences and ideas about the orchestral profession:

- What do you feel are the benefits and the disadvantages of being a full-time orchestral musician?
- What are your experiences of auditions?

Preparation for the profession:

- Do you feel you have the necessary technical and musical skills, knowledge of repertoire, and awareness of professional behaviour and the realities – work opportunities, stress, job security, for example – for a career as an orchestral musician?
- Did you learn these aspects from your professor?
- How was it disseminated?
- Do you feel optimistic about your future as an orchestral musician?

Teachers:

Music background and current situation:

- At what age did you begin learning a musical instrument?
- How long have you been in the profession?
- How much do you teach?

Experiences and ideas about the orchestral profession:

- How do you feel about your time as an orchestral player?
- Is being part of the orchestral music profession a worthwhile ambition?
- What do you feel are the benefits and the disadvantages of being a full-time orchestral musician?

Preparation for the profession:

- What do you look for in prospective undergraduates?
- Are students prepared sufficiently for the orchestral music profession?
- Do you include this information in lessons; indeed, is it considered necessary?
- Have you seen examples of inappropriate behaviour in orchestras?
- What qualities should students have on leaving a conservatoire?
- Were you properly prepared yourself?

The Quiz

To conclude, the students were asked the following questions, to gain an indication of their general knowledge and awareness of music and its UK environment. Answers, where appropriate, are provided here in italics.

- (1) What are the eight full time symphony-sized orchestras in London? (*Philharmonia, London Symphony Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, BBC Symphony Orchestra, BBC Concert Orchestra, Royal Opera House, English National Opera*)
- (2) What are the twelve in the rest of the UK? (*Royal Scottish National Orchestra, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Scottish Opera, Ulster Orchestra, English National Opera North, Hallé Orchestra, BBC Philharmonic, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Welsh National Orchestra, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra*)
- (3) Do you know the names of the two British composers who celebrated their 70th birthdays in 2004? (*Harrison Birtwistle, Peter Maxwell Davies*).
- (4) Have you played a Brahms symphony? A Johann Strauss waltz?
- (5) Do you know the positions/roles of: Kurt Masur (*Principal Conductor, LPO*); Clive Gillinson (*Managing Director, L.S.O.*); Jasper Parrott (*artists' management*); and Raymond Gubbay (*entrepreneur*)?
- (6) Do you know the location of: the Royal Festival Hall (*South Bank*); EMI studios (*Abbey Road*); and Henry Wood Hall (*near London Bridge/Borough*)?

The results – the musician's tale

Musical background and current situation

Initially, the first question regarding the age that each individual's instrumental life began, was intended as an 'ice-breaker' and a stimulus for the recollection of early childhood. In the event the information was illuminating: the present-day students started their main instrument at a younger age than their older counterparts: an average age of $8\frac{1}{2}$ compared with 10 years old. What was especially noticeable was the younger age at which the professionals had begun *any* instrumental learning: an average $7\frac{1}{2}$ years old and with only one exception the instrument had been the piano, while only five out of the 10 students had studied another instrument at all as a child (for four of whom it was the piano), and beginning at an average age of 9.

Five out of 10 of the students had enjoyed time in youth orchestras and young wind, brass and string ensembles ranging from local enterprises in Greater London, Dorset, Lancashire and elsewhere, to conservatoire junior departments; only three had gone on to national ensembles like the National Youth Orchestra. These formative experiences and their perceived benefits were to emerge again in later responses.

One-to-one instrumental lessons in UK conservatoires are usually about an hour long, once a week. Strict regularity is often impossible to achieve however, as the high standard of teaching demanded is often provided by top professional players whose lives are frequently governed by orchestral schedules, foreign tours and other professional commitments.

Within the sample, woodwind teachers on average saw the most students: a mean of 14, though this was skewed by one teacher who has a co-principal (50%) position in a London orchestra that allows him the time to teach a total of 29 students (all shared with other teachers), at three conservatoires in London and around the UK. Aside from this peak and a brass teacher with 12 students, the norm was between six and seven students each. The players' lengths of service as orchestral musicians in a demanding profession were a minimum of 18 years, the rest evenly spread up to 40 years.

Experience and ideas about the orchestral profession

The student perspective

Opinions varied, with largely optimistic replies from the students, and maybe some misapprehensions. Typical perceptions were that 'you're doing something you love', and 'when you sit there on the stage and you're playing some of the best music that's ever written, it's like a dream come true'. Student-perceived disadvantages included that 'there aren't many jobs... and if you don't get on with the people round you that would be difficult...'; 'if you make mistakes and stuff you worry about it and you think 'am I good enough?'' (an honest reply with which many professionals would identify); and 'not saying the wrong things to people: that's always difficult!'

String players voiced particular concerns about the possibility of their intonation and technique suffering through repeated rehearsals in a section. One also felt that 'chamber music allows an individual more scope for musical interpretation [than] orchestral music'. Similar concerns, centring on 'playing the same thing over and over again', 'day in day out' were expressed by several students.

By their post-graduate or even fourth undergraduate year many music students intending an orchestral career have applied to orchestras for auditions for extra work or positions. Of the group interviewed four had auditioned for professional or semi-professional work and six had not. Of the four, two had been successful. One auditioned for 'only one and that was good and they were really nice, and it was quite straightforward and nothing that I didn't expect'. Another had auditioned for a London orchestra and three others. One of the auditions was 'weird', in which the orchestral excerpts did not match the orchestra's repertoire. Nevertheless, this student had since gained a trial with another orchestra in the north of England.

The professionals' perspective

The experiences and feelings of the professionals regarding their lives as musicians could fill several vivid volumes, and one recurrent theme was that of enjoyment and privilege. A distinguished woodwind player considered it:

... a unique and very special way to make a living, and I think we're involved in something that's very precious... and a privilege to be part of. If I didn't feel like that I think I would have packed it up years ago!

An experienced brass player qualified the statement that 'I feel I've been an incredibly lucky man' with concern for the career's financial rewards:

My only regret [after 40 years] is I would like to have been paid a bit more money [quoting André Previn]: 'The British musician is the worst paid in the Western world'.

String players also felt:

I've been so lucky... it's a huge kick to play among great players... influenced by... a conductor or director or soloist, and giving your part to that... The repertoire is just endless and fabulous.

The professionals were united in their belief that the orchestral profession offered young people a worthwhile career, although woodwind players were a little more cautious:

... it's a hugely rewarding profession in lots of ways. I think those of us who were determined to get into it got a lot of musical satisfaction despite the musical frustrations we all have now and again.

As long as musicians... give themselves a variety of things to do, then I think it's incredibly fulfilling.

Another said:

I'd say it is [a good career] – I would never discourage anybody from doing it... [If] they've got the determination and the talent I think I would say 'have a go', because you can only have one go. And you can always do something else if it doesn't work out... these days there have never been more opportunities to change careers.

String players expressed somewhat guarded enthusiasm:

Absolutely... but I'd be very careful about encouraging children or... even pre-students... at a stage where they still have a good choice... If there's enough talent then that's not a problem, but the talent level has to increase as the support for the industry declines... If you're able to make a living then it's phenomenally exciting.

For a brass player:

It's been incredibly worthwhile, it's an incredibly important job artistically. We require good orchestras, chamber groups, and it's very, very fulfilling when it goes well... And like all musicians... when I was 17, 18, 19, I just *had* to do it.

The concern among students that repertoire would become repetitive was a view only partly shared with one of the professionals:

... over a period of time if you're only doing one thing, there is the possibility that creativity can start to become eroded.

The same woodwind player also pointed to orchestral 'cliques' and explained that

... certainly in a principal chair to sustain your existence there and cope with all the other stuff that's going on is incredibly wearing. And then... there will be times when you will work with conductors who you've actually got no time for whatsoever.

String players listed the following as disadvantages:

...boredom and feeling unfulfilled and unappreciated...and that you can get into a downwards circle of not practising and not being as good as you were [finding it harder] to keep your playing to a refined level...you don't always play with great players, and particularly being a string player in the section that can be a factor.

Another woodwind teacher believed:

The main down side is the under-funding of the arts generally, and music in particular, and the strain that puts on everybody involved in it. Particularly in orchestral music, the difficulty of finding enough money to pay for adequate rehearsals to subsidise concerts to the extent that you can put in interesting repertoire, and to pay for the best conductors and soloists to come and work.

Nevertheless, the consensus of the experienced players was positive:

I've played some wonderful music, the greatest music with some fantastic colleagues, some wonderful music directors...[and] from a job satisfaction point of view it couldn't be better [from a brass player]

In London...there's the choice and the variety of work...You can be doing chamber music one day then orchestra the next day, then teaching the next day, and solos and sessions...[from a string player].

For others:

...the opportunity to work with very talented colleagues and travel to interesting places...is something that is I think hugely worthwhile

There is a lot of touring, which I love personally, but if you are away from home and if you've got a young family that's very difficult.

Preparation for the orchestral profession

The student perspective

Technically and musically the students overall felt they were well prepared. It was in the area of repertoire that opinions differed between strings, and woodwind and brass.

The view from the strings

One string student confessed that although 'I have been given very good tuition from professors...[regarding] orchestral training on the whole I don't feel I've had any better quality of preparation than I had in my 6th form [at school and in the National Youth Orchestra]'. At the same time, she felt that '...as a string player your professor is there to make you play as best as you can as a solo player, and for string auditions you do need to have that kind of solo quality especially.' In the light of the high number of college graduates who go on to have careers in orchestras, this student's assumption that the professors' role is to create the best possible soloist, seems noteworthy.

Another student missed 'proper guidance – you know, other academies have . . . lessons only for orchestral music . . . If you have it every week . . . it would be much better'. Comparing his experience in the UK with that of friends in Eastern Europe and Russia, he felt that 'there was no actual good orchestral playing in rehearsals'.

A third string player found less formal ways of gaining the necessary experience: 'there's a lot of student conductors about who are always looking for opportunities, and I got caught into playing some concerts for them, and that's great for repertoire as well'. In preparation for the realities of the music profession, this string student felt aware of the challenges and difficulties, helped undoubtedly by having a parent in one of the London orchestras. In addition one of his professors 'was very helpful with information how things would be and she . . . kept my long term future in mind really well . . . encouraging me to really plan what I was going to be doing'.

Another string player felt that orchestral training was sadly lacking in his conservatoire. He believed 'there should be a massive surge from . . . professors who have specific training for training someone [who wants to be an orchestral player] . . . there's a lot of string players . . . who specifically aren't interested in orchestral playing [because orchestral discipline is not taught] who would make very fine players . . .'.

The view from the wind, brass and percussion

The experiences of woodwind and brass students were a little more encouraging. Most had received some level of guidance on the orchestral profession, although the subject of professional life was raised almost always as an incidental to the core lesson. A comment from a flute player, ' . . . things just come up' was a typical response. Another woodwind student had:

not really been told a lot about it . . . We've been told it's really hard and we're silly to try and do it . . . and you have to be on your best behaviour . . . In the first year you think 'Oh great, I'm going to be in an orchestra', but by now from what you've been told and taught it's not actually that great at all.

Regarding advice from her teacher to freelance rather than find a permanent position the same student said, 'I don't really listen to that'. A percussion student found out about the profession through his or her professors' own experiences: 'being around so many top-flight professionals . . . that's how you learn . . . You really see the bits of the music profession you can't really teach'. At the same time, he was frustrated at some of the pessimism they voiced about the profession. "orchestral work: good if you can get it, but there is none of it around any more" . . . It seems a very cynical view because from the look of things . . . there's lots of it; you just need to be looking for it rather than expecting it to come to you'.

Others relied on recently graduated friends for news of life after music college: 'a lot of them are really depressed because they've been doing loads of auditions and not getting anywhere', and 'You kind of hear people saying "I wouldn't want to do that for the rest of my life" – a few people have said that to me'.

Only one student, a brass player, felt:

They've prepared me very well . . . [My teacher] does a lot of classes . . . and his ensemble classes in particular are very focused on orchestral technique. Not so much

the social side of it – making sure you get the teas in . . . but how to play in relation to the rest of the section. And etiquette: not playing louder than the first horn, always making sure who you're tuning to and who you're blending with; knowing what everyone else is doing and knowing your part . . . We have that every week.

All students' views

When students were asked whether they were optimistic for their chances of gaining success in the orchestral profession, most qualified their optimism with phrases of concern or caution ('I don't really know – I'm not really sure . . .'; 'not really. There's a lot of competition . . .'). At the same time they remained fairly positive:

Yes, but I go in stages. If you asked me next month that might change!

I think I'll just give it a go and see what happens and make sure I have some backup plans.

It makes you more determined if you know there's so much competition.

Yes, [I'm] definitely [optimistic] . . . but I'm aware that it's a bit of a struggle . . . [and] I am scared as well.

The professionals' perspective

Regarding the qualities looked for in students before they begin their conservatoire studies, the responses followed no clear pattern although two mentioned 'potential'. One brass teacher even looked for 'actual love of the instrument, perhaps – if you can find it!' Others listened for students with ' . . . something to say on their instrument'.

An experienced woodwind teacher felt that while:

. . . underlying talent and ability [was important], a lot of the people who have the highest degree of achievement at the age of 18, unfortunately I think, tend to come from the private schools these days, due to the lack of . . . instrumental teaching in schools, which is a tragedy . . . So you have to be very careful when you're comparing people from the state sector and the public sector in terms of opportunity and potential.

But the broad feeling might be summed up in the words of a highly regarded brass teacher who, in addition to these qualities, believed

We're looking for people who are intelligent, who are nice to be with . . . [and you] go by your instincts of experience of playing and doing it for 20-odd years!

Of the teachers interviewed, only three regularly imparted information about the orchestral profession on an informal basis during lesson time. One typically responded:

Yes . . . especially in the later years. The lesson time is quite short in the early years and that needs to be taken up almost entirely with the practical teaching business. But as they get towards the final year and especially in the post-grad years discussions about the profession and perhaps how to go about getting work . . . become very, very important.

Other teachers engaged with the subject on a more sporadic or informal basis. One brought it up 'only if they're starting to apply for auditions and maybe they've got the odd trial or some extra work'. Another maintained 'it's the sort of thing you chat about in the pub... I tell them about the mistakes I've made and still do!'. Two talked about it 'a little bit' or 'not very much – only if it crops up'. One did not 'spend a lot of time discussing the daily routine', and one confessed: 'No, I rather regret that I didn't, not as much as I could have done.'

One string teacher found that:

Most of the lessons are desperately trying to learn this... stringed instrument, which is so terribly difficult, [or thought that students] have a lot of orchestra... where they're going to have more hands on, more direct experience of what it might be like than in their lessons, because lessons are not something that goes on in the profession.

And a woodwind teacher considered:

My job is to prepare them as an instrumentalist... There's plenty to do, and you've only got an hour to do it.

At the same time, most of the remaining woodwind and brass teachers asserted the need to address issues of the professions: 'teachers have got to be more clear about what students are letting themselves in for'; and 'We deal with [students' personalities] equally with their technique... [so that] they're going into the profession optimistically... This knowledge and this awareness of how the business works – I think that's our job to teach the youngsters that'.

It was clear that today's orchestral players wanted their students to be better informed than they themselves had felt on embarking in the profession. However, they still expressed ambivalence about the importance and practicality of imparting career advice during lesson time. This ambivalence is also reflected in Mills and Smith's (2003) survey of 134 music teachers' opinions on priorities for instrumental lessons. Mills and Smith found career advice to be ranked seventh in importance for conservatoire teaching. Other priorities in teaching, mentioned by professors in this study, were consistently ranked higher. For example, focusing on technique was ranked second, development of individual voice fourth, and widening of repertoire fifth.

Considering their professional experience of young people's preparation as orchestral musicians, there was a level of pessimism in the older group's views of young players' orchestral technique, stylistic awareness and attitude. While most felt comfortable with these abilities in young instrumentalists a string player knew of:

instances of people who don't know where the bottom end [of dynamics] is... for example... in a first violin section of 16, if you are playing *ppp* then actually probably it's a good rule not to be able to hear yourself.

Another's view was that:

there is a lack of awareness that if you turn up for the first rehearsal and you can't play it, that's actually not good.

Their attitude and knowledge of repertoire were the subject of varying opinion. One brass teacher claimed:

A lot of them aren't interested in music . . . and I think a lot of young people go to music college because they've had a great [social] experience in the county orchestra.

A woodwind teacher knew 'students who are very casual about that kind of thing', while an experienced string professional thought the problem:

stems from the attitude . . . that maybe it's not something that lofty to aim at, [and] therefore maybe [they feel] it doesn't merit the same preparation as going out and doing your little Bruch concerto with the Grimsby Symphony Orchestra.

The low level of inappropriate behaviour in professional orchestras was accounted for in part by, amongst others, a woodwind teacher whose experience was that 'In orchestras there's quite a lot of self-imposed discipline . . .'. One example, though not very damaging nor frequent, was mentioned by an experienced string player as: 'the term "lighthouse" . . . for somebody who's always looking around; then a lot of colleagues find that distracting', but he went on to say that 'Some of the natural enthusiasm which comes with youth can be misconstrued, and the way of dressing your enthusiasm is something usefully learned.'

The rather more important topic of alcohol-induced behaviour was considered, but the broad consensus was that 'young players don't drink like people used to . . . I think the behaviour of young players is probably better than it was'. One brass teacher thought 'they get a bit over-excited perhaps . . . or a bit of a hangover'. On general orchestral demeanour and discipline one professional admitted:

. . . things like yawning in concerts and slouching and too much chatting, although when you're actually on stage it's very hard to realise how it looks, because I find myself chatting to my desk partner . . . It's as though we've forgotten about the audience a little bit.

The professionals' own experiences of life straight out of music college were in contrast to their now elevated positions in one of the world's leading orchestral centres. Giving perhaps the most immediate responses of all in the interviews, possibly evoking clear memories of difficult times, not one of the sample felt prepared for the orchestral music profession. One declared that 'there was zero preparation for the practicalities . . . at 9 o'clock in the morning [for an audition], they put up the orchestral excerpts, and the first one was *William Tell* overture and I didn't have a clue!'. Another felt 'I didn't really know where I fitted in [and] . . . I've still got problems with it'. A string player, echoing an earlier comment from a student, explained that 'my orchestral experience . . . and preparation . . . were in youth orchestras . . . and absolutely not at conservatoire level'.

To finish, the professionals gave their views on what they feel are the ideal attributes of students leaving conservatoire for a career in the orchestral music profession. One practically minded woodwind player advised that 'the important thing is to get a degree'. Others looked to instrumental accomplishment as a goal: ' . . . good production, good sound, good intonation. I don't actually look for them to be perfect, but the ability to learn quickly'; and '[to be prepared] mentally and physically'.

A woodwind player confessed:

The thing that I'm looking for more than anything else, I suppose two things really: one is the quiet confidence that you need to sit in a section, because we are all insecure under the surface and we all have to assume this air of confidence in order to function, and somebody who comes in and betrays their insecurities too readily [makes us] very uncomfortable because it reminds us all of our own insecurities . . . And the other thing . . . is that nobody minds people making mistakes, certainly once. But . . . twice or, perish the thought, three times and you start to have serious doubts.

From one string player, a thorough and thoughtful list:

Stylistic awareness . . . listening skills . . . conviction of ideas . . . the ability to blend and be part of a group . . . good rhythm, good intonation – crucial things obviously . . . ability to communicate . . . a certain humility . . . flexibility, receptivity, openness.

From another:

You'd like to think that you'd taught them enough that they could teach themselves. That's an ideal.

Quiz results

Finally, students' knowledge of music and its UK environment, suggested through the quiz, showed some gaps. There was a reasonable awareness of British orchestras (although the Ulster Orchestra was not mentioned at all); only six out of ten knew *either* of our septuagenarian composers; only just over half had played a Brahms symphony, one of the staples of the orchestral repertoire; although Kurt Masur was known, neither Raymond Gubbay nor Clive Gillinson were familiar, and Jasper Parrott, not at all; and while the whereabouts of the Royal Festival Hall was known and Henry Wood Hall somewhat, it was perhaps an indictment of a moribund recording industry that only one knew the location of E.M.I. studios. Full results are included in Table 1.

Conclusion – past aspirations, present hopes, and future possibilities

Notwithstanding the wide variety of experiences from the respondents, some themes emerged. There was a marked difference between the two generations in their initial musical tuition; for the older players the piano formed the earliest instrumental experience, while the younger, if piano was studied at all, began it later than their main instrument. Given the broad musical sense – a wide repertoire and knowledge of harmony for example – that the piano affords, some may wish to make a connection between this pattern and teachers' remarks about present-day students not knowing enough about music and its structures, meaning and wider context.

Very prominent in interview was the sense of enjoyment that all the professionals had derived (and continue to derive) from their years as orchestral musicians; perhaps the students who for example, imagined growing 'tired of playing the same orchestral works day in, day out' might be reassured by the undiminished enthusiasm of their long-serving elders. Moreover, teachers may be persuaded to pass on more of these more agreeable experiences

Table 1 Quiz results for 10 fourth-year undergraduate or postgraduate students at UK conservatoires

	Number correct	Frequency (n = 10)
<i>What are the eight full time symphony-sized orchestras in London?</i>		
	8 out of 8	4
	7 out of 8	2
	6 out of 8	1
	5 out of 8	1
	4 out of 8	1
	3 out of 8	1
	2 out of 8	0
	1 out of 8	0
	0 out of 8	0
<i>What are the 12 orchestras in the rest of the UK?</i>		
	12 out of 12	0
	11 out of 12	0
	10 out of 12	2
	9 out of 12	2
	8 out of 12	1
	7 out of 12	1
	6 out of 12	1
	5 out of 12	1
	4 out of 12	2
	3 out of 12	0
	2 out of 12	0
	1 out of 12	0
	0 out of 12	0
<i>What are the names of the two British composers who celebrated their 70th birthdays in 2004?</i>		
	2 out of 2	3
	1 out of 2	3
	0 out of 2	4
<i>Have you played a Brahms symphony and Strauss Waltz?</i>		
	2 out of 2	5
	1 out of 2	3
	0 out of 2	2
<i>What positions do Kurt Masur, Clive Gillinson, Jasper Parrott and Raymond Gubbay hold?</i>		
	4 out of 4	0
	3 out of 4	1
	2 out of 4	4
	1 out of 4	3
	0 out of 4	2
<i>Where are: the Royal Festival Hall, EMI Studios, Henry Wood Hall?</i>		
	3 out of 3	1
	2 out of 3	5
	1 out of 3	4
	0 out of 3	0

to their students as a balance in the provision of career advice, as young people's optimism seemed occasionally undermined by teachers' negative and even depressing views during lessons.

Present-day teachers appear to have been given no special preparation or instruction for the profession, and much of the information itemised in the questionnaire has been

gathered through experience. But regarding the incomplete awareness in the younger group of London's musical environment ascertained from the quiz, why are more teachers not formally passing this information on to students? While they may not necessarily need to know who Clive Gillinson and Jasper Parrott are, young orchestral musicians' careers will depend on a working knowledge of Brahms' symphonies and Strauss' waltzes, and in my view it is not unreasonable to expect them to know about Harrison Birtwistle and Peter Maxwell Davies.

Perhaps as an adjunct to instrumental tuition, time could be set aside for teachers to impart their experiences, views and extra-curricular knowledge to their students in the same way they did to this interviewer. As one string student suggested, conservatoires could consider establishing a course strand with '... professors who have specific [skills] for training someone [who wants to be an orchestral player]'. Particularly musicians who are naturally talented may not possess the equipment to instruct others – they know it works for them, but not necessarily how it can work for others. In addition, the provision for all conservatoire instrumental and singing teachers of a period of teacher training, including the acquisition of socio-psychological and counselling skills, might be appropriate.

Coda

It could be argued that since 1800 the symphony orchestra has been at the centre of the Western musical tradition; conservatoire orchestral training feeds the cultural requirement, sending out enormously talented and gifted young people.

The technical and musical training at the UK's conservatoires seems to be in rude health, but while some of the older musicians attempt to pass on advice about the profession itself and many students wish for more help, perhaps an underlying view – one that may seem somewhat fatalistic – is best summed up in the words of one of the country's leading viola players: '... the really bright ones will be fine; I'm afraid it's got an awful lot do with talent, really'. However well they may be prepared while at conservatoire in all aspects of music and the profession, as a fine young student horn player observed: 'I know from experience that nothing can prepare you for the first time you sit in a professional orchestra and interact with them'.

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